

How SEO Can Help Your Firm Grow

There's something about the phrase Search Engine Optimization that causes eyes to glaze over and makes even the most experienced marketers cringe.

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Depending on your perspective, it's gotten harder, or easier, to do well. We've decided to approach SEO as a philosophy or a process we use to make decisions about website design, functionality and content. This way, the tactics and execution flow naturally through the whole web creation process and we don't get bogged down with confusing details after a launch. As an approach, it makes it easier to ensure we have the tools we need for a successful web project because decisions about SEO are built into the whole process.

So, for the uninitiated, what is search engine optimization, actually? Wikipedia has a pretty good explanation. It's the process of affecting the visibility of a web page or site through search results. Someone thinking about SEO and how to improve rankings considers how search engines work, what people search for, the actual search terms or keywords typed into search engines, and which search engines are preferred by their targeted audience. They then find a way to use this information to make changes to their website to address these variables. Basically, your website needs to function in a way that makes it easy for people to find your website in the first place and then keeps visitors interested in what your firm has to offer.

Variables change as search engines, like Google and Bing, adapt to changes in how people use the web. SEO is a field even the experts need to constantly learn about. According to Search Engine Watch, Google's updated algorithms in 2014 have affected more than 90 per cent of on-line searches. Conventional approaches to SEO are no longer sufficient to keep your company ahead of the game. This means it's probably time to reevaluate your SEO strategy.

KEYWORDS ARE NECESSARY, BUT CONTENT IS KING

In the earlier days of SEO, keywords were, well, key. Experts would embed selected keywords throughout your site, often doing things search engines actually frowned upon or using tricks that didn't result in good returns for users. If you think back to earlier Internet times, you might remember putting in search terms and getting irrelevant or old results simply because those websites were better at using keywords. But the Internet has gotten smarter, and keywords don't hold as much value as good content.

Your SEO strategy can't be dependent on keywords. While there are strategies which can

be employed to identify and track keywords which drive traffic to a website, encrypted keyword data means we can't always identify exactly which keywords people are using in their search queries to find a particular site. Having said that, any paid advertising or pay-per-click (PPC) advertising your firm does through Google AdWords will provide useful keyword data which can be used to understand your audience better.

Google's search engine algorithm continuously changes and continues to become more intuitive, so we need to adapt accordingly, shifting towards content-centric strategies. How people search has evolved too. Instead of related keywords or company names, people use online search to ask questions and often use complex phrases.

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Great content drives visitors to a website, motivates users to share content across their network, and creates a reason for visitors to come back. Content offers value, and Google's search algorithms recognize and reward this. Like Google, we all need to be aware and considerate of our end users and potential clients and offer them something informative, interesting, or at least entertaining.

A well-written piece of content on a properly optimized site will gain greater organic visibility, sustain that visibility into the future, and draw in the visitors you want. For our firm, an example could be an article like the one you are reading now, which might attract marketing professionals from the AEC sector searching for tips on how to improve the SEO on their own firm's website. This longer-term realization will allow you to maintain a steady stream of traffic to your site and foster greater loyalty from your audience and customers.

THINK CUES, NOT JUST KEYWORDS

Instead of focussing on SEO, focus on the idea of "discoverability." Fundamentally, you want to be sure users can find what they are looking for. Boxcar Marketing, an Internet Marketing and Digital Business Strategy firm, suggests discoverability is based on social cues, external cues, and on-page cues. These are tools you can use to improve your "discoverability."

- **Social cues** are images or videos, incoming links, and social sharing on LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and other popular platforms. One example of this might be when members of your audience or the public take photos of a building designed or built by your firm and then post it online with your name or handle. Another might be how well your website or blog posts from appear when the URL is shared on Facebook (i.e. have you noticed how messed up thumbnail images or

excerpts can appear on FB? It's important to set up correctly.)

- **External cues** are the more technical aspects of your site build, such as ensuring a site is crawlable (by search bots), how fast pages load, and bounce rates. External cues can be explored and improved by reviewing site speed report in analytics or information on creating a responsive site for mobile. Mobile compatibility is crucial these days, but more on that later.
- **On-page cues** is where keywords fall on the web pages and include other things like title tags, meta descriptions, heading tags, anchor text, and image filenames. Keywords should be in the first 200 characters in text blocks. You can use paid tools like Inbound Writer or Hubspot that can help with keyword suggestions.

Reading through these cues you should see a common theme: content. Powerful, sharable, eye-catching content will help your site thrive and stand out amongst your competitors.

GREAT CONTENT IS ORIGINAL, VALUABLE, RELEVANT, AND ENGAGING.

Great content improves inbound links and motivates social sharing (social cues). If your firm produces great content that people enjoy, they will be more inclined to share it with their friends. Great content also improves bounce rates (external cues) because

people will remain longer on your site as they explore and read more content and find out more about your firm. Great content should be relevant and consider some of the on-page cues like suitable titles, meta descriptions, anchor texts, and images.

Producing regular, high quality content can seem intimidating. But don't over-think your approach to start. Here are a few ways you can get started.

- When writing blog posts, think about what topics you would like to discuss, instead of focussing on keywords. If you're interested in the topic, and passionate about it, get it out and edit for keywords later.
- Tailor your content to specific customer profiles (or personas). Do not try to appeal to everyone, focus on your target audience and provide information that resonates with them.
- Partner with quality writers and organizations. Invite them to share their insights on your sites or guest blogger on their platforms. This builds strong content and linking, which improves SEO.
- Get input and ideas from the rest of your staff or team. Unique perspectives can generate new ideas for content.
- When you are stumped for content, ask your audience for topic ideas they'd like to see. If

you have an engaged audience that appreciates your expertise, they will probably have some great suggestions.

AEC firms are in an enviable position because the work they do is, generally speaking, already interesting and in many cases highly photogenic. The trick is packaging the content in a way that makes it easy for potential customers (or recruits) to engage with. Behavior is a great proxy for intent, so if you also employ marketing automation which applies lead scoring based on behavior, you can identify serious prospects and win more work through the smart use of web content.

Social media is playing an ever more important role in placing content in front of relevant eyes. According to sources like *PRweb.com*, professionals are spending one out of every six online minutes on social media these days! Yet, we are just beginning to see professional service firms like AEC companies adopt and use social media platforms to build their practice.

Professional services firms may feel that Facebook or Twitter doesn't work well for them. And that's OK. There are plenty of options, including LinkedIn, YouTube, Instagram, and Pinterest that have rapidly growing numbers of users—including both potential recruits and customers. Social traffic and social links are also important to improving SEO, because inbound and outbound links impact your search results. A powerful (yet under-utilized) option

for AEC firms these days is YouTube. Beyond the fact that video itself is captivating and need not always be professionally produced, YouTube is now the world's second largest search engine, surpassing Bing, Yahoo, and AOL with more than three billion searches every month. Social media vastly improves discoverability, as many users default to social media when looking for information.

Even on social media, everything you produce should be good enough so that your followers may want to share it with others. This is the best long-term content strategy. The sooner you can get there strategically, the quicker you will see results. You need to appeal not just to your clients, staff and colleagues, but to your community, professional association, schools, and of course to your industry friends. With fewer graduates from many design programs and increase in the number of Generation Y (Millennials) in the workforce these days, social media can no longer be ignored by AEC firms keen to attract and retain the best talent. Firms that understand this, create digital marketing communication plans that include interesting, engaging and authentic narratives (not just self promotion) are building brand equity in the minds of their audiences.

IF YOU HAVEN'T ALREADY, IT'S TIME TO GET MOBILE.

According to *Statista.com*, the number of mobile-only Internet users worldwide is expected to close in on half a billion users and

growing. This growth has been noticed by search engines, and Google's recent algorithm change was almost entirely designed to adapt to the mobile device trend. It is now absolutely imperative that you consider how your firm's website appears on mobile devices such as phones and tablets. Beyond merely working on an iPhone, your website design and functionality needs to be optimized for mobile users (i.e. if you still have a Flash site, well, you're damaging your reputation).

Here are some things to consider as you optimize your site for mobile:

- Keep your mobile site design simple and easy to navigate. On mobile, less is more. This applies to design, functionality and in some cases, even content. Make sure the most important content and call-to-action is immediately visible and easy to access.
- Confirm the images and videos on your website are optimized to work (quickly) on mobile devices.
- Make sure your site detects and directs users to an optimized version, while sending desktop users to the full site.

As with all marketing initiatives, incorporate a healthy spectrum of cross promotion into your digital strategy. SEO should be an important part of an overall marketing strategy, and not your entire marketing plan. By integrating

SEO with other initiatives such as advertising, e-mail marketing, and brand materials and culture, your brand strength will grow and enable your firm to position itself as a prominent player in the AEC industry.

We'd love to hear from AEC firms already working on some of this crucial marketing evolution and learn more about what works for you. Contact mark@industrialbrand.com or visit us at www.industrialbrand.com



Mark Busse is the founder and managing partner of Industrial Brand, an experienced brand strategy and marketing communications design consultancy. Industrial Brand helps architecture, engineering, and construction firms capitalize on changes in technology and the workforce to generate new opportunities and thrive in any economy.