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INTRODUCTION

It’s now time for the second version of our State of DMO Search report. The time was half a year ago, but 2019 has been so boring for search that we didn’t get around to it. Just kidding! It’s been so busy and interesting that we’ve been tied up with other things.

To recap what this report is, in case you’re seeing it for the first time: this is our regularly updated, comprehensive overview of current research, theory, and best practices for search engine optimization as it pertains to destination marketing organizations specifically. Reading it should help any destination marketer understand what the opportunities and challenges for SEO are, and gain at least a basic understanding of how to earn top rankings for high-volume keywords in the niches important to this industry.

For this edition, we’ve edited and updated everything (though much has also stayed the same, just as much in the field stays the same year in and year out), completed new research, and added sections addressing the hot button topics in SEO this year. Some of the highlights include:

VOICE SEARCH: The industry has gone through a number of topics du jour in my decade-plus working in it, and this would have to be the one for 2019. Everyone is predicting massive growth in voice search usage over the next several years, and everyone wants to know what to do about it. You can find info on how to optimize for voice search in several chapters of this report, including those on User Platforms and SERP Features.

ALGORITHM UPDATES: 2019 has been packed with algorithm updates from Google, including a big “general core algorithm” change in June and the incorporation of new language-parsing tools later in the year. We’ve added a brand new section called Algorithm Updates, to cover these, summarize the major ones from the past, and provide a home for discussion of the new ones sure to come soon.
DOMAINS: This is an old topic, but now we have a new chapter dedicated to it. Choosing and setting up the right domain is one of the fundamental pieces of building a successful website, so it made sense to go in-depth on the subject. What’s more, we were able to conduct a good study on the effects of changing your domain, which is always a scary process, thanks to our unique access to data for a wide swath of DMOs.

Again, those are the highlights; there’s much more we’ve done to make this edition fresh and relevant until the next one comes out. If you’d like to see what’s new in each chapter, check the sidebar right at the top for a quick bullet-point summary, as well as the contact info for the subject matter expert on our SEO team who maintains that section. We’d love to hear what you love, what you want to improve, and what you want to see added in future editions. Thanks for reading: we hope this report helps you achieve ever greater things for your destination.

“If our clients understand a little bit more about what it takes to succeed in DMO search engine marketing, they’ll be better partners for our SEO and PPC professionals.”
Keywords are in many ways the most critical and interesting link in the chain between a user’s needs and a successful online experience. Think about all the time you spend dreaming about a vacation and the variables that determine exactly where you want to stay: how close to major landmarks or amenities, how lovely the view and how delicious the nearby food. Those feelings, that energy, they all go into conceiving a great vacation. But when you go to search for the perfect hotel, you condense all those concepts into a few words. “Beach hotels in Santa Cruz” – that’s a long keyword, as these things go. From that little phrase, the search engine has to reconstruct your intentions and gauge what content might satisfy them.

KEYWORD TRENDS

Maintained by Paul McLeod

NEW IN VERSION 2019:

– Updated metrics and charts

– Updated analysis, including commentary on trends since the last version

– Send suggestions for future enhancements to Paul at pmcleod@simpleviewinc.com
When DMOs plan their content strategies, then, they need to keep keywords in mind as a critical component of their efforts, from planning to publishing. Many tools exist to measure keyword data. The best and most widely used for exploring search volume is the Google Ads Keyword Planner, which is discussed in the Research Tools chapter of this document. For tracking rankings, many tools exist across many price ranges, from standalone services to components of all-in-one platforms such as Moz Pro and BrightEdge.

What none of these tools tell you, though, is how many people are clicking each link, which is ultimately what we care about. We used to be able to guess this from our own internal web analytics (Google Analytics, for most), but Google began obscuring the keywords bringing people to our sites several years ago for privacy reasons. To fill the gap, they’ve provided a different view of the data in their Google Search Console tool. This tool will tell you, for a given time period (no farther back than the last 16 months), your total search result impressions and clicks, and average ranking and click-through rate (CTR). You can break each of these metrics down by device type, landing page and, best of all, keyword phrase. The data is not exact, and it obscures many of the fine details of user behavior for low-volume keywords, but it can give us invaluable insights into audience behaviors on the search engine results pages (SERPs) for the most common phrases related to destination marketing content.

In order to get an idea of the trends governing keyword performance and activity for DMOs overall, we pulled the data for 244 Simpleview client sites (most but not all on our CMS; by no means all SEO clients). We filtered our data for one of five keyword phrases (see below) for each destination, using the most general and most frequently searched name for the destination possible.

- [ destination ]
- [ destination ] hotels
- [ destination ] events
- things to do in [ destination ]
- [ destination ] restaurants
The keywords listed on the previous page were chosen because they represent some of the most popular phrases used to search for the travel information maintained by DMOs in any kind of vacation destination. There are other very popular phrases related to travel, such as "flights to [destination]" and "[destination] weather," but they tend to be won by other types of sites (OTAs and weather forecasters, in these cases). We collected data on impressions, clicks and average ranking by day for each day from December 12, 2017 to April 30, 2019, the full range of data available when we collected it. We will continue to update this data and our analysis in future editions of the report.

Collecting the data daily allows us to get more (though noisier) datapoints at different average rankings, and thus get at how DMO performance changes across several dimensions. We’ll look at the data through a number of different lenses to try to understand this critical topic.

Fig. 1.1

OVERALL

CTR by Rank for DMO Keywords
You will not be surprised to learn that people click the results at the top of the search engine rankings more frequently (Figure 1.1). The details of how the pattern plays out are interesting, though.

**Premium for top rankings:** Being ranked number one means 50-100 percent as many clicks to your site as being ranked number two does. By the time you get to position five, the decline in clickability is almost complete, and traffic isn’t much better than at position 10. Being ranked in the bottom five positions isn't much better than missing the first page entirely. (Ignore the weird rise in CTR from No. 1 to No. 2 on the purple Restaurants line; this is a fluky result caused by a very low number of impressions at these rankings for DMOs.)

**The keyword is more important than the ranking:** The CTR for the top position in the plain destination name results is equivalent to the fifth position for events, and a seventh of the CTR for No. 1 position for events. We’ll explore the factors driving these differences as we discuss the keywords individually.

**Not much has changed with CTRs:** In the year-plus between the gathering of this dataset and the previous one, most of the CTRs are the same, and the ones that differ come at keyword-rank combinations with very low impressions.

CTR is a great measure of the value of each ranking at each position. What about DMO site performance and the attainability of each ranking? To assess that, we can look at impressions (Figure 1.2).
Here again we see big differences across different keywords. The most common positions for DMOs across these keywords are three and four, but events phrases produce significant impressions in the top two slots. These keywords, all major sources of traffic across major destinations, are rewarding DMOs somewhat, but there remains room to improve. Since the challenges for each keyword are different, we’ll look at them individually later on as we discuss how these figures have changed from last time.

Lastly, we can break CTR down by device, where we see more interesting patterns (Figure 1.3). Pay less attention to the yellow line for tablets, where sample sizes are smaller. The blue desktop line makes good sense, with a steep decline through each position and most of the possible decline happening by position five. The mobile pattern came out strange last time, with position one getting a worse CTR than position two thanks to thin samples in that slot. Now, it looks much more rational. Unfortunately, the CTRs for mobile and desktop are a little bit lower than last time, possibly due to Google’s continued deployment of search engine related pages (SERP) features that take real estate away from links to DMO sites.

DESTINATION

These keywords, all major sources of traffic across major destinations, are rewarding DMOs somewhat, but there remains room to improve. Since the challenges for each keyword are different, we’ll look at them individually later on as we discuss how these figures have changed from last time.”
Looking at destination name search results, we find that DMO performance has improved somewhat in terms of ranking (Figure 1.4). Whereas in our last edition, they produced most of their impressions on this search in the three-to-seven range (mostly in the middle), the links now are concentrated in the two-to-four range. CTR is low at any position on this type of search, though, probably because so much information is presented immediately in Google’s search results (Figure 1.5).

This “knowledge graph” information box presents so much automatically culled, pre-digested information that many users will have their needs met without clicking anything. Things are a bit better on desktop, where the knowledge graph is off to the side and the actual organic rankings nowadays often receive top billing.

In any case, while the CTRs are much lower for this than for more specific keywords, the vast size of the search pool for this keyword (10x greater than that for even the most popular other keywords) means that the plain destination name is usually still the top overall keyword for most DMOs. Most competition for these rankings comes from Wikipedia and official city government sites, but DMOs have been doing better of late in these fights.

"Looking at destination name search results, we find that DMO performance has improved somewhat in terms of ranking.”
HOTELS

For keywords consisting of the destination name plus the word "hotels", obviously a big deal for a DMO, performance varies across destinations (Figure 1.6). The CTR pattern is logical enough and better overall than for the plain destination name. But DMOs almost never claim the top spot in the rankings, rather earning a significant amount of their real estate after the first page of results.

Note that only the top two or three positions get significant CTRs, so that, even though DMO performance has slipped somewhat (more impressions coming on the second half of the first page instead of the first), clicks haven’t changed that much.

The overall depressed CTR can be attributed in part to the two to four paid spots Google places before anything (far more than any other keyword studied here and to be expected, given the lucrative nature of the keyword), and also to the local businesses box that appears before the first organic result (Figure 1.7).
Only the official websites of actual hotels are eligible to appear in this mini-OTA-style search box. Once you scroll past all of that, you often find DMOs jockeying with OTAs and official hotel sites for a position in the top five. Traffic for this keyword is thus usually noticeable for DMOs, but not dominant.

This is the most normal and happiest keyword for DMOs, with CTRs following expected patterns of being very high at the top end, and having impressions entirely in the top five (Figure 1.8). Most DMOs rank one or two for their destination name plus the word “events”. These results are almost unchanged, except for the much higher CTR line going through position seven. While that’s nice to see, with all the rankings coming higher up it isn’t translating into much extra traffic.

That said, things are not nearly as rosy as they were a few years ago, when CTRs for the first spot were more like 60 percent, largely because of the introduction of the events carousel (Figure 1.9).
This SERP element always appears before the first result and essentially functions as a stripped-down calendar tool, with events from a variety of sources, including the DMO. Clicking through to event details offers a link back to the page the information came from (again, often a DMO site); this used to happen only on mobile but now also occurs on desktop.

THINGS TO DO

Here again the CTR pattern is sensible and better than average for all the keywords studied here (Figure 1.10). Performance among DMOs is quite strong, with most owning positions two to four (skewed away from two and towards three now when compared to our last study, unfortunately), with many having multiple links published in the top-10 when users search for “things to do in” the destination name. That said, Google now publishes a Things to Do Carousel much like the one on desktop and mobile, and this has siphoned many clicks away. Selecting one of these takes you to a Google Places detail page on a map-focused interface (Figure 1.11).
The only negative trend here is the almost total lack of rankings at number one. TripAdvisor claims that spot the vast majority of times now, almost always with a “Top 10 Things to Do in” article. DMOs should be looking more at opportunities to take this real estate back, as this trend is new over the past couple of years. They may already be doing this over the summer of 2019, anecdotally; we’ll check in again on this in our next edition.

Lastly, we look at the keyword consisting of the destination name plus the word “restaurants” (Figure 1.12). Here again we have a local businesses box at the top of the results; as with hotels, that excludes DMOs entirely. In addition, DMOs have a very tough time getting the top two spots, where CTRs are significantly better, though they get a lot of impressions at three and four. Competition on this keyword includes national sites like Eater, Trip Advisor, OpenTable and Yelp, and they’ve been winning a little bit more, with positions shifting somewhat from three to four since we last collected this data.

**CONCLUSION**

There is much more to the search space for DMOs than these keywords. All sites get traffic from hundreds of unique keywords each day, some thousands, and a few tens and hundreds of thousands. That said, many are minor variations on these high-volume terms, and Google often treats related keywords the same in terms of rankings and the extra SERP elements we’ve seen a sampling of here (see the Voice Search section in our User Platforms chapter for more discussion of this topic). With this understanding of data beyond search volume, we can better decide what keywords we have a chance to earn victories on and what the rewards for doing so are. You can find further information on the non-traditional tools and content that Google now so often serves to potential travelers on their platform in the SERP Elements section of this report.

There is much more to the search space for DMOs than these keywords. All sites get traffic from hundreds of unique keywords each day, some thousands, and a few tens and hundreds of thousands.”
DMOs come in many flavors, and many of them expend significant resources learning what demographics and interests are shared by people who may visit their areas. But, beneath the differences between the audiences for various destinations, what can we say about the people coming to DMO sites in general?

DEMOGRAPHIC DIMENSIONS
Tools such as Google Analytics and Quantcast, as discussed in our Website Analytics section, can provide some information on the age, gender, income, education, parenting status and other characteristics of our audience. Typically, they provide this information by matching
up the records of the people who visit our sites with information in other databases in which some users have revealed this information about themselves. Often, as a result, we can’t break our demographic information down to the level of the individual user, but we can still learn some things by looking at this data in the aggregate.

Simpleview places Quantcast tracking and other tags on each site that it launches, allowing us to look at the profiles of the audiences of many DMOs. When we do, we find some striking patterns.

**GENDER:** Uniformly across DMOs, website audiences skew female (Figure 2.1). Whereas all website traffic, as measured by Quantcast, comes in at 51 percent female, DMOs across North America earn more than 60 percent of their traffic from women, with few exceptions. On some sites, women outnumber men two to one.

**AGE:** Unlike gender, age distributions can vary significantly from one destination to another (Figure 2.2). DMOs tend to perform most differently from each other, where the blobs are tallest, as shown in the 25-34 and 55-64 age ranges: Millennials and Baby Boomers old/young enough to travel. Overall, DMO audiences skew toward Millennials and away from Boomers.
One major change showed up in the early 2019 version of this data: the 13-17 age bucket. For reasons unclear, DMOs went from receiving more traffic than average from this group to much less. Given the limited purchase decision-making ability of this demographic, this should not be too concerning. It may also be a seasonal effect, and we will continue to monitor. There were also small gains in the 35-44 and 65+ buckets.

**PARENTING STATUS:** Whether a website user has children in the home tends to vary along with age, of course (Figure 2.3). Some destinations attract people with children more often than others, and some don’t; overall they have more parents in the audience than average. The national split is about 50/50.

**INCOME AND EDUCATION:** These are two different dimensions, but they move very closely (Figure 2.4). Every DMO whose data we’ve reviewed skews toward above-average income brackets and higher levels of education. The degree of the skew shifts, though: expensive destinations do in fact attract richer, more educated audiences to their sites. That said, with travel being an expensive proposition most of the time, even the working-class destination attracts people with more money and schooling than the average web user, particularly in the $50-100K income range.
Almost without exception, DMO sites skew toward Democrats and away from both Republicans and Independents (though the latter are always still the biggest category). This may simply be a reflection of the association between higher incomes and greater Democratic affiliation throughout the population (Figure 2.5).

Demographic attributes are useful to know about a person, but they don’t necessarily determine everything about their behavior. The information on user interests, collected from advertising platforms such as DoubleClick, can help us understand more directly what sorts of commercial propositions attract our audiences. Google provides many of these in the Google Analytics platform.
TOP 10 AFFINITY CATEGORIES FOR DMO SITES (GA)

- Shoppers/Value Shoppers
- Food & Dining/Cooking Enthusiasts/30-Minute Chefs
- Lifestyles & Hobbies/Pet Lovers
- Lifestyles & Hobbies/Family-Focused
- Travel/Travel Buffs
- Media & Entertainment/TV Lovers
- Lifestyles & Hobbies/Business Professionals
- News & Politics/Avid News Readers
- Media & Entertainment/Movie Lovers
- Media & Entertainment/Book Lovers

Unsurprisingly, food, travel and shopping tend to be among the loose interests (affinity categories; these are people high in the purchase funnel for these things) shared by DMO site users.

TOP 5 PURCHASE-INTEREST CATEGORIES FOR DMO SITES (GA)

- Travel/Hotels & Accommodations
- Travel/Air Travel
- Home & Garden/Homie Decor
- Employment
- Real Estate/Residential Properties/Residential Properties (For Sale)
When we look on the previous page at the categories of things our users are closer to purchasing, according to their tracked browsing history, we find that the top two are very close to the DMO mission (since the first time we pulled this information, Travel/Air Travel has surpassed Home Décor for the second spot). This is an encouraging sign that DMOs are reaching the right web audiences.

**CONCLUSION**

Understanding the personal and psychological characteristics of our users in the aggregate can help us optimize our sites to inform, inspire and convert them. We look forward to exploring the details of these user characteristics in the future.

**SOURCES**

Google Analytics
Quantcast
In October 2016, mobile and tablet internet usage surpassed desktop for the first time worldwide. This is particularly true for international usage in countries such as Indonesia, where users tend to do most of their browsing on a mobile phone. Users in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom tend to engage in multi-platform browsing more often than other countries, which means that usability and functionality remaining consistent across all three major device types is critical for users.

For DMO websites, this trend is even more dramatic, with phones comprising 50-60 percent of traffic. When combined with traffic from tablets, mobile devices have pushed desktop traffic as low as 30 percent of the total on some DMO sites. This trend in our on-site analytics aligns with Google’s research that users will often search on mobile devices in short
bursts for travel information. With mobile usage continually increasing, it remains critical to ensure that your website is designed well for mobile users and quick to load so that you can reach them.

**DMO AVERAGES & IMPACT**

For the first 10 years after the introduction of the iPhone, the share of traffic coming from mobile devices increased steadily (Figure 3.1). Over the past year, however, the trend has leveled off. Tablet usage has also stabilized at a level about half of its peak from five years ago.

Engagement metrics (bounce rate, pages per session, session duration) have been falling for DMOs for a decade (Figure 3.2). While this is alarming, it turns out to be mostly a result of users shifting from desktop to mobile devices. Over the past three years, these metrics have been fairly stable, as seen here with pages per session, when you break them down by device type. It’s only the increasing share of mobile usage, where session duration is less than half what it is on desktop, that has brought the overall averages down.
DEVICE IMPLICATIONS AND USER BEHAVIOR
With the heavy rate of mobile internet usage worldwide, it is not surprising that Google moved to Mobile-first Indexing in 2018. This system focuses on the content available to mobile devices and applies rankings derived from that format to the desktop version of each page. This means that the mobile version of your content must contain the same copy and other primary content elements as the desktop version, in order to preserve a given page’s rankings in search results.

While the copy of the page must remain consistent across mobile, tablet and desktop, the user interface can be altered to fit the device in order to provide the best experience. This means that mobile versions should take advantage of “read more” text and accordions to allow users to sift through page contents for the things they want. Hiding nonessential widgets and interface “noise” is another effective design technique for mobile and tablet devices.

Desktop users, meanwhile, should receive a version with fully expanded text and lower-priority features that aren’t critical to the page’s purpose. Combined with fast technology, these techniques are the best way to optimize for Google’s Mobile-first Indexing.

MULTICHANNEL EXPERIENCE
Because users switch between devices so frequently to complete their travel research and booking, it’s critical to ensure your website experience is seamless across the devices. Users often switch devices mid-task if the activity is interrupted by real-life events or is limited by their current device.

Plan your design to work when a user might need to stop their task to pick up the kids from school, but wants to complete their registration on their mobile device while waiting. Or if the mobile device has limitations when conducting a transaction, or attempting to resolve issues via live chat and switches to a desktop device.
Design and optimize for each device’s strengths and weaknesses and ensure that the feel and interface is consistent. Users shouldn’t feel like they’re on a completely different website, but rather that each layout facilitates their needs depending on the device.

**VOICE SEARCH**

A voice search occurs when a user interacts with her device by verbalizing the search request, as when using Siri, Alexa, Cortana or Google Assistant. Optimizing web pages for voice search is not very different from the process of optimizing for search engine traffic generally, as the voice search tools all use one of the major search engines (usually Google) to get their results.

Let’s compare the voice and text search processes step-by-step for a mobile user *(Figure 3.3)*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STEP</th>
<th>VOICE SEARCH</th>
<th>TYPED SEARCH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Query entry by user</td>
<td>Spoken into microphone: Encourages longer phrases in a more natural style</td>
<td>Tapped or swiped on keyboard: Queries tend to be brief, without inessential connecting words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Query parsing</td>
<td>Transferred to search engine: The search engines largely discard the extra “conversational” words and phrasing</td>
<td>Transferred to search engine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results collected</td>
<td>Taken from regular organic search rankings: Google used by all Voice Assistants but Cortana, which uses Bing</td>
<td>Taken from regular organic search rankings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results presented to user</td>
<td>Read aloud and/or published on screen: If a featured snippet is present, the VA app may read it out loud, but otherwise the VA will usually simply declare that results are on the screen.</td>
<td>Published on screen</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Fig. 3.3**
As the screenshots on the previous page illustrate, the results are displayed somewhat differently between voice and typed search tools, but they come from the same sources, and the queries are understood largely the same way.

In order to appear in the results for voice search, it’s key to have your website ranking in the first position for a search phrase since with voice search, as the first result is often the only result offered. The “People also ask” featured snippets often powers the results for voice search, so optimizing for these featured snippets is a good strategy as well (Figure 3.4). See our Featured Snippets section for more information on appearing in these results.

**MOBILE LIMITATIONS AND TRENDS**

When writing content for mobile devices, keep in mind the limitations of a smaller screen. People can quickly understand short simple text regardless of device, but on mobile they will slow down when the text is difficult. Users aren’t afraid of scrolling, but removing unnecessary words and paragraphs is still key to writing for mobile users. Avoid content heavy in fluff and “marketese,” and get straight to the information that will provide users answers while also inspiring their desire to travel. Make sure your content is informative and entertaining, and maintain readability by writing for a general audience.

When designing for responsive websites, it’s important to design for mobile first. But not all elements of a mobile design should be transferred to desktop. When creating a new website, make sure you’re not simply porting the mobile design to desktop, but instead taking into consideration the differences in behavior for desktop users. For example, the Menu button might be essential on a mobile device due to the number of top navigation items your website has, but this button adds unnecessary clicks for and hides important information from desktop users. Not all mobile design points work well for desktop, and the reverse is also true.

According to Google’s research for travel trends, users are more consistently using mobile devices for planning and inspiration, and turning to desktop for booking. In December 2018, Google reported that, while searches for activities happened cross-platform in the three months prior to a trip, 54 percent of users switched to mobile exclusively after arrival. Mobile searches for phrases like “places to travel” have more than doubled over the previous two years, indicating that more users using mobile devices for travel inspiration before they’ve even selected a destination. Mobile searches for “best things to do” phrases also grew 85 percent while “day/weekend trip” increased 100 percent over the past two years.

Google also found that 48 percent of experience bookings are happening once travelers reach their destination rather than in advance. It’s even more important than ever to ensure your content is mobile-accessible, and optimized to provide guides, tips, and “travel hacks” for planning a trip to your destination. If your site accommodates experience bookings, it’s even more critical to ensure that the mobile experience is well-crafted.
FUTURE OUTLOOK ON MOBILE DEVICES

ACCELERATED MOBILE PAGES (AMP)
While Google’s AMP project is still in the beginning stages, Google News is heavily skewed to showing AMP articles over others. AMP is probably not a ranking signal directly, but it is viewed as desirable by Google for mobile devices because it provides extremely fast and slimmed-down mobile content. Accomplishing this, however, entails significant restrictions on the amount of content the page can contain and how advanced the code can be.

As of 2019, Simpleview CMS supports AMP for many pages of your website. AMP is available for blog posts, listing detail pages, event detail pages and coupon detail pages. Enabling AMP in our CMS requires a work order so that our developers can create AMP versions of your widgets and set up tracking codes to properly capture data from AMP pages. Google has been selectively serving up the AMP versions of DMO content to users, but these versions may end up engaging users less if not optimized. Design tweaks and links to related content are good countermeasures.

Before considering AMP for your website, look at your content and how it’s being used and the speed with which the pages load. If you need to display advertising and require a lot of custom tracking for a given page, it might not be a good candidate for AMP. Otherwise, it may help earn high rankings positions.

MOBILE DATA AND INTERNET USAGE
Mobile devices will continue to grow and dominate data and internet usage. Cisco predicts a number of trends for mobile devices by the year 2021, including:

- The number of mobile-connected devices per capita will reach 1.5 by 2021.
- The total number of smartphones (including phablets) will represent more than 50 percent of global devices and connections by 2021.
- Smartphones will surpass four-fifths of mobile data traffic (86 percent) by 2021.
- 4G connections will have the highest share (53 percent) of total mobile connections by 2021.
- Over three-fourths (78 percent) of the world’s mobile data traffic will be video by 2021.

WEARABLE DEVICE, VR AND AR TRENDS
Technology trends for the future involving mobile devices include wearable devices, virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR).

Smartwatches are increasing in popularity and functionality, enabling activities for travelers such as boarding flights and opening hotel doors. Carnival Cruises is also introducing a medallion with sensors to facilitate personalized service and boarding activities, as well as keyless entry and social interactions.

VR and AR are also being used in the travel space to facilitate virtual tours of hotel rooms, cruise ships and entertainment options. Eventually this could lead to content marketing and user-generated content opportunities as the technology evolves and costs decrease.
MOBILE MEASUREMENTS AND MARKETING METRICS
Make sure you’re using the correct metrics for your mobile initiatives. With a mobile-first world, digital marketers might need to readjust their marketing plans and the way success is measured. Analyzing desktop and mobile users separately will provide insight into your users’ behavior and how engagement and conversions differ. Create new measurement metrics and plans for each set of users to increase conversions and engagement and advance your marketing goals.

SOURCES
Mobile Internet Usage
Mobile Marketing Statistics Compilation
Cisco

FURTHER READING
Seamlessness in the Omnichannel User Experience
Reading Content on Mobile Devices
Mobile First is NOT Mobile Only
AMP Becoming a New Trend in SEO
Technology Trends in the Travel Industry
Travel Trends
5 Marketing Insights to Consider
Since the dawn of the internet, domain names have been a source of fascination and speculation for publishers. A good domain communicates what the site is about succinctly, serving both a functional and a branding purpose critical to the success of the site. Given this importance, it’s no wonder that domains have sold for mid-eight-figure values.

Search engines use your domain as something like a street address for your content: when they want to know where to find something you’ve published, they don’t look for “the site with purple and green colors and a lot of images of beaches”; they look for visitmytown.com. The domain is also one of the major things your visitors see in search engine results as they consider whether to enter your site.
There are several best practices you’ll want to follow when choosing a domain for a destination site, and they differ in some ways from the best practices for other sites. Among them are using a secure protocol, selecting a simple yet memorable domain name and choosing a trusted TLD (top-level domain, the part after the final dot). In addition to the direct benefits, getting all of these practices right also indirectly helps your site to start building authority by encouraging other reputable sites link to it.

**PROTOCOL**

The first part of your domain, up through the “://,” is the protocol: https://www.visitmytown.com. This portion indicates whether the user’s browser is transmitting information to and from your site in an encrypted format (e.g. can companies and machines along the transition path, other than the site itself and the user’s own machine, read the information or not). The most common protocol historically has been http:// (short for hypertext transfer protocol). It requires the least work and expense to deploy, but provides no encryption.

Alternatively, an SSL certificate (or secure socket layer) certificate creates an encrypted connection and establishes trust with the users navigating your site. The protocol on your domain in this case appears as https://, visibly showing users that your site is secure. Serving content this way requires registering with a third-party organization that guarantees the validity of the information your site sends and incurs a small annual cost. Nonetheless, it can be worth it to have the secure lock icon and https:// prefix in the browser bar when asking for private user information such as name, address, phone number and email addresses for visitor’s guides or newsletter requests. Furthermore, Google a number of years ago publicly announced that sites serving via the https protocol would receive a small boost in the rankings in order to encourage more publishers to move in that direction.
THE SUBDOMAIN
Falling between the :// and the first dot (usually), the subdomain can be anything you want it to be. By convention, it’s usually either “www” or not present at all for your main content. Any other option is possible and, in theory, SEO-friendly, and you can even use the subdomain to get an extra keyword into your URL. However, subdomains do require some work to set up and maintain, and they can confuse search engines about the structure of your site.

For some domains, a different subdomain indicates that its content is separate from the rest of the domain and should be regarded as its own site (think of blog platforms such as Tumblr that give a unique subdomain to each publisher). For others, having some content on a separate subdomain is merely a technical consideration required for different pieces of content to run on different platforms, or to differentiate more clearly between sections of a site that are still clearly related (e.g. content at “meetings.” might be geared to an audience of planners, while that at “es.” might be translated into Spanish). Any of these ways of using a subdomain can be SEO friendly if set up properly.

One last thing about subdomains: out of the box, Google Analytics will consider it a new session and a new user every time a person navigates from one subdomain on your site to another, which can cause your top-line reach metrics to be inaccurate, obscure the true sources of your traffic and make it difficult to track user paths. If using subdomains for your site, it’s best to ensure that your Google Analytics has been set up for cross-domain tracking, which will require some technical code updates.
THE DOMAIN ITSELF
The third part of your domain is the domain name itself (confusingly, this phrase is also used to refer to the entire domain). There are several things you’ll want to consider as you evaluate your options for this segment. It's easy to want to use something catchy and marketing-oriented; however, because your domain is like your street address as described above, you’ll want to pick something that contains the name by which people actually search your destination, accurately labels the information your providing and will function well for the long haul. Using something short makes it easier for users to remember your URL.

For a DMO, all of these considerations cut in favor of securing the simple name of your city, county, state or country if at all possible. Over the past two decades, we’ve seen destinations switch from MyTownCVB.org to TravelMyTown.com to ExperienceMyTown.com and more as their organizational branding changes. This is somewhat unfortunate from an SEO perspective. First of all, the domain name is one of the best places to put meaningful keywords, and the “CVB,” “travel,” “experience,” etc. filler words have very little SEO value (since hardly anyone searches for them). Second, every time you change your domain you are likely to lose significant organic search traffic for a time (see chart and analysis on this below).

Meanwhile, the benefits for marketing are elusive. Whatever your DMO’s branding is, your destination’s branding to the vast majority of your users will simply be your plain destination name. If you can secure MyTown.com or .org as your domain name for a reasonable price, strongly consider it, as it will always match your consumer branding no matter what the name of your DMO becomes. In addition, it will be easy to remember and type, and attractive as a likely authoritative source of information.

THE TOP-LEVEL DOMAIN (TLD)
The third part of your domain is the top-level domain or TLD. Your domain name and TLD together is known as your root domain. It's best to use a more common TLD such as .com or .org, as these instill more confidence in the legitimacy of the site with users. The more exotic TLDs now available, such as .biz or .info or .travel, though technically just as valid as anything else, are sometimes associated with spammer sites. Using a less common TLD could therefore harm your SEO strategy via indirect means, as users may not trust and link to your site as often.

DOMAINS AND FOREIGN-LANGUAGE CONTENT
If you’re targeting a specific audience through a language other than the primary one for your content, then it’s recommended to have a subdomain or subdirectory for that specific language rather than a separate TLD (e.g. es.MyTown.com or MyTown.com/es/ instead of MyTown.es). In theory, any of these approaches can work, but TLDs are less ideal because technically the foreign ones are specific to countries rather than languages. That is, a .es TLD signals to the search engines that you want to target Spain and not other Spanish-speaking countries, which is usually not the case for DMOs. The search engines do not read subdomains and subdirectories the same way.
DOMA IN AUTHORITY

‘Domain authority’ is a frequently cited metric in the SEO sphere (the primary version is calculated and published by the Moz.com Link Explorer tool; see our section on Research Tools), but it’s not technically a metric that Google uses. However, something like it certainly seems to have emerged within the Google ranking algorithm. The success of deep, largely unlinked landing pages on TripAdvisor.com vs. first-level pages on DMO sites is a good example of this. In any case, having an authoritative domain with many reputable backlinks is critical to SEO success, and the value of a link to any URL on your domain will be passed to the rest of your content via your navigation links, boosting your rankings across the board.

When you change domains, you risk losing some of this authority, at least temporarily. Redirects in theory transmit the full ranking power from your old domain to your new one, but in practice there is almost always a period of impaired search engine rankings for a few months after a domain change. We calculated the effect for 35 different DMO sites that changed domains (not always on the Simpleview CMS) over the past 10 years, lining up their launch dates so that we could measure the percentage change in organic search traffic from the previous before and after the switch (Figure 4.1).

Before the launches, organic search on the sites was growing at a steady clip between zero and 10 percent for months. Immediately afterward, growth plunges, bottoming out at 23 percent losses about four weeks after launch. The recovery then begins almost as quickly, with regular growth restored about 12 weeks out from launch. Keep in mind that these aggregate numbers obscure quite a lot of variation from one site to the next. In any case, if you’re considering changing your domain, weigh the pros and cons carefully, with significant traffic losses and ranking visibility high on the latter list.
WHAT ARE INDEXING, CRAWLING AND SPIDERING?
Search engines such as Google and Bing search the internet for new and updated pages. They do this by sending out programs that systematically read websites, storing their contents and code.

These systems are known as “bots.” These bots (also called spiders) record everything they encounter as they crawl, including content, code, links and other items they find noteworthy. Google’s search algorithms do many things with all of this data, as discussed in other sections in this report, but here we focus on how they gather the data and what a webmaster needs to do about it. This collection of data is called crawling or spidering.

The engines need to collect your site’s data ahead of time because they want to return results to users as fast as possible. Even if you focus only on URLs with unique content, the internet offers an uncountably vast collection
of them, and the search engines need to know which ones exist, what’s on them and how good they are within a fraction of a second of the user entering his/her search query. So not only do they crawl as many URLs as they can ahead of time, but they also parse each URL’s contents and associate the URL with the words it contains in a massive database. This database is called an index because it functions just like an index in the back of a book: look up the topic you’re interested in with a keyword, then get a pre-made list of locations to find that information. URLs not in the index will never get any search traffic, so ensuring proper indexation is the first, foundational step in good search engine marketing.

IMPROVED INDEXATION TACTICS
Search engines, despite the rise of machine learning in recent years, are still programs that follow observable patterns, which means we can understand how they work and devise tactics to encourage them to behave the way we want. Here are some basic best practices that almost anyone can implement to make sure search engine bots can explore and index their content.

1. BOT-FRIENDLY URLs
Creating URLs that both bots and humans can understand is simple in concept. A URL such as “simpleville.com/?pageID=459” is not informative without knowing the contents of the database it’s hooked up to. It doesn’t tell the user or the bots what the page is about. A more useful URL structure would be “simpleville.com/things-to-do/hiking/.” Anyone looking at that URL will expect to find hiking and trail info for the Simpleville area.

For DMOs, the biggest sources of bot-unfriendly URLs are pages for individual listings, events, offers and blog posts, all of which tend to be built from databases that store thousands of similar records that differentiate each entry with ID numbers. Make sure that your CMS includes the name of the business, event or topic being discussed in each URL displaying this kind of content. Using blog headlines as URL text is a good step, and standard now across most publisher platforms.

2. SITE SPEED AND PERFORMANCE
Make sure that your site is running at peak performance to help bots index all of your URLs. The search engines use a concept called “crawl budget” as they determine which URLs to crawl. Crawl budget is assigned on a per-domain basis according to the number and quality of links pointing to the site as a whole. The budget is an amount of time that they’ll spend visiting URLs on your site, so the faster it is, the more URLs they’ll see and potentially index.

Complicating factors in your code like third-party plugins, external JavaScript libraries and large unoptimized images (many megabytes large) can cause your site’s speed to dip. Google’s PageSpeed Insights tool provides speed metrics and offers suggestions as to what elements are slowing load speed.

On a DMO site, both unrefined code and large images can cause problems. It’s understandable and good that destination marketers like to put large and attractive images high on most landing pages, but it’s important to compress images to a degree that improves performance without sacrificing quality. Your site ideally will also serve smaller versions of images to users on mobile devices where the full resolution serves no purpose.
3. ORIGINAL AND USEFUL CONTENT
Search engines and SEO experts alike agree that the first and most important step in achieving higher search result rankings is to have high-quality content. But it’s not just a matter of rankings: thin or duplicated content will likely not even be retained in the index at all. The term “high quality” is fundamentally subjective, but we can take a few guiding principles to heart when selecting words, images and interactive elements for our pages.

• Make your content original (don’t plagiarize or copy content from your other pages)
• Tell vibrant stories about your destination and its people
• Share fresh and relevant news about your destination
• Provide unique functionality, such as vacation planning or destination exploration tools
• Provide information not generally available on other destination marketing sites covering your area

4. (NOT) USING NOINDEX EFFECTIVELY
A noindex meta tag is a short snippet of code that tells a bot reading the page not to store it in the search index, and they will obey. It’s sometimes useful when you need to hide content like a “Thank You” page for a form or non-user-facing system pages, but should never be turned on for normal content pages containing things you want searchers to find. Only use noindex tags sparingly and with a specific purpose, as they can silently kill your site’s ability to earn traffic. Regular scans for noindex pages are a good idea.

5. UTILIZE CANONICAL URLS APPROPRIATELY
Canonical URLs are a tool promoted by the search engines to alleviate webmaster anxieties about duplicate content. As most people concerned with SEO know, the search engines take a dim view of duplicate content. It wastes their time, eating up computation resources without giving them anything new to offer their users. As a result, they try to keep duplicate URLs out of their index and will penalize sites who seem to be serving it up egregiously or abusively. A little duplicate content is okay; a lot can kill you.

There are legitimate reasons to duplicate content on multiple URLs, though. Some DMOs syndicate their event and listing feeds to other publishers, which in theory only furthers the mission of promoting the destination. Others accept cross-posts from local figures in the hospitality business or provide their own posts to local magazines and newspapers. These are all fine things to do, and canonical URLs allow you to avoid search engine penalties by inserting a small snippet of code into the background of the page. The canonical tag will indicate to the bots where the original version of the content is, allowing the creator to retain the SEO benefits of their work. When properly implemented, canonical tags will direct the search engines to combine the metrics for multiple URLs into one entity in their index, meaning that a link to a duplicate URL will actually benefit the original URL.
6. CROSS-LANGUAGE REFERENCING
Pages that have translated variations need to provide the proper hreflang tag to allow search engines to identify separate pages that serve very similar purposes for audiences speaking different languages. Any page that has a translation of its content available on another URL should specify that location and the language used there.

The hreflang tag should be placed in the head of your HTML code as follows:

```
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="es" href="http://es.example.com/" />
```

This line of code tells browsers and search engines that there is a Spanish version available that lives at the "es." subdomain. Multiple hreflang tags might be needed if there is content with multiple translations. Each page would need to reference itself and all additional variations to ensure proper indexation by the search engines.

7. AVOIDING SPIDER TRAPS
A spider trap is a term for a “loop” of URLs that allow a bot to crawl endless new, valid URLs that contain no new content worthy of indexation. A classic spider trap can occur on poorly coded pages serving up several listings at once, with pagination links leading to the next batch. If these links are not implemented properly, they may allow a bot to continually crawl new copies of a page looking for rows of listings deeper and deeper in the database, even if the full set has been exhausted and no new information is being served. Routinely review your widgets and feeds to diagnose any code issues.

8. USING SITEMAP FILES
Sites should have two different sitemaps to serve two purposes:

1. The sitemap.xml keeps search engines updated with any new pages that are added; it should always have a complete list of the files that you would like indexed. XML is a file-type that provides clean, unformatted information to browsers and systems like search engines.

2. The HTML sitemap is for front-end users who want to find a page if they cannot find it through the navigation menus or in-site search function. It displays a general structure of the site and all its pages. Listings, events, and other database-driven pages should not be included in an HTML sitemap, or else it will become too cluttered to be useful.

DEVICE-SPECIFIC INDEXATION
Lastly, a word on how mobile content is treated when search indexes are being constructed. The increase in mobile internet users has inspired Google to focus on creating a “mobile-first index”. The pages served to mobile devices will now be the ones used to determine what content is on a page and which keywords it is relevant to; before 2018, the desktop version of a page served this role.

As a result, pages that serve significantly less or worse content to mobile devices will suffer, even in desktop search results. Most of our clients’ sites have now been moved over to the mobile-first index. Ensure that your mobile URLs serve all the content and functionality that you’ve used to optimize your desktop pages for search, preferably by adopting responsive design techniques.

SOURCES
How Search organizes information
How Google Search Works
Consolidate duplicate URLs
Localized Versions of your page
Webmaster Central Blog
“Authority” is a critical concept in the world of SEO. The term is used to refer to all the ways that search engines gauge the quality of a site and its content, as opposed to those ways in which they gauge the relevance of the content to the user’s keyword. Ideally, for them, any search result returned will be both relevant and authoritative.

THE EVOLUTION OF AUTHORITY
In the early days of Google, PageRank was the primary, if not only, authority factor. Google’s algorithm counted links to each page and used them to calculate what its PageRank score would be. The equation is more complicated than a simple count, however. The more links a page had, the more valuable the links it sent out became. A page with a few quality links would potentially obtain much more authority than a page with many low-quality links.
The reason Google needed this concept of “authority” and metrics for measuring it has been that simply “reading” the contents of one page and determining whether it responds better to a given search keyword the way a human could is very hard for machines. The job of indexing and rating all the content on the internet is too massive for humans and too complicated for a computer without these measures of authority. Links were an attractive stand-in for direct human judgment of quality because, indirectly, they represent some human somewhere saying that this page is good and worthy of being considered authoritative.

That said, things are much different today as Google uses more than 200 ranking factors to calculate the authority of a page. This became necessary as unscrupulous webmasters realized that there are ways to fake links. “We have no one signal that we’ll say, ‘This is authority.’ We have a whole bunch of things that we hope together help increase the amount of authority in our results,” in the words of Paul Haahr, a Google senior engineer. Quality links, though, remain a massive part of the equation, even if Google, Bing and other search engines have to evaluate them much more carefully before they use them.

Google says that authority is rewarded on a per-page basis. They avoid rewarding authority solely on a site-wide basis because it became too easy to get rankings for a weak page on a strong site. This problem peaked with the content farms run by companies like eHow and Demand Media, which would churn out thousands of quick, low-quality, keyword-optimized articles and rely on the strength of the sites that hosted them to earn rankings.

This doesn’t mean that there is no such thing as site-wide signals for domains. Some of the site-wide factors that can overall influence an individual page include:

- Site speed
- Malware on site
- Domain age
- Domain history (what has been published on it before)
- Tools for measuring authority

If you’re curious about where your site stands in terms of authority, you can measure it with several tools. Most, while helpful and can provide some insight and guidance to a website owner’s efforts, present not Google’s metrics but an estimation of page authority and domain authority. They generally attempt to replicate what Google does: crawl as many URLs as possible, record their links and calculate which pages get the most links from the best sites. Some of these tools are:

- Link Explorer (formerly Open Site Explorer)
- Majestic SEO Site Explorer

These tools generally charge a fee for access, given how many resources are required to complete their tasks.
Which links are important for a DMO?

We know that links are important, but as a DMO, what are some of the more important, quality and trusted links you should have pointing to your site?

- Local .edus
- Local .govs
- Links from your Member/Partner businesses

All of these are good sources of links because they themselves tend to have authority relevant to the keywords that DMOs are trying to rank for. Colleges and governments tend not to run spammy sites that link out for commercial reasons, so they tend to look trustworthy in Google’s algorithms. They also earn massive amounts of links themselves thanks to their official, real-world authority. Local hospitality business sites may be somewhat less trustworthy and authoritative by comparison, but, as legitimate sites discussing tourism in the destination they serve, their links carry extra weight in the determination of rankings for keywords related to those topics. Making efforts to earn links from these sites can significantly boost a DMO’s rankings.

ADDITIONAL AUTHORITY FACTORS

In addition to the PageRank calculation described above, many other off-page factors have been published by the search engines or discovered by SEOs.

- The number of linking domains: Not just the number of links, but the number of different domains that link to you is important.
- Link relevancy: Many SEOs believe that links from pages related to your page’s topic carry more relevance for search engines.
- Links from a homepage: Similarly, some SEOs believe that links from a homepage of a linking domain carry more strength than those on one of its pages. This assertion is difficult to prove one way or another, but since homepages tend to have more links than other pages, they’re better sources of authority for that reason alone, at least.
- The number of “do follow” vs. nofollow links: Google officially stated that they don’t count nofollow links (links with the rel=nofollow attribute attached in the background code, a tool promoted by the search engines to help webmasters avoid appearing to spam the link-authority calculations). But having only do-follow links in your profile looks unnatural, and is therefore suspicious to ranking algorithms.
- Contextual links: It’s generally believed that links within the content of the page are worth more than links in a sidebar or navigation section, for instance. This makes sense, as an in-content link represents a stronger endorsement of the target URL by the author.

REFERENCES

What are the best off-page SEO techniques?
Search Engine Ranking Factors
30 Most Important Google Ranking Factors
Over the last decade, there has been much debate over whether “social signals”—that is, links from social media posts to other websites—improve the target sites’ search engine rankings. Depending on where you look, you can find people saying the effect is massive or that it doesn’t exist at all.

As noted by Moz.com and Search Engine Watch, Google has officially said it does not use social media signals in its ranking algorithm. That said, quality content tends to earn more social engagement, which in turn tends to generate inbound links and mentions (references to your brand that can be recognized by ranking algorithms even without being formatted as links), which are authority signals that search engines value highly. Furthermore, despite the search engines’ protestations, so much citation and sharing activity occurs on Facebook, Twitter, and other social platforms that it must be a tempting source of ranking signals.
SIMPLEVIEW
STATE OF SEO

SOCIAL SIGNAL IMPACT ON SEO IS MORE CORRELATION THAN CAUSATION

No one has conclusively demonstrated an absolute, quantifiable way in which social signals cause a site’s search engine rankings to be improved. It is, however, easy to establish correlation between links in social posts and better rankings. At a high level, and according to some analysis by Searchmetrics, the top ranked websites in many of Google’s rankings displays vastly more social signals than all other pages. This is primarily due to brand keyword searches, as official brand websites perform strongly in social networks and are almost always allocated top positions by Google for their own names.

Even if it’s true that the search engine algorithms do not directly consider a site’s prominence on social networks, social signals may likely have an indirect impact on rankings. That is, it may often be that social signals drive website engagement, and those engaged users may be more likely to generate normal links from sites they control. Such an impact would indicate more than mere correlation.

Other avenues by which social signals may improve a site’s search rankings include:

- **4** Inciting the engines to rapidly index a new website or new individual pages of an established site.
- **5** Gaining a brand more search engine exposure through rankings for its social media profiles themselves.

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4. https://blog.kissmetrics.com/get-google-to-index/

FACEBOOK

Facebook remains the social network with by far the highest level of user interactions. Furthermore, Facebook, compared with the other social networks, correlates with rankings very strongly across the first search results page.

For Simpleview clients, Facebook is by far the most active social media platform and brings in the most non-paid referral traffic. 87% of all DMO social traffic comes from Facebook. Facebook of course has the broadest North American user base, and vacation destination content fits well with what that audience likes to consume and share. Facebook also is highly discoverable by the search engines, particularly Google, meaning that content posted there can often
discovered by people who don’t even use the service. That said, for the past several years Facebook has continuously rolled out newsfeed updates that diminish brands’ organic reach. Facebook referral traffic has declined as a result, and there are no signs of future adjustments working in the other direction. Many believe that Facebook is doing this deliberately so as to push publishers into paying for exposure on the platform. It may be that decreased user engagement with posts by marketers will lessen the indirect SEO benefits of being active on the site in the future, and we will continue to monitor how the situation plays out for destinations.

GOOGLE+
In April of 2019, Google finally and mercifully pulled the plug on Google+. After its much-hyped launch in 2011, DMO marketers became very interested in the platform’s potential, but it never really took off to compete with Facebook like Google hoped. There are no plans to revive it.

TWITTER
DMOs see a small amount of referral traffic from Twitter to their sites. Most DMOs are extremely active on Twitter and have decent followings, allowing them to drive traffic and, ideally, links from users. What’s more, virtually all content on Twitter is easily crawlable, though all of its links automatically and unavoidably marked with the rel=nofollow tag. Especially for fresh, fast-evolving topics, it would be difficult to imagine that Google would not find Twitter links to be a valuable source of engagement and authority signals for DMOs. Indeed, at one point much earlier in the platform’s life, Google paid for a direct feed of all of Twitter’s data, though that partnership ended long ago. On the other hand, the platform has historically been a welcome home for spam accounts, which would hurt its usefulness in ranking algorithms.

Whether it affects rankings or not, Twitter is a good place to influence users at the moment they need help in your destination, and can help you win strong advocates among your audience.

PINTEREST
Pinterest also sees a large drop in the average number of pins between first and second position, and the overall level of sharing activity is the lowest of the social networks analyzed.

Interestingly, we often find that the referral traffic from Pinterest on DMO sites produces relatively high volume and engagement compared to its prominence in the national conversation. We attribute this to Pinterest primarily being a visual platform where pins can be shared and re-shared with a link embedded in the post. Furthermore, Pinterest is a visual platform, and DMO sites are appropriately very visual.

OTHER PLATFORMS
Instagram is a wonderful platform for sharing destination photos and inspiring visitors. Lacking any facility for placing links within individual posts, though, its ability to broadcast ranking signals or drive referral traffic is quite limited. Instagram Stories sends noticeable traffic, as links can be dropped there, but these have zero SEO value. Note that, alone among the social platforms, Instagram offers decent session duration once users to get to DMO sites (if they arrive organically), though the session numbers are tiny. The same and worse can be said for SnapChat, which has no web-accessible profiles or posts at all outside of advertising.

Some DMOs have sought to engage with meeting and event planners via posts on LinkedIn. We can’t comment on the effectiveness of this strategy for generating leads directly (we have no data to use), but we can say that the SEO impact is likely to be very limited, given the general lack of sharing activity on the platform in comparison to the more popular ones.
Google updates its search algorithm hundreds of times per year. These changes are made by Google to better provide users with relevant and useful search results. Most of these changes go unnoticed, but occasionally these updates significantly impact SERPs, and SEO efforts must be adjusted accordingly. Below you will find a list of notable updates to Google’s search algorithm and how to respond to them.

UPDATES THIS YEAR

1. CORE UPDATE – 2019
This algorithm change was a broad core update, focusing on improving search results in terms of quality defined very broadly. This is an ongoing process designed to ensure that high-quality content is reflected on the first page of results. This update was uniquely notable in that it was the first algorithm update to be announced by Google in advance.
• **How it Affects DMOs** – While the industry overall has continued to see good organic search growth this year, anecdotally, some DMOs may have lost ground, especially those who are in competitive markets or have been relying on less robust content.

• **How to Respond** – Google’s official stance is that nothing needs to be optimized for this algorithm update. However, it is recommended that DMOs evaluate their content for pages with thin content, or that do a poor job addressing their topic.

2. **BERT Update – October 2019**
What sets the BERT update apart is that it is designed to analyze search queries rather than web pages. This update is oriented around improving Google’s ability to understand the language in search queries, particularly for more natural, “conversational” queries. BERT is expected to affect up to 10% of all search queries.

• **How it Affects DMOs** – DMOs with well-written, topic-focused pages will not need to make adjustments for the BERT update. However, pages with thin content or pages that do not answer the question of your targeted audience may be harmed.

• **How to Respond** - Once again, Google’s position is that there is nothing to optimize for with the BERT update. As always, DMOs should continue efforts to create high-quality, relevant content that answers the questions their audience is asking. Additionally, creating a dedicated FAQ section may be useful in that FAQs provide quality answers to conversational questions.

HISTORICAL UPDATES
1. **PANDA UPDATE – 2011**
Google’s Panda Update was designed to prevent poor-quality sites with thin or duplicate content from showing at the top of search results. So-called “content farms” like eHow at the time were dominating a huge variety of search results, and the widespread criticism of their poorly researched and written articles inspired this algorithm update. It became part of Google’s core algorithm in 2016.

• **How it Affects DMOs** – DMO sites with many low-quality or duplicate pages may not rank as high. As a result, organic traffic can drop significantly for these pages, or even the entire site. However, the volumes of bad content required to trigger this penalty are very large. It would be difficult to do so by accident with normal site management processes.

• **How to Respond** – Be sure the content you create is high quality and relevant to the user. We recommend that content consist of a minimum of 250 words, if possible. Additionally, scan your site periodically for duplicate content to avoid exclusion from search results pages.

2. **PENGUIN UPDATE – 2012**
Google’s Penguin Update was designed to target spam and manipulative link-building practices, as well as keyword stuffing. This update targets sites with spammy links pointed to their site, but does not look at the links on the site itself. Penguin became part of Google’s core algorithm in 2017.

• **How it Affects DMOs** – DMOs that engage in manipulative link schemes or keyword stuffing may be penalized and see a drop in their organic traffic. This is very unlikely to happen unless you have been intentionally violating Google’s guidelines for earning links.
How to Respond – To recover from a Penguin penalty, remove any unnatural links which you have control over, whether they are links you’ve built yourself or links you arranged on third-party websites. If you do not have control over the spammy links, use the disavow tool in Google Search Console to remove the bad links. Finally, update your content to ensure that the keywords on your site are included in a natural way.

3. HUMMINGBIRD UPDATE – 2013
Hummingbird was a major overhaul of Google’s algorithm which focused on the intent of searchers’ queries rather than on just the keywords themselves. This resulted in a more accurate knowledge graph and a set of SERP features designed to provide quick answers to users’ queries.

How it Affects DMOs – The Hummingbird Update focused on semantic search, which attempted to match the search results to the language of users’ queries beyond the keywords. As a result, Google’s search algorithm is more nuanced and has become more focused on user intent. Since DMOs tend to publish a lot of original content about topics relevant to travelers, this update should favor them.

How to Respond – DMOs can take advantage of this update by utilizing natural, as opposed to keyword-stuffed, language in the content of their sites. Other best practices include diversifying the length of you content, including visual elements within your content and implementing schema microdata.

4. HTTPS/SSL UPDATE – 2014
Google made security a priority by using https as a ranking signal. Google Chrome began marking all non-https sites as “non-secure” and warning users in 2018.

How it Affects DMOs – DMO sites that do not utilize an SSL certificate will be labeled as “Not secure” in the Chrome web browser. Sites that are https secured receive a boost in Google’s search results. Additionally, users may think twice before submitting personal information when signing up for newsletters or requesting visitor’s guides.

How to Respond – DMOs should obtain an SSL certificate for their domain in order to encrypt and protect their users’ data, as well as to gain a boost in the SERPs.

5. MOBILE UPDATE – 2015
This update expanded the usage of mobile-friendliness as a ranking signal, making it easier for users to get relevant search results that are optimized for their devices.

How it Affects DMOs – Due to the continued adoption of mobile devices, Google’s Mobile Update aims to feature sites that are mobile friendly in their search results. DMOs, like all site operators, stand to lose traction in the rankings if they don’t have mobile-friendly versions of their pages that contain all the same major content and functionality.

Things To Do In Phoenix, Arizona | Events & Attractions
https://www.visitphoenix.com › things-to-do ›
Come discover all the great things to do in Phoenix, Arizona. View our listings and explore scenic desert gardens, historic museums or plan an entire day trip.
Top 10 Phoenix Attractions › Fun & Amusement › Downtown Phoenix › Day Trips
Fig. 8.1
• **How to Respond** – DMOs should be sure that pages on their site render properly when viewed on mobile devices. To get a full account of mobile usability issues, consult the Mobile Usability Report in Google Search Console.

6. **POSSUM UPDATE – 2016**
The Possum Update changes local search results based on the searcher’s physical location. For example, the searcher is more likely to see a business in their search results the closer they perform that search to the business.

• **How it Affects DMOs** – This update is likely to impact a DMO’s partners more than the DMO itself, as DMOs are not eligible to appear in the local search results except with their physical visitors center locations. However, it should be noted that travelers will see different search results while visiting a destination than when if perform the same search in the planning phase.

• **How to Respond** – Although this update may not affect DMOs directly, it’s important that their partners be aware of the impact. Encourage your partners to obtain high-quality links, gather reviews and review their primary Google My Business category.

**RECENT UPDATES**

1. **MOBILE-FIRST INDEXING – 2018**
Google announced that they would be using the mobile version of the page for indexing and ranking.

• **How it Affects DMOs** – DMO sites will see an increased crawl rate from the Smartphone Googlebot, as opposed to the desktop version. Additionally, Google will show the mobile version of pages in their search results.

• **How to Respond** – Once again, DMOs will want to be sure that their site is mobile friendly. To achieve this goal, DMOs should ensure that mobile page speed is prioritized by optimizing images and prioritizing content above the fold.

2. **SNIPPET LENGTH DROP – 2018**
After increasing the preview snippets (the text that appears under a link in the search results) from 150-160 characters to around 300 characters in late-2017, Google rolled back snippets to their former limit (Figure 8.1).

• **How it Affects DMOs** – DMOs that updated their meta description tags in response to the increase in character length will need to revert back to previous standards. Unoptimized meta description tags may be truncated, negatively affecting CTRs from search results pages.

• **How to Respond** – DMOs should perform an audit of their site’s meta description tags to ensure each page has a unique meta description containing relevant, high-volume keywords between 140 and 160 characters.

3. **CHROME SECURITY WARNINGS – 2018**
With this update, the Google Chrome web browser began marking all non-https sites as “non-secure.”

• **How it Affects DMOs** – DMO sites without an SSL certificate will be marked as “Not secure” by the Chrome web browser, which is one of the two dominant browsers for North American users, along with Safari.

• **How to Respond** – If your site does not already have an SSL certificate, obtaining one will encrypt and protect your users’ data. Chrome will begin to recognize your site as secure.
4. MOBILE SPEED UPDATE – 2018
Google announced that page speed will be a ranking factor for mobile searches.

- **How it Affects DMOs** – Pages on DMO sites that have low page speed scores may be negatively impacted by this update. Since DMOs like to publish many high-quality images to inspire travelers, they need to be careful of overloading their pages with design elements that weigh a page down. Headers and videos are common culprits. However, the intent of the search query is still a strong signal, so a slow page may still rank if it has high-quality, relevant content.

- **How to Respond** – Run your important pages through a tool like the PageSpeed Insights tool to determine if pages can be better optimized for mobile users. Some common issues with page speed include unoptimized images and resources which block the rendering of the page. Check with your web vendor to ensure that all coding best practices for speed are being observed. Also consider publishing AMP versions of your URLs for the greatest possible speed (see the User Platforms section of this report for more information).

> DMOs should perform an audit of their site’s meta description tags to ensure each page has a unique meta description containing relevant, high-volume keywords between 140 and 160 characters.

— NEAL KINDSCHI
SEO Analyst, Simpleview
When creating new content for your site, the critical guiding question to which all others reduce is: what are the needs of my audience? Though there are other ways to approach this question, as SEOs we like to think in terms of keywords. Understanding an audience for us begins with keyword research to assess the full range of terms customers are searching for related to your destination. Anticipating and testing the audience’s intent behind these queries will then give you a solid basis for topic ideation, content creation and on-page optimization. Our Research Tools section has more information on keyword research techniques, and our Keywords section has original research on which keywords perform well for DMOs.
Given the current sophistication of search engine algorithms, word count should not be the primary goal in creating content. Matching your audience’s interests by providing a positive user experience via quality, relevant content, which can be as long or short as it needs to be, should be your primary goal in creating SEO-friendly content. We will discuss the ways you can, through research, writing and design, win with audiences and search engines.

**CONTENT AS ON-PAGE SEO FACTOR**

Quality text content, even as the web’s visual and multimedia capabilities expand, remains the foundation for effective SEO. This is particularly true for the types of informational searches ("[destination] events," “things to do in [destination]") that have historically brought in so much of the organic search traffic to DMO sites. The content must be unique to that page, as Google strives to filter out duplicate content from the search results in an effort to give its users the best possible experience.

While padding content with extraneous or repetitive text is always a bad idea, quality long-form content - that is, deep content that conveys the necessary level of detail for the audience you’re trying to reach - tends to perform very well in the search engine rankings.

- **CoSchedule and Hubspot** each tested blog posts by length and found that those with more than 2,000 words achieved higher rankings.
- **OkDork and Buzzsumo** studied content length in relation to social media virality. Of the 100 million articles they analyzed, longer articles greater than 2,000 words were more likely to be shared. They attribute this result to the ways that deep research and expansive content are more likely to compel sharing.

The authors of this research do however include a caveat: “The prerequisite to getting your content shared widely is to write compelling content.” That is, length alone won’t do anything.

- **The Backlinko study**, which analyzed various factors for search rankings of one million pages, had a key finding that the average first-page result on Google has 1,890 words. There were other and more important factors, but they also found a strong correlation between higher rankings and low bounce rates (thus more engaging), and with content that presents an in-depth exploration of a focused topic.
- **Medium’s study** of the optimal blog post length found that seven-minute reads, or around 1,600 words, had the best engagement. This all comes with the caveat that a lot of variation in the results means that length tends to correlate with quality content. They concluded that it makes sense to create quality content the length it needs to be. Written content does not need to be cut off unnecessarily short out of fear of short attention spans, nor should topics covered more succinctly be expanded to meet a preset word count.

Any DMO has a wealth of topics that can support 1,000 to 2,000 words of content in a single piece. Possible ideas:

- In-depth guides to major local attractions/events (logistics, highlights not to miss, etc.)
- Interviews with local hospitality luminaries (chefs, musicians, artists)
- Local history
- Upcoming event round-ups
WHAT MAKES FOR STRONG WRITING?
In addition to the SEO considerations outlined above, pure content quality is always paramount. The backbone of any good writing is a strong perspective on the topic at hand that answers or explains the questions implied by the search queries that bring people to the content. This type of perspective is best conveyed in the kinds of informative and/or inspiring pieces that DMOs specialize in, with a well-thought-out structure. To begin, outline the main subtopics and their supporting ideas within a strong, comprehensive introductory paragraph (maintaining the sort of fresh and inviting tone favored in marketing copy, of course).

As you proceed, deploy keyword-rich titles, headings and subheadings which clearly summarize the content that will follow each. Pay attention to the flow of the piece. Ask yourself: does section A logically connect to B to C to D, with clear transitions leading the reader through these connections? Neilsen Norman research has indicated “higher literacy” users like to scan the text, reading through headings, subheadings and the first sentences of paragraphs.

Style and grammar are of course critical. On a basic level, good writing entails grammatically correct usage and consistent use of brand voice and values. Employ easy-to-understand sentence structures and word for leisurely reading: an 8th-grade reading level will have shorter sentences and paragraphs as well as fewer difficult words, and little or no jargon.

When fleshing out a story, supply supporting details with facts that build authority, sensory details that elevate and create an emotional appeal to the audience, and goal-driven calls to action which, when correctly placed, persuade the audience to the desired action. If all of these elements come together, forming an interesting topic to a solid structure to valuable details presented in a pleasing style, your content will be more likely to earn good search engine rankings and reader engagement both.
WHY DOES CONTENT STRUCTURE MATTER ESPECIALLY FOR SEO?

Besides the reasons of readability mentioned above, there are some specific effects content has on SEO that you should keep in mind.

- Featured Snippets and Voice Search: When parsing pages for content to present in Featured Snippets (see our section on SERP Features for info on the value of these positions), Google often uses headings to ease the task. Placing a commonly searched phrase or question (e.g. "what is the best month to visit [famous local attraction X]") in a heading, then giving a succinct explanation, can earn major SERP real estate above even the first organic result and gain your site exposure via voice search, where the snippets are often read as answers.

- Headings containing keywords or related terms are crawled and identified by Google as pointing to the topic for that page.

- Exactly how influential keywords in headings are, as opposed to keywords in other page copy, is a matter of ongoing debate among SEOs. Whether they receive special weight or not, headings are an easy and non-spammy place to put high-value search keywords to ensure they’re well represented on the page.

- While the Google algorithms have been able to account for search term synonyms for years, more recently in 2018 Google began using neural matching, a form of machine learning, to understand how words are related to concepts on the word, sentence and paragraph level within a given piece of content. Staying on topic and writing organized, natural prose (as with keywords, don’t stuff synonyms either) is essential; much of the conversation around neural matching suggests that it helps Google better understand the topical focus of content as a human reader would.
VISUAL PRESENTATION
The web is, of course, a versatile visual publishing medium. While too many bells and whistles can be distracting if the content offered is fundamentally text-based, there are still plenty of design decisions to be made if you want to maximize the appeal of your content.

With mobile users outnumbering desktop users of DMO sites two-to-one, you must ensure all page elements are presented in a mobile-friendly fashion. That is, text must be legible and interactive elements such as links and buttons must be easy to touch as intended with a finger.

Use on-brand and audience-friendly fonts and styling (don’t go nuts with unusual text colors or sizes). Place optimized images pleasingly among written content, using at least one image per page (which tends to correlate with improved rankings). And of course, ensure that your overall updated website design is in line with current trends and usability best practices.

Content Length/Word Counts for DMO Website Content
There’s no magic number when it comes to word count and SEO; however, it can be helpful to keep some loose rules in mind. Below are some general guidelines that may assist you in your content creation. Ultimately, the correct length for a piece will vary based on your target keywords, audience intent, organizational goals and results from testing various content approaches.

- Listings detail, event details, contact us, forms, media galleries and homepage: **At least 100 words**
- Top-level navigation pages (main page for a section of the site): **At least 300 words**
- Second- and third-level pages: **At least 500 words**
- Blogs: Depends on the level of detail required to serve the topic, so they can range from 200 words (reminder for an upcoming event) to a few thousand (an in-depth treatment of significant topics in your destination, such as a listicle)

“There’s no magic number when it comes to word count and SEO; however, it can be helpful to keep some loose rules in mind… ultimately, the correct length for a piece will vary based on your target keywords, audience intent, organizational goals and results from testing various content approaches.”

– ERIN MCNAMARA
Lead SEO Analyst, Simpleview
DMOs face several challenges when deciding how to structure their content. Having built several hundred sitemaps for DMOs, Simpleview has amassed a degree of expertise in identifying and solving the most common problems that arise.

**STRATEGY: SITE STRUCTURE GOALS**

At the highest level, DMOs are trying to bring more visitors to their area, usually with an emphasis on filling hotel rooms. If we dig further, we find that they’re attempting to accomplish this goal by appealing to several different audiences:

- **Leisure travelers:** The largest audience, these people are traveling for pleasure. They may be traveling to get away or to attend an event at a fixed time, such as a wedding or a festival.
While numerous, they are relatively more difficult to influence than other audiences (because they lack a single point of contact to influence a large group) and are more budget-conscious (because they’re usually paying their own way).

- **Business travelers:** For some destinations, business travelers are a keystone of their tourism strategy. For others, they’re an afterthought. DMOs seeking to bring them in will tend to do so by focusing on meeting and convention sales, where one success can mean thousands of new arrivals staying for multiple nights.

- **Group tours:** Motorcoach group travelers may be coming for leisure, but as the tour operator is the one making the decisions about who goes where, specialized content needs to be developed to attract them.

- **SMERF:** The various types of small gatherings represented by the Social, Military, Educational, Religious, Fraternal phrase used throughout the industry can bring a number of small wins to a DMO. These groups may not be as big as conventions and conferences, but they require some planning assistance and other services, and thus can be influenced by an interested DMO.

- **Weddings:** Weddings are of course common and expensive, and for destinations that specialize in hosting them, they are likely to bring in a number of out-of-town guests.

- **Media:** Any DMO with a strong PR department will want to use its site’s content and tools to influence writers and publications potentially interested in covering the destination.

There are of course other audiences for the DMO to reach, but these categories cover the most prominent ones in the industry.

This chart displays the content topic that users are looking at on their first pageview of a session vs. the second (Figure 10.1). The formula for each bar is:

\[
\text{# of pageviews attributed to the topic sum of all sessions reaching that page depth}
\]

Keep in mind that most sessions don’t ever reach a second pageview. Interestingly, the home page gets a greater share of activity on the second pageview than the first, as most users are sent to deeper landing pages by search engines, social media and paid marketing campaigns. Meanwhile, event details, listing details and blog posts are important for bringing users into your site, but are not as frequently browsed after that point.
TACTICS: WHAT YOU CAN OFFER YOUR AUDIENCE
Some types of site content and tools will apply more to one audience than another, but most audiences are typically looking for the following things on a DMO’s site:

Inspiration: Great content (a term we use broadly to include text, images, video and even tools) can inspire non-travelers to travel and inspire travelers to choose your destination over the competition. The inspiration stage (often called “Dream” in marketing-funnel lingo) is likely where DMO content has the greatest influence on actual travel decisions.

Information: Informing users where to find hospitality businesses and local events, among other things, was once a critical service provided by DMOs. While DMOs can still use this information to have a major impact on travel decisions, many competitors have since emerged in this space, including international tourism information sites such as TripAdvisor and search engines such as Google.

Planning and Booking Assistance: Once travelers have decided where to go, they need tools to make it easier to book transportation and accommodations, and plan their schedules. Quality online tools, including booking engines, trip planners and RFP forms (for professional planners) can provide invaluable assistance.

ALIGNING STRATEGY AND TACTICS IN NAVIGATION STRUCTURE
With these particular audiences and modes of outreach in mind, we can start to understand how a DMO site’s navigation should be shaped. Knowledge of real-world traffic patterns takes us even further.

First, a site’s navigation needs to be easy to use. This means that it needs to allow a user on one page (most often the home page) who’s interested in content not available where they are now to find the relevant page efficiently.
At the top level, this means restricting navigation options to seven or fewer items, as the average person can’t retain more in short-term memory. Too few options, meanwhile, require broad labels that may not give users enough direction on where to go next. At Simpleview, we usually aim for 4-6 nav options.

In years past, many DMOs chose to use that limited space in the top navigation to address each of their options separately. For instance, the links at the top of a site using this approach might be: Visitors, Meetings, Groups and Media. This makes some sense, in that each of these sections will need specialized content that appeals to its intended reader. The problem, though, is that 98 percent or more of users on your site will be going to the Visitors section, as DMO sites tend to be visited overwhelmingly by travelers, not meeting or event planners. A top navigation that enables them to drill down into the site immediately will produce better results.

As a result, we typically recommend that the main navigation bar be devoted to the primary categories of information that interest travelers. These typically revolve around attractions/activities, events, dining, lodging, and miscellaneous logistical information and tools that won’t fit in the other categories. The content for planners can still be made accessible through a secondary navigation bar that is less visually prominent.

Once the broad categories of site content have been selected, they need to be named. We typically recommend functional, search-engine-friendly navigation names rather than inspirational ones. Thus we prefer phrases like “things to do” to “play” and “hotels” to “stay.” While it’s always good to inspire people, when a phrase is frequently entered into search, that’s a strong signal that people find that language natural to use. They will also be more likely to intuitively understand what they’ll find in a section if you match your phrasing to theirs. Furthermore, phrases with frequently searched keywords in their names and URLs will be more likely to rank well for those phrases, which, at the top navigation level, are among the most well-trafficked of those available to a DMO.

The same principles apply as you drill down into the navigation. Limiting the number of options present in any one section at any one level will help users grasp the options available to them, and giving them functional names will only further that goal. As a typical DMO will have between several dozen and several hundred pages to publish - not including blog posts, listings and events - this can be challenging. So it can make sense to keep marginal topics out of the navigation and instead allow Google and other search engines to bring the right audience to them.

Database-driven content such as listings, events and blogs typically do not appear in the nav, as they are far too numerous to fit. Visit any popular content-driven site, such as Buzzfeed or The Onion, and you won’t find them trying to list everything they’ve published - or even a significant percentage of it - in the navigation. Instead, the navigation can lead users to pages with tools that let them explore the businesses, events and content in those databases.

There are of course many, many details that go into crafting a quality navigation structure that enables every page to succeed. Start here and continue to test, preferably with rigorously designed experiments, and your site’s performance should continue to improve with time.
As the old saying goes, you can’t improve what you can’t measure. Knowing the latest tools and techniques for analyzing a DMO website’s traffic patterns is critical for getting the most out of the time and money you put into it. This rundown of the ways we approach analyzing sites and campaigns at Simpleview should get you started on the right track.

A BEGINNER’S GUIDE TO SITE ANALYSIS

We’ll start with the basics before we get to the details of what we find works best for this industry; feel free to skip ahead if you have a strong grasp of analytical philosophy.

When we are trying to get a picture of what your audience looks like or how they react to the content on your site, we begin by deploying a tracking system sophisticated enough to drive sound decision making.
We need to be able to track the movements of users and gather as much information as possible to learn what pages and functionality push them closer to our desired outcome: traveling to your destination.

As you might imagine, many tools can help us track your users’ behavior, and we need to understand what each service does well and where there are limits. Some of the measurements we typically pull from website analytics are:

- Pageviews
- Sessions
- Member/Partner Referrals
- Time on Site
- Bounce Rate
- Number of Unique Visitors (Users)
- Onsite Bookings

These are among the more basic metrics that we can use to track a user as they browse a site. Nearly all of these measurements can also be sliced into dimensions. For example, we can generally tell which browser a user is accessing your site with (Figure 11.1). If we break down a metric like sessions, not the total number of sessions to your site, but the number of sessions from each browser, we are said to be adding a “dimension” to our data.

![Browser Usage Shares for DMO Sites](image)

Fig. 11.1
Knowing how people react to your content, design and tools is a necessary step for enhancing your ability to appeal to your audience. We can, through these metrics, begin to do that. By looking at bounce rate, as an example, we can see if people are hitting a particular page and performing no further action. This might tell us that the page needs better calls to action, which can help drive a person deeper into the site.

But it’s not quite so simple. A high bounce rate could mean that users are finding what they need on your page quickly and no further action is needed. Which is the correct answer? We’ll probably have to start pulling your data apart, looking at new metrics and dimensions and processing that information intelligently in order to find the truth and make a good decision about optimizing that page for its best possible performance.

With this very basic understanding of how to think about site analysis under our belts, let’s talk about some tools and information you can pull from each.

**Google Analytics (GA)**
Google Analytics, often referred to as just GA, is practically an industry standard when it comes to website analytics. Once tracking is installed on all pages which need to be tracked, GA can start reporting real-time activity on your site.

In general, any page with tracking code installed will register activity whenever a user moves to a new page. Optionally, your web development team can add additional tracking instructions to links, images, forms and all other elements of your site to track user interactions with them directly. Using this data, along with data from the browser and computer settings, GA is able to paint a picture of the people visiting your website and see what they do.

This level of tracking is the bedrock foundation without which you can’t do much else, and GA does it as well as anyone, for free.

**Advantages:**
- Widely used across the industry; virtually every DMO uses it at least as a backup system
- Matches (or sets) all standards for web metrics and dimensions, most of which are tracked accurately with out-of-the-box code
- Massive reporting and dashboard interface allows users to dig deep into the collected data
- Event tracking allows flexible tracking of almost any user action on your site
- Tracking can be configured to attribute user activity to off-site marketing campaigns down to the ad creative level

**Disadvantages:**
- Cookie-based system cannot track across platforms/devices; one person who visits on phone and desktop will look like two different users
- Limited amount of demographic information available
- For more popular sites, tracking limits and data sampling may become a problem at the free tier, and the cheapest paid tier is $150K per year
Google Search Console (GSC)
Google Search Console, formerly known as Webmaster Tools, offers a powerful set of tools that can provide additional information about how people are finding your site. Once you’ve proved ownership of the site (on Simpleview’s CMS, we can get this done for you in about five minutes), this free suite of site management tools becomes available almost immediately, though it won’t provide any retroactive data to you.

We discuss the many uses of Search Console for maintaining and diagnosing problems with your site elsewhere in this document. For our discussion of analytical tools, the most important part of GSC is the Performance Report. Since the 2018 version of GSC, which for the first time in years provided a major update to the UI and functionality of the tool, the Performance Report replaces the old Search Analytics Report. The metrics and dimensions are largely the same.

With this data, we can partially fill the huge gap in analytics created by the loss of organic keyword attribution information no longer visible to our servers when people use the secure version of Google’s site (for DMO’s: 99 percent of all users over the last few years). We can see which keywords are bringing users to your site, how you rank for those keywords and how your ability to get clicks changes as those factors change. This can be immensely valuable for diagnosing and responding to traffic fluctuations.

The data, however, has some limitations. In order to protect user privacy, very rare keywords are obscured and all of the numbers are based on a sample of data rather than the full set of all user interactions. Generally, the distortions to the data aren’t that big, but they exist. A bigger problem is that the data is only available through a certain window into the past. With the old GSC, that window was 90 days, but the new version exposes up to 16 months of data. This expanded view into search data is fantastic, in that it allows us to do year-over-year comparisons for recent months. Still, maintaining a long historical record requires extracting and storing the data.

**GSC Performance Report Metrics And Dimensions**

**Metrics:**
- Impressions
- Clicks
- CTR
- Average Position

**Dimensions:**
- Queries (i.e. keywords)
- Pages
- Countries
- Devices
- Search Type (Web, Image, or Video)
- Search Appearance (Rich Results, Web Light Results)

**ADVANTAGES:**
- Quick to set up
- Has otherwise inaccessible keyword data

**DISADVANTAGES:**
- Only shows up to 16 months of data
- Does not show how users behaved once they arrived on the site
- Does not connect to GA profiles or demographic information
- Only shows Google searches
Quantcast
Quantcast is a page-tracking tool not unlike Google Analytics. It tracks user activity on any page on which it’s installed and collates that data into information about users and sessions. What it does better than most other tools, at least free ones, is provide demographic breakdowns of users and compare them to national benchmarks. Among these dimensions are age, gender, child-rearing status, income and education, which Quantcast populates by matching your users to its database of those who have unmasked themselves at some point in the past.

However, as of mid-2018, Quantcast has begun to restrict our ability to add new sites to the free version of the tool. Simpleview is evaluating whether to keep using it, but individual site managers can still get the full set of tools formerly available to free users.

Advantages:
• Allows for much more insights into the types of people visiting the site
• Free
• Easy to implement

Disadvantages:
• Advanced features are paywalled
• Does not allow flexible custom tracking
• Limited historical time window for reporting

Facebook Pixel
In 2016, Simpleview began putting a Facebook pixel on client sites in order to take advantage of a service whereby Facebook would match the users on our sites with the information they provided in their public profiles, potentially giving us access to demographic and interest information on our users. However, the Cambridge Analytica scandal and the general global shift toward focusing on user privacy rights have greatly curtailed the functionality of this service, and we no longer employ it.

When used together, these tools can provide powerful information about the people who are visiting your website. We can determine what people are searching for, how they act when they get to your site and even determine a lot of information about what types of people are looking at our site. Together, this allows us to craft strategies to attract and convert more potential visitors.

ACTUAL TRAVEL DATA
While the above are great tools for analyzing on-site behavior, they leave much to be desired for measuring the ultimate impact of websites on travel behavior. How many people came to your destination and how much did they spend while they were there? This question is the hardest to answer in the DMO space, given the fact that most bookings occur on OTAs or directly with hospitality businesses. Hopefully, the emerging suite of in-market data tools will allow us to “close the loop,” as it’s said.

Among the most relied-upon statistics in our industry are those describing lodging performance, such as occupancy percentage, revenue per available room (revpar), average daily rate (ADR) and demand. These statistics, supplied by proprietary research companies such as Smith Travel Research, show the actual number of visitors coming to the area. But how can we tell how many people are here because of your efforts? Attribution is key.

“When used together, these tools can provide powerful information about the people who are visiting your website.” — ANDREA MIRANDA
SEO Analyst, Simpleview
Can we somehow link a person who is in-market today with some interactions this person had with us through one (or more) campaigns? Google, Arrivalist and Adara are trying to do just that. By using location tracking, website pixels and browser cookies, these companies are trying to determine how many people interacted with a campaign (or multiple campaigns) and then actually arrived in-market. If successful, one would be able to determine an approximate cost per arrival for each campaign run, which will allow us to determine the overall effectiveness of specific campaigns.

**CONCLUSION**

Every organization is different and has a different focus. Some are concerned primarily with meetings and conventions, while others are far more consumer-based. Starting with a goal in mind, building an analytics strategy which helps to measure all phases of the conversion process and identify strengths and weaknesses is critical.

Every option listed above paints a little more of a picture. No one service will allow you to see a complete image; only by using these services together will you be able to gain greater perspective and build the ultimate DMO digital marketing strategy.
When Google returns a search result in the simple, classic format - blue link, green URL, grey text snippet - SEO professionals refer to that as a “blue link.” The reason why there’s a nickname for these is that, instead of being the universal norm as they were through many years, they’ve now become hard to find above the fold on many SERPs.

Instead of blue links, users will now very often, particularly when searching for very popular keywords, see one kind of rich result or another. These are informative or interactive SERP widgets that present pre-digested information to users rather than simply pointing them to another site. Rich results can help a searcher complete their task without ever having to leave the Google search results page to visit the site where the information originated from (which is why Google deploys them).
Knowing which rich results appear for the top keywords in the DMO space is critical for understanding what opportunities are available for gaining organic search traffic.

**KNOWLEDGE GRAPH**
The Knowledge Graph is a system Google launched in 2012 that uses semantic-search information from a variety of sources to gather facts about people, places and things, and how these are all connect and relate to one another. The Knowledge Graph powers Knowledge Panels and Knowledge Cards.

**KNOWLEDGE PANEL**
Knowledge Panels are powered by information in the knowledge graph. The Knowledge Panel is a box, normally located on the right side of search results, that presents information about a person, place or thing. There are a variety of factors that determine what information gets pulled into Knowledge Panels (including relevance to the keyword, search authority, etc.). Verifying your visitor’s center’s local business listing will not ensure that your site gets a link in the knowledge panel for your destination, though it might be helpful for searches for the visitor’s center itself.

**CAROUSEL AND RICH CARDS**
The Carousel is a set area that displays a horizontal row of Rich Cards pointing to further information (Figure 12.2). The cards are always different versions of the same type of content relevant to the user’s search (e.g. news articles or recipes). Carousels are triggered on popular DMO keywords such as restaurants, things to do and events, as well as general searches for destination names and travel info.

How to optimize: Currently, the only type of content DMOs are eligible to get into a carousel for are events and articles. Make sure that you’re following Google’s latest structured data guidelines for providing pre-digested information about your articles (including bylines and publisher info in structured data snippets), and you may be able to get a carousel for that content under a link to your site.

Attractions Carousels link to Google Places pages in the Maps tool, keeping users on Google rather than sending them to your site.
them to DMO sites. Events carousels do the same thing on both mobile and desktop, though they will at least include a link back to your site if you provide the event information. Make sure that your site publishes structured data info on your events (this happens automatically with the Simpleview CMS).

Top Stories carousels have historically been open only to sites verified to have a well-populated feed of news-only (e.g. not marketing) articles; these requirements may have been relaxed recently, and we will be conducting experiments to see if we can get a DMO blog accepted for inclusion. The Top Stories section also requires that articles be published in AMP format, which is an option available with the Simpleview CMS.

**Rich Snippets**

Rich snippets provide a small sample of a website within search engine result pages and give users a quick and easy way to access some of a site’s information (Figure 12.3). Rich snippets utilize structured data markup, which can be added to a site’s code and helps search engines interpret your site correctly and thoroughly. Examples of rich snippets include event dates and locations, photos, music tracks, reviews, prices, display ratings and more. For DMOs, events are the content most likely to feature in rich snippets.

**How to optimize:** Add structured data markup for detail pages for events/listings/coupons. If you are on Simpleview CMS 3.0 this is already present, though you may choose to map your CRM categories to Schema.org event types to get more specific category assignments. This can be done within the Simpleview CRM.

**Image and Video Results**

Google uses metadata, labels and descriptors to help index, rank and categorize photos for their appropriate search queries (Figure 12.4). In addition, machine learning has lately made it possible for Google to interpret what an image depicts and return it for relevant keywords, even in the absence of metadata.

**How to optimize:** Optimize image alt tags for relevant keywords in your CMS. Generally, publish as many high-quality, high-resolution images as you can. DMOs tend to have great photographic resources, so use them to inspire people to travel via image search.

Images and videos can also be optimized for keywords by embedding them on pages that contain quality content relevant to their topics.
LOCAL RESULTS

Local Results were updated by Google in 2015, changing the way local business information was displayed on the search results page. The local results pack only displays three listings, rather than the seven slots available prior to 2015 (Figure 12.5). Local businesses can show up in the local results pack by claiming their business in Google My Business and with the proper optimization. DMO listing pages will not show up in these results, as Google reserves them for the official sites of actual businesses. This can be frustrating because local results boxes take up a huge amount of real estate on high-volume searches for hospitality businesses. Try searching your destination’s name plus “hotels,” “restaurants,” “shopping,” “rental cars” and many other key terms, and you’ll likely find a local results box.

How to optimize: Make sure your visitor’s center (physical location) has a Google My Business listing, verify the business location and encourage your partners to do the same for their businesses.

FEATURED SNIPPETS

When a user asks a question in Google Search, we might show a search result in a special featured snippet block at the top of the search results page. This featured snippet block includes a summary of the answer, extracted from a webpage, plus a link to the page, the page title and URL (source). Over the past year-plus, featured snippets have begun to increase in search results. Search queries such as “things to do this weekend” and “where can I see the northern lights” are likely to bring up a featured snippet (Figure 12.6).

Even better, featured snippets also form the basis of answers to questions posed via Voice Search. Earning voice results may not earn much traffic to your site, but it’s at least a bonus. Google will also often present additional questions that will bring up a featured snippet in a “People also ask” box beneath the snippet for the current keyword. Clicking on one of these will give you an answer right there, without requiring an additional search to be performed.
How to optimize: Google will sift through the top five search results until it finds one with structured content that it can interpret easily, so the better your ranking, the better chance you have. Be sure to include thorough and optimized content on your site, and format content in numbered or bullet-point lists. Alternatively, you can place the information as the answer to a question that is formatted as heading. Research which keyword searches pull featured snippets, take a look at the content that is being pulled in by Google and see how that source is formatting their page.

SITELINKS
“Sitelinks are meant to help users navigate your site. Our systems analyze the link structure of your site to find shortcuts that will save users time and allow them to quickly find the information they’re looking for.” (source)

How to optimize: The best way to optimize your sitelinks is to have an xml sitemap submitted to Google, plenty of keyword-rich internal links, clear hierarchy and well-optimized content. Google’s algorithm decides which sitelinks will appear and are most relevant to a person’s search (these cannot be edited by the site owner (Figure 12.7)).

TWITTER PACK
Google started showing tweets directly from Twitter accounts in search results in 2015 (Figure 12.8). Maintain a high-quality, active Twitter account to be eligible for this valuable real estate.
Pretty much every DMO has hundreds of URLs that need to be checked for errors and optimized for relevance to critical keywords, and most have thousands or tens of thousands. The SEO market is filled with programs and software services that make it possible to manage all of that efficiently. We have identified several tasks needed to keep a DMO site well optimized for search and provide insight into some of the tools available for getting those things done.

SEO RESEARCH TOOLS
Maintained by Matt Burns

NEW IN VERSION 2019:

- Updated keyword rank tracking tools
- Most of the content is evergreen; if new analytics tools become relevant, we’ll add them in later versions.
- Send in your suggestions to Matt at mburns@simpleviewinc.com
1. Site Scans
Sometimes you need to check something really simple and easy ... 8,000 times. Scanning tools are the way to go. A good one should be able to start from one URL and “spider” out from the links it finds there to discover the rest of the pages you want to check. It should also be able to take a list you provide and check just those URLs.

Many versions of this tool exist with different features and price points. We like Screaming Frog, which can record almost anything you want to find from your URLs, including H1s, broken links, titles, noindex pages and meta descriptions. In addition, Screaming Frog has the ability to search the contents of each page it visits for any information that’s marked up in the code the same way across pages. This can be extremely useful, for instance, if you want to know the heading on every page of your site, but the headings aren’t coded with standard heading tags. Screaming Frog requires an annually renewed license, but it’ll save you enough time to be worth it with just a few site scans.

2. Keyword Research
You can’t optimize for search if you don’t know the phrases people are searching for. A good keyword research tool can help you pinpoint the most popular keywords for a topic you already know you need to write, or it can help you discover new keywords you never would’ve thought of.

Google Ads Keyword Planner is the gold standard for this, and has been for some time. Google has 90 percent of the organic search market for DMO sites, so they have direct access to almost all of the data on what people search. They don’t give us precise access to the exact volume of searches for terms, but their information is still much more accurate and comprehensive than that available from providers such as WordTracker, who have to sample tiny amounts of the general population’s internet activity and draw inferences from there.
In particular, Google has better data on long-tail, less frequently searched keywords than other services. This can be especially helpful when you’re researching keywords for niche topics in your destination (e.g., best burgers in Prescott, ice wine in Traverse City, etc.) that serve a small but enthusiastic audience.

While the tool is free, Google will try to get you to start an Ads campaign before they give you access. You can either comply or look up the ways to sneak around the pay gate.

One thing Google’s tool won’t inform you of is the keywords that your competitors are getting traffic from. Finding out what phrases are giving them rankings and clicks can be a great way to identify gaps in your own content strategy. Several tools are available to fill this need, such as SEMRush and KeywordSpy; they work by programmatically checking the search results for millions of popular keywords and analyzing which sites rank where. Most such tools offer a limited free preview but require a subscription for deep data.

3. Indexation Monitoring
As webmasters, we want to know whether Google and Bing can access our content, how frequently they do so and what they think of its quality (see the section on Indexation for more information about this topic). We could get an idea about these issues by examining our server logs and looking for requests from their crawling computers, but thankfully both search engines give us the information from their perspective via free online tools.

Google Search Console (formerly known as Webmaster Tools) provides an overview of general site health and basic search-engine friendliness. Here we can see whether our sites have valid sitemap.xml files, how many total pages have been indexed and where Google is encountering crawl errors. They also have tools that report on missing or poorly constructed meta tags. Like with other automated scans of this type, however, the results are superficial and in need of analysis before they can be acted on.

Bing Webmaster Tools offers much of the same functionality for that search engine. While neither Google nor Bing is willing to divulge all of their secrets for high rankings, there are many worthwhile SEO steps that we can take to make their lives easier, and they use their search consoles to help communicate those to us. These tools offer the most direct information we have on these critical subjects.

4. Backlink Analysis
Generating quality links in bulk is critical for your site’s ability to get indexed and establish itself as an authority within its topic space (see the section on Authority for more information on this topic). Knowing what sites are linking to yours and what that says to the search engine algorithms would be almost impossible without tools that collect and present link metrics.

As with site-scan tools, there are several worthy backlink analysis solutions that work in similar ways. Open Site Explorer, Majestic SEO and Ahrefs, among others, attempt to mimic Google’s crawling and indexation behavior, trawling URLs up and down the web to collect the links published on them. They then take the resulting massive graph of links and analyze it to produce summary authority metrics that help you understand at a glance how your links compare to those of your competitors. The detailed information on individual links is just as important, though, as it can be used to find sites that link to competing sites (but not to your site) in support of a link-building outreach campaign.
5. Keyword Rank Tracking

It would be very difficult to track your keyword rankings well by hand. For one thing, you should probably be paying attention to dozens of keywords, and you’d want to be collecting your rankings weekly, if not daily. For another, search engines personalize results based on your own browsing history, so much that you probably won’t be able to get an accurate view of your rankings for the typical search user.

Naturally, rank-tracking tools have cropped up to make this not only possible, but easy. At Simpleview, we look at Google Search Console’s performance data most often, but there are other quality competitors such as Advanced Web Ranking. They all will take a list of keywords and check their rankings, usually from the geographical location and type of device that you specify, at the frequency you request. With the basic functionality largely similar across tools, which one you choose comes down to price and how much you like the interface.

6. All-Inclusive Platforms

As you can see, there are many ways for software to make SEO efforts more efficient and effective. It shouldn’t be too surprising to learn that many vendors have packaged the most popular tools together into comprehensive SEO platforms. Moz.com, BrightEdge, SE Ranking and many others provide their own versions of all the tools listed above, plus more. Moz, for instance, offers a nice Keyword Competition tool that will estimate how difficult it is to get top rankings for a given keyword.

The basics that each tool will cover include:

- Automated optimization audits (meta tags, headings, etc.)
- Keyword volume (often simply piped in from Google Ads)
- Keyword rank tracking
- Backlink analysis

These are just a few of the tools that we use behind the scenes here at Simpleview. If you would like to know more about our SEO services, please reach out to your account manager.

“
As you can see, there are many ways for software to make SEO efforts more efficient and effective. It shouldn’t be too surprising to learn that many vendors have packaged the most popular tools together into comprehensive SEO platforms.”

— MATT BURNS
Lead SEO Specialist, Simpleview
If you came of age in the mid to late ‘90s, you remember the birth of the consumer-focused internet. Along with this rise of digital storefronts, chat rooms and online articles came, unsurprisingly, a myriad of users who sought to abuse the system by manipulating data to benefit from content that wasn’t offering any real value in return.

These people are using techniques commonly known as “black hat” or “web spam.” In the online world, Google has learned to battle against web spammers by closing loopholes in their system that allow pretenders to take the place of real contributors to the online community who have something to offer.

Here are some lies and truths, and advice on how to make sure your true content gets found.
KEYWORD STUFFING
A blatant, old-fashioned version of keyword stuffing might look like this:

Beer, st patrick, saint patricks, green, shamrocks, drinking, getting drunk, green beer, st patty's, pubs in ireland, irish pubs, irish boston, boston pubs, boston bars, bar and grill in boston, boston st patricks day things to do, irish pub in boston, best things to do on st patricks day, st patricks day best place to be

But the term includes more subtle versions of the tactic now too:

If you’re looking for great St. Patrick’s Day pubs in Boston, check out our list of top Boston St. Patrick’s Day bars. These clubs near Boston, Massachusetts will be a great place to celebrate St. Patrick’s Day.

Even this is relatively blatant by current standards.

Advice:
You should practice writing authentic, natural language that tells users what is on your page. Be sure to include important keywords that your target audience searches. If you’re wondering whether you’ve used them enough, you probably have.

The following represents an optimized meta description tag with natural language and no stuffed keywords:

An Irish Pub in Boston is the best place to be on St. Patrick’s Day. Browse these listings to find bars, saloons, green beer and shamrocks.

BLACK HAT BACKLINKING
Backlinks, also called an “inbound links” or “incoming links,” are the links that point to your site from others. Toxic backlinks are ones that come from sites that serve up malware or appear to exist only to manipulate Google’s appraisal of your site’s authority (see the chapter in this report on Authority for more information). If you have significant numbers of links from toxic URLs (a few are inevitable and not problematic), your site may get dinged for its association.

Advice
Thankfully, it’s very difficult to get enough toxic backlinks to trigger a penalty without actively trying to do so. No one has much incentive to attack DMO sites in this way. Though it’s possible that a DMO might benefit temporarily from buying spammy backlinks in order to manipulate search engine rankings, DMO sites naturally have very strong backlink profiles thanks to their status as official resources for their destination. It’s unlikely that it would be worth risking that inherent strength given how stringently Google polices backlinks. In fact, Google confirmed in March 2019 that policing link spam is still one of the primary ways they seek to keep manipulative content out of their search results.
THIN AND DUPLICATE CONTENT
Search engines would obviously prefer not to show their users pages with little to no original content. Whether the content is copied from your site or another one, they will be unlikely to reward it with strong rankings, and publishing large amounts of it could get your good content penalized as well.

Thin content does not happen by accident. It usually results from attempts to create as many keyword-optimized URLs as possible without having to spend resources on genuinely good content. This was a tactic employed by large content farms in years past, but DMOs rarely publish such poor content as to get penalized for this issue.

Advice
If you do need multiple pages with duplicate content (e.g. a navigation page about the Eiffel Tower, a listing for the Eiffel Tower and a blog about your visit to the Eiffel Tower), you can use canonical URLs, which will tell search engines to assign the ranking value to only one of the URLs instead of interpreting them as copies or plagiarized content.

PAGERANK SCULPTING
Pagerank sculpting is an attempt to distribute the PageRank of a website to certain pages in an unnatural way. Webmasters who adopt this method will attempt to boost the ranking power of high-value landing pages, while depriving low-value pages of it. They do this by only pointing links, which transmit ranking power within a site, at the higher-value pages. Whether this method is beneficial is controversial in the SEO scene today.

Advice
Artificially distributing pagerank by exploiting the theoretical quirks of Google’s algorithm is viewed as a negative practice. The key word here is artificially. Given how thin the evidence for this technique’s effectiveness is, and how well DMO pages are linked anyway, it’s probably not worth making your site look manipulative for a marginal gain in ranking power for a few pages.

Conclusion
Search engines are pretty smart and continue to get smarter all the time. It would be very difficult to win long term by trying to cheat the system; they only have to catch you once to ruin everything. Spend your time and effort building good content according to healthy SEO basic best practices and you’ll succeed.

RESOURCES:

“Whether the content is copied from your site or another one, they will be unlikely to reward it with strong rankings, and publishing large amounts of it could get your good content penalized as well.”

– MARC SANDIN
SEO Specialist, Simpleview