

BRUCE CLAY[®]

AUSTRALASIA

Global Internet Marketing Solutions

SEO FACTORS

& TRENDS



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Welcome to the Bruce Clay SEO Factors and Trends Report

The requirements to rank highly in search engines are constantly changing and the pace of change is accelerating.

This change is being driven by search engines striving for more relevant, rich and engaging search results, thus improving the user experience and increasing their market share.

In the past, we would see changes to search engine algorithms a few times a quarter, now changes can happen a number of times a week.

The objective of this report is to help you identify the key factors that could affect your search engine optimisation (SEO) strategy, and ultimately your search engine rankings.

To improve or maintain rankings requires a constant focus on the changes to the search engine algorithms. The prize is relevant and highly converting traffic and improved brand trust and awareness.

We hope this information will assist you to ensure your SEO strategy is current and optimum.

The Team at Bruce Clay Australia.

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Key SEO Factors – 2009

1. Online Brand Presence

During 2009, significant changes were introduced to Google rankings where “brands” started to rank higher for certain competitive keywords in some countries. Google has since stated that there was a change to the algorithm and this has become known as the Vince update.





It appears that Google started using 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 (or web references) 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 and the increased potential for higher rankings.

“Brands” thus started ranking higher due to the high number of web signals and brand related searches due to their high online and offline brand presence and associated trust and authority.

SEO and online brand presence are key parts of the online network required to increase search engine and social media visibility and drive more traffic to a site.

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.

2. Social Media Optimisation

Social media continued to expand rapidly in 2009. Social media optimisation (SMO) is the process of optimising social media assets to improve the quality and number of rankings in search engines and the internal search engines of these individual social media platforms.

SMO can assist with improving rankings in search engines by:

- 👤 Increasing primary and secondary links to a site
- 👤 Adding content to the site (user generated content and feeds)
- 👤 Increasing the number of web signals (see point 1)
- 👤 Improving discoverability of site content
- 👤 Increasing the number and type of pages that rank for a particular keyword

SMO can assist with improving rankings in the various social media platforms by ensuring proper tagging, keyword usage, level and relevance of participation and following the guidelines of the relevant platform. SMO can also be invaluable in search engines when it comes to online reputation management.

Recommended actions:

- 👤 Broaden your online presence using appropriate social media channels, and optimise these for internal and external search.
- 👤 Encourage user generated content.
- 👤 Add social media feeds/blog to your site if appropriate to provide additional, fresh content and increase user engagement (see point 9 about Engagement Objects™).
- 👤 Minimise any potential duplicate content arising from the use of digital assets on the site and multiple social media sites.
- 👤 Ensure linking between the site and social media sites is set-up in the optimum manner for SEO.

3. Personalised Search




During December 2009, Google changed the way they use personal search history.

Prior to December, Google would only provide tailored search result to users logged into a Google account. The search results were personalised based on past search history, recorded while the user was logged in. From December, Google will now provide personalised search results to all users, based on searches made in the past 180 days, via data recorded in a cookie.

The impact of personalised search is now widespread and search results for most users will now be different, especially when Google history, geographical factors and multiple search engine data centres are taken into account.

From an SEO perspective the implications are that SEO projects need to be measured more on traffic metrics rather than rankings, and care needs to be taken when assessing rankings and ranking changes.

Recommended actions:

-  Continue to optimise your site. You will still need a well optimised site to rank well.
-  Ensure that SEO programs are measured on a number of metrics with converted SEO traffic and total SEO traffic being the key items.
-  Ensure browsers are cleared when checking for “non-personalised” search results, or use a tool such as a ranking monitor or browser plug-in to provide this function.

4. More Search Results

This year has seen an increase in the number of non-standard or blended search results included in a standard search result page including maps, videos, images, news feeds and blog posts.

In addition, search engines have introduced real time search and shopping results into the search result pages.






Real time search results contain recent updates from popular social media sites and headlines from news sites and blog posts.

Shopping results are product listings that include price, description as well as other potential items such as ratings and shop name. (Note: To date, shopping results have only appeared in Google.com.au, when the “More shopping sites” option is switched on.)

These changes have resulted in increased competition (where once a first page listing was one of ten, it now is one of twenty, or more) and in certain cases, standard organic search results are being pushed further down the page.

Many companies are already leveraging these new opportunities to rank via different media.

Recommended actions:

-  Use appropriate digital media assets on the site and in particular on key landing pages – see Engagement Objects™ (point 9).
-  Add your business to Google’s Local Business Center.
-  Optimise all digital media assets and your Google Local Business Center listing.
-  Add fresh content to social media and news sites to get a chance at appearing in real-time search results.
-  Optimise shopping listings using Microformats.

5. Richer Search Listings

During 2009, Google made several improvements to add more value to search listings for the users. These included the one line site links, rich snippets, breadcrumbs and geo-location.





One line site links display additional links below the snippet in a single line. These links are displayed, at Google's discretion, for pages using named anchors to mark up their different sections (e.g. Wikipedia).

The roll-out of rich snippets started in 2009, providing additional relevant information about a page to the search results. These elements add useful information about author, product prices, reviews and ratings to the search result. Rich snippets are essential to get a product to rank in the shopping results or for a restaurant to appear with its star rating.

When Google ascertains that the URL is too long, too short, or too obscure to add useful information to the user, it may provide a site hierarchy, relative to the ranking page, in the form of a clickable breadcrumb. Google plans to expand upon this feature in the future, further increasing the requirement for optimised site structures and internal linking.

Google Webmaster Tools has recently released a new feature allowing webmasters to specify which country they want to target for their non geo-centric domain extensions. This results in the display of the targeted country in the search results, and in better rankings in the targeted location.

Recommended actions:

-  Use named anchors to improve the likelihood of one line site links appearing in the search listings.
-  Use Microformats to improve the likelihood of rich snippets appearing in the search listings.
-  Optimise site structure and internal links to improve the likelihood of breadcrumbs appearing in the search listings.
-  Specify the targeted country in Google Webmaster Tools, where relevant.

6. Link Building








Links from relevant and trusted sites are an important part of obtaining high search engine rankings.

During 2009, there was a further shift to rewarding sites for the quality of inbound links rather than the number of inbound links, as well as a continued focus on not buying links and cracking down on linking schemes, and comment spam (e.g. comments in blogs).

Building links should no longer be limited to approaching directories or other poor quality sites. Now, more than ever, you need to be smarter than your competition and think laterally about how you can build links manually and naturally. Building links should be about identifying ways to encourage sites to link to you and leveraging both offline and online strategies and business functions to increase the number and quality of links.

Identifying and building links should be done by all areas of a business, including PR, partnerships and content syndication.

Recommended actions:

-  Focus on quality over quantity.
-  Leverage existing online and offline strategies.
-  Create pages and content that are worth linking to.
-  Leverage social media to generate links (see point 2).
-  Distribute digital assets to other sites and social media sites.
-  Ensure the link profile of the site appears natural.
-  Ensure the geographical linking profile is supporting the SEO strategy.







7. Speed of Site

In November of 2009, Google announced that site speed would play a greater part in its search engine algorithm.

Google is now actively encouraging webmasters to optimise pages in order to decrease load times. Faster sites deliver a better user experience, increase conversions and can also improve bounce rates and time on site thus potentially improving rankings.

Both Google and Yahoo now provide comprehensive guidelines in relation to improving the speed of a site.

Recommended actions:

-  Optimise the code.
-  Externalise StyleSheets and JavaScript code.
-  Consider using file compression, where appropriate.
-  Reduce server load and number of requests.
-  Avoid redirects.
-  Investigate using content delivery networks, where appropriate, for large digital media assets.





8. Mobile Search

In 2009, the use of mobile search grew rapidly driven by the success of the new generation of smartphones, such as the iPhone. These smartphones made mobile search more accessible for users while improvements in mobile bandwidth and improved geographical search results also aided the rise of mobile search.

The limitations in connection speed, screen sizes and bandwidth usage are pushing mobile search results to be more efficient and minimalist. A mobile searchers' behaviour is quite different with a more "on-the-go" type of search requiring the mobile search results to be more localised, quick to load and easy to read and interact with. These trends means that ranking in the top 3-5 results is becoming even more important, making mobile search optimisation a key strategy for businesses.

The mobile's location generally being the same as the user's location means that the mobile phone has become more personal than any other computer before. Google is starting to use the geo-location features to display relevant nearby search results (Near Me Now) as well as location-based search suggestions (Google Suggest).

Recommended actions:

-  Optimise your site for mobile search.
-  Optimise for local search by adding a Google Local Business Center listing.
-  Ensure business location information is indexable on the site.
-  Submit your site to other local listing sites.

9. Engagement Objects™

Engagement Objects™ are non-text elements on a page which draw attention and elicit user involvement, such as images, videos, Flash objects, audio, maps, news, books, widgets, feeds, interactive games, tables and blog posts.

In 2009, Engagement Objects™ became significantly more important as a key ranking factor for landing pages. This is due to search engines aiming to provide a rich and engaging user experience and will thus reward (rank higher) sites that include appropriate Engagement Objects™.

We believe that the introduction of blended search by the search engines was a precursor to the use of Engagement Objects™ as part of rankings for specific pages. The search engines now have the ability to spider and index many different types of digital media assets.

Recommended actions:

- 👤 Include Engagement Objects™ on key landing pages.
- 👤 Ensure page load times are not impacted (see point 7).
- 👤 Ensure Engagement Objects™ are properly optimised and spidered.
- 👤 Ensure there are no duplicate content issues if multiple versions of the same Engagement Object™ are used across the site.

10. Spidering




During 2009, Google improved the spidering of Flash and JavaScript, both common web technologies.

For Flash in particular, Google was already capable of indexing textual content, clicking buttons, entering input, discovering links, supporting common JavaScript embedding techniques and indexing ActionScript. Since 2009, Google is capable of indexing content loaded from within a Flash object and associating it with the parent Flash file and any documents that embed it.

Regarding JavaScript, it appears that Google is expending more resources to discover URLs deployed in JavaScript, in an effort to discover new content previously hidden behind JavaScript links.

In addition, in October 2009, Google released a report outlining strategies for webmasters to enable AJAX content to be spidered. Getting AJAX content crawlable enables the search engines to index and rank pages otherwise hidden from a search engine spider. Allowing the search engines to index AJAX content may impact on duplicate content strategies previously implemented as well as on the internal linking structure of a site.

Recommended actions:

-  Ensure the site uses available technologies to achieve the optimum SEO benefit.
-  Continually review the changes to the spiderability of Internet technologies to assess the impact on rankings.
-  Assess the implications of implementing AJAX on a site.

11. Canonical Tags




During 2009, Google introduced the canonical tag to help webmasters manage duplicate content issues.

This tag allows webmasters to inform Google what URL is the “canonical” (preferred) version of a duplicated page, via a tag added into the head section of the code on the page. This ensures that Google displays the canonical version in their search results as opposed to other duplicated versions and aggregate PageRank.

There are many ways to manage duplicate content including the Meta Robots Tag, Robots Exclusion Protocol (robots.txt), redirects and internal linking. The advantages of the canonical tag are ease of implementation and aggregation of PageRank.

In December 2009, Google announced a major update to canonical tags, whereby they can now be used to manage duplicate content across different domains.

Recommended actions:






-  Check for any duplicated content across sites and identify the optimum canonical version of the URLs.
-  Assess if the canonical tag is the best strategy to manage duplicate content and implement accordingly.
-  Only reference the canonical version of each page in the xml sitemap.

12. Contextual Links

During 2009, Google representatives announced that they reserved the right to treat links differently within a page. Our research indicates that during 2009, search engines have added more weighting to contextual links (those links from the body of the page) and less weighting to links from the navigation, side-bars and footers (also known as templated links).

This is due to contextual links being seen as more as a vote of higher confidence as opposed to templated links that are more geared to usability and navigation.
















Recommended actions:

-  All important internal linking should be done via contextual links.
-  Contextual links should use good quality anchor text and be surrounded by relevant text.
-  Minimise templated links to increase the PageRank passed by contextual links.
-  Ensure that your site's linking structure is maintained through contextual links.
-  Externalise templated links when necessary.

Additional SEO Factors – 2009

“While the previous 12 factors are considered important, the following factors should also be considered when developing your SEO strategy”

The additional SEO factors to consider from 2009 are:

-  Rel=nofollow changes made optimised site structure more important.
-  YouTube officially became the world's 3rd largest search engine.
-  Google Webmaster Tools added Parameter Handling.
-  Increased use of click through rates, bounce rates and refined searches as ranking factors.
-  Introduction of video sitemaps.
-  Google improved Webmaster Tools to include more information.
-  Google Analytics added new features to improve tracking and reporting including goals tracking, event tracking, mobile apps and mobile sites tracking, multiple domains tracking, mobile GA, custom reports, advanced segments, advanced filters, email alerts, custom variables, analytics API and asynchronous tracking code.
-  Facebook and Twitter release internal search engines and APIs.
-  Yahoo Search sold to Microsoft.
-  Bing increased market share in US, no major change in Australia.
-  Google SideWiki and SearchWiki allowed users to comment and personalise search results when logged in.
-  Keyword tag officially denounced by Google as a ranking factor.
-  Video results are increasingly ranking in the SERPs thus a strong need for optimisation.
-  The ever increasing number of search queries and searches increased the importance of the long tail keywords.
-  Google Caffeine.

Key SEO Trends – 2010

“2009 has been a year of major changes in SEO, we believe 2010 will continue this trend and the following are some of the key factors”

The key trends for 2010 are:


- 🔗 Many of the key factors from 2009 will continue to have a major impact in 2010. For the coming year the key factors to consider are:
 - 🌐 Speed of site – roll-out and increased importance.
 - 🌐 Mobile search – improved geo-targeted search results using GPS, mobile phone triangulation and IP location.
 - 🌐 Online brand presence – continued global impact.
 - 🌐 Social media optimisation – increase in social media platforms.
 - 🌐 Personalised search – will use more diverse and deeper data.
 - 🌐 Linking – even stronger push to relevant and natural links.
 - 🌐 Richer search listings – rich snippets will evolve to include new formats, and new data items will be added to search listings.
 - 🌐 Engagement Objects™ – video and audio will increase in importance.
 - 🌐 Spidering – will continue to expand across formats and technologies.
 - 🌐 Search result page – page will continue to be refined and enriched.


- 🔗 Increased importance of SEO due to more relevant search results driving better quality traffic, higher conversions and a higher return on investment.


- 🔗 SEO being seen as a growth strategy but also a mandatory defensive play.


- 🔗 SEO will become more difficult to implement as sites become more complex due to increasing business requirements, evolving technologies, increasing depth and breadth of search engine algorithms and SEO touching multiple areas of a business.


- 🔗 Search engines will continue to focus on spam with harsher penalties spam tactics. White hat SEO will be critical.


-  Growth in competent SEO training courses will be necessary to educate businesses on how SEO works.


-  Bing to power Yahoo search and grow market share. In Australia, this means more focus will be needed on site rankings in Bing, should their market share improve.

-  Search engines will continue to provide more information and guidelines. Be careful that you accurately interpret these and apply them correctly. Ensure that you assess what they say but also what they do not say.

-  Optimising product listings will become critical with the increasing importance of rich snippets and product search.

-  Search engines will continue breaking the language barrier by indexing translations of sites and serving translated search results to the users, providing a substantial amount of new relevant search results to the index.

-  Reputation management will become even more important, due to increasing complexity of search engine algorithms and the number of social media platforms.

-  Due to more targeted search results, web analytics will become a necessary part of SEO for everyone.

In Summary

Marketing departments, in-house SEO teams and IT departments need to ensure that they have adjusted their SEO strategy to take account of the SEO factors and trends raised in this report.

This year will be a year of change and increasing competition in the search results.

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

Next Edition

We will release the next edition of this report in July 2010. To receive future copies of this report please contact Des Odell via email at dodell@bruceclay.com.

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