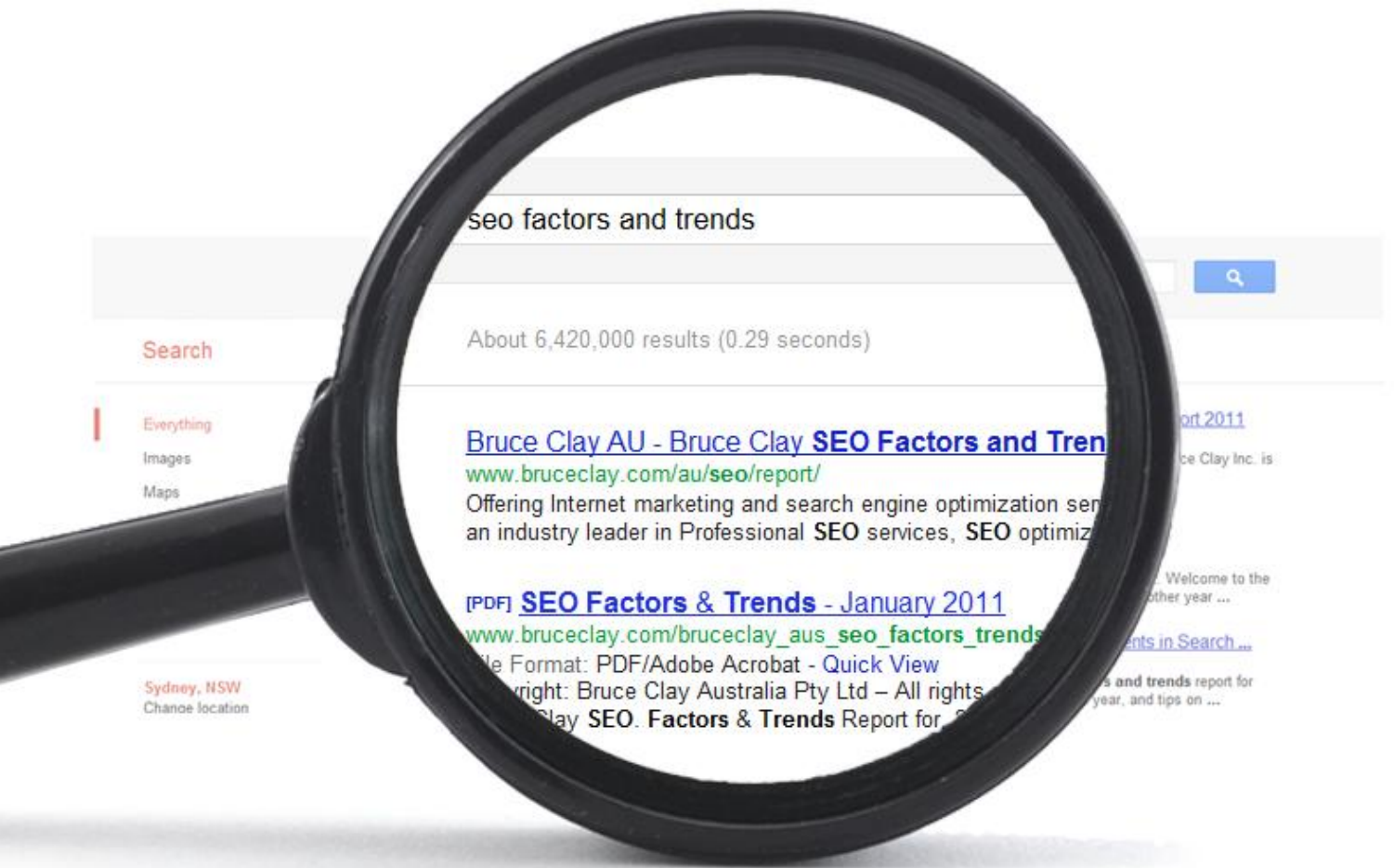


SEO

FACTORS & TRENDS

JANUARY 2012



BRUCE CLAY
AUSTRALASIA
Global Internet Marketing Solutions

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Welcome to the Bruce Clay SEO Factors & Trends Report for 2012

This report details important factors impacting SEO which we observed during 2011 and key trends which could have a significant impact in 2012.

2011 was yet another year of increasing change and complexity in the search engine marketplace.

Understanding what is important to the search engines and the continual changes to their algorithms should form part of your ongoing [search engine optimisation \(SEO\)](#) strategy.

If you get these strategies right, the rewards are high, including increased volumes of relevant, highly converting traffic combined with improved brand trust, reach and awareness.

The objective of this report is to help you further understand the key changes which took place in the search engine marketplace during 2011 and trends for 2012, and enable you to take action based on those insights.

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

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Key SEO Factors – 2011

This section identifies key changes to search engine algorithms and the search engine marketplace in 2011 that had a significant impact on search engine rankings.

The key changes are listed in a broad order of relative importance to SEO overall.

1. Panda Update

Google wields the big stick on untrustworthy sites with thin and duplicate content

The Panda update – also known as the Farmer update – was rolled out in the United States at the end of February 2011 and then globally to English-language users in April.

This update targeted sites with duplicate, thin and poor quality content, as well as content deemed not helpful to the user. High quality websites featuring original and useful content were rewarded with improved rankings.

Google provided some insight as to what counts as a high quality site. Questions like: “Would you be comfortable giving your credit card information to this site?” and “For a health related query, would you trust information from this site?”, are just two of more than twenty questions that webmasters should ask themselves to assess the quality and trustworthiness of their sites and content.

Google released several Panda-related updates and is likely to continue the trend in 2012.

Panda - significant release dates:

- 1.0:** 24th February 2011
- 2.0:** 11th April 2011
- 2.1:** 10th May 2011
- 2.2:** 16th June 2011
- 2.3:** 23rd July 2011
- 2.4:** 12th August 2011
- 2.5:** 28th September 2011
- 3.1:** 18th November 2011

Recommended Actions:

- Ask yourself the questions that Google provided for webmasters and if a key area is lacking, fix it
- Implement a content strategy and plan that will ensure you’re only producing high quality, original, useful, relevant and informative content
- Don’t scrape, copy or republish content, or produce other low quality content that is unhelpful and uninformative to users
- Think laterally about content and how you can better serve users with the numerous content types and options available
- Send your content writers and producers to some SEO copywriter training

2. Mobile Search

Mobile marches into local

2011 was a big year for mobile and mobile search - with its own buzzword “SoLoMo” (Social + Local + Mobile) being coined, referring to Mobile Apps that use social networks to connect people to local offers via the geo-location services on their mobiles.

Mobile usage nearly doubled in 2011, and so has mobile search; Facebook reached over 250 million mobile users, Twitter 75 million mobile users, and Christmas 2011 saw record purchases via mobile.

Mobile and mobile search will continue to grow, change and develop in 2012 and cannot be ignored. Search engines will continue to grapple with indexing traditional mobile, smartphone and desktop websites to bring the best user experience to mobile search users. To address this, you need to develop a clear mobile strategy and mobile search objectives.

Once you have created your mobile search strategy, there are three main options available:

- Leave your current website as it is. Google may rearrange the way your page renders to improve the user experience. However, if Google feels your page may not be viewable on a mobile device, it may remove that page from its mobile search results.
- Make the desktop website mobile-friendly, displaying the same content as the desktop website, but with a mobile user experience. This can be done using two alternative techniques:
 - The mobile-friendly website can be shown on the same URLs as the desktop website but display differently for different devices.
 - Mobile users can be redirected to the mobile version of the page, located on a different URL. Canonical tags should be used to avoid duplicate content issues. Google will endeavour to send mobile users to the mobile page.
- If you want a fundamentally different mobile experience, create a new, standalone, mobile website.

Recommended Actions:

- Develop a mobile search strategy and objectives, making sure to integrate social and local strategies
- Assess the technical options available and which will best meet your objectives
- Integrate the mobile site with your desktop and social properties
- Use canonical tags to control potential duplicate content

3. The Rise of Facebook

Social vs. Search or Goliath vs. Goliath

In 2011, Facebook continued its seemingly unstoppable rise from quirky university community to an indispensable site which connects vast sections of the online world with each other. As Google is the poster-boy for Search, so Facebook is the poster-boy for Social.

Even though Facebook currently accounts for a small percentage of search activity through its 2010 Bing tie-up, its share of user's online time has been growing significantly faster than Google and in terms of some metrics, such as time on site, it has now overtaken Google properties. Facebook's success has had a competitive impact on Google's search offerings and is a factor to consider in any SEO review. If users are spending more time on Facebook, they are likely to be doing fewer searches on Google.

By September 2011, Facebook had broken through 800 million registered users, of whom approximately 50% logged on to the site daily. It is predicted that Facebook will break through the 1 billion user mark in 2012 thanks to emerging markets such as India and South America.

In terms of Monthly Unique Visitors in the US, Facebook has approximately 160 million unique users per month. This compares with approximately 180 million unique users across all Google properties. The key metric illustrating the Facebook vs Google battle is the average monthly number of minutes users spent on each site in the US: with just over 400 minutes being spent on Facebook and approximately 250 minutes across all Google properties.

These factors have had significant and multiple indirect influences on SEO over the last year, including Google+, Google's +1s, and more social data and metrics integrated into Google's ranking algorithm.

Recommended Actions:

- Entities with a Facebook page should also have a Google+ page to be further established as a topic authority
- Pages which use Facebook "likes" should also use Google +1s to share relevant content
- Integrate both Open Graph metadata and schema.org mark-up onto relevant content pages
- Prioritise key landing pages for enabling interaction with the social graph

4. Social Signals

It really is “who you know”

In December 2010, Matt Cutts confirmed that social signals were part of the Google search algorithm and efforts were being made to integrate social signals deeper into the metrics used. Although Google had counted publicly crawlable Twitter links and Facebook links for a while, this was the first admission that they were trying to assign some sort of authority to a post's author. Cutts gave two examples that they were used to help populate real time search and, in certain cases, blog search.

Whilst social signals bring their own particular challenges, their interpretation and scoring for ranking purposes is likely to be similar to existing calculations for domains and traditional web pages around age, popularity, authority and relevancy. These factors are likely to be incorporated into scoring and trust mechanisms, similar to PageRank. Danny Sullivan from SearchEngineLand referred to this as Social Rank. Bruce Clay on the Bruce Clay blog asked the question “Are Likes the new Links?”.

Whilst the fire hose deal between Google and Twitter expired in July 2011, which meant the real time search went offline, Google, in other statements, has clearly identified other social content it pays attention to, including FriendFeed, Quora and Flickr. Google is crawling social signals, indexing them and ranking them, and will increase their relevance to the algorithm as they improve their comprehension of them.

As detailed in other sections in this document, Google launched Google+ in June 2011 and by early 2012 had continually released numerous enhancements and integration into standard search. These enhancements could not happen unless Google paid attention to social signals and the authority derived from them.

Recommended Actions:

- Ensure you have a social signals and social authority strategy in place as soon as possible
- Use Google+ to build circles, hangouts and engagement with the community
- Evaluate your Facebook strategy - focus on, and measure, engagement to ensure you remain relevant and within ROI requirements
- Make your Twitter feed a relevant feed that people want to follow and will re-tweet - use it to enable time-sensitive information, education and sharing
- Review and engage with other social media platforms, such as YouTube, Flickr, Quora, etc, on an ongoing basis

5. Google+

Google gets social at long last

In June 2011 Google rolled out their latest social media effort, Google+. What differentiates Google+ from other social media networks are the Google+ concept of Circles and Hangouts.

Google+ Circles are designed to replicate that way we all manage our real life contacts, by enabling us to incorporate people into self-managed and flexible circles which determine how we share content with these separate, but sometimes overlapping, groups of people. You can drag and drop people into various groups and share things individually with each group. Google+ Hangouts enable video chat and group chat with Skype - a great form of live, direct communication.

Google+ started as a platform open only to individuals; however this expanded in November 2011 to involve businesses with the launch of Google+ Business Pages. These pages offer a way for businesses to further engage in the social space, by creating their own profiles and brand specific pages.

It will be important to use Google+ and Google+ Business Pages to capture an audience, build a community and brand awareness by taking advantage of the social graph. A Google+ user now can influence Google search results for all those within the user's Google+ Circles.

Direct Connect, another feature of Google+ Business Pages, will impact SEO through the way users search. By placing a "+" in front of a brand name into Google's search box, Google will then point you to the brand name's Google+ Business Pages. For example, searching the keyword "+Pepsi" in google.com yields Pepsi's Google+ Business Page in the auto-complete drop-down box.

Google+ and Google+ Business Pages are not simply Google's answer to Facebook and other social networks. Google+ has already, and will continue to, impact SEO with its ever-evolving and new features.

Recommended Actions:

- Set up a Google+ Business page and optimise it
- Build relevant circles
- Share yours and others content relevant to your objectives - such as photos, videos, blog posts, and relevant landing pages
- Promote your business through your website as well as using Circles
- Track your Google + traffic through Google Analytics (available early 2012)

6. Search Results Now 35% Fresher

QDF (Query Deserves Freshness) on Steroids

Although the concept of “Query Deserves Freshness” (QDF) has been part of Google’s algorithm since 2009, in late 2011 Google significantly extended both the signals it used to score freshness and the number of queries this scoring mechanism then impacted.

The basis for this change was Google attempting to quantify “how fresh” results for particular queries need to be. Google classified this into three distinct types of freshness queries:

- Recent events or hot topics – such as information on the latest or biggest news stories
- Regularly recurring events – these queries are most likely now to show the most recent event information
- Frequent updates – these queries remain the same over time but the information is likely to need to be recent

Google’s own estimation was that this update affected the results for 35% of searches in some way, although they have since clarified this to state that only 6%-10% of search query results have changed significantly enough to be noticeable to the end-user.

The full list of “freshness” factors is not known, but Google has stated that one of the major factors is the point in time they first crawl a page, which has significant potential implications for content update strategies.

Recommended Actions:

- Review your current content, content development strategy and assess impact
- Keep abreast of news and events relevant to your website’s target market
- Create new content at intervals that best match the freshness requirements of individual keywords
- Ensure fresh content is linked from and to key landing pages and showcased on heavily trafficked pages
- Update old information on existing web pages, especially those for regularly occurring events
- Ensure that all signals are used to inform search engines of the new content availability - such as sitemaps, RSS feeds and pings

7. Duplicate Content & Pagination

De-duping the web

Google's Panda update in February 2011 was designed to filter out thin and duplicate content web sites and web pages from Google's index. It is now more important than ever to create unique and compelling content for maximum user interaction, engagement and involvement, with duplicate content considered a negative quality signal.

In October 2011, Google, through Google Webmaster Tools, started showing the detection of external duplicate URLs. This will aid the removal of duplicate content throughout the web and increase traffic to the original document source. It shows that Google is tracking this data, no doubt with far more sophistication than is currently surfaced.

Duplicate content refers to pages of content that either completely matches other content or is significantly similar. Common forms of duplicate content include the original web page and its stripped-down printer friendly page, pages targeting mobile devices, or sequential content pages from catalogues or articles.

Google also introduced new HTML link elements, pagination tags, in September 2011 to help webmasters eradicate sequential duplicate content issues. The pagination tags `rel="next"` and `rel="prev"` on content pages should be used to indicate a content series and the canonical page to which link value should be assigned to search engines.

Google has supplied webmasters with a variety of options for avoiding and dealing with duplicate content issues, most notably canonical tags. With Google's algorithmic updates being strongly focused on quality over the course of 2012, it is essential for site owners to manage any duplication issues before they arise.

Recommended Actions:

- Always create content that is unique and focused on user needs - content should never be created for search engines
- Review your site for obvious and not so obvious duplicate content
- Act swiftly on any duplicate content issues identified by Google Webmaster Tools on a regular basis
- Use 301 redirects on duplicate pages and redirect them to the original content page where possible
- Use the `rel="canonical"` tag on pages which share identical content if a 301 redirect is not possible
- Use pagination tags `rel="next"` and `rel="prev"` on web pages to control the content series relationship between component URLs

8. J.C. Penney Link Penalties

Links schemes can get you punished, big time

In February 2011 the New York Times published an exposé on a link scheme which led to many high rankings for the J.C. Penney site across a broad range of products and categories. For non-US readers, J.C. Penney is a well-known US retailer.

Google's response to the evidence presented was swift: investigations were undertaken and the ranking fallout was substantial as J.C. Penney's rankings were manually reduced - even though Matt Cutts, Google's Head of Webspam, said that Google's algorithms had started to work. As a result, dozens of number one rankings plummeted to the sixties and seventies within hours of the penalty being imposed.

J.C. Penney denied allegations that they were involved in a paid links scheme to boost search engine rankings, stating that such tactics were not authorised and were in violation of their natural search policies.

Buying paid links can be an enormous temptation for companies or organisations, as legitimate link building techniques can be time consuming. This might seem like an easy ticket to riches, but eventually it is likely to negatively affect rankings, not to mention the potential reputation damage. Buying links to boost rankings violates Google's Webmaster Guidelines and is unlikely to be successful in the long term, especially as any penalty applied by Google is most likely to outweigh the benefit of these dubious schemes.

Google has even caught itself out on several occasions for violating their own guidelines, and have proved that even they themselves are not immune from link penalties by dropping their own rankings to page 7 for a period, or reducing their PageRank. Just recently they penalised their own Chrome browser page for some unintended link spam.

Recommended Actions:

- Create engaging, high quality, unique content to attract natural links from the community and to attract social media shares
- Develop a link building strategy and detail implementation plan – think laterally and leverage existing resources and presence
- Understand where links will be sourced from, by whom and how - ensure that only white-hat link building techniques are used - if there is “media spend” on links, ask more questions
- Regularly check your back link profile for any suspicious links and proactively request removal of links where appropriate
- Build a risk mitigation plan should you identify any risks in this area

9. Google +1

Everybody gets a say in Google's results

In conjunction with Google+, 2011 saw Google launch their social sharing feature with the release of Google +1.

Google +1 allows logged-in Google Account users to '+1' a URL which essentially means they're voting for, or recommending, the page. A '+1' can be applied to a URL by clicking the +1 Button which is visible in the Google Search Results or by clicking the '+1' icon on pages with the button implemented (similar to a Facebook 'like'). Furthermore, if the user has a Google+ account then the URL can also be shared with their Google+ Circles.

Google +1 is significant to SEO because +1's are social signals which contribute to the social graph and which may also be used by Google to provide better, more informed, organic search engine rankings. Social signals are significant evolving ranking factors and have the potential, over time, to rival links as the primary signal for measuring external endorsements for web pages. From a traditional SEO perspective, +1s may also be indexable from a user's Google profile.

In reaction to the development of the social graph, it is little wonder that Google has developed their own way to gain insights and incorporate them into their search results. As Google continually endeavours to reduce spam and provide better search results, so Google +1 provides them with a Google-controlled and operated endorsement system.

Due to the way Google has set up +1 and its corroboration with other social media efforts, it would be surprising if Google was not able to allocate greater trust and value to +1's over other social signals, given there is also an accessible profile attached.

Recommended Actions:

- Create quality content that users are likely to want to share, vote for, endorse or recommend
- Develop a Google+ and +1 strategy
- Implement the Google +1 button on your web pages
- Incorporate Google +1 in your SEO strategy
- Encourage users to +1 and market your content
- Include +1's and social interactions in your SEO reporting - use Google Webmaster Tools and Google Analytics to access this information

10. JavaScript & Ajax

Google GETs POST

In November 2011 Google announced an improved ability to crawl AJAX and JavaScript. Matt Cutts confirmed that the Googlebot now has the ability to execute some on-page AJAX / JavaScript. This is the first confirmation the Googlebot has been able to do this.

The most obvious result of this update is that Google is now able to index some dynamic comments from popular social plug-ins, like Disqus and Facebook Comments. This will directly impact a website's social graph and further integration into the social web.

Pages which require JavaScript and AJAX POST requests have been difficult for search engines to crawl and index accurately. Generally, a POST request changes the page without actually changing the URL, whereas GET requests usually create a new URL.

The current Google approach focuses on POST requests that a typical user would encounter when they load the page. AJAX driven social media comment widgets may be the key driver for this new update as the end user's comment often include a link back to their profile page allowing the search giant to track user's interactions across the web and better customise the search experience for those users and their connections on the social graph.

The complexities of POST and the problems of mimicking user interactions by Googlebot mean that GET requests are still the preferred method for content delivery from an SEO perspective. It is important to note that the updates to Googlebot do not guarantee that all AJAX deployed content will be crawlable or indexed by Google.

Recommended Actions:

- We continue to recommend that GET is used to fetch the resources a page needs and that important content should continue to be spiderable and indexable under a single, search-engine friendly, canonical URL
- Avoid using AJAX / JavaScript to deploy important content
- Avoid complex, bespoke, AJAX / JavaScript implementations which are less likely to be understood by a search engine robot
- Be careful to avoid inadvertent cloaking by displaying different content to users and search engines
- Ensure the robots.txt file and HTTP headers are configured to allow Googlebot to access all appropriate JS files and any URLs requested via AJAX
- Third-party commenting engines, like Disqus or Facebook Comments should be investigated as potential ways of encouraging and managing inline comments and discussions with a view to increasing your websites social graph

11. Schema.org

Read between the lines

In 2011, Google, Yahoo! and Bing confirmed that W3C's microdata format would be the structured data markup of choice, by helping to create the cross-engine initiative that is www.schema.org. The search engines decided the data format they wanted webmasters to use, and they are now incorporating elements into ranking algorithms.

Code markup is now available for many sorts of structured data, such as reviews, ratings, organisations, videos, events, recipes, breadcrumbs and products. In the past 12 months this list has been expanded even further to include authors, prayer times, music, and apps markup.

Google continually tries to make types of information more easily accessible so that users can see content on their search engine results pages. For instance, in the US, users are now able to search for recipes directly from the Google interface, and filter using categories similar to Google News. Content that may once have been spoon-fed to Google as an XML data feed can now be crawled and indexed as part of a regular page.

Implementing this type of markup is important for the future, as they are likely to play an increasing role in generating the social graph and interpreting social signals.

Currently, deploying schema.org markup is primarily about increasing click-through rates. As the term Rich Snippets implies, the markup may help your site have an enriched snippet displayed when it appears in the search results and these can improve click-throughs significantly. These super-charged snippets can include features like star ratings, images, names of authors and other useful elements to help persuade users to click on your particular result.

Even if your site currently ranks well, there are still a number of different options for the curious searcher to click on. Standing out with Rich Snippets is an important way to help drive the initial click.

Recommended Actions:

- Review the schema.org list of schema and develop a strategy to implement those that are relevant to current or planned content
- Evaluate current site templates or CMS for opportunities to include markup
- Include schema.org markup in any new site development
- Ensure that markup amplifies social signals and social authority for the social graph
- Use the [Google Rich Snippet testing tool](#) to ensure correct markup implementation, and to preview your snippet

12. Yahoo & Bing Integration

Yahoo! is now the machine that goes Bing!

In September 2011, Yahoo announced it had finally completed the transition of its search data, indexing and algorithms to Bing for all markets with the exception of Korea. To the end-user this means that if the same search is performed on Bing and Yahoo in those countries, the same set of search results should now be returned.

This changeover process started in late 2010 and was a mammoth task as it covered web search, image search, and video search across desktop and mobile for over 40 markets. To the external viewer this was achieved with barely a blip in user experience.

Nominally, this has resulted in both Bing and Yahoo's search results being improved as the pair worked hard to ensure that quality gaps in both companies' algorithms were addressed before surfacing the combined and refined results to the public.

This means that SEO's have slightly less work to do, as there are now only two major engine algorithms to consider. The downside of this is that the power of traffic derived from search engine rankings has now condensed to a duopoly.

Recommended Actions:

- Ensure any rankings present in Yahoo have transferred successfully to Bing
- If rankings in Yahoo have dropped, investigate and take restorative action as appropriate
- Ensure that attention is now paid to the Bing algorithm
- If rankings are poor from Bing / Yahoo, ensure that some attention is paid to optimising the site to be in line with the requirement of Bing's algorithm
- Be aware that Bing and Facebook have a mutual search partnership which is likely to integrate further over the coming period

13. Yahoo Site Explorer

Hello darkness, my old friend

In late November 2011, a sad event occurred: Yahoo closed down its site reporting tool, Yahoo Site Explorer. Even though Yahoo! has long been declining in relevance as a search engine, the demise of this tool is a significant factor for 2011 and beyond.

Yahoo Site Explorer originated in 2005 and was the only comprehensive free tool from one of the major search engines that allowed users and webmasters to find out which pages were indexed from their site and others, as well as fairly extensive information about the inbound links to any site.

This provision of link data was easily its most advantageous facet, as it allowed webmasters to build a realistic link profile for their own site and for competitors. It was also a useful way to start to hunt down web spam which plagues most search engine indexes.

Nominally, Yahoo Site Explorer has now merged into Bing Webmaster Tools. Although over the past few months Bing Webmaster Tools has been actively adding new features, in practice, those features can only be used to discover data about your own registered site.

With the end of Yahoo Site Explorer, there is now no realistic search engine-provided back link data for other sites: Google's link: command only shows limited samples, and Bing hasn't shown any back link data since it was known as MSN. Users will now have no choice but to use other third-party tools to obtain back link data for sites other than their own.

There are several quality paid tools, some of which crawl the web and maintain their own index. Most of the free tools either have limited data, or the source data does not seem as deep or as reliable. None of these tools are pulling data from a major search engine and are thus reliant on their own crawling.

Recommended Actions:

- Use Google and Bing's Webmaster Tools to track and monitor your own site's backlink profile on a regular basis
- Use a reputable third-party tool to discover and analyse the backlink profile of your own site and competitor sites on a regular basis
- Be aware of the limitations of these tools and the different crawling and analysis methods that may be in play
- Feed this information and analysis into your link building strategy

14. CRO and SEO

You've got the traffic, now maximise it

Conversion Rate Optimisation (CRO) is the post-click art and science of optimising web pages either to convert more visitors into leads or sales, or to engage the visitor with the page or the site for a longer period of time. As usefulness and relevance to search queries rises in importance, so does the impact of CRO on SEO and its importance to SEO.

The real art in CRO comes from creating elements like persuasive headlines and calls-to-action. Showing users value in your offerings is always a more effective approach in gaining conversion lifts than showing users fancy graphics or restructuring the same content into a different look and feel.

Iterative testing should then be conducted to impact a combination of micro-elements, such as click-throughs and other interactions that don't directly impact revenue but do improve funnel momentum, and revenue conversions, such as shopping cart checkouts and membership subscriptions that directly impact revenue.

CRO helps business:

- Funnel more users to important pages on your site, which improves time on site, increases engagement and drives more links and likes and thus improves SEO
- Increase top line revenue by average rates of 30% up to 200% and higher
- Improve brand loyalty and trust, which has been shown to increase click-throughs from the search engine results page, which may improve SEO
- Decreases the bounce rate of visitors, which may improve SEO

Recommended Actions:

- Baseline your conversion data
- Ensure your analytics software is set up correctly
- Analyse your site for conversion rate optimisation opportunities
- Analyse and improve your content to increase visitor engagement, time on site, and predictable visit paths, and to reduce bounce rates
- Conduct iterative testing to determine the most successful elements to achieve conversion rate optimisation

15. Additional SEO Factors 2011

This section identifies other additional SEO changes that were made in 2011 that are considered worth noting but are not as important as those outlined in the previous section.

- Over the course of the year there were many changes in the Google Places and Local results, including:
 - Blended Google Places results;
 - Google Places results displaying for non-location or non-brand searches (e.g. computers, furniture);
 - The removal of citations from the Places results.

This meant that local businesses have been playing a constant game of catch-up to stay up-to-date with the latest variation of Places results. The removal of citations may also have led to a devaluation of link juice from those kinds of sites.

- Modifications to the display of search results pages, including author information and larger, more prominent sitelinks. More relevant information was given to the user about a result and more real estate was taken up by the first few results. Non-consumer friendly links like the Google Cache links have moved off-page or into the Instant Preview pop-up.
- Google modified its HTTPS secure search. They no longer pass the detail of the search query within the referrer information for logged in users on google.com and this is expected to roll out globally. This means that it has become harder to accurately track referrer traffic from Google and “Not Provided” is on its way to becoming the single largest traffic sending keyword. The keyword data is still passed to Adwords advertisers, and, to some extent, is currently still in the data available through Google Webmaster Tools – although this is not a complete data set and is from a pre-click perspective.
- Google (accidentally) released a document explaining how to identify and assess relevancy for their remote quality testers. This made it easier for site owners to understand the thinking, in detail, behind what Google looks for in a site. There were not search secrets per se, but it definitely gave an insight into the Googleplex. For example, some of the guidance given was that a business Facebook page is not necessarily a critical result, but a band’s or famous person’s Facebook page may well be.
- The Twitter fire hose tap was turned off in mid-2011. This allowed other news vendors back into the space, but removed many tweets from the results.

- Although this has not been a truly viable SEO tactic for a number of years, Google has been “thinking about’ giving less importance to keywords within domains as a ranking signal. There is still some correlation between head terms and the occurrence of keyword-related domains, however this is likely to be more down to backlink anchor text and high content relevancy anyway.
- Google Shopping launched in Australia in May 2011, thus enabling local retailers to directly feed their product information into Google.

Key SEO Trends – 2012

2011 has been a year of major changes in SEO. We believe 2012 will continue this trend and the following are some of the key factors.

The key trends in SEO for 2012 are:

- Panda and the quality content concepts behind it are likely to continue to be ever-increasing in their importance to successfully ranking in Google. It cannot be stressed highly enough that quality content, which is loved by users, is going to be one of the main elements of search engine success over the next year or two.
- Aside from quality, content will also have to be fresh, useful and shareable to social media to be successful in 2012 and beyond. If content investment is not yet prioritised in the online budget, it should be.
- One of our team members calls the sets of updates promoting brands to the top of SERPs “Branda”. This upwards shift in SERPs dominance of big brands for non-brand searches will continue. Some people claim favouritism for big companies, but it is likely to be down to increased engagement by brands with the web and an increased sophistication in the way they engage.
- Google’s core page layout has changed significantly over the last few years. The “10 Blue Links” remain but are perhaps less of a feature as other content modules, both search and monetised, have elbowed their way onto the page. Even with Google’s renowned uncluttered layout, for some searches, especially in the US, it is now not uncommon for the first of the 10 blue links not to be visible above the fold. It is likely, especially with the inclusion of social snippets that this trend will continue and that fewer websites will be seen above the fold.
- Facebook continues to go from strength-to-strength but has a capable competitor now in Google+, backed by search. We expect there to be an even bigger push for the lion’s share of end user ‘eyeball time’, with new features and new ways to engage. In line with this, we also expect there to be ingenious new ways of integrating social ads into the experience. Make no mistake, the social battlefield and the influence of social on search, both directly with the social graph, and indirectly between competing websites is only going to get bigger.
- A lot of people were hoping this day had come a lot sooner, but it seems with the adoption of HTML5 into certain aspects of Google’s content, that HTML5 is finally coming of age, again. It’s most significant advantage is that it can run natively on mobile devices. Look forward to increasingly interactive sites coming this way using HTML5.
- After a few false starts, it looks like Google has finally tapped the social zeitgeist with Google+ and their business offering, Business Pages. We expect because of the tie-up with Google and the technical construction of the content that a Google+ presence will be an invaluable aid to a successful SEO campaign. It is likely that Google+ will start influencing personalised results sooner rather than later. Please note, between the first draft of this document and publication, Google launched Search, Plus Your World, integrating results from your social circles as well as traditional search results.

- As mobile continues its stratospheric uptake, so we expect Google Places to continue to develop quickly, especially if it ties in closely with the social graph and personalisation. Expect a search for “good coffee shop” to yield Places results personalised with comments, observations and recommendations made by your social circle.
- Matt Cutts managed to worry everybody by talking about Google being interested in what can be seen on a page “Above the Fold”. And then they went and released the update mid-way through January 2012. This is likely to be a continuing developing area over the next couple of years, and is indicative of the development of Google’s crawling technology and their alignment with what they perceive the end-user as wanting from a “good website”. Make your content load fast and keep the juicy stuff above the fold.
- Freshness is a big topic and look towards Google, and others, trying to refine the freshness developments that took place towards the end of 2011. Expect more queries to deserve freshness and for the freshness of results to have a more accurate lifespan.
- It seems with the release of schema.org that rich snippets are another of those technical elements which are at last coming of age – and they seem to have been a long time coming. Expect the various rel=“” tags to gain in importance over the next 12-24 months as their usage becomes more widespread. As they tend to add code bloat, server speed and hosting infrastructure will be vital to successful implementation of the tags.
- Citations, even though they have disappeared from Places results, will remain as significant signals of relevance for local search.
- On-page factors which have not traditionally been seen as SEO factors will rise in importance. Elements like CRO, bounce rates, and user engagement may well all become more important metrics included in the ranking algorithm.
- Key to multi-national websites will be the implementation of the link rel and href.lang attribute. This will ease a site owner’s fear of duplicate content and provide more accurate website targeting to different end-users who may speak a common language. Getting the website structure and code right to cover these eventualities will become more important.
- Traffic analysis will be made immeasurably harder by the rise of “Not Provided” as the search query from securely logged in Google users. Early estimates have put the % of queries affected as high as 20%. This could even be a pre-cursor to the data being available to premium Google Analytics users. Some elements of the data may be available from Google Webmaster Tools, but it is not specifically identifiable and comparable.

- The iPhone changed the way we used mobile phones. Then came Siri. It is expected that voice search, and other types of augmented reality search will grow in importance in 2012. They've been here for a while already but expect them to take off this year – especially in Local search. You never know, this could even be the year that mobile barcodes / QR codes actually become more than a geek tool. Of course, these services still need to have trusted sources feeding them relevancy and authority signals, which are still expected to be drawn from your website and social graph.
- As mobile search gains pace, expect the user-experience to rise in importance for mobile sites to be successful in search.
- Links are dead, long live likes! This isn't quite true (yet), but certainly expect 'likes' to strengthen their relevance signals to search engines. As these signals get stronger, expect 'like' spam schemes to become bigger and more commonplace before they are algorithmically taken down by Google's spam combat expertise.
- +1 will become the equivalent of bookmarking a page and Google may merge Reader into G+ to create your own personalised shareable news feed.
- Facebook has extended its Open Graph in January 2012 to include more business related signals on people's timeline pages. It will be interesting to note how this plays out into expanding the social graph.
- The 4G mobile phone network is on its way, bringing with it faster data speeds and phones which are also capable video cameras. Expect a rise in "vlogging" over the coming 12-36 months which may, like in all the best sci-fi movies, eventually replace the written word.

In Summary

2011 was the year that content was finally crowned King and quality, relevance, useability and engagement all became significant factors in search engine success.

2012 is shaping up to be the year that social is fully integrated with search at an in-depth personal level.

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

Search engine success is becoming increasingly complex as the number of variables in the algorithm increases and their importance to the overall ranking score changes. Human views on web content are also rising in relevance to online marketing strategies.

As has always been the case, driving search engine traffic is a combination of creating original and unique content desired by users and then generating numerous relevance signals to search engines around the content's topic.

When considering the cost of generating converting traffic, organic search traffic continues to deliver the highest ROI. As relatively low cost traffic and customers are important to every business, SEO should be included as part of your internet marketing strategy.

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.

About Bruce Clay Australia

Bruce Clay Australia delivers [search engine optimisation \(SEO\)](#) services, tools and training to the Australian market. Bruce Clay Australia is part of Bruce Clay, Inc, a leading provider of internet marketing optimisation services, with an emphasis on SEO. As developers of the SEOToolSet™, Search Engine Relationship Chart®, Search Engine Optimisation Code of Ethics, and many other optimisation technologies, Bruce Clay, Inc is one of the best known and most reputable internet marketing optimisation firms in the world. Bruce Clay, Inc was founded in 1996 and has offices in the United States, Europe, Asia and Australia.

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Next Edition

The next edition of this report will be released in January 2013. To receive future copies of this report or to subscribe to our monthly SEO Update please email info-au@bruceclay.com with your name and email address.

Previous Edition

The [2011 SEO Factors and Trends report](#) is available from our website.

Disclaimer

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