

## Features

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## Care About SEO

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SEO stands for “Search Engine Optimization.” According to StatCounter, a primary source web analytics service, in October 2022, 87.3% of online searches in North America went through Google. The next most popular search engine in North America was Bing, which handled 7.05% of searches.

Why does it matter which search engine handles the most traffic? Because, by necessity, the algorithms and formulas, configurations and data-handling procedures employed by the largest search engine will have

the largest influence on SEO activities. After all, if you’re optimizing for search engines, like it or not, you best pay attention to the one that routes most of the Internet traffic.

### How do Search Engines Work?

This is a simplified explanation, but it’s all you need to understand how and why to make SEO updates to your website. Search engines are composed of software programs with web crawler bots, usually called “spiders,” that crawl the Internet, register data and, essentially, “report” it back to database. That’s part one: gathering data from around the Internet.

Part two is using that data to serve up results when someone searches for a word or phrase. That’s where the word “algorithm” comes in. Merriam-Webster defines algorithm as “a procedure for solving a mathematical problem (as of finding the greatest common divisor) in a finite number of steps that frequently involves repetition of an operation.”

In SEO speak, the algorithm used to deliver search results is the set of rules that determine what a specific person sees when they type in a key phrase.

### No. 1 Doesn’t Exist

That last sentence is key to understanding how SEO works today, as opposed to 10 years ago. In 2008, when I first started working in digital marketing, I would spend weeks writing keyword stuffed articles for websites. I’d rewrite web pages to get “Garden Center in City, State” to fit on the page as many times as humanly possible. That’s how the Internet worked. And that’s how some SEO businesses still work, even though that practice (thank goodness) doesn’t work now.

Today, search results, especially those returned from Google searches, incorporate much more than what’s written on a specific web page. In addition to the words on a page, these other elements can factor into what you see when

you type in “Garden Center in Indianapolis, Indiana,” versus what I might see when I type in the same phrase. Individual results are influenced by:

- Browser settings
- Physical location while doing the search (are you in the city you're searching?)
- Your recent search history
- Your recent Internet activity

Two people can be sitting in the same office, type the same phrase into the same search engine and, because they're typing it in on their own computers with their own history, they'll get different results.

If you take away nothing else from this article, remember this: There is no one true No. 1 search result on Google. There are thousands or hundreds of thousands of No. 1 search results on Google for the same search term.

### **How to Get to No. 1 (for Someone)**

Here's why you should care about being one of those thousands of No. 1 results: On Google, the first non-ad link in search results—so the “No. 1 result” for that search—will get 39% of the clicks. That percentage drops off significantly as you move down the results list and the percentage of clicks are almost statistically insignificant for results appearing on pages 2 or greater.

SEO is often presented, in pithy Internet articles or by agencies wanting to sell services, as a straightforward set of activities or deliverables guaranteed to generate results, and it's not. SEO isn't, however, impenetrable magic. It's somewhere in between. If SEO work 15 years ago was about gaming the system, SEO today is about providing useful information and a good experience for visitors.

Luckily, if there's one thing IGCs know how to do well, it's provide a good experience.

In SEO land, that means serving up results that are relevant to the person doing the search. That's probably the biggest evolution in search and something that makes SEO easier for garden centers today than a decade ago. Yes, money still plays into it, and no search engine is ever transparent about how much its algorithms tip the scales toward businesses paying for advertising, but on the whole, the relevance of the result is key. That's because if people searching don't receive relevant, useful information, they'll find a different search engine to use and the search engine will lose money.

### **Are You Relevant?**

How can a search engine tell if the results they deliver are relevant to the searcher? It can tell by the user's engagement with the results. If I search for “pink fall blooming camellia shrub,” click through the No. 1 result, and immediately leave because the info is about a camellia for sale somewhere 500 miles away from me or about a spring-blooming camellia, the search engine will register a mismatch. Here are factors affecting visitor behavior that contribute to search results:

**Website load time:** The faster the better.

**Mobile optimization:** It's no longer an option. Websites have to be easy to navigate on phones, which means text that scales, a layout that logically stacks, buttons instead of links and limited static text as part of images (because that text won't scale and becomes illegible at a certain size.)

Page content matches meta information for page: Yes, that's “techy.” What it means is that if your page title, page description and other fields the spiders crawl say “Pink fall blooming camellia shrub” and the words and pictures on

the page are about fuchsia spring-blooming camellias, resulting in visitors clicking away quickly or “bouncing,” there’s a mismatch and your ranking will fall.

**ADA compliance:** Alt tags on images that describe the images (no keyword stuffing), high contrast between words and backgrounds, logical information organization, use of header tags to categorize information, avoiding content that causes seizures (flashing) and more.

**Internal links:** These are links that lead your visitor from page to page. For example, a link on an “About” page that links to your “Hours and Directions” page.

**Quality content:** There’s no point in visiting a website with no useful, actionable information. It’s why obviously keyword stuffed pages rank low, if at all. They provide no use to the person searching.

**User experience:** Each of the above points contributes to user experience or UX. Summed up, good UX means a website is easy to navigate, has valuable information, and is current and aesthetically pleasing. In September 2021, Search Engine Journal reported that “38% of people will stop engaging with a website if the content and layout are unattractive.” Page layout is part of user experience. Lose the big blocks of text or paragraphs with no headings. Break web content into neat sections with headings, bullet points and plenty of white space. Bold key phrases to make the page skimmable. The Nielsen/Norman Group, a UX research firm, reports that 79% of website visitors scan a page before committing to reading it.

There are other factors, many of which are detailed in November 2022’s article, “Deep Clean Your Website.” In the end, good SEO isn’t magic and it isn’t formulaic. It’s about providing expert information in a format that’s equally easily indexed by search engines and easily consumed by website visitors. Go through the list above and work on each item. You’ll be amazed at the difference it makes.

If you’re not sure where to fill in the meta description on your type of website or need info on exactly how to use an H1 tag, my best advice is to ... you guessed it ... Google it!

## Additional SEO Improvements

You can work on making your website wonderful forever, but these additional activities pack a punch:

- Fully complete your Google Business profile, including hours and pictures. Then keep it updated. Add event info or seasonal hours.
- Offer e-commerce? List products on the Google Merchant Center.
- Start a YouTube channel.
- Comb your website and incorporate conversational phrases that people might use in voice search. For example, someone might type “best aphid control tips” into a search engine, but they would verbally ask someone “How do I control aphids in my garden?” **GP**

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