KEYWORD RESEARCH 101

Keyword research is an integral part of your SEO strategy. Before creating content for your site, you should know what terms your audience uses to find your content. Their search terms are the keywords you want to use to drive more traffic to your site.

What Is Keyword Research?

Keyword research is the cornerstone of SEO (Search Engine Optimization). It's the process of identifying the search terms people enter into search engines to find the information they're interested in. By including keywords in your content, you can increase your search rankings, which will make your content seem more valuable and make it more likely the user will click on *your* content as opposed to someone else's.

Keywords:

- Are the words and phrases that define what people are searching for
- Describe the topics you write about

Why It Matters

Keyword research is important because keywords are how people find your content. If you use words to describe your products but your audience doesn't use those words to search for products, they aren't going to find you and you're going to face a steep uphill battle to get traffic to your site.

People use keywords to find solutions to their problems when they are conducting research online. If you're successful with your keywords, your content has a better chance of getting in front of the people who are looking for the information which will mean more traffic for you.

Among the many benefits of conducting keyword research are:

- **Marketing trend insights**
- **Traffic growth**
- **Acquiring more customers**

Is Keyword Research Still Relevant?

It's no secret that keyword research has changed immensely in the last 10-15 years. If you're willing to evolve with these changes, keyword research is still incredibly useful and relevant.

In the past, the goal of keyword research was to stuff the keywords into your content in the hopes of pushing your pages to the top of the search results. Search engine algorithms have evolved past that.

Some hallmarks of search algorithms used today include:

- More and more people are using their voices to search rather than typing in keywords. **Natural language** changes keywords fundamentally because it changes the format of the request.
- Search engines try to bring you the most relevant content to your request and oftentimes will answer your query in an **answer box.** This is usually based on well-optimized, relevant content.
- **Semantics.** Optimizing content for a single phrase is no longer enough. You also have to include related phrases that mean basically the same things.

Essential Concepts of Keyword Research

Before we jump right into doing keyword research, let's explore some of the essential concepts. This will be helpful later when we start learning how to actually accomplish keyword research.

Understanding Keyword Types

There are three main types of keyword types used:

- **Head or short-tail keywords:** Usually just 1-2 words with a high search volume.
- **Body, modifier, or medium-tail keywords:** These are 2-3 word phrases with moderate search volume.
- **Long-tail keywords:** Four or more words strung together with low search volume. They are the bulk of web traffic.

Your focus keyword or key phrase is a word or phrase you want search engines to find on a certain page of your website. Determining your focus keyphrases is done through keyword research.

Keywords vs. Topics

SEO has evolved a tremendous amount over the past 10-15 years and some believe that keywords have become relatively unimportant in your ability to rank well for the searches people are making. But this isn't completely true. Keywords still matter, just as covering topics does.

Latent Semantic Indexing

Latent semantic indexing (LSI) is basically search engines using word association to decide what content searchers will find most relevant.

Since LSI helps the search engines give people the most relevant results, part of a good keyword strategy is finding LSI keywords you can utilize in your content.

Understanding Keyword Intent

To make the most of your keyword research for content creation, SEO, or marketing in general, you have to understand the intent of the searcher.

There are four different ways to describe keyword intent:

- **Navigational:** Users searching for a particular website.
- **Informational:** Users searching for the answer to a question.
- **Investigational:** Users searching for information that may lead to a conversion.
- **Transactional:** Users are ready to buy.

Knowing the intent of the search will help you determine which keywords will help you rank the best.

Key Elements of Keyword Research

When you're conducting keyword research, there are three main elements you should pay attention to.

- **Relevance**
- **Authority**
- **Volume**

Your keyword strategy is based on your keyword research. You'll decide which content you're going to create, which keywords you'll focus on, and where you will publish it.

Getting Started With Keyword Research

The very first thing you need, before anything else, is to know your target audience. Until you know exactly who is looking for your products, you won't know how to target them with your marketing.

Determine Your SEO Goals

Before you get started, it's a good idea to outline the goals of your SEO strategy. **You can get started with questions like:**

- What is the main goal of my business?
- What separates my business from the competition?
- Who is my target audience?
- What values are important to my business?
- What promises do I make to my customers?

Once you've developed a mission statement and know the goals you're hoping to accomplish with your marketing strategy, you'll have taken a huge first step in developing your keyword strategy.

What are you hoping to accomplish with your keyword research and SEO? There are many answers to this question.

- Brand recognition
- Conversions
- Industry authority
- Thought leadership
- Increased traffic
- Audience growth

Knowing what you hope to accomplish with your SEO strategy and keyword research will make finding the right ones a lot easier.

Making a List of Keywords

For this part of the keyword research process, you're going to try to get into the minds of your target market and brainstorm. While keeping your mission and goals in mind, **ask yourself these questions:**

- What are they looking for?
- What search terms will they use to look for your product or service?
- What problems does your product solve?

One simple strategy is to make a list of relevant topics based on what you already know about your business and your audience. These are general topics that you'd like to rank for. Put each of them in a virtual bucket. Try for about 5-10 topic buckets.

Once you have a few topic buckets to focus on, you can start filling them up with keywords related to the buckets. These are the keywords and phrases you think are important to rank for in SERPs and that your target customer is probably searching for.

Research the Keywords You've Come Up With

Once you've created your list, you can start diving a bit deeper into your keywords. There are some really great tools available to make keyword research go a bit easier for you.

The first tool is Google. Yep, that's right, just Google the keywords you've come up with and check the searches that Google suggests while you are typing. Those suggestions are actual questions people asked Google. You can also check the "related searches" on the results page.

How Intent Affects Keyword Research

The way Google sees it, it's more important that your content addresses the problem a searcher intends to solve rather than just inserting the words the searcher used.

What does this mean for keyword research?

Unfortunately, keywords can have different meanings beneath the surface. The intent is so important to your rankings that you'll have to be cognizant of how the keywords you target could be interpreted.

Keyword Research Tools

There are a lot of great tools out there to help you come up with more keyword ideas and to help you easily find information like search volume, ranking difficulty, keyword value, competition, etc. Here are some favorites to get you started:

- Ahrefs offers keyword research, content, and SEO tools.
- Google Adwords Keyword Planner is a great tool that allows you to evaluate monthly global and local search volumes for keywords, competition levels, and estimate cost per click.
- SEMrush provides keyword data and helps you find keywords related to your search terms. This is a paid tool but also has a free option.

Using Your Keywords

Once you have a great list of keywords, you'll need to decide which ones you want to rank for and where you're going to use them.

Use Google Keyword Planner to Whittle Down Your List

Google's Keyword Planner allows you to search the volume and traffic estimates for the keywords you're thinking about using. Once you have this information, you can use Google Trends to refine your choices.

Prioritize Your Best Chances

Based on your website's authority, you can prioritize the keywords that you have a chance of ranking for on Google.

Big companies with well-established brands typically go after the high search volume keywords and Google rewards them with top-ranking authority on many topics. You should consider prioritizing keywords that have little competition.

Research the Monthly Search Volume (MSV) for the Keywords You Choose

MSV is the number of times a query or keyword is entered into a search engine during the month. Tools like Google Trends can help you discover the most searched keywords and related keyword clusters.

Consider SERP Features

Here's a quick overview of what types of SERP featured snippets are:

- **Image packs:** These are search results displayed in a horizontal row of images. If there's an image pack for your chosen keyword, you should write an image-heavy post to rank over it.

- **Paragraph snippets:** Featured or paragraph snippets are short snippets of text that appear at the top of the search results to give the searcher a quick answer to a common search query. Having a good understanding of the searcher's intent and giving a concise answer can help you to rank better.
- **List snippets:** These snippets are designed for posts that outline the steps to do something from start to finish. You'll often find them when making a "how-to" search. Creating content with direct, clear instructions can assist in winning a top ranking here.
- **Video snippets:** These are short videos that search engines display at the top spot in a query instead of text-based snippets. Posting a video on YouTube and your website helps you get this ranking if you tag the target keywords people are looking for.

Make Sure Each Bucket Has a Mix of Short and Long-Tail Keywords

Short-tail or head terms are the keyword phrases that are shorter and more generic. Usually, they are 1-3 words in length. Long-tail keywords are longer and more specific; three or more words.

Head terms are searched for more frequently, which generally makes them much more competitive and harder to rank for but they will give you the most search volume.

But, your long-tail keywords may be more desirable. As discussed earlier, someone who is searching for something more specific is likely a more qualified lead rather than someone looking for something more generic.

Observe How Your Competition Is Ranking

Just because a keyword is important to your competition's rankings doesn't mean you have to also use it. But, knowing what keywords your competition is trying to rank for is a great way to evaluate your list of keywords.

Best Keywords for SEO

The best choices for SEO will take into account relevance, volume, and authority. Your goal is to find highly searched keywords that you can realistically compete for based on:

- The level of competition for the keywords.
- Your ability to create content that is better than what's currently ranking.

Where to Use Keywords in Your Content

Once you've finalized your list of keywords, you can start placing them into your content. Actually optimizing your content for SEO is a little more complicated but to get started, **you can start using keywords in these key areas:**

- **Page title**
- **Meta description**
- **Links and social media**

You'll also use keywords and related terms throughout each piece of content. Just be careful to avoid stuffing keywords - Google will know and penalize you for it in rankings.

Top 5 Tips for Better Keyword Research

Now that you're on your way to conducting quality keyword research, here are some tips for doing the best keyword research you can possibly do.

Tip #1: Decide Your Scope Before You Start

It can be easy to get started doing keyword research and start going off-topic when you don't know what you're really looking for. Spending hours mindlessly making notes of every term that seems remotely relevant to your website is not an efficient strategy.

Tip #2: Monthly Search Volume Is Important but Intent Is Key

The MSV means very little if you have no real chance of getting onto pages 1-2 of the rankings or if your content doesn't give the user what they're searching for.

Enter intent: Understanding what users are really looking for when they type in a keyword. A good rule is to check Google to find out what is actually ranking for a particular keyword before you decide on your target.

Tip #3: Use Google Search

Type in your keyword but before you hit enter, take a look at what Google is suggesting as relevant variants. It's a great place to start looking for quality long-tail keywords.

Tip #4: Target Variations, Queries and Questions

Once you find the keywords or queries that you want to use in your content, there are still opportunities to get your content to rank higher. Variations of that keyword can be used on the same page. When you target synonyms and semantically related keywords, you can help to expand your keywords and improve your rankings.

Tip #5: Use the Tools Available to You

Don't be afraid to learn how to use the tools available for keyword research. This is especially true of the ones from Google, because they are free, which makes them a great place to get started.

Keyword research can be overwhelming when you're first getting started, don't be afraid to utilize tools and tutorials for tips and tricks to make it easier.