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AUSTRALASIA

Global Internet Marketing Solutions

SEO

FACTORS

& TRENDS

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Welcome to the Bruce Clay SEO Factors & Trends Report for 2011

2010 was another year of increasing change and complexity in the search engine marketplace.

To improve or maintain search engine rankings requires a constant focus on the search engines and changes to their algorithms, and then adjusting your [search engine optimisation \(SEO\)](#) strategy to take these changes into account. If you get this right, the rewards are high, including more relevant and highly converting traffic as well as improved brand trust and awareness.

The objective of this report is to help you identify the key factors that changed in the search engine marketplace in 2010 and the potential trends in 2011.

We hope this information will assist you in ensuring your SEO strategy is current and optimum.

The Team at Bruce Clay Australia.

Contents

Key SEO Factors – 2010 4

Additional SEO Factors – 2010..... 28

Key SEO Trends – 2011..... 30

Key SEO Factors – 2010

“This section identifies key changes to search engine algorithms and the search engine marketplace that could have an impact on search engine rankings.”

1. Local Search

During 2010, Google rolled out significant changes to local search, with the introduction of Google Places.

This has resulted in local search results being merged into organic results with resulting changes to the rankings, layout and number of location-based search results appearing in the organic results. This was one of the major updates for the year.








During November, Google released Google Hotpot, where Google Places listings are recommended based on personal and connections' ratings. Google is attempting to make local search results more personal, relevant and trustworthy.

The introduction of reviews as well as the opportunity for business owners to reply to them has made Google Places a site of conversation, which requires monitoring to manage your online reputation.

In December, Google announced Google Favourite Places, where popular Google Places listings can be rewarded with stickers that include Quick Response (QR) codes linking to their Places listing, which users can then scan to find information, read reviews, find offers or “star” the listing.

It is thus more important than ever for businesses to optimise specifically for local search.

Recommended actions:

-  Claim your listing on Google Places.
-  Optimise your listing.
-  Ensure all business registrations and information on the web is consistent.
-  Mark-up your address details on your website using Rich Snippets.
-  Develop strategies to increase reviews.
-  Monitor and address reviews, where appropriate.
-  Ensure there are optimised landing pages for all important local search queries.

2. Social Signals

In 2010, both Bing and Google confirmed the use of social signals within their respective organic ranking algorithms.

Bing and Facebook formed a partnership whereby Bing uses Facebook likes as a ranking factor and shows this information in the search results. Google confirmed they were using publicly available information from Facebook in their algorithm. These changes could lead to likes becoming as important as links in the algorithms, as search engines continue to find new ways to fight spam and improve search quality.







Both Google and Bing confirmed that they attempt to calculate the authority of Twitter and Facebook users and assign weight on tweeted and posted links based on a users' authority.

In December, Google announced for the first time that they are taking negative reviews and comments into account when determining rankings.

Social Media is thus becoming more influential within SEO and as a result, Social Media Optimisation (SMO) is even more important.

In addition, major social networking websites are increasing their focus on search. This increasing search competition is forcing search engines to integrate social signals into search results to improve relevance and search quality, while attempting to reduce spam.

Recommended actions:

-  Develop a social media strategy incorporating SEO.
-  Strengthen and optimise your online and social media presence.
-  Engage with your audience on your website and social networks.
-  Incorporate social media into your website.
-  Monitor and manage your online reputation.
-  Incorporate SEO and SMO as part of your company's DNA to maximise content relevance, web signals and inbound links to your website.

3. Online Brand Presence






Google continued to place an emphasis on brands throughout 2010, in line with their view that users want to see search results from brands that they know and trust, and that brands are a way of reducing spam in the search results.

One key change occurred in May when Google released a new brand suggestion feature, aimed at helping users find the most popular brands on the Web related to their search query. This information appears at the top of the page above the organic search results. We believe that this information is based on Google's determination of online brand presence.

Online brand presence is where Google uses a number of factors to evaluate the relevancy between a brand and a keyword, including web signals, brand + keyword search volume and brand + keyword refined search volume, as well as factoring in significant trust and authority elements. Web signals are the number of times a brand is used in conjunction with a keyword on pages on the Internet. The higher the number of web signals compared to ranking competitors the more relevant that brand is to a specific keyword, which increases the potential for higher rankings.

SEO, SMO and online brand presence are key elements of the online strategy required to increase search engine and social media visibility and thus drive more traffic to a website.

Recommended actions:

-  Leverage online and offline marketing activities to increase online brand presence.
-  Expand link building strategies to include the development of web signals.
-  Use social media to increase and improve web signals.
-  Ensure an online presence is developed, targeting your strategic keywords.
-  Incorporate SEO best practice into all communications to ensure keywords are used in conjunction with your brand.

4. Mobile Search

During 2010, search engines have shown that they are placing a high importance on mobile technologies and mobile search.








Data released throughout the year showed that mobile search volumes continued to grow rapidly, the market share of searches from mobile continued to increase and most mobile searches were made using Google.

Google started taking into account a user's physical location when performing searches on iOS and Android devices, tailoring both the search results and search suggestions accordingly.

Google Instant also became available on iOS and Android devices, making mobile search even easier for mobile users.

One of the more impressive mobile developments during 2010 was the rise in the sophistication of "Google Goggles" software on Android phones that allowed users to take a picture of something and have Google return search results based on that picture.

Recommended actions:

-  Determine the optimum strategy for mobile search.
-  Optimise for mobile search.
-  Ensure you have an optimised Google Places listing.
-  Mark-up your products using Rich Snippets and/or submit your product feed to Google.
-  Implement a mobile XML Sitemap to let Google know about your mobile content.
-  Keep usage of non-standardised technologies such as Flash to a minimum as they are not supported on certain mobile platforms.
-  Follow mobile SEO best practices.

5. Video




Video content has long been a difficult medium for search engines to understand, however during 2010 Google introduced several new services and standards to help Webmasters provide valuable metadata to search engines about their video content. In doing so Google now has the ability to understand video content in ways never possible before.

Google officially launched the introduction of an audio transcription service to YouTube that uses sophisticated automatic speech recognition technology to take the audio content of a video and generate automatic captions for the video content. Previously YouTube relied solely on video owners to provide transcripts and Closed Captions to gain a better understanding of the video content.

Furthermore, Google introduced support for Facebook Share to mark-up videos and Media RSS (MRSS) to improve spidering of video content. In conjunction with this, a new feature was added to their Webmaster Tools suite that deals exclusively with Webmasters submitting video content by using either a video XML Sitemap or MRSS protocol.

Based on Bruce Clay research performed in 2010 it also became clear that Universal Search items such as video were appearing more often in standard search results than in previous years.

Recommended actions:

-  Look for methods and opportunities to produce relevant and high quality video content for your website.
-  Ensure that all video content is either marked up using Facebook Markup Language, incorporated into an XML Sitemap file or added to a MRSS feed file.
-  Optimise video for Universal Search, video search and search on social media platforms.

6. Branded Search




In November, Google began to give more prominence to brands in the search results and is thus making it increasingly difficult for third party websites to rank highly for brand keywords.

Google demonstrated this by removing a previous restriction that would only allow for two results from a single domain to rank on the same page within the search results. When searching for an established brand, Google can potentially return an entire page of results belonging to a single domain when it thinks the user's intent is to look for that brand only and the brand's website has sufficient pages that Google determines to be relevant to the search.

This will make it harder to rank for products and services when they are not your own and it has thus become more difficult for third party websites, such as affiliates, distributors and aggregators, to rank highly for branded search terms.

A key benefit of this change is that it has made reputation management for brands an easier task, due to the increased number of ranking opportunities available.

Recommended actions:

-  For third party websites, add unique content and value to the user, other than repeating the products and information of the brand.
-  Build high quality and relevant backlinks.
-  Improve your online brand presence.

7. Google Mayday Update








In May Google made a significant change to their algorithm, which became known as the Mayday update.

The key change was to improve the quality of long tail search results. It appeared that Google was now applying many of the same ranking criteria they applied to short tail searches, to the longer tail searches.

Many websites were impacted, particularly those that had focussed purely on a strategy of ranking for long tail terms, did not have good rankings for head or shorter tail keyword terms, were not authoritative enough or did not have a good quality link profile including deep linking to their sites.

The key results have been more authoritative sites and sites that rank well for head or shorter tail keyword terms appearing in the long tail search results.

Recommended actions:

-  Ensure the content on your website is unique and of value to the user.
-  Ensure you have sufficient content to be seen as an expert in your field.
-  Include supporting keywords and synonyms on page – do not focus on one single phrase.
-  Follow the same SEO methodologies used for competitive head terms.
-  Build an optimised and siloed website structure.
-  Ensure there are good quality, on-topic internal and external links with deep linking into the website.
-  Build up your online brand.

8. Website Speed

During 2009, Google indicated that they would be focusing on website speed in the future and announced in April 2010 that website speed was officially part of their ranking algorithm.




This is consistent with Google's mission to send users to the information they are seeking and deliver it in a quick, user friendly and engaging manner.

There are many factors that can contribute to the time it takes to load a web page including server size, hosting configuration, page content, type and quality of code, code errors and the number of Engagement Objects™ on the page.

Engagement Objects™ are non-text elements on a page that draw attention and elicit user involvement, and include videos, images, podcasts, audio files, charts, widgets, RSS/Atom feeds, maps or polls. As these add more content and potentially time to load a page, they need to be carefully balanced with requirements for page load speed.

The most significant performance improvements can be gained by optimising the front-end code (for example, the components that make up the webpage such as HTML code, images and JavaScript), as this may account for approximately 80% of the page load time.

Recommended actions:

-  Monitor your website speed using Google Webmaster Tools and other online tools, and compare the results to your key ranking competitors.
-  Optimise your website load time to perform better than your ranking competitors.
-  Ensure that you are not slowing the web page down by adding too many Engagement Objects™.

9. Rich Snippets

During 2009 and 2010, Google has added more information to search result pages by including additional relevant information within individual listings. These richer listings are called Rich Snippets and can appear in search results as well as Google Places pages.






In order for Rich Snippets to appear in a search result the website must provide additional information to Google using Microdata (introduced in 2010 as being the official format specified in HTML 5), Microformats or RDFa.

In 2010, Google introduced new Rich Snippets formats for events, recipes, breadcrumbs, and products. These can trigger search results incorporating events information, cooking time, breadcrumbs or product price, reviews and ratings.

In addition to the existing RDFa video format, Google has started supporting Facebook Share format for video mark-ups.

The key benefit of Rich Snippets is that they can lead to better click through rates for your result as well as improved online brand presence.

Recommended actions:

-  Add Rich Snippet formats to appropriate data.
-  Include location mark-ups on all relevant landing pages to support local rankings.
-  Mark-up your videos using Facebook Share to improve the indexation of videos.
-  Leverage Rich Snippets on 3rd party websites to improve traffic and rankings.
-  Optimise your website structure and internal links to improve the likelihood of breadcrumbs appearing in the search listings.

10. Spidering & Indexing





Search engines continue to improve their spidering and indexing capabilities.

Google has made significant inroads into better indexing non-textual content such as images and videos with the introduction of image XML Sitemaps, Facebook Share and Media RSS.

Google has also created specialised Sitemap protocols for programming code, news, geographic and mobile content.

Finally, in a combined effort with the team at Adobe, Google have stated that they have dramatically improved their indexation of Flash content in 2010.

Recommended actions:

-  Based on the media types you have in your website, use these Sitemaps to ensure they are indexed by Google and that these Sitemaps are optimised to facilitate better rankings in search engines.
-  Use image XML Sitemaps to specify what your most important images are.
-  Use geo-location data in your Sitemaps where appropriate to help develop relevance for local search.
-  Incorporate data about any code, news, geographic, mobile, image or video content into a specialised Sitemap to help build relevance.








11. Linking

During 2010, search engines continued to focus on fighting link spam and better understanding and evaluating links to improve search results.

Google continued to emphasise that websites should not buy links to improve rankings and should instead focus on creating content that is worth linking to. The risk of being caught and penalised for buying links is rising each year and can have a major negative impact on your business and reputation.

Google was granted a new patent, previously filed in 2004, based on the “reasonable surfer model”. In this model, all links are not equal in value and pass different amounts of value to the linked pages. Generally, the links that a reasonable surfer would choose are the ones that will pass the most weight. This patent gives us some idea of how Google may allocate weight to the different links on a page based on criteria they deem important. Some key factors include the location of the link on the page, the relevance of the page content surrounding the link, the content of neighbouring pages and the content and length of anchor text.

Recommended actions:

-  Do not buy links for ranking purposes.
-  Ensure the website structure, internal linking and location of content support your key landing pages.
-  Use contextual rather than templated links.
-  Create good quality and useful content, also known as “Link Magnets”, which users will link to.
-  Leverage existing online and offline strategies to build links.
-  Leverage social media to generate links.
-  Ensure the link profile of the site appears natural.

12. Google Instant




In September, Google introduced Google Instant. Instead of waiting for the user to type their search query and click on the search button as they have traditionally done, Google Instant starts to perform searches in real time as the user types in their query.

In addition to dynamically updating the search results, Google Instant also offers users suggestions as they type, based on the most popular search phrases of other users. This was only a change to the user interface and did not affect the rankings of search results in any way.

Many predicted that as a result, users would no longer search for long tail queries and websites would be forced to optimise for similar groups of keywords. In our experience to date, Google Instant has had little impact on most websites' traffic. If anything, it has improved the traffic to quality websites due to an increase in certain cases of the amount of visits from shorter keywords.

The main impact of this change is an increased review and refining of search results before clicking. This could result in less traffic from search engines but would increase relevance and the potential for conversion.

Recommended actions:

-  Analyse movements in organic traffic, click through rates and bounce rates pre and post roll-out and assess strategies to address any issues identified.
-  Analyse your organic search traffic for phrases which have shown significant growth in popularity since the introduction of Google Instant and adjust your website's content accordingly.
-  Develop and maintain an optimal website structure as this supports combinations and longer tail terms and helps your site look like an expert when users are seeing multiple search queries on a single page.





13. Instant Previews

In 2009, Bing introduced a feature in their organic search results that allowed users to see a much more detailed snippet of each page in the search results without having to click through to the result itself. In 2010, Google followed suit and introduced a similar feature known as Google Instant Previews. Instead of showing a richer text snippet to the user, Google now displays a preview of the entire page that allows users to better understand the context and content of the page before clicking through. For the first time, the design of a website has the potential to impact on the click through rates from search engines.

Bing and Google both offer a way for webmasters to disable the preview of their page. Google, however, also offers the caveat that websites that display page previews are up to 4 times more likely to receive a click than those that do not.

The user interaction with Google Instant Previews will in addition send signals to Google about the relationships between searches, previews and clicks, and how these compare to the ranking competition. For example, if a website has a high number of previews per search it could indicate low levels of brand recognition for that website, for that search term, and thus have an impact on the way Google evaluates the online brand presence.

Recommended actions:

-  Design your website to encourage click through.
-  Ensure the page's topic or purpose can be clearly identified from the preview image.
-  Use search engine friendly technologies on your website. If your website is mainly Flash based, and you have seen a drop in click through rates from Google in previous months, it is recommended that you investigate alternative methods of generating clean image previews in Instant Previews.
-  Investigate opportunities to incorporate Engagement Objects™.

14. Google Caffeine




In June, Google launched a new version of their indexing system known as Caffeine. Caffeine promised to provide “50% fresher results” than their previous index by indexing the web at a much faster rate and hugely expanding the amount of content stored within the index itself.

Google announced that Caffeine was a response to the changing nature of the web with the rising popularity of videos, images, news, and real time updates, as well as the increasing expectations of searchers in terms of relevance and freshness of the search results.

Caffeine is designed to update the web nearly instantly and allows Google to process hundreds of thousands of pages in parallel that provide near real time index updates. This new process allows Google to index in parallel all different content types, including images and videos.

Caffeine will not directly impact rankings, but will speed up indexing, index more of your website and improve Google’s understanding of your site.













Recommended actions:


-  Use Engagement Objects™ on your website.
-  Ensure all your content types are being submitted dynamically to the search engines using XML Sitemaps or other supported feeds.
-  Spread the word about new content through external sources such as social networks and social bookmarking websites.


Additional SEO Factors – 2010

“This section identifies any additional SEO changes that were made in 2010 that are considered worth noting but are not as important as those outlined in the previous section.”

The additional SEO factors to consider from 2010 are:

-  Yahoo and Bing entered into an agreement that saw Bing start to power Yahoo's organic search results.
-  Bing confirmed that they use click through rate (CTR) in their ranking algorithm.
-  Search engines continued to expand their personalisation of users' search results as well as the continued expansion of Universal or Blended Search items, such as videos, images, maps, blogs and news, in the search results.
-  Both Bing and Google updated their image search interface to provide a much cleaner and more user-friendly experience.
-  Google launched a new image format designed specifically for the needs of the web called WebP.
-  Google launched Google TV, potentially a new key platform that needs to be optimised for search.
-  Continued focus from the search engines on reducing duplicate content in the search results and encouraging quality and unique content.
-  Google launched several major improvements to their Webmaster Tools suite including improved notifications, malware, soft 404 errors, top landing pages, as well as more in-depth keyword, search queries and backlink data.
-  Google search results now give an indication of whether a website has been hacked by displaying a "This website may be compromised" notification in the search results for relevant pages.
-  Google continued to add features to Google Analytics that provide important information and insights for analysing and optimising search traffic. Examples include In-Page Analytics, Major Contributors and Weighted Sort.
-  Google launched a new microblogging service known as Google Buzz.
-  Google introduced a new attribute and guidance around how to deal with duplicate content issues in multilingual websites.












-  Google publically stated that they would discontinue censoring results in China even though censorship was required by Chinese law in order for Google to legally operate there.


-  Google began to experiment with two new meta tags that allow them to help identify the original and syndication sources for news items.









Key SEO Trends – 2011

“2010 has been a year of major changes in SEO. We believe 2011 will continue this trend and the following are some of the key factors.”

The key trends for 2011 are:

-  Continued focus from search engines on reducing spam, duplicate content, content farms and low quality websites in search results, including new ways for users to give more specific feedback and details about the type of spam.
-  Positive reviews and ratings will become an important part of ranking well, particularly in local search.
-  Continued increased interaction with search engine results, allowing for more informed decisions before clicking and increased engagement with the site visited.
-  Results will become more personalised through location, past search history and information gathered from other sources about you and your friends (e.g. Bing with Facebook).
-  More emphasis on optimising all digital marketing channels and the rise of Internet Marketing Optimisation (IMO) as a key business strategy.
-  Increased emphasis on landing pages incorporating SEO, usability, design, social, conversion and engagement – driven by focus on bounce rates and click through rates.
-  Focus on click through rate optimisation by factoring titles, descriptions, rich snippets and Google Instant Preview.
-  More focus on converting SEO traffic, through conversion rate optimisation.
-  The uptake of HTML5 will increase and continue to influence website design – currently few websites are utilising HTML5 elements to enhance the user experience and increase search engine understanding.
-  Increased competition from existing players like Bing, international players like Yandex (Russia) and Baidu (China), new players like Blekko and social search engines like Twitter and Facebook.
-  The search market will grow dramatically as Internet penetration grows in Africa, Asia, Middle East and Latin and South America.

 Many of the key factors from 2010 will continue to have a major impact in 2011. For the coming year the related key trends to consider are:

-  **Local Search:** Increased quantity and frequency in search results. Businesses with physical locations to rank better.
-  **Social signals:** Increased importance on social signals to improve relevance and quality as Google sees Facebook as more of a competitor in the search industry. The existing alliance between Bing and Facebook could be expanded to others such as Google. The Bing-Facebook Partnership may end up being the biggest game changer in the industry for a number of years. Social signals could become as important as links and popularity (likes) to become a significant algorithm influencer. SMO will remain a key component of building social signals and online brand presence.
-  **Video:** The appearance of videos in search results will increase significantly. Websites that include videos will begin to perform better in the search results. Engagement will become a more significant factor in ranking algorithms, requiring more use of Engagement Objects™, non-text elements which draw attention and elicit user involvement.
-  **Linking:** Continued focus on removing link spam and on link quality rather than the quantity of links, less emphasis on PageRank, more emphasis on authority, relevance and deep links, social signals to become as important as links. Potential for some high profile collateral damage in this space.
-  **Online Brand Presence:** Continued efforts by the search engines to use brands as a mechanism to improve search quality.
-  **Branded Search:** Brands will gain more real estate and prominence in search engines and aggregators, resellers and other intermediaries will continue to lose rankings and organic traffic.
-  **Mobile Search:** Increased focus from the search engines as the volume of mobile searches grow rapidly.
-  **Rich Snippets:** Search engines will continue to provide richer search results and new ways of marking-up content.

Spidering and Indexing: Search engines will continue to find ways to find and index new content and technologies.

In Summary

There are many new opportunities to extend your search presence, but also many new risks and issues to consider.

The search engine environment is becoming increasingly complex as the number of variables in the algorithm increases, spam updates are made and search becomes more integrated with other online marketing strategies.

When considering the cost of driving converting traffic to a website, organic search traffic continues to deliver the highest ROI. If low cost traffic and new customers are important, SEO should be included in your arsenal of Internet Marketing activities.

You need to ensure that your business has considered all of the SEO factors and trends identified in this report, in their SEO strategy.

Please note that this report is not a complete list of all changes to search engine algorithms and does not include many of the traditional SEO strategies that can still deliver significant value. These traditional methods should still be included in your SEO strategy.

If you have any questions, require further information or clarification about the contents of this report or have any other feedback, please contact us.

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Next Edition

The next edition of this report will be released in January 2012. To receive future copies of this report or to subscribe to our monthly newsletter please contact Des Odell via email at dodell@bruceclay.com.

Previous Edition

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