

The Essence of SEO: What Is High-Quality Content?

What exactly is high-quality content? To answer that question, you can't simply talk about content marketing. You have to understand Google's ultimate aim for search. Let take a deeper look at search, how it's evolving, and how that affects marketers. Then we'll review the challenges you face as a content creator and what you need to do to create higher quality content on a consistent basis.

Google's apparent anti-SEO stance

In 2013, Google launched "Hummingbird", a new search algorithm used to sort through all the information it has when you search and come back with answers. A **"search algorithm"** is the technical term for what you can think of as a recipe that Google uses to sort through the billions of web pages and other information it has, in order to return what it believes are the best answers. They also removed the keyword tool in order for marketers to focus on content, issuing the following quality guidelines:

- Make pages primarily for users, not for search engines.
- Don't deceive your users.
- Avoid tricks intended to improve search engine rankings.
- Think about what makes your website unique, valuable, or engaging. Make your website stand out from others in your field.

Source: Google Quality Guidelines

<https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/35769?hl=en#3>

Tricks is essentially what SEO had become—a bag of tricks for ensuring your pages could rank well without you having to do any real marketing. Likewise, [Optimizing a website](#) should be a marketing activity, not a game.

- Find your unique selling point.
- Differentiate yourself.
- Offer value to your customers.

Do that, and you're sure to be found, not just by Google, but by your customers too.

It's a game change...

For SEOs, this is a major game change, but without traditional keyword research, the game doesn't seem to have any rules. And it's especially hard on those of us who "get" the importance of writing for people. Yes, we do want to create useful, engaging content. But we still want to tell search engines what we're doing.

We want to wrap our high-quality content around keywords so we're confident our content gets found. How are we supposed to do that now? It seems we have no choice but to walk the path Google is blazing.

We're got to let go of the traditional SEO tactics and produce high-quality content.

Why all the fuss about high-quality content?

It's important to understand why Google is moving this direction.

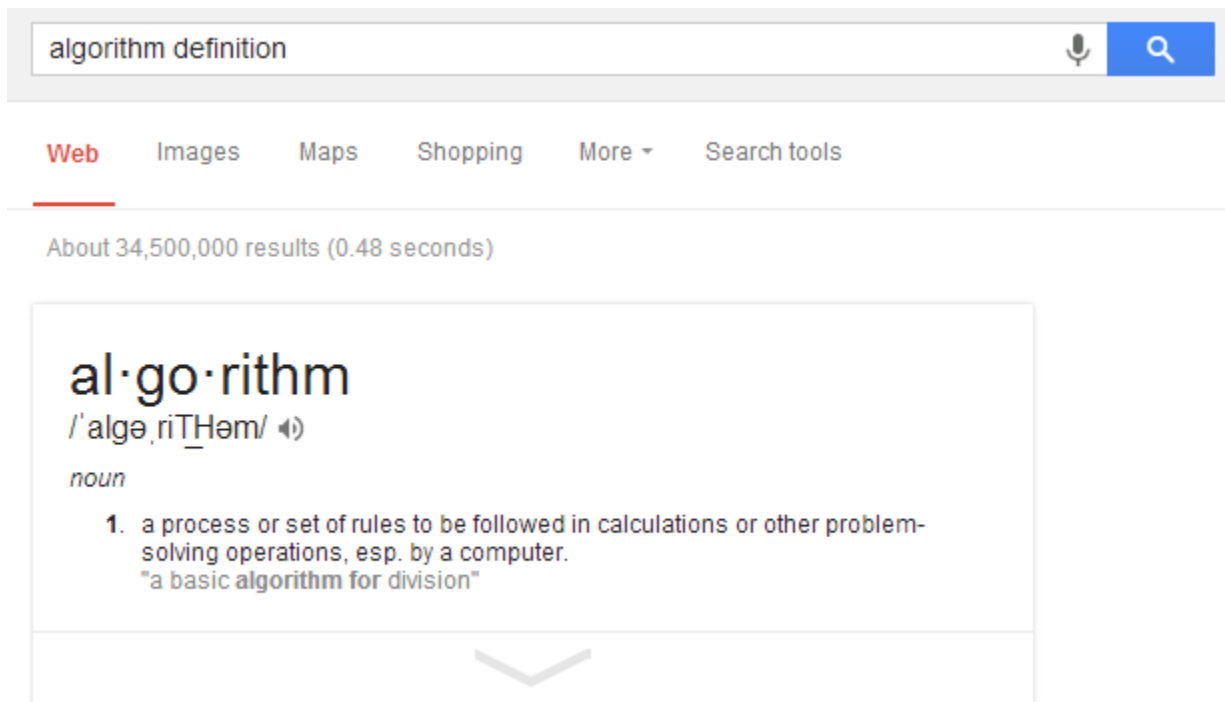
Remember, search is a business, the product being search results. (Okay, ads too, but mostly SERPs.)

Google is in the business of answering people's questions, and they want to do it as intuitively as possible, integrating with the way people now use technology.

Keywords used to help with that. But now, keywords are a hindrance. Marketers are misusing them to the point that they don't reliably tell Google what a page is about. And people don't always use the right keywords to ask a question. That's what all the algorithm updates are about. Each iteration gets Google that much closer to being able to intuit what you're looking for, depending on the context of previous questions, your location, and (most likely) other criteria.

Like Apple's Siri, Google wants to provide an interactive experience.

For instance, in years past, when I wanted to look up a word, I visited a dictionary site, typed in a word and waited for the definition to come up. Now I simply type in the word, followed by "definition." Here's what I get:



What used to be three steps that took a minute or so is one quick step. Overall it's a better [user experience](#), which makes me lean on Google (not the online dictionary) when I want to look something up.

That's where search is going.

The evolution of search

Search is changing because technology is changing. One day we won't be typing inputs into a search bar, we'll just talk to our devices. Google is getting ready for that day. We probably should try to keep up. What this means for marketers

Search engines aren't trying to make life harder for website owners. They see search as a product, and as they improve their product, the game changes by default.

To keep up with Google, all search engines have to provide the best possible search results. They'll continue to refine their ability to find the best, most useful content online.

That's why quality content is your best tactic for [showing up in SERPs](#).

Here's how Google says it in its information on [affiliate sites](#). I've highlighted the phrases that stand out to me:

*Google believes that pure, or "thin," affiliate websites **do not provide additional value** for web users, especially if they are part of a program that distributes its content to several hundred affiliates. These sites generally appear to be cookie-cutter sites or templates with **no original content**. Because a search results page could return several of these sites, all with the same content, thin affiliates **create a frustrating user experience**.*

Notice that last phrase: "frustrating user experience." Google wants to be the go-to search engine, the one that understands people's intentions when they ask a question and gives the quickest (and best) answer.

They don't want to give an answer that's frustrating or wastes people's time.

Low-quality, keyword-loaded content won't help them achieve their goals. So they're refining their algorithms to weed out that type of content.

What they want to deliver are Web pages that provide the richest experience for the user. Hence the term "quality content."

So what is quality content?

Content isn't merely a blog post or Web page that you post to your website. In reality, it's information you submit to search engines to be given to searchers.

So quality content is anything that Google decides is worth sharing.

It's real answers to real people's questions.

It's content that people want to digest because it helps or entertains them, tells them how to do something or where to find something.

It's information that people talk about in their own blog posts or around the water cooler.

It's the stories they pass along to their own circles or mention in social media.

It gets quoted, linked to, and shared.

That's quality content.

Create that, and create it well. Add to the knowledge graph, and you'll rank well with Google and your users.

The challenge of creating quality

There are a few things you need to keep in mind when you make it a goal to create quality.

1. Quality is a subjective goal.

Who really knows what it is until you hit it? Is it long, short, funny, serious? It could be any of the above. It could be none of them. So an important part of your content strategy has to be defining this word for your brand.

2. Quality implies trust.

That's why Google shares stuff that they see other [people sharing](#). They see that as a vote of confidence, a tick mark on the quality scoreboard. So while you're building the quality of your content, it's important to put energy into [building trust](#) too.

3. Higher quality content may seem to directly conflict with your profit goals.

You can't use content to promote your products. Yet most businesses don't want to pay writers to write materials that aren't promotional. From my perspective, this is one of the biggest challenges for marketers—providing profit-building content to please the C-Suite and readable, useful content for users.

4. Higher quality content requires a bigger investment.

You'll have to invest in better writers and graphic artists. You may also need programming help to create interactive content.

5. The [ROI](#) on quality content may not be immediately evident.

It takes time to build a reputation as the go-to resource. You may have to invest a lot of time and money on the front end, trusting that you'll reap the rewards down the road. This is another reason you need to have a written content strategy that defines "quality" for your business, outlines the tactics you want to pursue and details your expected outcomes.

6. It's risky focusing on quality.

Quality content is usually different than anything else out there. You have to be willing to make waves or stand out. Try hard not to simply copy other brands' strategies, but to come up with something that works for you.

How you can consistently create higher value content

1. Get to know your readers.

Content marketing is a customer-centric strategy. Your blog posts, special reports and other content aren't product brochures. They're a way for you to connect attract and connect with your ideal customers. Because of that, your first task as a content marketer is to get to know your readers.

You need to find out what they're interested in, what questions they're asking, what worries them, what their goals are, and anything else you can find out.

Remember, in the eyes of Google, *quality* content is content that answers your readers' questions. So by all means, answer their questions.

2. Talk in their language.

This is especially important now that Google's keyword tool is no longer available. Instead of asking Google what search terms people are using, listen to your customers.

Go to forums where they ask questions. Connect with them in social media. Watch their comments on your blog and other blogs in your industry.

What words are they using to talk about your products? Those are the words you need to use when you talk about them. And by doing so, you'll automatically optimize your content—because it will match the queries they type into search engines.

3. Keep the focus on customers, not selling.

Blog posts aren't sales pages. Remember that. Use blog posts to answer questions and generate interest in your products. Then link to sales pages in case readers want to learn more.

Create content that [builds relationship](#). Your objective should be to build trust and credibility among your target audience. Not to sell. Not in your content. Let that come later, after you've earned their trust.

4. Create content for every stage of the sales funnel.

Write down every question your customers are likely to ask at every level of the funnel. These are the same questions they're going to type into a search engine. So create content that targets those keywords. But don't stop there. Create additional content that simply provides useful, actionable information.

5. Create content on a regular basis.

Consistency builds trust. It also makes you credible. And the more content you produce, the more search queries your content can rank for.

So set a schedule you can reasonably maintain, and get busy producing content.

6. Go the extra mile.

To be higher quality, your content has to be better than the stuff everyone else is doing. So you have to step up your game if you want to have the highest quality content online.

Think outside the box. Get creative. Then start delivering.

Are you up for it?

It's a new game, with little guidance except that weird, undefinable word, "quality." But for now, it's all we've got.

So are you up for it?

Do you have a plan for creating quality content? What are your biggest challenges?

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