Alphire Digital Marketing

10 Reasons You will NEVER See a Positive ROI from SEO… and What You Should Do About It

by

Dane Christensen

Alphire Digital Marketing

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10 Reasons You will NEVER See a Positive ROI from SEO — and What You Should Do About It

Introduction

If you've been starting to doubt whether you're getting your money's worth for your SEO budget, you're on the right track. The entire SEO market is teaming with shady operators who talk a good game, but never actually deliver any tangible results.

But it's much worse than that.

The truth is that the SEO scammers are just the tip of the iceberg — a symptom of the real problem, which is that the entire SEO/Organic Search field is a sprawling collective racket that will simply waste the budgets of most small and medium websites.

In the pages that follow, we expose the knowledge that your advertising agency or SEO consultant does not want you to know (and maybe doesn't even know themself). Each one of these ten key reasons is irrefutably revealed as a factor in reducing the odds that you will ever see a significant amount of verifiable traffic as a result of your investment of time and money in SEO.

This analysis finally reveals exactly *how* the SEO landscape is drastically tilted against smaller websites, and why all the money you pay to SEO agencies, consultants, contractors or employees goes right down the drain.

Don't spend another dollar on SEO services until you finish reading this report.

The Long Tail Cliff

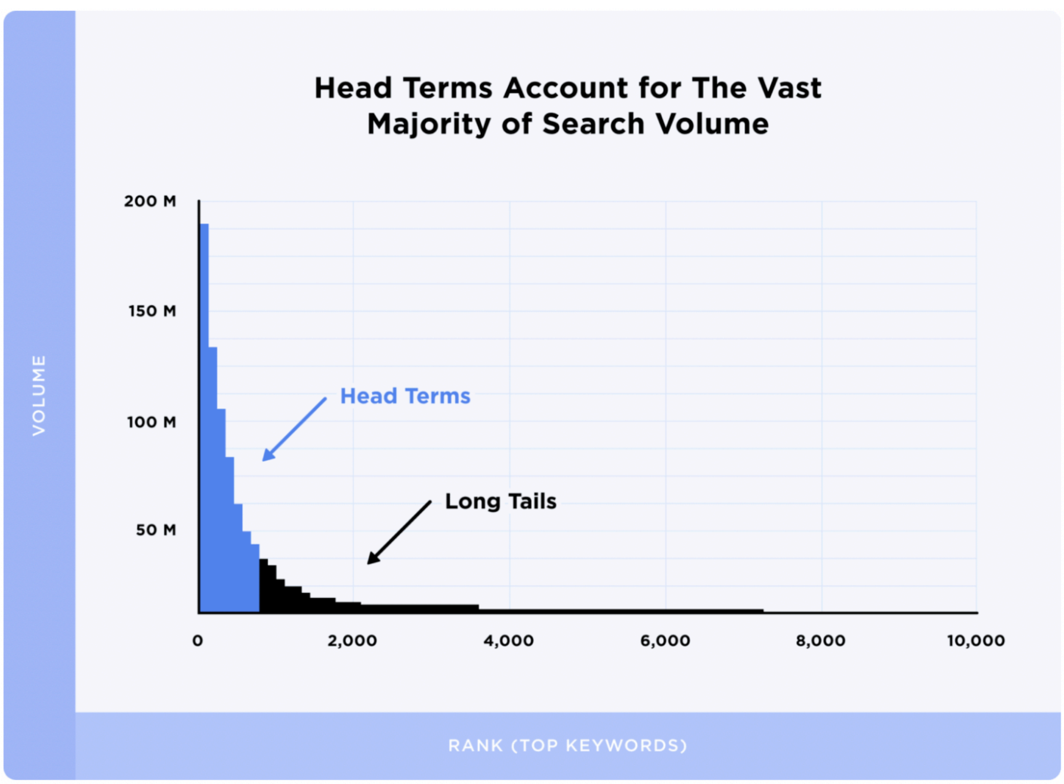
It was common knowledge from the early days of search engines that ranking near the top of search results for Root Keywords (or Head Keywords) was very difficult. So SEO practitioners have long hailed the 'long tail' as the watchword for SEO success.

Long tail keywords are all the possible phrases or word combinations that derive from a root phrase. For example, the root phrase 'digital marketing agency' could be associated with a wide array of associated words and phrases like 'best digital marketing companies', 'ppc marketing agencies', etc. The idea is that the long tail is so long that there are plenty of long tail keywords for everyone.

What SEO specialists don't tell you is that the drop-off in search volume for root keywords to that of long tail phrases is precipitous. The volume for a root term is often one or two orders of magnitude higher than the highest volume long tail terms. That means long tail terms get from 1% to 10% the click volume of root terms.

This pattern isn't ubiquitous, of course. Some words have a more balanced distribution between root and long tail keywords. But the overall pattern is clear.

Here's another way to look at this phenomenon. [An analysis by Backlinko] revealed that even though long tail phrases account for 91.8% of the phrases people searched for, all long tail searches combined only account for 3.3% of total search volume.



In other words, the vast majority of searches on the web (96.7%) are for the relatively few (8.2%) root keywords, while a very small share of searches (3.3%) are spread out among a vast number (91.8%) of long tail keywords.

These metrics also dispel the myth that while root words are clearly the most popular, the vast breadth of long tail keywords more than makes up for it. Based on the fact that root keywords account for 8.2% of searches and long tail keywords account for 91.8%, there are on average roughly 11 long tail words per root keyword. Long, sure — but not that long. Given that the root keyword has 10 to 100 times more searches, it's easy to see that the vast majority of all search queries are made for root keywords.

The point being, that small to medium websites that can't expect to rank anywhere near the top of search results for root keywords are completely missing out on the vast majority of website searches.

While all SEO practitioners must acknowledge the prominence of root keywords and the difficulty in ranking for them, standard operating procedure is to subtly downplay the exponential scale of the Long Tail Cliff, and the extreme difficulting of scaling it.

The Top Ten Slide

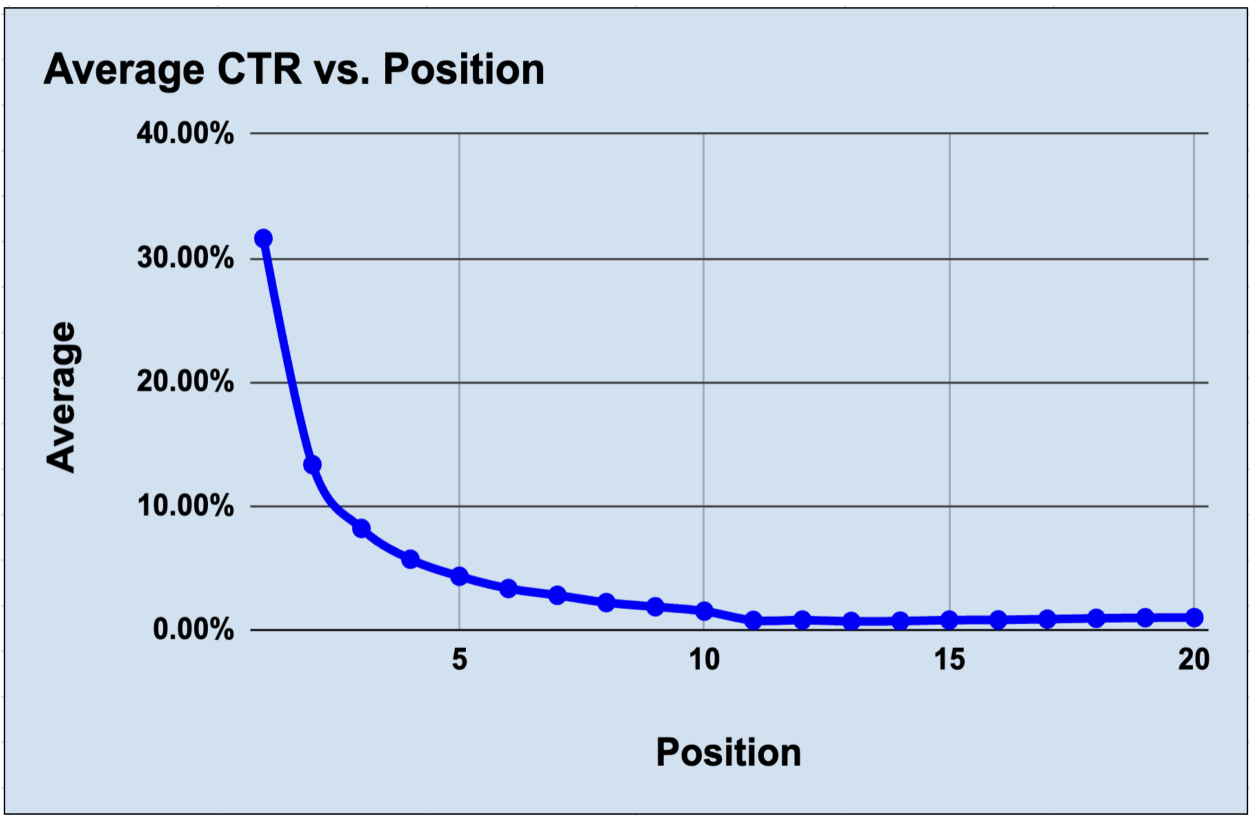
Once visitors reach a search results page, the question is, which links are they going to click on? SEO gurus will tell you that they are working really hard to boost you into the Top 10 positions in the search rankings so you can get your share of those organic search clicks.

What they won't tell you is that even getting into the Top Ten isn't enough. The vast majority of clicks are going to the top three search results. The click through rate (CTR) plummets so rapidly over the first three or four positions, that the rate tapers off because there's not much further it can drop.

Various studies and analyses have been conducted that invariably show that CTR is vastly higher for the first three positions, before dramatically dropping off on the fourth or fifth result, and quickly tapering off to around 1% by result #10. Past the first ten results, the CTR is negligible.

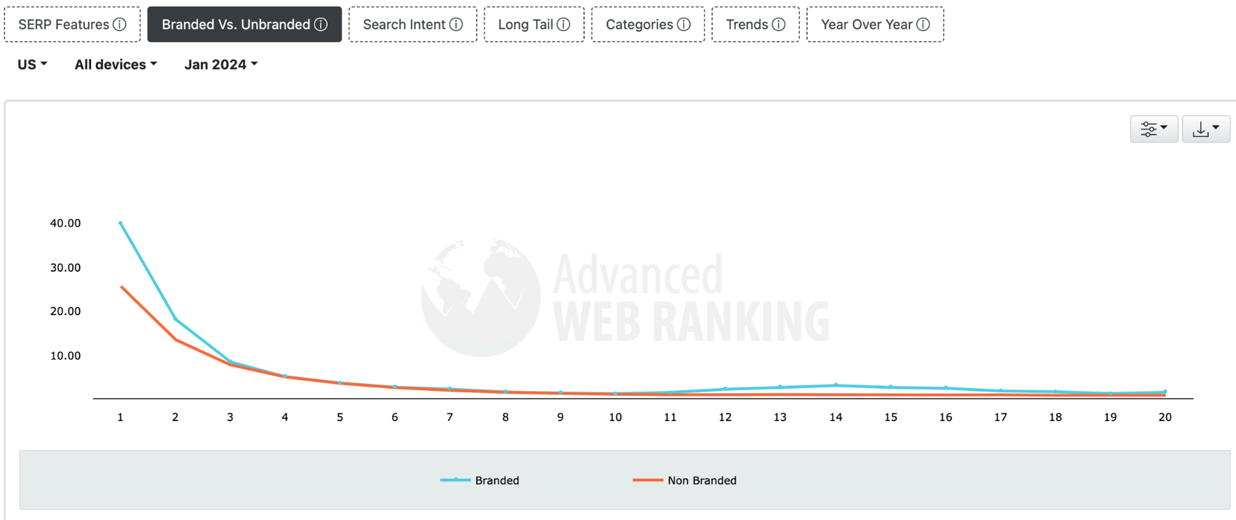
Alphire Digital Marketing Agency did a meta-analysis of six of the most authoritative studies on SERP CTRs in order to arrive at a consensus picture of the the Top Ten Slide. We averaged the findings for each of the following major studies:

Organization	Source
Advance Web Ranking	[Google Organic CTR History]()
First Page Sage	[Google Click-Through Rates (CTRs) by Ranking Position in 2024]()
SEJ	[Branded vs Non-Branded Organic CTRs on Desktop, Mobile]()
SEO Clarity	[Largest Ever CTR Study]()
Backlinko	[Here's What We Learned About Organic Click Through Rate]()
Sistrix	[These are the CTR's For Various Types of Google Search Result]()



SEOClarity and Search Engine Journal both returned somewhat atypical results, with the former showing the results as much more skewed toward the number one position, and the latter showing CTRs significantly lower overall than the others. But the other four reports are in a similar range, so our averaged results look fairly similar to each of those studies.

This graph from the Advanced Web Ranking report is a typical representation of the Top-Ten Slide.



This data shows conclusively that the huge torrents of traffic promised by purveyors of SEO services go almost entirely to the websites that gain those coveted Top Three positions.

The combination of these first two factors dramatically reduces the pool of organic traffic within reach of the average website. The vast majority of organic search traffic goes to the websites that show up in the Top Three positions for Root Keywords. All the organic rankings outside of this very narrow subset will result in relatively low click volume.

Now let's take a closer look at just what is involved in getting those few precious slots that garner all the clicks, and what is available outside of them.

A Global SEO Arms Race

If you are spending money on SEO services, you are engaged in an arms race with super powers that you can never hope to win.

For almost any given keyword with any potential commercial relevance, there will be dozens or hundreds of major competitors including corporations, mega portals, media companies, thought leaders, competitors, and more — all spending money on SEO to try and beat you to the Top Three spots.

Given the highly competitive nature of the field, it is extremely rare for a small player to rise into these top positions for any keyword of any value (with one exception, covered below). Therefore, all the small players must fight amongst themselves over the relatively few deep-rank, long tail key phrases.

And just because the lucrative Top Three positions for high-volume root words are all taken by major players, doesn't mean those giants won't be competing with you for all the lower positions on the long tail keywords, as well. So it's worth taking a closer look at them and all the other types of entities you'll be competing with for any SERP ranking of relevance.

Mega hubs

For a vast number of searches, the first, second and third positions are likely to be taken by mega hubs like Wikipedia, Amazon, Quora, Reddit, Medium, and many others. These sites have an extremely broad footprint thanks to crowdsourced and user-generated content developed by a vast army of contributors, so it's impossible to compete with them in terms of keyword relevance. And they are extremely high Domain Authority (DA) sites.

Obviously, your average little site has no chance of beating these behemoths.

Industry Hubs and Publications

For just about every topic, interest or industry under the sun, there are also sites dedicated to being the primary hub or portal for that specific interest. These sites don't have nearly the breadth of coverage that the mega hubs described above do, but in their particular domain, they do have large collections of deep, focused, and fresh content. They also have very high authority scores.

These sites will invariably beat yours on any keywords you compete for.

Comparison Sites

If you sell software applications or SaaS, before anyone sees your website they will see all the comparison sites like G2, Capterra, TrustRadius, Trustpilot, GetApp and several others. For other sectors, such as legal, health care, housing, automotive, travel and most other aspects of life, similar intermediary sites have emerged to provide reviews and guidance to help people narrow down their searches.

In addition to having huge DAs and high engagement on the SERPs, these sites have the best keyword juice on the root terms that define their field.

Multinational Corporations

Depending on your business, you could find yourself competing with large corporations. These companies have massive Domain Authority (DA) by virtue of their ubiquitous products, services and customers. They have software engineers designing their site at the code level for SEO optimization and staff dedicated to generating mountains of SEO optimized content.

The only keywords you're going to beat these monsters out for are the few that slip through their fine-meshed nets.

Large Institutions/Organization

If you aren't competing against major corporations, you might be competing with other types of organizations such as colleges and universities, non-profit organizations, government agencies, religious organizations, etc. These sites may not have all the technical firepower and budget to throw at SEO, but they often have very high DA by virtue of the scope of their endowments, budgets, followership, and share of mind.

Websites for organizations like these won't beat your site for ranking because they care about SEO so much. They'll beat you because they are simply bigger and better known than your company.

Media Giants and Publishers

As if running that gauntlet wasn't enough, now we come to the biggest monster of all so far: The Media. Hundreds and thousands of news and entertainment companies whose very business model depends on producing content and getting it in front of eyeballs. They churn out content in every format possible on every topic imaginable, generated by skilled professionals who are supported by an infrastructure designed to streamline distribution.

Do you think even one of them has forgotten to make SEO a standard part of their process? They haven't. And they will beat you every time.

Thought Leaders

So far we've covered six categories of competitors that could represent dozens or hundreds of organizations, each one of which with a sprawling, heavy footprint.

And then there's the thought leaders and influencers. These are the little guys, but they are legion. They are the consultants, analysts, agencies, and firms who want to establish authority in their field while generating organic traffic in the process. They won't crush you easily like all the major players, but they just keep coming; collectively churning out an endless flood of useful, engaging, keyword-rich content, increasingly with the aid of AI tools.

Only the best of these producers occasionally crack the Top Three for long tail keywords, but you'll find the leaders and the long tail of influencers spread throughout the lower ranks of the long tail keywords along with all the rest of your competitors.

Direct Competitors

Having covered this host of website types ranging from the super massive to the bit players, all vying for the coveted Top Three positions, we come at last to your direct competitors.

Whatever product, service, or content you provide, you probably have a list of three to seven companies that you come up against consistently — all the usual suspects. Chances are, these were the only companies you were really thinking about when considering how to 'beat the competition' in terms of SEO.

They should be the least of your concerns.

Unless they are a really major player themselves, your direct competitors are probably no more likely than you to prevail against the horde I've just described.

Competition Summary

So far we have seen that between the Long Tail Cliff and the Top-Ten Slide, you are really only in the running for a tiny fraction of all the keyword searches out there. And now it should be clear that you are competing with hundreds of websites, most of them much bigger and well-known than yours, all of whom have also been convinced that SEO is essential, and devote a good deal of resources to it.

At this level, ironically, the rival with the 'SEO Advantage' is the one who wastes the least amount of their limited resources chasing elusive organic clicks, and instead applies them more effectively elsewhere.

The Google Gauntlet

Before a visitor Googling your targeted keyword ever sees an organic link, they must first run the gauntlet of all the features (read: distractions) placed in the way by Google.

Of course, Google doesn't think of them as distractions. Nor do their users. They're trying to add value for their users by providing the most, best resources they possibly can in all the formats their users require. And apparently they are getting it right, because people keep going back to Google.

So it's a Win-Win.

It's just not so much a Win-Win-Win when it comes the average website operators.

For all but the biggest players, if you're counting on a steady flow of traffic from SEO, you're bound to be disappointed when you find your site buried under scroll after scroll of quality content and information, impeccably curated by AI, all of which is more relevant and important than yours, by design.

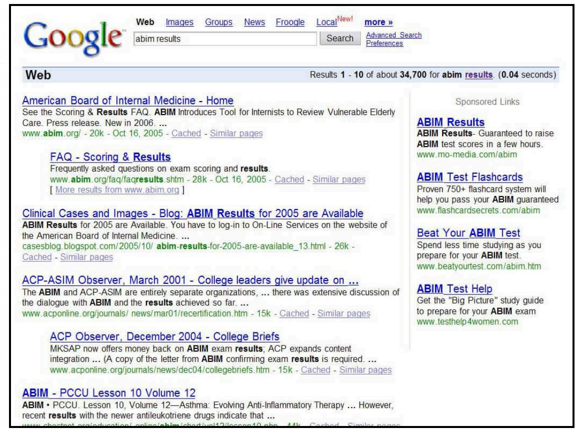
Following are the various types of features/distractions your would-be visitors will have to ignore on their way to finding your page. Not every search will generate every single one of these types of results, but every search is certain to include several of them.

Google's AI understands the nature of every search, and provides the most appropriate and compelling elements for that search.

Sponsored (Ads)

Of course, the 800-pound gorilla is Sponsored Ads. In the early days, Google's clean, minimalist interface was one of its standout features. Just a simple search field in the middle of the screen and a handful of navigation links. And on the search results page, a crisp set of useful organic results as the main content on the left, and a set of highly relevant sponsored ads stacked neatly in a column on the right.

Ever since Google eliminated the right column ads and moved sponsored links to positions above and below the organic search results on February 19, 2016, the distinctions between paid and organic links have been blurred in the minds of visitors, as the quantity and complexity of Google Ads have gradually expanded.



These days, it's common to have an entire screen full of ads and not see the first organic listings until after you scroll. And the continuous scroll basically results in sets of Organic and Sponsored links all shuffled together. So Sponsored links remain a distraction no matter how far down a visitor has to scroll to find your organic site.

Images

Images are one of those features/distractions that only show up when Google determines that visual representations would be useful to the user. (Of course, the user always has the ability to click into the images results from the navigation menu, too.)

Given that a picture is worth a thousand words, engaging graphics are bound to siphon off a certain percentage of people. Websites that include lots of high-quality, clearly identifiable graphics will benefit from this feature.

If that sounds like an SEO optimization opportunity, consider the fact that the sites with all the great graphics are generally the ones that can afford to pay skilled graphic designers to create infographics, memes, and other forms of compelling visual assets. The images feature, while beneficial to the users, Google, and the big players, is just another way to steer organic traffic away from the smaller players' buried text links.

Videos

Related videos are just images on steroids. Videos are more compelling than static images. And they require more resources to create. So video content is a turbocharged way to drive traffic away from deep text links and to the big budgets of major players.

Shopping

The shopping bar appears when searches indicate a clear intent to find products for sale, and it is one potential bright spot for smaller players. Any ecommerce shop that gets properly set up with Google Merchant and Google Ads can place themselves in a Google Shopping scroll side-by-side with the biggest players in the field.

Of course, these aren't free, organic clicks. This is PPC traffic. But at least small players can get equivalent visibility to the giants here.

As for SEO, the quick and easy accessibility to matching products from all types of players at the very top of the search results ensures that those who are willing to pay directly for clicks will be rewarded, while ecommerce shops hoping to generate sales through free organic text links will most certainly be disappointed.

Top Stories

If the search term entered has any relevance to current events, Google is likely to include a Top Stories section near the top of their search results page. This section will include the most recent, most relevant, and most popular news stories related to the query from the most popular media sites that the visitor tends to like. These compelling news stories have a good chance of picking off a large portion of searches who aren't intent on finding a website promoting content, products or services.

People Also Ask

The Google search results page will almost certainly include a 'People Also Ask' section that includes links to similar search queries. Again, this is convenient for users who might see a better way to phrase their query. But it doesn't help low profile websites.

The major 'high authority' competitors are likely to show up near the top of the search results for all of the related searches, so they'll get the clicks either way. But for smaller websites that just happened to squeak into reasonably high rankings for one of these terms, it's just another chance for potential visitors to be diverted.

Knowledge Graph Panels

Knowledge graph panels are interactive boxes that appear on the right side of Google's search results pages (SERPs). They are visual representations of data from the Knowledge Graph, which is a virtual encyclopedia of facts. Knowledge panels are designed to help users quickly understand a topic by providing a snapshot of information based on Google's understanding of available content on the web.

So for all those Google searchers who are just looking for the quickest answer to their question, Knowledge Graph Panels will often do the trick, providing the visitor with all they wanted without ever having to scroll at all.

Great for the user.

Terrible for websites hoping for free organic traffic.

MaxAI

And finally, there's the ultimate feature/distraction that renders SEO virtually irrelevant — MaxAI. Google's sophisticated AI technology assembles all the most important and relevant information about the query into a clear and concise presentation. It's similar to the Knowledge Graph Panels, only it is more directly driven by AI.

It's the most effective way yet to help users find exactly what they want without having to scroll through a bunch of websites.

Between all these various types of rich media, Google's search results page today is so busy they make the landscape banners of yesteryear seem quaint by comparison. That said, these modern AI-powered search results are far more sophisticated and helpful to web surfers than ever before.

These gains have been achieved by designing a highly competitive environment in which only the cream of the crop rise to the surface, and the rich get richer while the also-rans languish.

Branded Organic

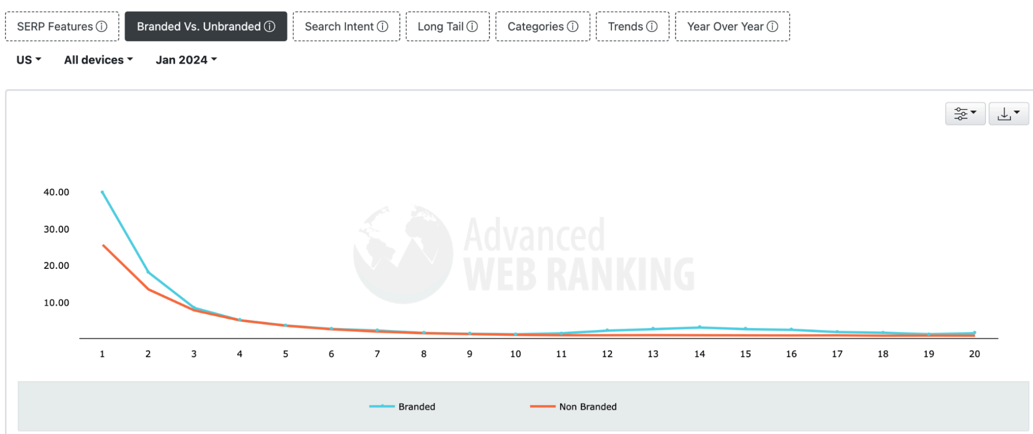
There is one exception to the Top Three Slide rule: Your brand name. On almost all of the Non-branded keywords, those top three slots go to the big players. But on searches for your brand name — and your brand name alone — you get to rank in the top three consistently.

The number of searches and clicks you can expect for your company name is a function of your web presence and socio economic footprint. For most companies, that means there is a relatively small number of searches on your brand name. However, that top ranking means most of those clicks will go to you.

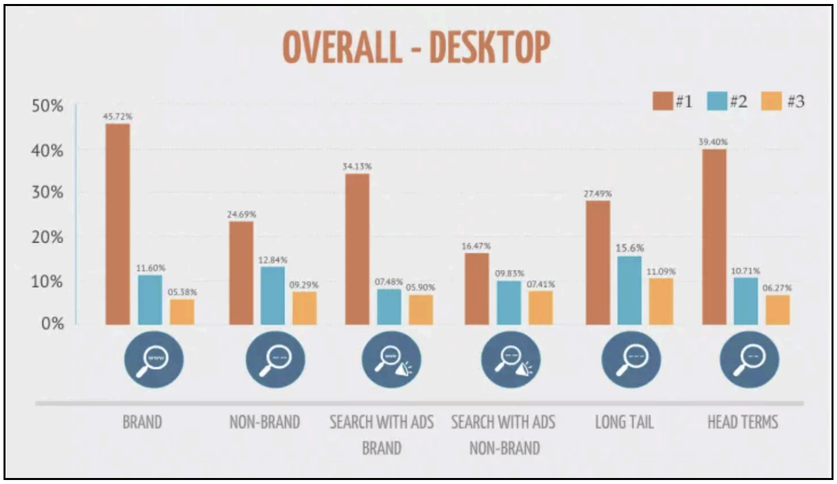
The combination of the searchers' obvious intent to find you and your top ranking results in the fact that your branded keywords probably account for somewhere in the neighborhood of 80% ± 15% of all organic search queries found in Google Search Console.

The Evidence for Organic Branded Dominance

The Google Organic CTR History report produced by Advanced Web Ranking referenced above also clearly shows on the line graph that a sizable majority of clicks come from branded keywords as opposed to unbranded.



A major study by Search Engine Journal titled Branded vs Non-Branded Organic CTRs on Desktop, Mobile that analyzed 160k keywords across 400 websites showed a massive difference in the click through rate (CTR) between branded and non-branded keywords.



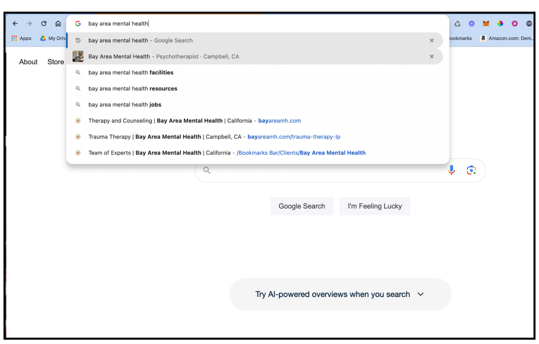
(Notice how this chart also illustrates the [Top Ten Slide] covered above.)

Both of the last two analyses focused on the difference in the CTR between Branded and Non-branded keywords. Of course, these studies are simply confirming what we intuitively understand. It makes sense that when someone types in a brand name, and that brand name comes up at the top of the search results, the CTR is going to be higher.

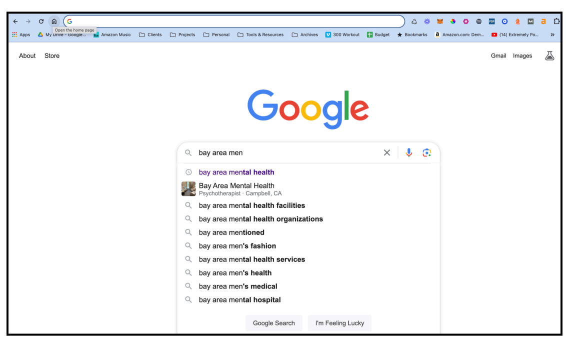
That elevated CTR accounts for the reason that Branded keywords make such a huge proportion of the organic visitors to your website.

Direct Visitors + Branded Organic Visitors

Just like the 30% of Direct visitors who were specifically looking for your site, the 80% of Branded Organic visitors were also looking specifically for you. They just happened to type your name into the Google search field rather than the web browser URL field — that's all.



Visitor types name into browser search field



Visitor types types name into Google Search form

The truth is that about a quarter to a third of visitors were looking for you by name via the browser field, and about another third of visitors were looking for you by name via the Google search form.

When you look at your Google Analytics and it breaks down your traffic sources by Channel, now you'll know to collapse the Direct Channel with the Branded Organic Search channel. Consolidate all the other channels, and what you are likely to find is a breakdown of your traffic that looks something like this:

- Searching for you by name (Branded Organic + Direct) ~ 65%
- Various other channels (organic social, paid social, referrals, etc.) ~ 25%
- Unbranded Organic Search ~ 10%

So far we've seen that because of the Long Tail Cliff, the Top Three Slide, and massive competition from a vast array of formidable competitors, you are likely to receive only a tiny share of those clicks. Here we see that of the few Organic clicks you do receive, the majority of them were searching for you specifically, and SEO played virtually no part in them finding you.

Now let's proceed to strip away even more of the value of these Organic Search Visitors.

Bullseye Target Audience

You may be thinking that even if your modest website does only catch a relatively few crumbs that slip through the cracks, that's still a decent number of visitors from your perspective. And after all, these are the highest quality clicks you can get, right?

Well, let's examine that premise by taking a closer look at the profiles of these so-called long tail visitors.

Competitors

Let's start with your competitors. You know, the ones you are so concerned are outranking you in the search results. You can count on the fact that every marketing person, sales rep, executive, and investor from every one of your direct competitors has searched on the keywords related to your mutual business models, and followed the links to your site.

You know when you go into Google Analytics and segment out the high quality visitors who check out lots of pages and spend a lot of time on your site, and even convert — multiple times?

A lot of those are your competitors.

It's hard to know what percentage of your visitors are your competitors, because it varies across a wide range of factors. Even the term 'competitors' is fuzzy. But think about it. Have you checked out your competition's website? Have others from your company checked them out? So…

Vendors

The number of competitors scouring your site is probably dwarfed by the number of would-be vendors who have one service or another that they think would benefit your company. If you think your competitors are high-quality visitors, then you're going to love the vendors. They are very interested in learning everything about you, and spend plenty of time poking around your site.

They may not be quite as inquisitive as your competitors, but there are so many more of them. For every aspect of your company involving money, from finance to HR to marketing to development to operations to your tech stack to your supply chain, there are several vendors who would love to win your business.

And they all need to do their due diligence if they really want to make the sale, which means perusing your website.

Press/Analysts/Researchers

This one may not be the biggest group, but it’s significant enough to mention. Depending on your industry and your position in it, some portion of your visitors will be people who are looking into your site because it’s part of their job, not because they have any interest in buying your product or service. They are checking out your site because they are writing an article on ‘The Top 20 ______________ in 2024’ or doing a competitive analysis for a client or something like that.

Job Seekers/Recruiters

Another significant group of visitors are job seekers and the recruiters that represent them. Any company that includes a Careers section or lists a single job opening can expect a steady stream of visits to that page.

How significant the number of visitors of this type is depends largely on the size and nature of your business, but if you are large enough to list careers on your website, it’s likely that search terms including ‘job’, ‘career’, and ‘employment’ will appear frequently in your search queries report.

Employees

Speaking of jobs, another huge chunk of your website visitors are your own employees. It’s your marketing people proofreading a press release. It’s the graphic designer showing off their work to a friend. It’s the HR people double-checking the job listing they just posted. Your employees have a thousand and one reasons to visit your website.

Customers and Prospects

Obviously your existing customers and prospects have reasons to visit your site. It could be to find customer support, or to decide which service level they need, or to find a help document. Depending on the size of your customer base, the traffic from those people who already use your service or are considering it could be substantial.

It’s difficult to cite any sources to support an estimate of just what percentage of website visitors are left after factoring out all these other types of visitors. That’s probably partly due to the fact that this is an incredibly difficult thing to track, as well as to the fact that few people in the SEO industry seem interested in looking into such questions.

But while we don’t have much data to support the argument, logic suggest that given the breadth of the visitor types described above (and probably some we didn’t think of), it’s safe to say that attracting quality visitors is not just about hitting the the target.

You need to hit the bullseye.

The Levers of Power

Any SEO practitioner worth their salt is ready to respond to all of the forgoing criticisms. True, they'll admit, those high-quality long tail keywords are relatively rare, and correspondingly precious — which is all the more reason you need my expert help to make sure you get as much exposure to them as you possibly can.

Only this line is total BS, too.

SEO providers put a lot of effort into creating the perception that they are uber hackers who are pulling all the right levers and turning the right dials to just the right levels in order to align your site with Google's algorithm.

In reality, there are over 200 ranking factors involved in the Google algorithm, and only a fraction of these factors involve anything an SEO specialist has any impact on at all.

Let's just take a look at the Top 8 Ranking Factors according to Backlino:

1 - Quality Content: *The most important SEO factor. Google wants to show users high-quality, informative, and relevant content.*

Your SEO service provider isn't going to add anything to the quality of your content. By 'high-quality, informative, relevant content', they mean as judged by the users, not by the algorithm. In other words, content that reads well and is engaging is going to show more user engagement than content that isn't. That kind of readability will come from a subject matter expert elucidating cogent and maybe even original content, not some SEO service provider. Obviously, articles should contain key words. It would be difficult to write substantial articles on your subject matter without including them.

Any difference made by a SEO service provider in terms of this number one factor is negligible at best, and potentially counterproductive. (e.g. keyword stuffing)

2 - Backlinks: *Links from other websites to your website. They act like votes of confidence. The more high-quality backlinks you have, the higher your website will rank.*

A SEO service provider using tools like Semrush, Ahrefs, The Hoth, and Moz Link Builder, can easily get you submitted to all the directories, publications, and every other property that accepts submissions within a matter of minutes. After that, the difficulty curve spikes dramatically.

At that point, they come up against a wall of Human filters. Those are the filters that require a person to make a decision to invest time and effort into creating a link to your site.

Here's a rule of thumb: If it's an automatic submission, anyone can easily do it, and it isn't worth much. If it requires manual effort and more than one email to arrange, a SEO service provider probably isn't going to make it happen.

3 - Technical SEO: *The technical aspects of your website, such as its website speed, mobile-friendliness, and crawlability. Make sure your website is technically sound so that search engines can easily index and understand your content.*

Many SEO service providers love to emphasize technical optimization, because they know it helps extend their client engagement. The clients don't understand how all that works, and they don't want to know. They just want the SEO service provider to deal with it, however long it takes.

Actually, the technical aspect is not nearly as big a deal as they would like you to believe. Here's what Google says about it technical optimization in their Google Search Essentials document:

> *"There are actually very few technical things you need to do to a web page; most sites pass the technical requirements without even realizing it."*

And to the extent that technical optimization will help, you don't need a SEO service provider for that. Whoever develops or manages your website can easily get a report of all the technical issues using Google PageSpeed Insights, the Google Lighthouse Chrome extension, or GTMetrix. Those are the right people to address these issues, not some SEO service provider.

Pro Tip:
Beware of going down the technical optimization rabbit hole. Check out some of the leading sites on the web and notice that their technical scores aren't that great. That's because solving for speed can create other issues with the site, much of it related to usability. (see below).

The best approach is just to solve the biggest issues as long as the solution doesn't cause any other problems. As soon as you encounter any serious technical challenges, stop there, because you are entering the zone of more-harm-than-good.

No SEO service provider is going to tell you that. Instead, the go down every rat hole they encounter and report back in detail. Technical SEO can keep your contract going indefinitely, but it won't move the dial on your organic traffic.

4 - Keyword Optimization: *The process of using relevant keywords throughout your website's content. This helps search engines understand what your website is about.*

Now we come to the factor that most people associate with SEO — Keyword Optimization. Just how big a factor is Keyword optimization? Well, if we apply the Pareto Principle (the 80-20 rule) to the Google Algorithm, we could roughly guestimate that 80% of the influence is in the top 20% of ranking factors. Keyword Optimization is maybe just 10% of that 80%, so it could account for maybe 8% at most. My opinion based on my experience is that it's probably less than that.

Educated guesses are all we have in terms of such metrics, as Google doesn't publish this kind of information (though they definitely have it). But we think it's safe to say that the relative impact of Keyword Optimization in terms of organic rankings ranges from minimal to negligible.

And SEO service providers don't even have that much influence in this area either. As mentioned above, if you're producing plenty of interesting, relevant content, the keyword optimization will take care of itself. Again, you would be hard pressed to produce lots of meaningful content about your subject matter ***without*** incorporating plenty of keywords and related phrases in the process.

In other words, you don't need a SEO service provider optimizing your keyword density. They think they are being clever by gaming the Google algorithm, when IRL, Google recognizes their ham-handed attempts to flirt with keyword stuffing thresholds and, and either ignores them or possibly even penalizes them.

What Google and its users want is useful, relevant, engaging content with a natural level of keyword use. Any SEO-related tweaks will have an insignificant effect, one way or the other.

5 - User Experience (UX): *A measure of how easy and enjoyable it is for users to use your website. Google wants to show users websites that provide a good UX.*

How do you suppose Google establishes the UX score for every website in order to factor it into the ranking? Is there some single UX score? Or does this 'UX' Factor really represent a whole complex of sub-factors? For example, a clear, obvious, taxonomy of pages set up in a menu formatted in a conventional manner is certainly one of those UX factors. You could argue that page load speed is a key aspect of the UX factor, but that also falls under technical optimization. You can see how fuzzy this all gets.

Not to mention the fact that probably the biggest factor in terms of how it influences behavior is the visual design of the site. Does it have beautiful graphics with lots of attention to detail, yet optimized for fast loading? Do the graphics flow nicely to enhance the copy and clarify the message? Does it employ CSS and JQuery interactivity to increase engagement? Can the visitor just tell that this is a high-quality website that they want to engage with?

Obviously, your UX designer and graphic designers have a lot more to do with this factor than your SEO service provider.

Another key factor in UX is simply using clear messaging in headlines and descriptions. It doesn't take a genius SEO Expert to realize that you should include key phrases in the navigation that link to pages, and that the same phrase should appear as the <H1> headline of the page, and be incorporated into the <H2> description.

This is the kind of basic blocking and tackling that anyone involved in digital marketing, from content developers to web developers, and everyone in between should be clear on. You don't need a SEO service provider to handle this.

6 - Schema Markup: *A type of structured data that you can add to your website to help search engines better understand your content.*

Here we have Backlinko, one of the most respected authorities on SEO, listing Schema Markup as one of the top eight ranking factors, when technically, it isn't a ranking factor at all. Rather, providing information about various established object types in a structured, semantic framework helps search engines understand web page content, which can indirectly affect SEO performance.

That said, this may be the one area where a dedicated SEO service provider can be of some help, only because this is a task that seems to fall between the cracks among all the other roles on the marketing team. It's a thankless task that involves adding structure to websites in order to help Google improve its service, at the expense of website operators. It theoretically yields some unverifiable, indirect benefits to the site operators, but that can't be confirmed.

7 - Social Signals: *The likes, shares, and other social interactions that your website's content receives. Make sure your website is shareable and encourages social interaction.*

Google definitely keeps a close eye on social signals to see who is popular and trending. The organizations that are able to keep pumping out lots of social posts will garner the most attention. The ones that can keep up that pace and also produce high-quality, original content as opposed to rehashing the same material over and over, will fare even better on this factor. Those that elicit engagement from their followers and engage back with them will fare the best of all.

And none of this has anything to do with SEO service providers. Of course they'll make the case that they need to inform the social posts with SEO information, but that's more BS. Just as with all forms of content, you can't send out a steady stream of content without getting in plenty of references to your keywords naturally.

8 - Brand Signals: *The overall perception of your brand online. Make sure your brand is well-known and respected.*

What is the measure of brand signals? Obviously this is another 'Factor' that incompasses any number of actual sub-factors. It's not like they have some 'Brandometer', and every website has a score. Or maybe they do. How would we know?

What does seem clear is that these ‘Brand Signals’ are simply a euphemism for the size of an organization’s socioeconomic footprint. In other words, big, well-known organizations tend to throw out stronger ‘Brand Signals’. Surprise, surprise.

And by now you can probably guess what comes next… this has nothing to do with your SEO service provider.

The Other Factors: We have addressed the top eight search ranking ‘Factors’, and the fact that SEO service providers are not needed and/or make little difference on any of them. But what about the rest of the over 200 factors in the Google Algorithm? Maybe that’s where the SEO service providers really make their mark?

Analyzing every one of the identified factors in terms of SEO service providers importance is beyond the scope of this report. But for now, suffice it to say that, just as it is with keywords, the long tail of SEO Factors basically reflects the Top Factors, in that the only thing that really makes a difference is producing lots of high-quality content and being super popular. All the SEO service providers can do is nibble around the edges of that reality.

SEO service providers would very much like to continue convincing you that they are the Great and Powerful Wizards of the Algorithm, applying the levers of power to direct the torrential flow of visitors in your direction.

The truth is that Google has rendered SEO service providers more like toddlers, confined to a safe playpen with their See-and-Say consoles, pulling on plastic levers and pushing big bright buttons of red, yellow, green, and blue.

The Analytics Gap

The significance of web analytics relative to the world of SEO and Google Search can't be overstated. Web analytics is a subset of the search industry that involves gathering all of the raw data related to web visitor behavior and attributes, and providing tools to slice and dice that data in various ways, with the objective of mining useful insights that can be used to inform and improve the performance of marketing efforts.

Unfortunately, the de facto standard for web analytics today, Google Analytics, provides a surface-level view of website performance by default that, at least in the case of organic search results, actually distorts the reality for people who don't look below the surface, redirecting them toward spending money on useless SEO services.

Do you want to prove it for yourself right now?

Just go into Google Analytics (GA4) and click into Acquisition > Traffic Acquisition. There you should see a graph that shows you all the main traffic sources. If your company spends significantly on Google Ads or any social platforms, then Paid Search or Paid Social will likely be one of the biggest producers of traffic, with Organic Search not far behind. Somewhere in a distant third will be Direct Traffic, and all the others making up small percentages each.

If you don't spend much on Search or Social, then Organic Search is probably the clear leader, followed by Direct Search with a sizable percentage, and Organic Social, Referrals and the rest following that.

That's where most data analysts stop. All their bosses want to know is: Do our metrics look normal? And are we keeping our KPIs going up-and-to-the-right? And since business in general does tend to keep improving, metrics follow suit, and the analysts don't need to dig any deeper than that.

If they did, they'd find what I have described above, which is that ~65-80% of their Organic Search traffic are people who typed the company name, domain name, or other identifying keywords like product names, owner/executive names, etc. into the Google search field instead of the browser field.

By attributing all of these branded visitors to Organic Search they have perpetuated the false assumption that SEO spending or effort had anything to do with it.

This is what we mean by the 'Analytics Gap'.

Even if the web analytics manager did have the initiative to dig into the question of just how many Targeted Organic words actually resulted in conversions, they would find themselves with a significant technical challenge.

In GA4, the only way to get any data at a keyword level is through the Search Console > Queries report. This report provides four metrics:

- Organic Google Search clicks
- Organic Google Search impressions
- Organic Google Search click through rate
- Organic Google Search average position

Notice that conversions is not among those. And GA4 doesn't provide a way to add any kind of conversion column.

The only way to modify this report is to add filters using Dimensions that fall into the following categories.

- Custom
- Demographics
- General
- Geography
- Page / screen
- Platform / device
- Time
- Traffic source
- User lifetime
- User

Notice that none of these refer to conversions, however. That would be too easy.

In order to set up a filter on the Queries result, you have to create a Custom filter that is based on an Event. In order to do this, you first need to set up an event in the GA4 Admin based on the parameter 'search_term' contains [your name].

Of course, it's not that simple, either. Because 'contains [your name]' alone is probably not going to account for all the variations on your company or website name that people might search on to find you, and that represent 'owned' keywords (let alone other 'brand' words like execs, products, etc.). So you probably need a more complicated definition of these words using Boolean logic or even regular expressions.

All this is theoretically possible for Google Analytics masters, but almost no one working in a small or medium company actually goes to this extent.

Instead, they point to how much Organic is producing, point at the Search Engine Console Queries report, and pat themselves on the back *for how many of those organic keywords are turning into brand name searches*, and move on.

People don’t seem to stop and consider the possibility that it is all the Paid Search, Organic Social, and Paid Social that is driving the Direct traffic and most of the Branded Organic Search.

Instead, they prefer to believe that it’s their SEO efforts that produced all that brand awareness.

So the other channels produce all the results, and SEO takes all the credit.

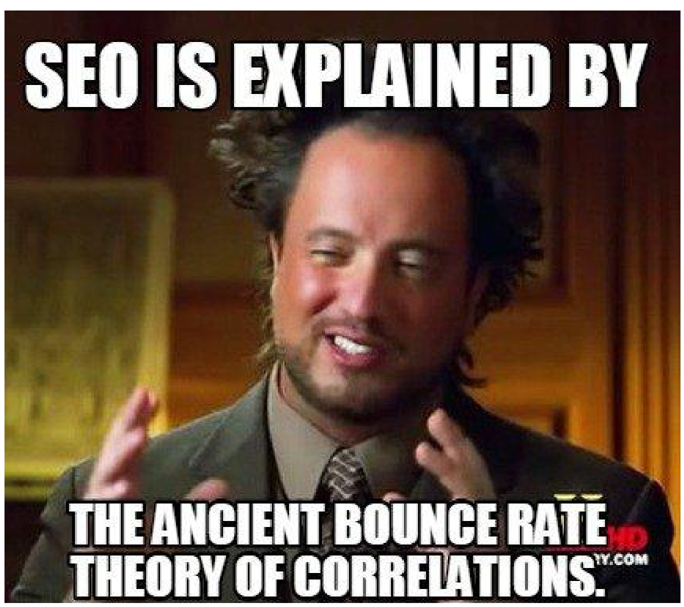
That’s the Analytics Gap.

This very limited set of reporting capabilities only applies to Google Analytics. In the Google Adwords console, you can easily generate reports that show the number of conversions and a wide range of other metrics applied at the search term level. Of course, these metrics only apply to Google Ads, not to organic.

In other words, if you pay money directly for your clicks through Google Ads, you have a powerful set of reporting tools that can provide robust reports with granular control. If you are primarily depending on organic search traffic, the only reporting tools available to you provide a limited and distorted view of reality — one that pushes you in the direction of continuing to waste your money on pointless SEO services.

That’s the Analytics Gap.

The bottom line is, even in the unlikely event that you were generating significant quality leads through your SEO efforts, the chances you’ll be able to prove it are remote.



Artificial Intelligence Has This

All of the above points are devastating to the case for SEO, but they will only be relevant for a short time longer. Whether that timeframe is a couple or a handful of years, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is inevitably going to obviate the entire SEO industry.

It used to be that the Google Algorithm was the black box that all the SEO experts were trying to crack. But the AI running behind the Algorithm is far more mysterious and powerful. While SEO specialists have plausibly touted their ability to game the Google Algorithm, similar notions about pulling the wool over the eyes of AI are laughable at best.

The truth is that Google's AI has already made the SEO specialist moot, as covered in the Levers of Power section above. Google's AI is so sophisticated at understanding what your website is all about and exactly where it fits into the scheme of things, that SEO specialists' lame attempts to direct it's attention are practically meaningless.

Even though SEO efforts are ineffectual in the face of Google's AI, and have been for many years, the industry persists simply due to the collective belief that SEO works.

In order to perpetuate the illusion of relevance, the industry is now shifting to 'AI-enhanced' SEO services. All the SEO tools are scrambling to incorporate some AI-oriented features, as if the AI features were simply ways to extend the capabilities of the Human experts.

This is all a diversion to give the impression that Humans still have a role in the process of determining search rankings — at least for a while longer. But sooner than later, the reality of the situation — that SEO hacks are just noise to be cancelled out amidst the signals Google AI is processing — will become more clear to everyone.

And that's only half of the equation that ensures that the SEO specialist will go the way of typesetters and switchboard operators.

Goodbye SERP

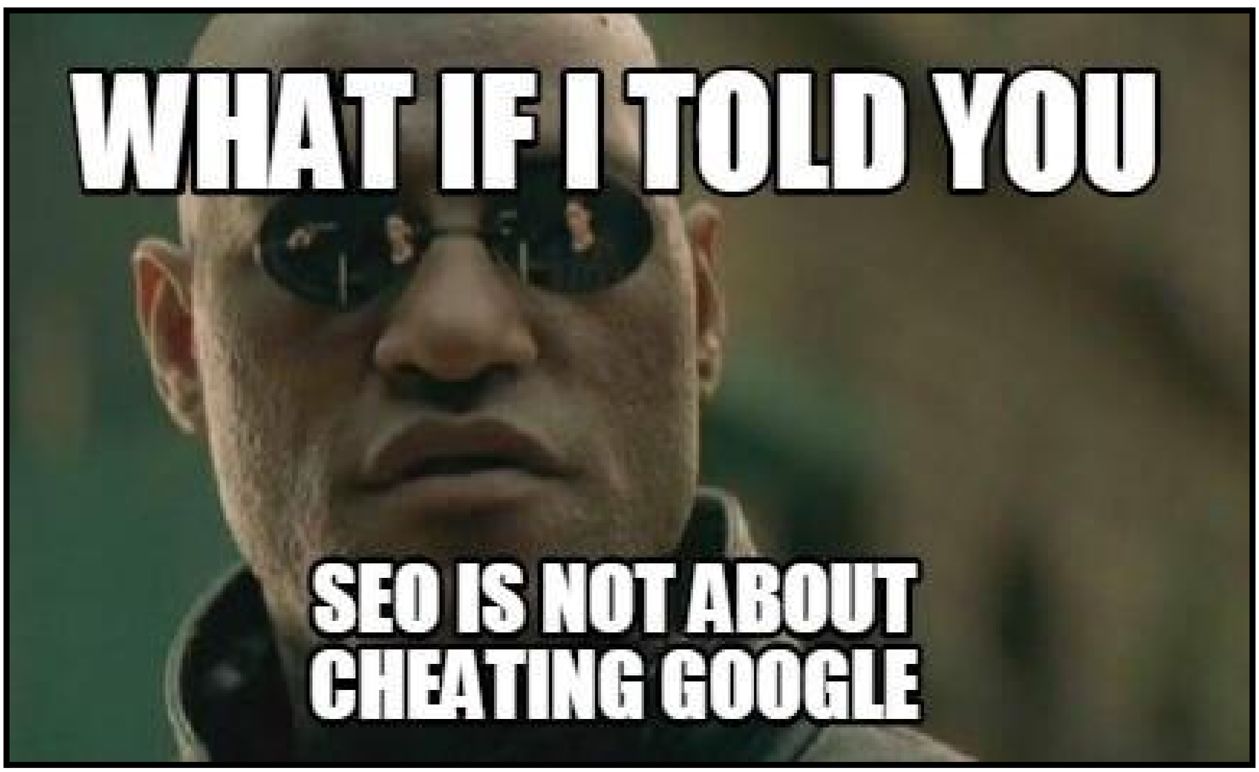
The other reason there is no point in investing in SEO is that not only does AI render the SEO specialist obsolete in terms of Organic search rankings, but AI will ultimately render the Search Engine Results Page (SERP) itself obsolete.

Today, Google is the de facto standard starting point when people decide the need to find something. The SERP is the product of that query, and Google has endeavored to make it provide the closest things to what you actually want. It figures that out based on your search query, data about you and every other website and web user on Earth, along the power of its algorithm.

In time, Google's AI will no longer be serving up a smattering of different resources that it thinks has the best odds of being what you need. As AI develops and inevitably transforms into Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), it will begin to know exactly what the user is trying to accomplish and be able to provide more intentional direction.

Who wants to scroll through search results, wondering if each page is what you need based only on the page title and description, when you can have a highly skilled executive assistant do all the research for you and provide you with a step-by-step plan to accomplish your specific goals in the most time- and cost-effective way?

At some point in the not-too-distant-future, (probably 2-5 years) we will all begin to engage with the Web and the Cloud and AGI in very different ways. And antiquated notions like SEO will be swept away like so many other remnants of a bygone time.

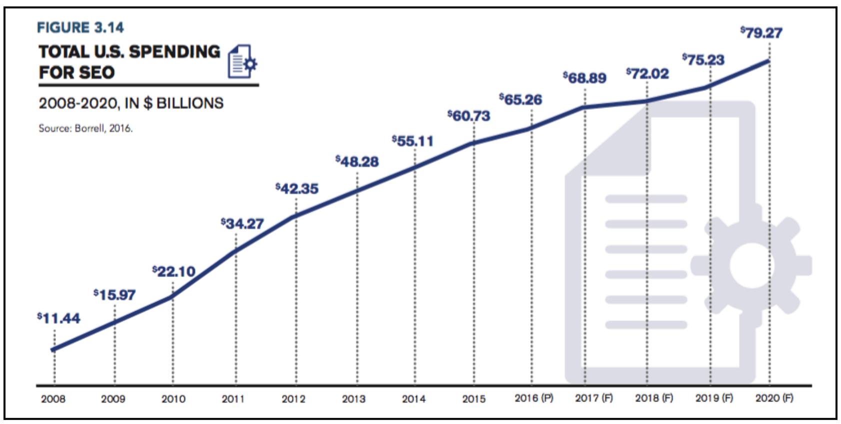


Your Sunk Cost

The title of this report is 'Ten Reasons You will NEVER See a Positive ROI from SEO'. The nine reasons covered so far all applied to the 'Return' side of the Return on Advertising Spend formula. The overall point of all nine reasons was that you are not likely to see much return on your SEO spend.

Now let's focus on the Spend side of the equation.

According to a [report by Borrell Associates](), US businesses spent approximately $80 billion on Search Engine Optimization (SEO) services in 2021, with the majority of businesses spending between $500 and $5,000 per month. If we add all the spending on SEO up since the beginning of the industry, it is approaching a Trillion dollars spent on SEO services to date — most of which has had little effect on changing the composition of search results.



For all of these years, website operators have been told that SEO is a long game, that they shouldn't expect to see results for six months to a year, and even then the results will be cumulative over time. So you just have to keep investing in it, and like a huge freight train or a tanker ship, it will gradually gain momentum over time, and eventually all those investments will catch up to you.

Only for most operators, it still hasn't caught up with them. They still haven't seen solid evidence for that big flow of organic visitors who convert to sales, and now they are stuck in that uncomfortable situation of having to decide whether it's time to cut their losses or keep chasing after those sunk costs.

This can be an agonizing experience in any case, but it's even harder when SEO experts emphatically warn that if you back off on your SEO efforts, you're sure to quickly fall behind all your competitors. That makes it extra difficult to just pull the plug on SEO services, and most companies just keep paying for it, just to be safe.

That's why you'll never see a positive ROI on SEO. Consider this typical scenario.

A website operator has been spending $1000/month to an SEO service provider for two years. That's a total of $24,000 spent so far. Let's say that their COGS and/or other forms of overhead are 50%, (i.e. gross profit is 50%) so they really need to make $48,000 in sales to reach the breakeven point.

In order to show a positive ROI, that operator will need to be able to track organic visitors from their original search, through their various meanderings across your various web pages and channels, and directly associate them with orders in their ecommerce system or CRM.

But they haven't been able to show any directly attributable sales so far, and every month they keep investing in SEO keeps adding to the investment pile that they need to offset with those sales. The hope is that the SEO efforts will start to kick in at some point, and the tracking will get more accurate, and eventually they'll be able to show the sales that justify those SEO efforts.

Most companies will never manage to accurately track conversions of Organic Search visitors to sales, let alone be able to show enough directly attributable organic conversions to show a positive ROI on a monthly SEO budget, let alone be able to show a positive ROI against all of the money invested in SEO over the history of their websites.

No, it is extremely unlikely that a small or medium website will ever be able to show a positive ROI on their investment in SEO.

Unfortunately, the combination of delayed results, ambiguous feedback, and the collective belief that SEO will ultimately achieve results in the long run, and the natural dread of having to admit that we made a mistake and wasted our money, create a perfect situation to foster the natural Human instinct to chase our losses.

This ensures that companies will continue investing in SEO, and pushing that theoretical ROI breakeven point further out into a future that extends far beyond the time that SEO will remain relevant.

What To Do About It

We have laid out a pretty grim scenario in the pages above — a Trillion dollar industry based on smoke and mirrors, utterly skewed in favor of the digital Haves over the Have-Nots, brazenly operating in broad daylight because conventional wisdom says that it's totally legit, and accelerating headlong into a brick wall called AI.

It would be very bad form to lay all that on you without offering a solution. Fortunately, there is plenty of things you can do about it.

If the bad news is that you've wasted thousands of dollars on a useless services, the good news is that you can take all those thousands of dollars you've been spending on SEO and either redeploy them to other channels, use them for other business purposes, or just add them right to the bottom line.

You're welcome!

You have the opportunity to take an instant win by simply overcoming your need to chase your SEO losses and stopping your spending on SEO Today.

But before taking this major step, it is a good idea to have a professional audit of your digital marketing channels, especially if you aren't entirely sure whether you are in that 80% of companies that receive no little benefit from SEO.

Many digital marketing agencies offer a free SEO audit. Typically, they'll input your website and other basic information into an SEO tool like AHrefs, Semrush, SE Ranking, or SEOptimer, which will spit out a generic report that basically presents the anatomy of your SEO status. However, these audits are designed to reinforce your need for SEO, not to challenge them.

Alphire Digital Marketing offers a Free SEO Audit that is different from any other audit. This SEO audit slices straight to the key data that will tell us if SEO is a cost-effective solution for your business, or if it's just wasting your money.

A more robust Premium SEO Audit is also available for $495 that explores a wider and deeper set keywords, and includes deep competitive analysis, custom analysis by an Alphire analyst, and a screenshare meeting with that analyst to review the results.

Once you've proven beyond a reasonable doubt that SEO won't pay off, you can forget about it and focus on how to apply those new found funds more effectively. For an extended exploration of the digital marketing landscape and all the options available to digital marketers, see our companion ebook 'Making the Most of Your Digital Marketing Budget'.

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