

ThoughtShift presents

# SEO Friendly Web Design Explained



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# Introduction

This guide has been put together for Chief Marketing Officers, whether you're an Entrepreneur, Marketing Director, eCommerce Director, Digital Marketing Manager, Head of Sales & Marketing or the head honcho in charge of the website's success.

It's been created as a step by step roadmap to launching your next website so that it's built to maximise natural search engine optimisation (SEO) from the start. The result of following every step of this plan will be a website that drives ongoing incremental increases in brand awareness, traffic, lead generation, eCommerce revenue and ultimately new customer acquisition through SEO.

I've been working in digital since 2000 and have been involved in hundreds of SEO web design projects. From enterprise to eCommerce to small business size, this battle plan is suitable for in-house web projects or projects working with agencies where the budget is anywhere from £5,000 - £500,000.

From one CMO to another, this guide will prevent costly mistakes where the entire budget is spent on the website with not enough left to market it. Or worse still, needing to call in a SEO agency AFTER the site is built and generally ensuring "ta da!" doesn't quickly turn to \*face palm\*.

So get comfy, as I dish the dirt on other people's tragedies that'll help pave the way to your road to glory.

Helen Trendell  
Co-Founder, Managing Director & Chief Marketing Officer  
ThoughtShift

# Step 1: Goals

This first step looks relatively easy. What are your goals for the site? Lead generation, eCommerce revenue, new customer acquisition, traffic or brand awareness?

Most people say all of the above with a big focus on new business either more enquiries or more sales.

Brilliant. So we all know goals should be SMART goals so what specific number do we want to get to in say 12 months from launch?

Gah. That's where most of us become unstuck. Unless we've been given a clear target ourselves, how do you know what's even possible anyway? If you don't already have someone breathing down your neck with *that* figure you need to hit or else (or a voice inside your head), we found a nice bit of research that says on average us marketers allocate around 10% of our annual revenue to our digital marketing budget. So if you want to deliver £1 million in annual turnover, your total budget should be £100,000. If you want to grow from £1 million to £10 million in the next year, then a £1 million budget should suffice.

Now we just need to apportion a percentage of that budget to the website depending on what other digital marketing we're doing already or existing resources we need to support.

Another way to look at your goals is to look at how much a new customer is worth to you over the long term and how many of those do you need to attract in the next 12 months.

## Step 2: Analytics

Where are you now? It's great that the plan is to double revenue in 1 year but is that currently being measured through your website analytics? How much revenue is coming from SEO currently and what percentage of the overall revenue does it represent? If you're also going to be spending in other digital marketing areas then benchmarking all channels now will help you see how best practice SEO affects PPC (pay per click), Social Media, Email, Affiliates and PR.

If you already have Google Analytics event tracking, goal tracking and/or eCommerce tracking set up then not only can you see traffic volumes but you can also see the conversion and eCommerce data.

If it's not set up already, this should be set up immediately so you can see your conversion rates from visit to conversion by channel. With SEO, you can even break it down further to see which keywords and landing pages drive the highest conversion rates. Getting the keywords that drive the highest conversion rates to rank higher in the search results is typically the fastest way to increase conversions from SEO.

So whilst everyone else is focusing on increasing their traffic you can smugly gain new customers by using these conversion insights, hidden just below the surface in Google Analytics.

With eCommerce tracking data, you can also look at the highest revenue or transaction driving keywords, landing pages and products to prioritise for merchandising, sales growth and customer acquisition.

## Step 3: Brand

With 7 million new websites launching every single day, it's fair to say... there's a hell of a lot of competition out there. So what makes your brand unique? What's your business' mission, vision and goals? What are your brand values? Why do your customers buy from you rather than your competitors? Why should new customers who've never heard of you buy from you?

- Is it your amazing same day delivery service?
- Do you have an awesome money back guarantee?
- Are your products exclusively available through your site?

When people are looking for things online, we refine our queries with words like "luxury", "cheap", "best", "fastest" so the brand step can be really handy to find niche keywords that are less competitive and you have a much faster chance of ranking for.

Plus those "longer tail" (more specific) keywords will be better converting because they'll be more relevant. Developing your brand positioning is a self-fulfilling prophecy, by standing out from the crowd and being different your site is more engaging, more likely to convert and this even has a SEO benefit. Google prioritises sites with a great user experience, so your site will rank even higher and get even more traffic... which will convert! Result.

## Step 4: Competitors

Now checking out your usual competitors' websites might not be particularly useful for best practice SEO (unless you're exclusively a pure play online company), as your traditional competitors might not rank in Google very well at all. However, what is very useful is to look at is your search competitors.

The sites that are currently on page 1 of Google for the terms you want to be found for (the top 10 natural search results after the paid ad positions) have done all the hard work for you. You can look at, what page on their site is ranking for that keyword (is it their homepage or a deeper internal page)? What content do they have (testimonials/videos/images)? What markets are they targeting (or is it a bland catch all, speak to no-one page)? What domain authority do they have?

Google and other search engines prioritise websites in the search results, placing the sites with the highest authority first. This is calculated by a number of factors including the value of the 3<sup>rd</sup> party inbound links a site has – or independent votes of trust. Just like a recommendation or referral.

You can quickly compare and benchmark your site to your competitor's authority scores with [www.opensitexplorer.org](http://www.opensitexplorer.org). Just pop your domain name in and compare up to 5 sites for an instant score out of 100.

Over 50 is pretty good, that means you've got some good authority already and will need to migrate this equity in your URLs to your new site (more on that later). Over 70 totally rocks and under 30 means you've got a way to go.

Crucial to your SEO success however, is how far away from your search competitors you are. If your score is 35 and you're competing with sites with scores over 70 then you're unlikely to get on page 1 within 12 months. However, Rome wasn't built in a day and the sooner you start, the sooner you will get there. Even if it takes 3 years, once you're up there you're then going to be enjoying the benefits of people looking to buy exactly what you do every single day.

Plus there will always be shorter term, less competitive wins you can go for to start with. And you can also use SEO tools to get reports of all the links your competitors have and use these as contact lists to build your own links up super-fast.

# Step 5: Audience

This is one of the most crucial steps in new SEO website design. Who is your website for? What audiences are you looking to reach with this new site? Who are your existing customers? Are they male/female, younger/older, UK/international, B2C/B2B? What are their incomes, what are their job titles, what are their interests, what's important in their lives, what other brands do they use, what's a day in their lives like?

To really hone in on your ideal customers, you can segment them into buyer personas and think about their challenges and goals at every step along the buying cycle.

## Awareness

What are the problems your audiences are facing when they might first become aware of your type of product or service? What events trigger this first enquiry? New home, new baby, new job.

## Consideration

What is important when your audiences are considering a purchase and comparing your service to your competitors? What comparison charts, calculators, tools, brochures and guides do you have already to help move customers along the buying cycle?

## Purchase

What evidence can you show prospective customers that proves you do what you say or that they should buy now? What testimonials, reviews, case studies, social media following, photos, videos and special offers do you have to close customers on your website?

If you don't have all these elements yet, then you can assess their value and develop them further in future stages of the SEO web design process.

## Step 6: Keyword research

Now you know what you need to achieve, what makes you unique and who your ideal customers are you can put yourself in your customers' shoes and use a keyword planning tool such as <https://adwords.google.co.uk/KeywordPlanner> to see how SEO can help you meet your goals.

Start by thinking about what keywords and phrases your prospective customers would search for when looking to find a service or product like yours (think about them at each stage of the buying cycle). List them in the tool to look for "keyword ideas" and find out how many searches are made in your local market each month for those and keywords like them. You can filter by location whether you're interested in UK, US or global markets (particularly useful for keywords like "jewellery" that are spelt differently in different markets).

As a general rule of thumb, we estimate you're likely to get around 33% of the available search traffic to click through to your site if your site is found on page 1. This is extremely rough and totally depends on the situation. It can be as much as 100% if you're in the no. 1 spot and down to as little as <1% if you're position 10. Click through rate is massively affected by the relevance of your meta data, which we'll be coming on to soon.

So if you learn that the keyword "silver jewellery" gets 9,900 searches per month in the UK, you could predict you could get 3,300 visits to your site each month once found on page 1. You can then multiply that traffic by your conversion rate and average order value (if you don't have a current conversion rate, the national eCommerce average is 2%). All of a sudden, you've got the predicted return on investment for SEO and a list of the most valuable keywords to build your content around.

### Predictive Revenue Calculation for Page 1

Keyword Search Traffic / 33% x conversion rate x average order = Monthly SEO Revenue

# Step 7: Search architecture

If we're allowed favourites, then this step is mine. This is where you take all of the data from all of the previous steps to date and list out the sitemap of the new site.

What sections do you need? What sub categories hang beneath each section? What will the URLs be? Most importantly, which keywords will each of the pages be optimised for? You can use synonyms on the same page but if it's a different topic it should really have its own page for Google to rank it highly. Shoving a keyword in on a page that's not about that keyword just won't work. If there are any juicy revenue driving keywords that have no pages to live on, then you've just identified some content gaps that you can create content around in the upcoming content strategy step.

## URL structure

Now if you did find keywords already driving traffic and conversions in the analytics benchmark step, you want to be extremely careful about changing your existing content and existing URL structure. If you make any changes to your existing content and URLs you could lose any existing rankings, traffic and conversions you have at the moment.

You might hate your current website design but if it's sending you traffic and conversions, look at carefully reusing the current content you have and updating the design and graphics. If you have horrible unfriendly URLs that look like gobble-di-gook they might not be as horrific as you think. You may in fact have a huge amount of SEO equity trapped in the inbound links from third party sites linking to those pages. So if you want to change URLs you need to list the current URL and the new URL you want to redirect it to for every page that is changing and we will pick it up in the penultimate step (which isn't too far way now, you're actually on the home straight).

## Meta data

Now, whilst you're listing all of your new pages, current URLs and new URLs anyway this is a great time to optimise your title tags and meta descriptions – known collectively as meta data. Meta data is the snippets that appear in the search results rather than in the visible on page content itself.

Meta data is by far the most valuable step for SEO in terms of getting your site ranking for keywords you don't rank for at the moment. The more keywords you rank for, the greater your traffic and conversions. Plus if you can protect the keywords you already rank for and add new ones in, you'll rank for brand new ones as well and you'll increase your traffic and sales from SEO straight away. Whoop!

## Migration mayhem prevention

If you already have unique keywords in your title tags, then proceed with caution here because as soon as you start moving existing keywords in titles around you could impact your existing rankings. If you do it right, this impact could add hundreds of thousands of pounds in new business. If you do it wrong... bad, bad times are in store.

A good approach is to target one keyword and its synonyms per page with the most valuable keywords placed as near to the left of the title as possible (Google thinks it as being important and adds more weight to keywords positioned there). You have up to around 60 or so characters per page and every space is a missed traffic and conversion opportunity.

Your meta description on the other hand, should be about conveying your brand message to your target audience and include a strong call to action to win the click against those pesky search competitors. Whilst being a handy mop up place to get all the secondary keywords that don't quite make the elite title tag cut (hey there's not enough room for everyone at this party).

# Step 8: Content strategy

With your search architecture firmly under your belt all wrapped up in a nice spreadsheet, this provides you with a fantastic to do list of content you have and content you need.

## Content types

Content includes a mix of text, images, videos and formatting. How you create this content will depend on what you want to communicate and the resources you have at your disposal. You may want an incredible infographic to showcase your service but only a designer will be able to update it and it's going to need updating often so it might not make the cut unless it's not going to change often or you have an in-house designer. Similarly you've seen that your competitors have got some great video content showing off their approach and you just have to have a video as you know you do an even better job.

## Structure

Search engine results are full of all kinds of results from web pages to blogs to product reviews to events to videos and images, you can optimise every asset to maximum SEO effect by including relevant keywords in titles and descriptions. Plus there's some special coding practices for SEO called Schema Markup (enables things like review rating stars appear in the search results).

The best way to ensure your content is optimised for SEO is to make sure your site complies with W3C (word wide web consortium) regulations for coding HTML (hyper text markup language) and pages include headers in header and sub header tags to give structure such as H1 tags and H2 tags.

## Internal linking

Your internal linking practices are just as important as your external linking practices and helps users and search engines alike get to new pages on your site. In fact your linking strategy should reflect your buyer personas' needs and help them fulfil their user journey, ultimately leading to a conversion.

Content at the earlier stages of the buying cycle such as blogs, buyer's guides and calculators should lead the user to a choice of relevant product or service comparison options. Whereas your product or service landing pages should lead only to a signup form completion or add to cart option. You don't want to link away from these pages or you will be seriously damaging your conversion rate and potential sales.

## Step 9: Social media strategy

Another guide entirely could be written on creating your social media strategy, but right now this is all about baking social media optimisation in at the SEO build stage. This is all about maximising your chance of getting links because getting your visitors to help build your links will be a much faster way than doing it all by yourself.

### Blogging

First things first. Should you have an onsite blog? Well if you have something interesting to say and have someone who can update it at least twice a month as a minimum and 4 times or more per month ideally, then yes, definitely do it. A blog adds a human voice and is a great and easy way of writing about topics of interest to your audience that your regular content doesn't necessarily cover. For example a fashion site can talk about "getting the vintage look" with links to product pages; a travel site can talk about "round the world luxury style adventure" and link to a choice of different tours or a software site can talk about "how to increase enterprise productivity".

### Content distribution

Once you've got a flow of new content, you'll want to get this content distributed and the most obvious place, is your own social media profiles. So to save you huge amounts of time in posting to the plethora of channels available to you, you can use a tool like Hootsuite to automatically push new content on to Twitter, Facebook, Google+, LinkedIn et al and promote your brand with links back to your site all in one fell swoop. You could even make a website requirement that your blog automatically pushes your blog content to your relevant channels.

Another website development requirement that comes as standard out of a lot of the out-of-the-box software like Wordpress, Shopify and BigCommerce is RSS feeds for the blog. RSS (stands for really simple syndication) enables anyone who reads blogs through a feed reader to click an icon and get your feed. It's like them signing up to you email but without them giving you their email address. Whilst you don't get their email address, you can list your blog feed in blog RSS directories getting your site lots of nice links back to you site, helping you grow your website authority and rank higher for the terms your main pages are targeting. Happy days.

### Blogger outreach

Blogger outreach is another off page SEO or social media tactic that can be extremely effective in reaching a new audience whilst gaining links or brand mentions. Google now recognises brand mentions or citations as an indication of your brand authority so even if you don't get a link this approach will still help you improve your natural rankings.

# Step 10: Technical strategy

OK I've kept the scary technical bit till the end, but it's really not that scary. It's a website and it wouldn't exist were it not for this stuff. This happens at the build stage.

Now the elements of your website's technical strategy that are absolutely essential are:

- Sitemap** – You need your site to have a XML (extensible markup language) sitemap.  
This is a list of all of your site's URLs that can be uploaded into Google Webmaster Tools and Bing Webmaster Tools to ensure that the major search engines have immediate access every time you change or add a new piece of content. It needs to be automatically updated every time you add a new page. If you can have a HTML version too, that helps your internal linking and users to navigate your site.
- Page Speed** – Your website needs to operate at lightning fast speed. More than 1 second to wait for your web pages is too long! Do not settle for slow websites. Pay more for web hosting to get a faster site, as a faster site will be ranked higher in Google. We've seen this one change alone have major impacts on page 1 rankings. Make your code super-lean, lots of plug-ins can really bloat your site so keep features to essentials, mobile usage will be overtaking desktop soon if it hasn't already in your sector so speed is fundamental.
- Canonical URLs** – Your site needs to have one almighty version of every URL on your website. If you have a [www.yourwebsite.com](http://www.yourwebsite.com) and [www.yourwebsite.com/index.php](http://www.yourwebsite.com/index.php) version of your homepage URL the authority of your homepage will be split across 2 separate URLs. Google will recognise one version as a duplicate, remove it from their index and with it, up to half your website authority. By making sure that the less sexy version permanently redirects to your one uber version, all the links you have will effectively point to the one uber version and you'll increase the authority of that URL without even needing to gain a new link! If you have this problem now, fixing it in your new SEO web design will significantly improve SEO performance.

Over the years, we've developed lists of over hundred items like these three that will all improve your SEO, but unless you're on page 1 and want to move from #5 to #1, most of them are overkill. If you at the very least build these three essentials in to your next web build you will be preventing future grimacing and teeth clenching.

# Step 11: Launch

You're nearly there but just like a rocket launch, this step is not to be taken lightly. Countdown at the ready...

You need to have everything prepared. Do not book a holiday starting the day after and most importantly, don't let any of your key people disappear off at the time either. Make a launch day on any day of the week other than a Friday and block the whole day out in case you need to roll back. Plus the day afterwards for any snagging.

There are a number of checks to make before you push that button and immediately after:

- **Analytics** - If you already have an existing analytics account then make sure you add this same code on to your new website. You don't want to start again and lose all your old, historic data. Make sure all your goals and eCommerce tracking are set up in advance of your imminent go live date. Plus block your own IP (internet protocol) address for you and your other location based web teams so you're not including your own traffic in your stats.
- **Redirects** – If you've changed URLs you want to make sure your redirects are in place and when the site goes live, you will want to test them (or at least spot test them if you have hundreds/thousands), to check they are indeed redirecting correctly. If they are not, this is a top priority task that needs resource to troubleshoot and resolve that day. Redirects can be bounced around a number of servers and therefore don't always behave how you expect in the real world. Worst short term case scenario is users are getting to your site but getting a 404 error page. Long term worst case scenario is that the previous page was a page ranking in the search results and as no-one spotted it didn't redirect properly at launch, then you lose your rankings, traffic and conversions for that term. Use your spreadsheet as your definitive check list and prevent covering in the stationary cupboard later.
- **Robots.txt** – many a site's nemesis, the sneaky /robots.txt file. So innocent yet so powerful, it is where developers tell search engine spiders they are disallowed from crawling a site – usually when in development. Makes total sense, you don't want anyone seeing it then. But then in the excitement of launching the new site, no-one remembers this unobtrusive line of code in this unassuming file. But this has in fact been many a website's SEO downfall. Plus to make matters worse, Wordpress, website overlord and master to millions has a nasty default habit of auto-checking a little tiny box in its interface that says "block from search engines" when you launch a new site. You have to manually uncheck this box to ensure your site can be indexed and crawled by Google. Otherwise you have no chance of ever being found.

# And that pretty much concludes our whistle stop tour of SEO web design...

## Save for one final thought for brand spanking new sites.

If you have zero links to your new site, **you will be uncrawlable**. So someone, somewhere needs to link to your shiny new site and if you're short of best website buds then a press release syndicated online with a link to the site is a jolly nice way to get your site off the ground.

Although, getting your site crawled and getting your site to #1 in Google is a completely different matter... worthy of an entire guide in itself!

# About ThoughtShift

ThoughtShift is the award-winning digital marketing agency increasing eCommerce revenues for multi-channel brands including Oliver Bonas, RED5, Biscuiteers and Anna Scholz.

Specialising in the retail, furniture, fashion and travel sectors, ThoughtShift's Agile Digital Methodology™ identifies the most valuable online buyer segments to create new customer acquisition strategies integrating SEO, PPC and social media marketing.

Winners of the Chartered Institute of Marketing's Marketing Excellence Award 2015 for Marketing Performance Measurement, ThoughtShift's digital marketing campaigns increase brand visibility across Google, Facebook and Amazon to grow incremental online sales by millions of pounds each year.

**Pick the low hanging fruit**

Get your free revenue gap analysis

