

Measurable SEO for a Travel Company

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“It is said that, the best place to hide a dead body is the second page of Google search results”, Arun commented angrily when Raj, the person handling the web presence of Arun’s travel company mentioned that the company’s website is visible on third or fourth page of Google in response to most of the search queries relevant to their business.

ABC is a small travel company started in 2010 and operating in a well-known southern city of India. The company has everything that any common man would believe to be passable for being successful – the right city, variety of well-maintained vehicles, professional drivers, experienced guides, association with many prominent hotels and an efficient back office. However, Arun, the proprietor of ABC is unhappy about his company’s performance. His key concern is that the company has not garnered good response during the last two months – the period which all the travel companies in that region consider to be a peak season of business.

While Arun was successful in the formative years of his business, ABC’s business model could not continue to be relevant in the changing landscape of travel industry. The business was shrinking, barring few old loyal customers, the company was unable to entice travelers to avail its services. Arun had realized that the business scenario has changed and only way to join the fray of modern-age travel market was to go online. With renewed hopes, Arun embarked on the online-space by launching his travel portal and appointed Raj as web-manager. With increased number of business enquiries, the entire team at ABC was excited and hopeful of attracting more customers during the business season. But to their utter dismay, the company could not attract any new customer.



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“Search Engine Optimization which is measurable is pivotal to stand-out or for that matter even get noticed in the clutter of e-travel business” said Karthik, management consultant and a childhood friend of Arun, when Arun mentioned that his web presence is not paying off. Karthik, devised a new strategy after taking stock of ABC’s web-presence. Besides, contemporary SEO techniques, deployment of Google Analytics was part of the new strategy.

The changing landscape of Travel Industry:

Today’s traveler is far from the age-old conventional one, who used to walk into a travel agency, explain the travel requirements to the agent and settle on a deal without having specific details about the options available. The traveler today wants to make informed decisions and performs extensive research on the web to avail best deals and packages. Search engines like Google have become a preferred way of doing the required research. ***The modern age travelers believe that something that is not found on Google, indeed does not exist.*** These changes in the travelers’ behavior is transforming the travel industry in a fundamental way.

The travel e-commerce or e-travel industry is big and growing bigger. In India, the online travel market alone is expected to account for around 40-50% of the total transactions by 2020 according to IBEF (IBEF, 2018). The growth in the Indian online travel space has been fueled by many drivers. These include the increase in household incomes, rise in ecommerce and smartphone penetration. A recent Google India-BCG report has projected the overall Indian travel market to reach \$48 Bn by 2020 at a CAGR of 11%-11.5% (INC42, 2018) and with the online travel market alone expected to be 40-50 percent of the total transactions, there is a great scope for e-Travel service providers.

The significance of Search Engines :

According to the Netcraft’s January 2018 Web Server Survey, there are over 1.8 billion websites (Netcraft, 2018). With the humongous amount of data available on the web, ***getting some specific information from the web would be like finding needle in the haystack.***

Google now processes over 40,000 search queries every second on average, which translates to over 3.5 billion searches per day and 1.2 trillion searches per year worldwide.

The search engines play an important role in facilitating the web users in getting the right information at the right time. It basically searches the web based on the words entered in the search query. A web search engine is a software system that is designed to search for information on the World Wide Web. The search results are generally presented in a line of results often referred to as Search Engine Results Pages (Wikipedia, 2018).

The volume of the data available on the web, the different architectures used to develop the websites, the different ways in which the data is stored and the different ways in which users express their search requirements, makes the task of search engines a non-trivial one. Search engines employ incredibly detailed processes and methodologies to improve their results. Any search engine typically has two functions: crawling and building an index, and providing search users with a ranked list of the websites that they have determined are the most relevant (Lifewire, 2018). However different search engines implement these two tasks using different algorithms and in fact compete only based on parameters related to these two tasks such as the process time, degree of relevance etc. The job of crawling is done by a spider, also known as a robot or a crawler, which is just a program that follows, or “crawls”, links throughout the Internet, grabbing content from sites and adding it to search engine indexes. The indexes are updated regularly and when the search query is entered, the engine retrieves the matching results using indexes and displays the list of results in the order of relevancy.

There are hundreds of search engines available on the web. While some are serving country specific content, some are confined to a specific domain and some are generic in nature. The most popular search engines are Google, Bing, Baidu and Yahoo. ***Google is the world's most popular search engine, with a market share of 90.14 percent as of February, 2018*** (Statcounter, 2018).

Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

An overwhelming percentage of customers do an online check before making a purchase. What this means for a business is that they simply cannot afford to lose all those customers. Though the data contained in the internet is too voluminous, with the right SEO strategy, it is extremely feasible for business owners to bring their business to the attention of large audience online.

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SEO is the process of getting traffic from the “fee,” “organic,” “editorial” or “natural” search results on search engines(Searchengineland, 2018). It is art, craft and science of driving web traffic to web sites. Some web sites depend on broad and generic traffic. These businesses need hundred and thousands or millions of hits per day to prosper and thrive. The web businesses are looking for high quality, targeting traffic. This traffic is essentially like a prequalified sales prospect: already interested and able to buy your product(Google Books, 2018).

As a marketing strategy, SEO basically studies how search engines work, the algorithms which dictate search engine behavior, what people search for, the actual search terms or keywords typed into search engines, and which search engines are preferred by their targeted audience. Optimizing a website may involve several aspects like editing the web content, changing the structure of the website,increasing the backlinks or inbound links as an indicator of the popularity of the website, tuning the underlying code to both increase its relevance to specific keywords and to remove barriers to the indexing activities of search engines.

In an endeavor to show the best results to its users, search engines update their algorithms regularly. The changes made in the algorithms are based on the user behavior, technological developments and to counter the strategies of their competitors. From the perspective of the website owners, the regular updates in the search engine algorithms makes SEO a continuous task. A good SEO strategy does not just look at changes that needs to be made to align with the search engine updates, but also looks at SEO processes which can have a negative effect on the website’s ranking.

Black and White Hat SEO Techniques

SEO techniques are classified into two categories – Black and White Hat. The techniques that search engine companies recommend as part of good design are white hat and those techniques which search engines do not approve are black hat. White hat involves creating content for users, not for search engines, and then making that content easily accessible to the online “spider” algorithms, rather than attempting to trick the algorithm from its intended

purpose. An SEO technique is considered white hat if it conforms to the search engines' guidelines and involves no deception.

Search engines may penalize websites that use black hat methods, either by reducing their rankings or eliminating their listings from their databases altogether. Such penalties can be applied either automatically by the search engines' algorithms, or by a manual site review. One example was the February 2006 Google's removal of both BMW Germany and Ricoh Germany for use of deceptive practices. Both companies, however, quickly apologized, fixed the offending pages, and were restored to Google's list (Wikipedia, 2018).

SEO Strategy devised for ABC

Considering the ABC's business model, the issues that the company was facing and the dynamics of search engines, Karthik, a management consultant devised a new strategy for the web presence of ABC Travels. With the new strategy, the endeavor was to ensure that the ABC's web-presence is prominently visible on Google when people search for any travel related requirements in the city where ABC operates. Further, to ensure that the SEO process followed by the company is measurable to enable benchmarking with competitors and for improvement of quality, suitable analytical practices were made part of the new strategy.

Before embarking on a SEO process, it was important for the travel company to keep in mind the following aspects:

- With reference to ranking on Search Engines, there are two types of websites competing for the tops spots, those offering services like travel agencies, hotels, airlines, etc., and those promoting content like personal blogs, review websites, etc. Travel companies like ABC are competing against both, to a certain extent as search engines have become a traveler's preferred way of doing research about all aspects of travel.
- People will most often enter more general terms as a search query and will rarely look for a specific agency or hotel.

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- Several researchers have proved that a visitor will not convert on the first visit and will almost never visit just one website. They will do a fair amount of research, explore several options, and then make their choice. Therefore, the goal is to have them come back, rather than get that conversion as soon as you can(CubeDigital, 2018).
- **SEO is not an install once forget forever process**, rather it should be viewed as something that becomes more effective with perpetual evolution. It is not enough to just implement SEO for the sake of it. We must also be diligent enough to keep improving upon it since SEO is a continual process.
- There are four stages in travel decision making process(ThinkwithGoogle, 2018). While every travel company would like to become part of the “booking moment”, they should never underestimate the power and allure of any of the others. After all, customer awareness is a step closer to a conversion than customer ignorance.



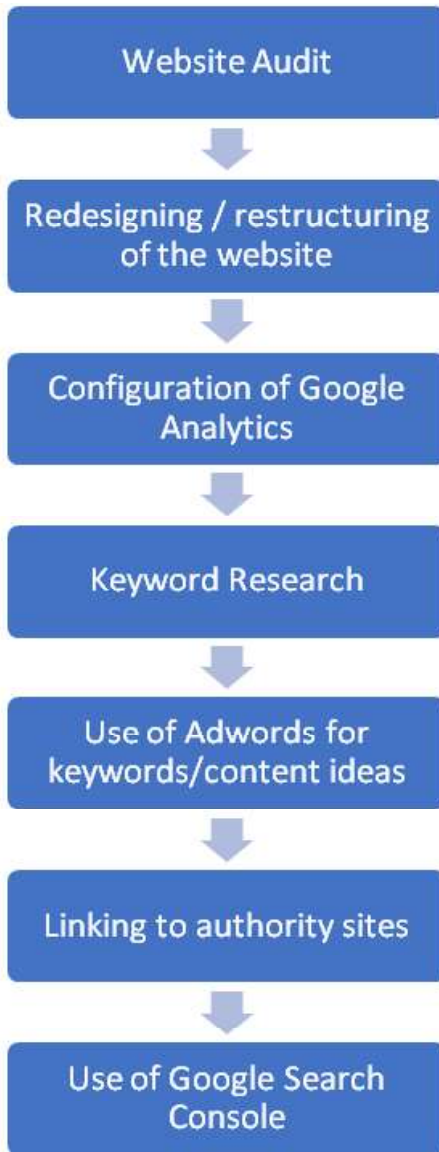


Figure 2 The approach used by the Company to improve the rank on Google

Website Audit:

As a first step, a detailed audit of the website was conducted to study the website's technical architectural issues, accessibility and usability aspects, nature and quality of content posted on the website, the company's profile on the web etc.

Redesigning / restructuring of the website:

The audit revealed specific architectural issues related to file organization which was deterrent to the indexing process of the search engines. The design of the website was not mobile friendly and as a result the website had a high bounce rate. Unlike many of its competitors, ABC's website did not have presence on social media and as a result the profile of the company was not clear on web.

Configuration of Google Analytics:

As measurement is critical for success of the website, Google Analytics was configured to get the required insights about the performance of travel website. The objective of bringing analytical capability was not only for assessing the quantity and nature of traffic to the website but also to get the required inputs to improve the SEO activities.

Keyword research:

Keyword research involves identifying which phrases are used on search engines when people are looking for information about the business of interest, and usually includes finding both the search volume and relative competitiveness of the terms. Keyword research is a critical component for search engine optimization because when used correctly it provides a road map for both the design and execution of building websites and developing content. As part of the SEO strategy, ABC employed the Google Keyword Planner in addition to extensive experiments on search engines to identify the keywords that other players in the travel industry are using.

Configuration of Google AdWords :

While the company was not comfortable with spending of money on displaying advertisements on search engine results page, the purpose of configuring Google AdWords without adding any funds to the account was to identify appropriate title, description and keywords which Google AdWords would suggest.

Linking to Authority Sites :

Besides backlinks, the quality and relevancy of website's outbound links play a critical role in the ranking of the website. The Hilltop update of Google basically assesses any page as hub of information based on the links on the website. In fact, several industry studies have found a correlation between outbound links and Google rankings(Backlinko, 2018).

Use of Google Search Console to get more Targeted Traffic :

Unlike most SEO software in the market, the data we get from Google Search Console comes straight from Google. The data from Google Search Console can help in improving the Click-through-rate, get ideas for high performing content and to assess the quality of links.

Measuring SEO with Google Analytics :

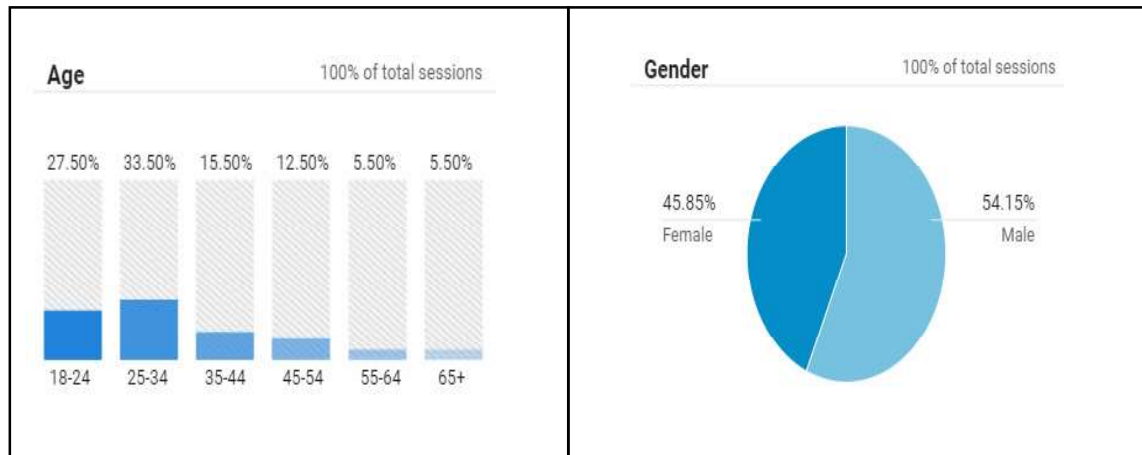
Driving more organic traffic from search engines involves analyzing the website structure, content, links and users' data to optimize the website for search engines. Google Analytics besides facilitating the reports pertaining to different aspects of SEO, also helps in measuring the effectiveness and efficiency of third party tools and techniques used for SEO. Google Analytics can provide several actionable insights:

Tracking Demographics and Interests of the Web Visitors :

Collecting the demographics and interests data allows the website owners to know more about their visitors, which can help in delivering content or create products that address their needs(Monsterinsights, 2018).Drilling into the demographics and interest report helped

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ABC Travels to identify their high-value customers. These reports provided information about Gender, Age and Interests.



Tracking Views and CTRs :

Google Search Console is a free service that allows website owners to monitor their site's presence in Google search results. Google Search Console when linked with Google Analytics, helps the website owners to easily analyze the SEO rankings along with other Analytics data. In addition to impressions, clicks and CTR, ABC travels could study the SEO score and impact of the focus keyword on their organic traffic.

Tracking keywords data :

The data in the acquisition report gives insights into how users search to find the company pages and the relevancy of company's pages to those queries. This report helped ABC to find useful metrics like clicks, impressions, CTR and average position.

Is the travel company travelling in the right direction ?

"What gets measured gets improved" - Peter Drucker

What triggered the new web strategy at ABC travels was the dip in revenues and market share. After spending three months on making fundamental changes in their website and

SEO process, the company has seen significant difference in its web presence. Though not the first result, the site which was visible only on third or fourth page of the Google Search Results is now listed on the first page. This change has resulted in more impressions, although this has not translated into significant number of clicks. The company is hopeful of leveraging on the increased web traffic. Also, based on the insights given by Google Analytics, the company is making regular changes in its website to reposition itself on the web.

While the change in the ranking from third page to first page appears promising, there are several questions, that as of now remain unanswered:

- The new web strategy was focused on improving the relevance of the company's website on Google. Is it a right strategy considering that Google is not the only search engine?
- Several companies have used Adwords, the SEM product of Google to increase their visibility on the web. What would be appropriate for companies like ABC, to focus on SEO or SEM or both?
- It is not the case that you need to replicate or mimic everything that your competitors do. But many web experts suggest that in case of SEO it could be wise to indulge in a little "me-too" behavior. Especially given the fact that SEO could be working very well for your competitors who with its aid might be snatching valuable customers who could have been your patrons. Would it be a Black-hat practice to use the keywords that are used by your competitors?

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