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QUICK GUIDE TO SEARCH MARKETING

8 tactics to boost or repair your search strategy

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Quick Guide to Search Marketing

8 tactics to boost or repair your search strategy

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Search Marketing: 8 tactics to boost or repair your search strategy

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TACTICS YOU CAN LEARN OVER LUNCH

Welcome to *Quick Guide to Search Marketing* – a resource from MarketingSherpa featuring bite-sized tips for busy marketers.

In this report, we give you ideas for improving your search marketing strategy.

As noted in [MarketingSherpa's 2012 Search Marketing Benchmark Report – SEO Edition](#) (free excerpt at link), to achieve good organic rankings and ensure that their products and services are found across all formats and venues, organizations must be strategic with their search marketing planning and processes, as well as ever-savvy with the creation and optimization of all digital assets.

In this report, we'll show you:

- Why local search is so important
- How to recover from problems and Google penalties
- Tips for improving your link-building efforts
- How you can use PPC to test elements of your strategy

We know you're in a hurry, so let's get started. We're eager to share these tips on how you can take your search strategy to the next level.

Bobbi Dempsey
Editor, *Quick Guide to Search Marketing*

About the Quick Guide Series

MarketingSherpa's *Quick Guide Series* is designed with you, the busy marketer, in mind. We provide quick, simple tips you can use right away.

For each *Quick Guide*, we scour the vast MECLABS library of marketing research, from MarketingSherpa case studies and Benchmark Reports, to MarketingExperiments optimization tests and analysis. We highlight tips to help improve your marketing performance right now ... or at least by the time you're done with lunch.

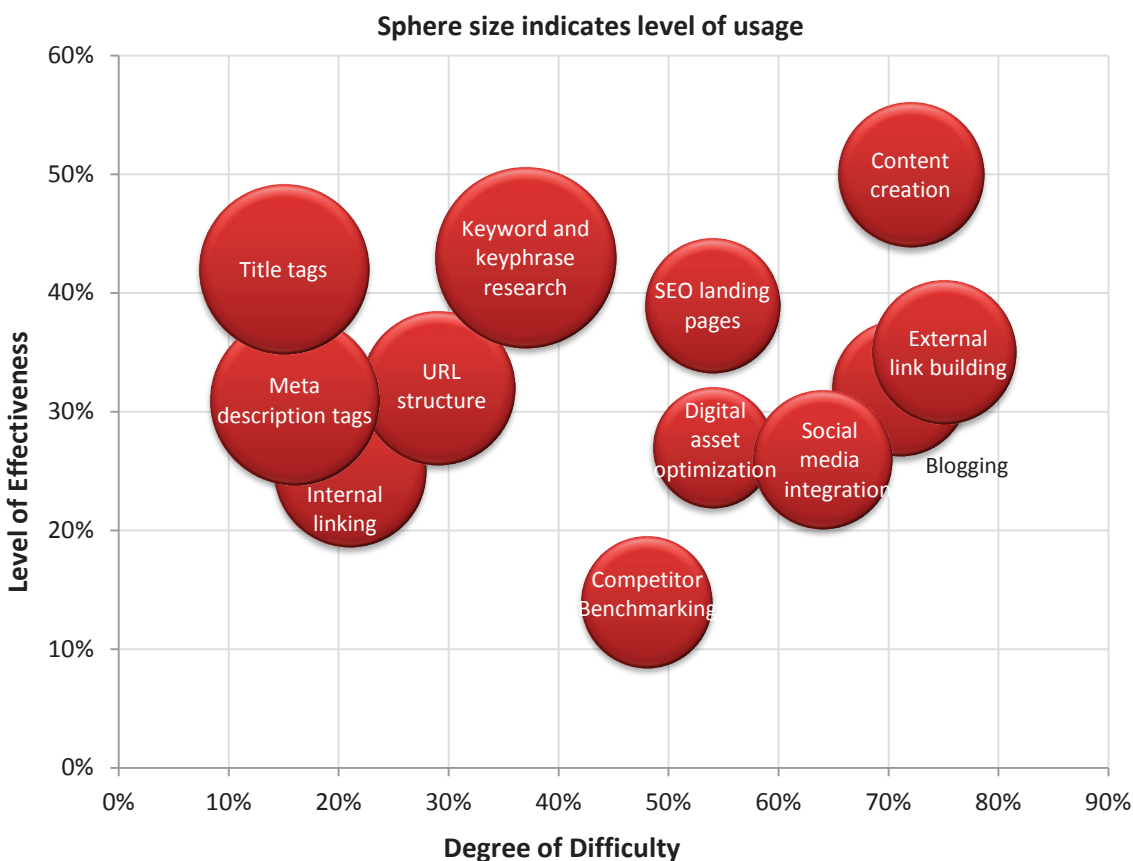
Tactic #1: Start with the basics


Before tackling the challenging stuff, go back and review the initial steps you've already taken. You may have overlooked something easy that can make a big difference. As Daniel Burstein, Director of Editorial Content, MECLABS, noted in the MarketingSherpa blog post, "[What is the Easiest Tactic to Improve SEO?](#)" Matt Brutsché of Austin Search Marketing advises marketers to start by focusing on one of the most basic elements – meta tags.

Meta tags are HTML components that can include page titles, descriptions and keywords. These components are visible to search engine spiders but do not affect the appearance of the webpage.

As illustrated in the chart below, [MarketingSherpa's 2012 Search Marketing Benchmark Report – SEO Edition](#) (free excerpt at link) found that marketers consider meta description tags to be among the easiest SEO tactics, while being about mid-range in effectiveness, suggesting a pretty good bank for the buck.

Chart: Three-dimensional view of SEO tactics



 marketingsherpa Source: ©2011 MarketingSherpa Search Marketing Benchmark Survey
powered by MECLABS Methodology: Fielded April 2011, N=1,530

“More than 80% of organizations do not find it difficult to add meta description and title tags. As such, these two tactics are also the second- and third-most widely used,” said Kaci Bower, Senior Research Analyst, MECLABS, and lead author of the report.

Here are a few agency insights from the report that correlate with Brutsché’s experience:

- We have gotten the best results from revising the meta description tag, which is part of an overall effort to produce a compelling blurb in SERPs.
- [Most effective tactics for improving rankings are] new and fresh content along with effective meta tags.
- [Most effective tactics for improving results from SEO efforts are] keywords analysis for title tags and meta description.
- [Most effective tactics for improving rankings are] properly formatted meta tags and keyword placement.

Tactic #2: Think local

Marketers like to think big. But sometimes taking a global view can result in overlooking potentially rewarding local opportunities.

In the MarketingSherpa article, “[Local SEO: How geotargeting keywords brought 333% more revenue](#),” the team at The Hauser-Ross Eye Institute & Surgicenter near Chicago thought improving its site’s SEO could help boost income from medical and elective procedures. The team came up with some search terms—such as “cosmetic” and “optical” but discovered that competition was heavy for search rankings in those categories.

So the team decided to start by doing a paid search ad that targeted keywords in its top categories. The paid search ads gave the brand immediate visibility in search engines and provided data that could be used later to help build the team’s SEO strategy.

For three months, the team maintained and improved the program, always looking for keywords that fit these three criteria:

- High volumes of traffic
- High conversion rates
- Low levels of competition

Here are some ways the team researched keywords:

Ask the front lines

Understanding which keywords to focus on for SEO requires a deep understanding of your audience. The best terms to target are revealed when you understand how people look for information and companies in your market. To learn more about its customers, the team sat down with Hauser-Ross’ patient coordinators, who accept inbound calls for the organization. It asked about the language that patients use, the questions they ask, and the topics they discuss when calling.

Website analytics

The team also looked to see which natural search keywords were already driving traffic to its site. This helped the team understand the keywords for which it had some authority and the keywords it needed to improve on.

Leverage keyword tools

The team gathered the keywords it uncovered in its paid search efforts, customer research and website analytics, and started analyzing them with the free [Google Keyword Tool](#).

Even though the tool is designed for AdWords (Google's paid search program), it helped the team:

- Estimate volume of traffic for each keyword
- Estimate level of competition
- Uncover other relevant keywords through the tool's suggestions

Geo-targeted keywords

Many of the opportunities the Hauser-Ross Eye Institute & Surgicenter team uncovered were variations of a broader keyword, particularly variations that included a nearby location. For example, instead of targeting the highly competitive term "lasik surgery" the team found that including the organization's city, "Sycamore," or a nearby suburb brought visitors who were looking for nearby facilities (and therefore more likely to convert).

Here are the main areas in which the team improved the site's local SEO:

Persistent header and footer

The team added the office's street address, city name and phone number to the header, and also included the full address and phone number in the footer. The footer also included 10 links to nearby organizations and hospitals the team is affiliated with, many of which have titles that include the names of nearby cities. Including this information in the persistent header and footer essentially added it to every page on the website.

Homepage

The team added the office's location in two other places on the homepage. It also included a list of nearby locations at the bottom of the page:

"Serving clientele from: Sycamore, Rochelle, Dixon, Yorkville, Sycamore, Dekalb, Geneva, St Charles, Batavia, Sandwich, Dixon, Rockford, Belvidere, Oswego and more!"

This list was also added to several other pages.

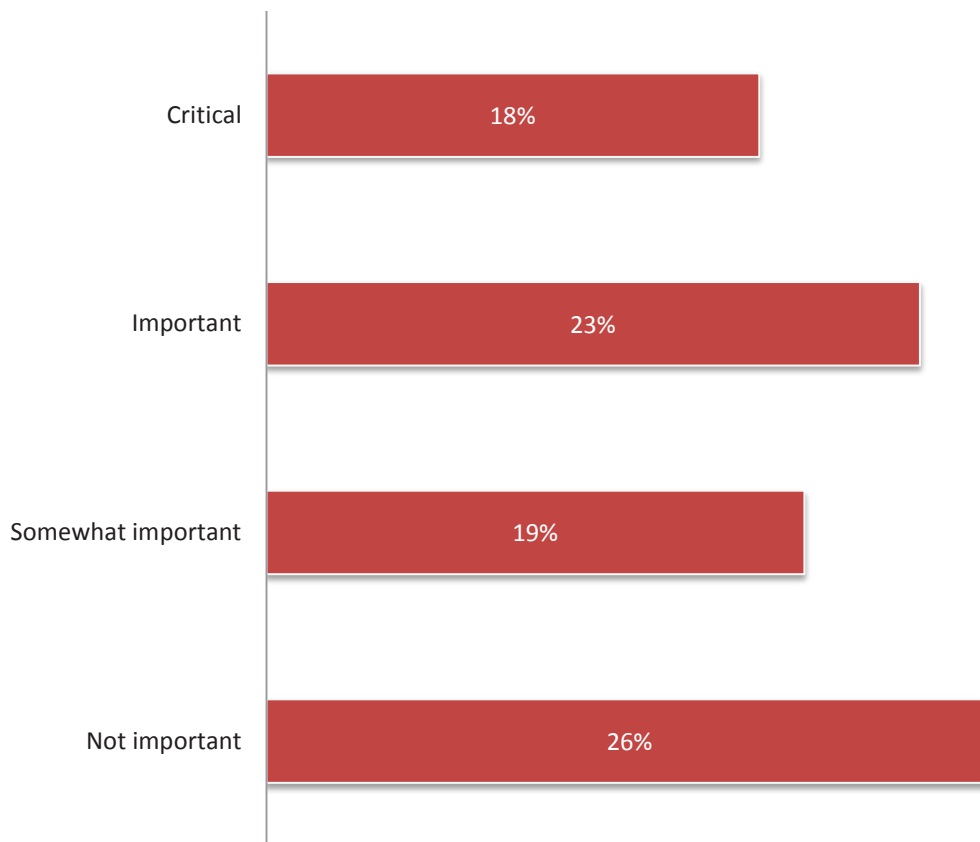
'Contact us' page

The 'contact us' page lists the office's full address first in regular text, then again in a large map. The page also includes the office's phone numbers, email address and fax number.

Tip: Spruce up your local business listings

In the MarketingSherpa blog post, "[Search Engine Marketing: Taking advantage of local search and local business listings](#)," David Kirkpatrick, Reporter, MECLABS, points out that, according to the *MarketingSherpa 2012 Search Marketing Benchmark Report – SEO Edition*, "Forty-three percent of organizations consider local search a critical or important factor for achieving search marketing objectives." (See chart below.) "Individuals and businesses are increasingly looking to local listings for shopping, restaurants, services, vendors and more. For these reasons (among others), appearing in local search results, which are listed at the top of the search engine results pages, can help a business stand apart from its competition."

Chart: Degree of importance local search plays in achieving search marketing objectives



Source: ©2011 MarketingSherpa Search Marketing Benchmark Survey
Methodology: Fielded April 2011, N=1,530
powered by MECLABS

Kirkpatrick says the first step of any local search marketing effort should be claiming, customizing and enhancing the local business listing, such as a Google Place Page. "These listings are featured at the top of search engine results pages providing businesses that have secured the listing valuable search real estate. What's amazing is that according to the *Search Marketing Benchmark Report – SEO Edition*, 41% of organizations haven't claimed a local business listing, and another 22% aren't sure if they have or haven't claimed a listing."

Kirkpatrick says this tactic is most effective for consumer marketing retailers, because many buyers are going to look for research and comparison information online while preferring to shop locally.

Tactic #3: Use PPC as a testing tool

Paid ads can be an effective way to generate leads and drive traffic to your site, but they can also serve as a great way to test elements of your strategy. As noted in the [MarketingSherpa 2012 Inbound Marketing Handbook](#) (free excerpt at link), nothing is worse than spending time doing search engine optimization only to see that you've poorly optimized. This is where PPC can help. You can use PPC ads to run tests on keywords, page copy, headlines and more, and then integrate the findings into your search engine optimization efforts. It is much quicker to run A/B tests for these types of elements than to wait for SEO results.

In the MarketingExperiments blog post, "[Search Marketing: 46% more conversions from PPC ad test](#)," Daniel Burstein shared the results of a paid search test conducted for a MECLABS Research Partner, North American Spine. The team tested three versions of a pay-per-click ad, and found that the best results came from the treatment that used a negative message, essentially telling potential customers what they could "avoid" rather than what they could receive, namely "back pain relief." This version also included a clear, specific description of what the procedure actually entailed – "one micro incision." This ad generated 46.6% more leads than the control. By studying these results, the marketing team would be able to pinpoint keywords and phrases that it could use in other content for better search results.

Tactic #4: Improve link building

Search engines use a variety of factors to rank your pages. Marketers have guessed at which are the most important for years, and one continues to top the list: inbound links. The links pointing to your website have a huge impact on its search rankings. Your site can have beautiful design and optimization, but without inbound links, it will struggle to reach the top of search pages.

In the MarketingSherpa article, "[Link Building: 5 steps to build a better SEO strategy](#)," SEO experts shared tips on attracting valuable links.

"Links are very, very powerful and useful. Google and Bing continue to rely on them as primary signals," says Rand Fishkin, CEO, SEOmoz, an SEO software and resource provider.

Here are the experts' tips for getting high-value links:

Tip #1. Repurpose someone else's data

Many universities and trade groups publish great research. However, researchers are not marketers. Their reports can be confusing. You, on the other hand, are a skilled communicator. You can turn that data into juicy link bait.

Start by searching for research on your industry. Google Scholar, for example, will let you search academic publications. You can also use commands in regular searches to target your inquiry. Examples:

- Search for specific types of documents with "type:pdf" or "type:doc"
- Search specific types of websites with "site:edu"
- Search a specific website with "site:example.org"

Once you find good information that is poorly presented, reach out to the organization and ask if it is acceptable to reference the data. You will likely be asked to cite the organization, link to its site, and perhaps follow other usage guidelines. Be careful you do not violate anyone's copyright.

After you get clearance, clean up the data. Pull it into a fantastic article or use it to create good charts or an infographic. The benefits of this strategy, Fishkin says, are the high-value links it can earn from universities and other organizations. Be sure to show the researchers what you created, because they will likely link to your work.

Tip #2. Participate in social networks

Each of the experts emphasized that social media can be a powerful way to attract links. Fishkin considers it "extremely powerful and essential."

"Writing great content that people actually read and getting intensely social with that content is generally the easiest way to get things moving," says Jon Ball, CEO, Page One Power, an SEO agency.

Approach #1. Reach the influencers

If you do not have a significant audience, then you will get better results by promoting your content on a one-to-one basis. Search for the online leaders in your industry, often called "influencers," and build a relationship with them.

Eventually, you can try to collaborate with influencers in some way. Here are several ideas you could propose:

- Interview them for your blog
- Contribute content to their blogs
- Ask to collaborate on a project

Don't just ask for links. Strive to help them and you will often earn links as a result, Fishkin says.

Approach #2. Engage your audience

If you have thousands of connections on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, then you earn links by sharing content that these audiences love. Just make sure the content you share is hosted on your website (so the links are attributed to your domain). Sharing content will also encourage "likes," "retweets" and similar interactions that are shown to have a positive correlation with higher search rankings.

Tip #3. Research the competition

The power of each tactic varies by industry. To uncover what works in your niche, you must research. One of the best places to start is your competition. Create a list of your top competitors for search rankings. Then, use link-analysis tools to understand where they get inbound links and how they acquire them.

"That's one of the quickest ways [to find good targets]," says Neil Patel, Co-founder, Kissmetrics, an analytics platform provider. "It's timesaving, but it's very effective."

Unfortunately, the major search engines stopped providing tools that list the inbound links of other websites (you can only see the links pointing to your own site). Most competitive tools require payment for some or all of their features. Two popular choices:

- Open Site Explorer - from SEOmoz
- Site Explorer - from Majestic SEO

Both tools offer free features but require payment for advanced analysis.

Tip #4. Have a blog worth reading

Marketers know that a blog can help SEO. The problem is that many company blogs are not worth reading.

"The simplest, most basic strategy that companies fail at, and that can be used for incredible amounts of good, is to do a blog that people actually read," Ball says.

Company blogs are destined to fail when they are:

- Corporate and formal; lacking personality
- Written for search engines instead of people
- Promotional instead of informative
- Inconsistent in timing, topic and quality

One of the most important parts of a good blog, Ball says, is that it comes from a person and not a brand. Readers want a blog with personality, he says. "When you are trying to get high-quality links from real sites in your niche, often it's very difficult to do that if there's no personality, or individual, or writer behind the blog itself. ... It's a people business," Ball says.

Tip #5. Aim for long term; avoid one-offs

A one-time boost is helpful, but you want a stream of links to flow to your website for months and years. The best way to do that is to build a full strategy instead of focusing on single tactics. Blogging and participating in social networks can be part of an on-going strategy. Here are a few other examples:

- License your content and technology

Your company may produce information that is valuable and unique. If so, you can invite people to share this resource, but only if they include a link to your website (you can even ask for a specific anchor text, Fishkin says).

Information you can license out may include:

- Monthly research reports
- Images and videos
- Online tools (such as an embeddable calculator)
- Industry awards and contests
- Anything unique and valuable you can share for free

- Share your bloggers

All of the experts we interviewed noted that contributing content to other websites can be an effective way to build links. If you have content creators on staff (writers, designers, videographers), ask them to contribute to other sites or broker exchanges with them.

- Encourage creative ideas

A willingness to try new ideas can help drive your link building over the long term. Do not be afraid to brainstorm and test new approaches. Ball noted, for example, that an e-commerce site he worked with created an online product museum where visitors could view the history of products, a glossary of terms, historical images and other interesting tidbits. Another site created a vintage pop-up book library, he said. Both attracted inbound links.

A good way to find ideas is to consider why people link to websites in your industry. Then, think of how you can target that behavior in a campaign. For instance, people may provide links because they:

- Contributed to the content
- Think the information is helpful, funny or otherwise valuable
- Referenced the information in a discussion, blog or report
- Want to highlight a resource
- Follow usage guidelines when sharing other people's content
- Have a partnership with the website

Tactic #5: Correct problems quickly

Search marketing involves many different components. The challenge for marketers is to make sure every element is running smoothly with a wide net, including domain and page authority, inbound links, referral paths, Google Analytics and Webmaster Tools, content, keywords, HTML construction, social media, inbound and outbound marketing campaigns. But it's important that you stay alert so you can detect and quickly correct anything that might be negatively affecting your results.

In the MarketingSherpa article, "[Search Engine Marketing: E-commerce site turns an 82% bounce rate around for a 400% conversion increase](#)," the team at Tops Products noticed a substantial amount of inbound traffic was coming to the office supply company's e-commerce website via a referral path from a prominent online automobile website. But Jennifer Stagner, Technical Support Manager, realized that the high inbound traffic also had a high bounce rate. For every 100 visitors who clicked through to the Tops Products website, 82 of them were instantly exiting the landing page.

Stagner and her team were able to use Google Analytics to find the problem. They discovered more than 10 different links on the automobile website funneling traffic to Tops Products. Next, "we went and looked at those links on the site to see what images were there, what anchor text was there, what was the consumer seeing. That is when we found out what the problem was," Stagner said. On the automobile website, the links to Tops Products were marketed as, "Get your bill of sale form right now." However, once a user clicked the hyperlink, it was showing up as a married living trust product.

Stagner and her team set about identifying all of the incorrect links from that automobile website. "We had set up a redirect site," Stagner explained. All the redirects were configured so every time someone clicked the links, instead of going to that living trust for a married couple, the consumer would automatically go to the correct page — the automobile bill of sale form.

Stagner said in their case, "We did have a system set up where we could just have our webmaster set up a 301 redirect if a link isn't going to the right place." She advised, "If you don't have that kind of functionality, it would be as simple as contacting the other website."

"After we fixed all those redirects, we waited a few weeks to see if there would be an impact on bounce rate or conversion," she said. The result when they went into Google Analytics was a "pretty dramatic increase." Since Stagner and her team fixed the existing links, "customers were clicking through, they were spending significantly more time on the site, they were actually making a lot of purchases."

Stagner said she and her team learned a "great lesson here." Even with a tremendous amount of work put into engaging in marketing partnerships and getting a link or product placement on another website, it can all be undone by small issues. "If you don't manage the technicalities and have a quality control system in place for ensuring that you're actually passing value through, you could be missing out on substantial amount of revenue," she said.

Tactic #6: Watch out for Google penalties

Google penalties can be fatal to your search strategy. In the MarketingSherpa article, "[Search Marketing: How to avoid and remove Google penalties](#)," the team at Phonebooks.com found this out the hard way when their natural search traffic from Google went from about 76% to nearly zero practically overnight. After doing some research, they suspected Google had penalized Phonebooks.com and buried its search results.

Tip #1. Routinely check site metrics

Aaron Rosenthal, President, Phonebooks.com, first uncovered this problem by looking at Phonebooks.com's site metrics. Always check your site metrics. Look for large deviations in traffic, conversion rates, time spent, etc. Investigate any large and sudden changes that you cannot explain. This will help uncover a range of problems, whether they stem from ad campaigns or affiliate partnerships.

Tip #2. Investigate common technical issues

Here are some common technical issues that cause penalty-like situations:

- Duplicate content

Duplicate content — or content that is nearly identical on two different pages of the same site — typically does not earn a penalty. Google will choose which page to list and suppress the other(s). Some marketers with suppressed pages have interpreted this as a penalty, but Google does not see it that way. There are several ways to signal to Google which page among duplicates you want listed, which Google calls "canonicalization."

[Note: If Google believes the content's intent is to deceive visitors or manipulate search engine results, a penalty may be administered.]

- Metadata: 'no-index' tags

Google will completely drop a page from its search results if it has a simple meta tag in its HTML code, such as:

```
<meta name="googlebot" content="noindex">
```

- Mistakes in robots.txt file

Site administrators can use a "robots.txt" file to signal to search engines that a site or some of its pages should not be indexed. Mistakes in this document can block you from Google search results.

- Other technical issues

There are a range of other possible technical reasons your natural search traffic has plummeted. You may have accidentally password-protected your homepage, or your site might be blocking Google's IP addresses.

Tip #3. Identify the type of penalty

If you are not having technical issues and you've noticed a huge drop in traffic — you may have a penalty. Now you need to determine the exact nature of your penalty.

Here are three good areas to check:

- Check rankings for keywords

Search for your website in Google using your top keywords and note any large drops in your rankings. Everything might appear normal for some keywords. On others, your page-one SERP ranking might have fallen to page five or 10. If you notice that your results have been buried for certain keywords, your team should look into all SEO work done targeting those keywords and determine if any less-than-honest tactics were used. Be sure to check the inbound links that have anchor text using those phrases.

You might notice that all of your results are buried. Rosenthal, for example, noticed his team's results were buried for all keywords except for searches for "phonebooks.com."

- Look for missing URLs

Google might have blocked certain URLs completely from its index. Conduct a "site:" search in Google for your website and check if your high-traffic pages are being listed. If you cannot find some, they've likely been removed due to a violation of Google's guidelines. Identify the problem, fix it, and submit a reconsideration request.

- Check site security

Google will remove websites from its index that have been hacked. If your entire site is not showing in the search results, take a look at your site security and talk to your site administrators. Google may alert your company if the site is removed for this reason.

Tip #4. Fix everything that violates quality guidelines

Once you've found the pages or keywords in question, you need to determine what is wrong with them and fix them as soon as possible. Google publishes quality guidelines in addition to its technical guidelines. Many prohibit black-hat SEO tactics, such as:

- Using hidden text
- "Cloaking" or using sneaky redirects
- Keyword stuffing (loading a page with irrelevant terms)
- Participating in link schemes, such as link purchasing or excessive reciprocal linking

Other prohibited areas include installing viruses, running phishing scams and creating sites with little or no original content. Using any of these tactics is an extremely bad idea. First, they create a poor user experience and undermine customers' trust in your company. Second, such tactics earn penalties from Google.

All preaching aside, if your company is or has ever used such tactics, you should immediately stop and remove them from your website. Only when you've completely cleared out the bad apples can you submit a reconsideration request.

Tactic #7: Capture long-tail searchers

As explained in the MarketingSherpa article, "[Long-tail Search Marketing: SEO how-to content and videos earn 9% conversion rate](#)," some consumers are "do it yourself"-ers. When their dishwasher breaks, they find the broken part, look up the part number, and enter "SparkleWash SW541D" into a search engine to find a replacement.

These types of searches are often called "long-tail." They are used by a small number of people who are looking for something very specific, and they can drive highly qualified traffic to a website.

Ali Irani, President, MI Technologies, used these searches to build his business, which sells replacement television parts online. To target long-tail searches, his team created FixYourDLP.com, a site that teaches visitors how to replace specific parts in specific televisions. Once visitors learn how to make repairs, they can click to visit the team's e-commerce site to buy the parts they need.

The single largest driver of traffic to FixYourDLP.com is organic search, Irani says. The site has the top organic result for "dlp repair" in Google, and it ranks seventh for "dlp parts" (Discount-Merchant.com ranks second for that keyword). Far more important than these broad terms are the narrow, long-tail search phrases such as "JVC DLP Lamp TS-CL110U." The team targets dozens of these phrases with how-to pages and tops the search results for many of them.

Here are some of the tactics the team used to grab the top results for these long-tail searches:

- *Targeted content* - By providing videos, images and how-to content on an extremely specific topic, the team turns these pages into a valuable resource for searchers. The search engines respond by giving these pages priority over others that do not match their depth or focus.
- *Follow SEO guidelines* - The team followed SEO guidelines to target these pages to specific part numbers. For example, each page includes a part number and model name in its title. The images and videos include the related part numbers and other information in their metadata. Additional content such as compatible model numbers and step-by-step replacement instructions provide more information to visitors and search engines.
- *Always grow* - Letting a site go stale can degrade its search rankings, so the team regularly publishes content to the site and maintains its forum.

The team at Tops Products (see Tactic #5) also incorporates a long-tail approach. "We actually do a substantial amount of long-tail business, and that's because we have 14,000 products, 3,000 of which are on the website," Stagner explained.

Used on a niche seasonal tax software download product, for example, "one of the ways we help with long-tail keyword strategy is we will use the Google keyword tool to measure the search interest monthly for a particular keyword, and try to make sure that our content is optimized for search interest as measured by Google," Stagner said.

The first step is for marketers to make sure they are using Google Analytics to view referral traffic by source and medium. "So when you log into Google Analytics, you're going to see your source options, and as you click through, you'll see where the links are that are passing traffic through your site," she said.

Tactic #8: Be alert to new tools

SEO—and the strategies that can affect it—changes constantly, so it's important to stay informed on the latest tools and tactics. This is often a process that involves a lot of trial and error—some tactics may prove surprisingly effective, while others may not be worth your time.

One brand new tactic marketers really haven't had much chance to test out yet is Facebook Graph Search, as discussed in the MarketingSherpa blog post, "[Search Engine Marketing: Navigating Facebook Graph Search](#)," by David Kirkpatrick.

In that post, Jonathan Greene, Social Media/Business Intelligence Analyst, MECLABS, said, "Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg has defined 'graph' as the network of one's friends, relatives, favorite brands and products. A 'graph search' therefore is a search that leverages one's 'graph' or 'network' to provide more interesting, relevant results."

He added, "The biggest implication for marketers is that Graph Search, if successful in stealing significant market share from Google, will flip SEO on its head. Links will be replaced by 'likes' in the SEO hierarchy and building social capital will be the new optimization strategy for organic search improvement."

Although Facebook Graph Search has not rolled out across the entire Facebook ecosystem, it's certainly worth thinking about for a head start in creating a strategy to meet this new search engine marketing avenue.

Dan Sturdivant, Account Manager, Speakeasy, and Chairman, DFW Search Engine Marketing Association, said the importance of "likes" will be greatly increased. "For some businesses, local retail in particular and restaurants especially, this is critical. Consumers will use Graph Search to research companies and services. Businesses 'liked' by their friends will reinforce an immediate connection with that business. Taking that further, engaging consumers, asking them to 'like' the page is important, and then engaging them through a newsletter or other marketing tactic and pushing them back to the Facebook page is critical."

He said that last part is a big change. "It used to be you would want to drive folks back to your website, and while it goes against the 'digital sharecropper' concept, driving people back to the company's Facebook page is a good idea."

Useful Links and Resources:

[Marketing Research Chart: SEO tactics used by organizations with and without SEO processes](#)

[MarketingSherpa Article: Paid Search Marketing: Automation increases revenue 22%](#)

[MarketingExperiments Blog: SEO Research: Why opportunity is knocking for marketers doing SEO](#)

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