# Case Study

Using Data to Maxamize SEO

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Search Marketing for eCommerce

Introduction

In 2014 Visiture began working with a midmarket merchant who sold shipping crates and similar materials online in a B2B setting. Over the years his main distribution channel was organic search traffic from Google, Bing, and Yahoo. In 2012 disaster struck and the merchant was faced with a grim task of recovering their highly sought after positions in Google. With a few years of little success the Visiture team took over and has almost returned this merchant to where they used to be in organic search results resulting in hundreds of thousands of dollars of increased revenue from organic search in particularly, Google.
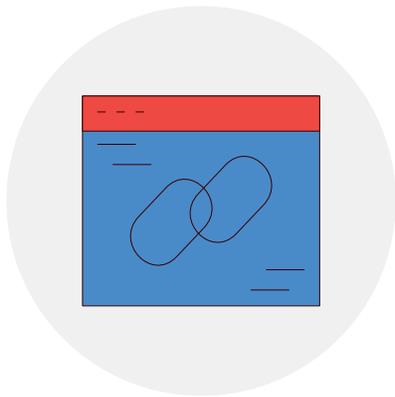
For the first portion we will show you how we used data to optimize his website.
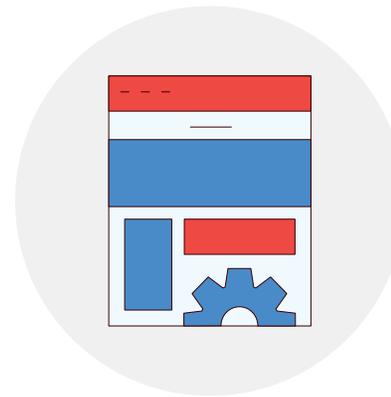
Secondly, we will show you how we used data to continuely optimize his backlink profile.

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On Page Optimization

Optimizing your website to increase search engine relevance.

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Keyword Matrix & Discovery

For the first part we were tasked with identifying the right keywords to target. This merchant had been performing organic search marketing for some time. We intended to amplify his current efforts by a thourough keyword research. We used the Google Adwords Tool to identify

Recommendation - Follow our suggestions and make sure there is nothing stopping you from linking from your homepage, to categories, to products, and your homepage links to your blog; and then the blog links to your products and categories. We will cover the blog and best techniques soon.

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Schema Markup

There is a lot of noise in regards to Schema markup. Technical SEOs swear by it, but, for an e-commerce business, is it necessary? We Googled "Schema Markup," and here was the first schema markup result:

"Schema markup is code (semantic vocabulary) that you put on your website to help the search engines return more informative results for users. If you've ever used rich snippets, you'll understand exactly what schema markup is all about."

So, how does this effect e-commerce? The answer is: It really doesn't to a certain extent. It helps Google crawl a website. Sure, this is great for a hotel with dynamic changing content or airplane flights. It is also great for lists of items, such as a cookbook or a list of items needed for someone searching for their favorite dish. We have been seeing Google put content from popular websites for certain phrases so it will be important for body content as the screen shot on the right suggests.

Recommendation – Schema, right now, is not as necessary as other initiatives that take precedent, especially if you run a CMS such as Shopify, BigCommerce, etc. With more open sourced platforms such as Magento and Demandware, you might need help to correctly mark up different items, but if your aim is to increase organic search traffic right now, Schema doesn't help. However, we are sure Google's aim is to get users information or content more quickly, so could we see products marked up in the organic listings? Not likely, because of Google Shopping's popularity, but you never know. Be sure the Schema markup is correct, but do not spend too much time on this in 2016.

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Proper Meta Titles

Computer learning will be a hot topic when it comes to SEO in 2016. This is affecting the way we do meta information. The old days of stuffing keywords are deader than a doornail. However, we still want to optimize meta information for two things: engines and people. With computer learning, Google understands what a user wants, and has realized meta information is relevant but not as necessary. For example:

If we want to optimize a keyword for "Garmin Watches," a pre-2016 method would be to optimize it by putting the keywords on the farthest left-hand side.

Example - "Garmin Watches for Sale by XYZ Company."

Now, with machine learning, Google can tell who clicks what (higher click-through rates increase authority) and how they interact with the page (bounce rate, exit, time on page). We want as many people to click on it as possible, so using something with a high call to action or click-through rate is best.

Example - "Shop now for Garmin Watches - Best Prices."

In the old days, Google could not understand modifiers, meaning if I put more keywords in, like "best" or "new," I could outrank someone who did NOT use those keywords in the meta title.

So, if one meta title says "Best Watches for Sale," and mine says "Shop now for New Modern Watches," it will carry the same weight, or very similar weight, as someone searching for "Best Watches for Sale."

Recommendation - This might be confusing, as this is a gray area, but we need to focus on optimizing for engines (still have the keyword "watches"), and for people (include calls to action or modifiers to enhance click-through rates).

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Meta Description

This may be bold, but meta descriptions may be more impactful than titles because of the computer learning. This is very similar to meta titles, and focuses less on keywords and more on actual calls to action. However, there is a gray area. For example, an e-commerce business category may have multiple keywords for which you are optimizing. The best way to optimize the meta description is including a list separated by commas.

For instance, if you have a "Wedding Rings" category with multiple versions, you will want to include the different sub categories in this description. Using a meta description rich with keywords is still an effective tactic and should still be utilized without stuffing the keywords.

Target Keywords:

Wedding Rings
Wedding Bands
**Classic Wedding Rings**
Colorful Wedding Rings

Good - **Shop at XYZ company for the best wedding rings & bands including classic, colorful, or modern styles. Shop today and get 10% off your first order.**

Bad - **Shop at XYA company for the best wedding rings, wedding bands, classic & colorful wedding rings. We also have modern, contemporary, and more.**

You can see the bad one utilizes too many keywords, says wedding three times, and includes even more modifiers (modern, contemporary) instead of a call to action to induce a click-through rate.

Recommendation - Keep your meta descriptions keyword rich, without repeating keywords, and include calls to action or modifiers to induce a higher click-through rate. Talk about the company or specials you run, as this will produce the highest long-term results for an e-commerce business.

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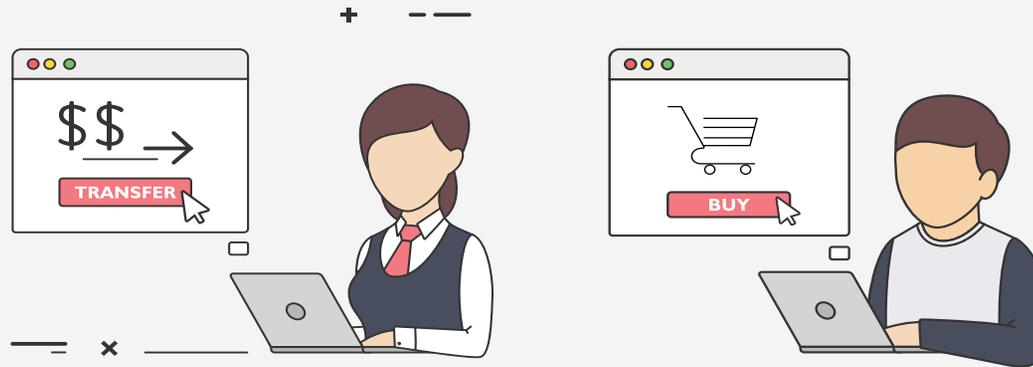
Alt Tags

Until Google can read exactly what an image is, Alt tags will also be the last item to optimize on the SEO list. There are many exceptions to the rule, especially merchants that get results from the Google images tab. However, if resources permit, you want to optimize your Alt tags very similarly to your meta information: Be sure to describe the image, and use similar keywords to the page it is on—otherwise, it could look suspicious to Google. Is that likely to happen? Not likely, but you never know, and not doing so could be costly.

Recommendation - Use Alt tags if you have the resources in place to do so, be careful to not keyword stuff, and make sure the Alt tag is similar to the page it is on.

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URL Structure

Going back to our pyramid structure, Google wants folders to be categorized correctly. Using a template below is, and generally will always be, the best structure to use:

Example.com/Category/Subcategory/Product
Example.com/Blog/Blog-Name-Here

Please note - If you have products with multiple categories, using an example.com/product and example.com/category/ subcategory works well to cut down on duplicate content, especially if they follow the rules below:

There are exceptions to the rule. Generally, you need two out of the three of our "tripod." That is: breadcrumbs, sitemap, and site structure. If you have two out of the three, you are generally pretty good. However, having all three should be superior in Google's eyes.

What has changed is Google's focus on shorter URLs. Prior to Panda 2.0, having "keyword rich" URLs was superior. WordPress even automatically makes the URL the same as the title, so if we created an article, "How to Quit Smoking," it would become example.com/blog/how-to-quit-smoking.

What we found with Panda 2.0 is that having a different URL than the title of the page and the meta title was superior, and it under optimized the page. What we are learning for 2016 is having a brief and "to the point" URL is superior. So, instead, you would use example.com/blog/quit-smoking. Google likes the keywords on the farthest left-hand side, similar to the old ways of doing meta titles, and keeping it as brief, short, and sweet as possible.

Recommendations - Make URLs short, brief, and keywords on the farthest left-hand side. Keep the traditional structure of example.com/category/product, and make sure you have two of the three tripod options.

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Category Body Content

Category body content for an e-commerce business is still a vital tool. However, many e-commerce businesses have tried this tactic with zero success, or, at least, any tangible results from the resources allocated for this.

Does having content on all of the category levels really impact positive search results? The answer is yes and no. It does, if you have other positive attributes which will help optimize the page. This can include inbound links, navigational links to the page, reasons for people to share the category level, etc.

In short, having body content does, in fact, help, but not if it is the only thing you are doing to optimize a category level page. We ran a test for an e-commerce business (late 2015) for one category page where they had inbound links and proper information filled out in the meta field. When we put on a piece of body content, it surged to a second page placement. A screenshot is below of the ranking report:

Daily Ranks for Kaleidoscope Glasses (Google.com)

We can see that this does, in fact, give a positive lift. However, we have tried the same experiment with content without links and have received zero benefit. We think this is because of the dreadful Panda update in Google. An e-commerce business naturally picks up any Panda update because it is a bunch of pages that has many inbound links going to other pages without thin content. To combat this, a Panda update applying body content will always be a tested and effective tactic.

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Category Body Content Cont.

However, when writing this content, it must include relevant content about the page. If you write miscellaneous content that has nothing to do with the pages it links to, Google will find this bizarre, and you will find yourself susceptible to different updates, especially a few recently where Google has tried punishing affiliate sites that create content to trick the Algorithm into ranking the page for products it does not sell (Algorithm was released around October, 2015).

Recommendation - Body content is still a viable tactic for the category level. Only optimize it with relevant content that correlates to your products and the category level. Do not over optimize it, and make sure the content fits the user. Make sure to not bog down the page with content, and remember, the searcher wants your products. Too much content can ruin the searcher's experience and ultimately cause high bounce rates. Having content below the product level is ideal, with some content above the products. Having 200-300 words on top and around 300 words on the bottom is ideal.

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Interlinking

Interlinking has always been a fascinating subject for e-commerce merchants. Technically, the whole website interlinks to each part very well, because it utilizes things like a navigation bar, categories, "related products," or other features to give users product or category suggestions. However, there is still work that can be done.

Interlinking your different category page content and product content is a very underutilized tactic. Google favors long form content, as a study has found out for 2016. E-commerce is being pushed down because of Google Shopping and affiliate content, more and more, most likely to the detriment of the user. However, this doesn't mean we should give up and only use Google Shopping. It just means our tactics have to change in 2016. One way for e-commerce to combat Google's changes is to become more like the websites they are favoring: long form content websites.

If you look at a long form content website, it has a lot of content, images, and more that links to different products and categories using text links compared to product image links. Having body content at the category level or product level, which interlinks to different pages, could be a sneaky tactic the advanced SEO user can utilize in 2016.

However, there are also plenty of websites which abuse this tactic. A safe rule of thumb is one interlink per 100 words. Of course, sites like Wikipedia use upwards of 100-500 interlinks per page, but we are not trying to be them. We want to be safe, and make sure what we do makes sense for the user and the search engine. Only use interlinks if it makes sense for both.

Recommendation - Using interlinking is important, but do not over optimize it. Apply 1 per 100 words, and only if it makes sense for the user and the search engine.

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Proper Tags

Many old content management systems or shopping cart solutions have produced a lot of outdated tagging systems for their content. Being able to have Google crawl your site and understand quickly is imperative. Shopping systems like BigCommerce and Shopify do a great job keeping it clean and easy for Google to understand.

Each page should start with an <h1> tag for the category title, and then the paragraph text should be wrapped in <p> tags. Any sub headers should adopt the <h2> and <h3> tags. For in-depth content, the use of <h4>, <h5>, and <h6> are also needed. Making sure to look through your source code to check that the different content items have the proper tags is imperative.

It is also important to look through your source code to identify and remedy any line items of code that do not make sense when tagging your content. For instance, having a <bold> tag around all of your text or having <tr> tags can confuse Google, which will not understand how it is displayed.

Systems like Shopify, BigCommerce, and Magento are paving the way for proper use of the tags. You can also check to make sure <h> tags are not wrapping your logo, breadcrumbs, etc. All text should be tagged in the way Google needs it to be.

Recommendation - Google has not changed the way it does tags. For 2016, it is important to make sure your tags are properly tagging your content in your category level and product level. If you do not have <h1> tags on category pages, it is imperative you do so for every category page.

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Canonical Links

There will not be much change to canonical linking in 2016. Robust systems like Magento and other shopping cart solutions will still require canonical linking to cut down on duplicate content. One prediction for 2016 with canonical links is looking into your content. Has a higher source re-published your content and not given your site the original credit for it in Google eyes?

Getting your content re-published for links and social signals is fantastic! But, if you publish your content on a new site with a higher domain authority, and the link to your site does not contain the rel=canonical, you can suffer from a lack of social signals and link authority to your site.

Recommendation - If you are already implementing canonical links, then not too much will be changing since the start. An important focal point in 2016 will be for content teams, PR teams, SEO teams, or anyone managing your content to make sure, if someone re-publishes your content, that they are not deemed the authority for that piece of content; if it is found to be so, it will be extremely important to reach out to that source and get them to implement the rel=canonical tag.

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Duplicate Content

Duplicate content will be a large issue faced by merchants heading into 2016. Open sourced programs are notorious for these duplicate content issues, and, with merchants being more advanced, a technical audit will be needed for many merchants.

It is important for merchants to look into their robots.txt file to look for different types of their shopping cart pages which should not be indexed. Merchants can also go into Google webmaster tools to tell Google which pages to crawl or not crawl. Useless pages like example.com/my-wish-list will need to be stopped from being indexed. Having attribute pages being indexed will also create problems for merchants, as the competition will continue to rise, due to the advancement of technical SEO that merchants are gathering.

Another item to be looked at is duplicate content from links and from resources. It is important to also look at your content and make sure it is not republished on other sites with a higher domain authority; otherwise, that content has a chance to be indexed, over your content, in the search engines.

Recommendation - Check webmaster tools and your robots.txt file to noindex, or tell Google to not crawl useless shopping cart pages and any additional useless pages, which create duplicate content issues like attribute pages.

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Brand Pages Focus

Brand pages are a very underutilized asset an e-commerce business has in their repertoire. They can provide very high converting organic traffic if done the right way. In 2016, e-commerce will move even farther away from manufacturers' default content and more into unique content for their particular site to help them rank above the competitors in SKU-heavy markets. In addition to this, it is important to also have your content and links focus on the individual brand pages to help them rank above the competitors.

Recommendation - Stop using manufacturing default content, and write unique high-quality content for your site. Have your links and content centered around brand pages to help them rank for those phrases.

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User Generated Content

If you are not generating user-generated content for your site, you may be lagging behind your competitors. When we say user-generated content, we generally mean reviews for products. This is how Amazon does so well in search, as all of their products have hundreds, if not thousands, of unique pieces of content (reviews). It is genius, and a tactic you should take advantage of. Offering rewards for user-generated content will continue to gain in popularity.

There are other ways of attaining user-generated content, such as social media shares for monetary discounts upon checkout, writing blog content for your blog, providing reviews on their personal blog, and other various user-generated content techniques. With it being more difficult to manipulate the system, we will see more merchants focusing on how to develop user-generated content, compared to producing the content themselves and using scarce internal resources to do so.

Recommendation - Make sure all reviews are your own content on your site, with 100% control over the reviews. Focus on how to generate user-generated content, such as reviews, social media shares, and different tactics you can use to develop high-quality unique content.

Site Speed

Site speed as a topic in 2012-2015 has been hammered into oblivion. Without going into too much depth, we will only talk about 2016 and what you need to know concerning site speed.

With the emergence of cart solutions such as Shopify and BigCommerce, merchants are able to have fairly well-optimized sites out of the box quickly. The emergence of these shopping cart solutions give smaller merchants great, fast, and optimized websites quickly and efficiently. The challenge will be for merchants with more complex and robust solutions to compete. The good news is that these merchants have a large presence, more links, and more authority in Google's eyes, but they should still look to improve their speed to compete with these new solutions.

For 2016, we will see a bigger focus on the mid-market of merchants, with archaic or slower cart solutions, to optimize their site speed to compete with the newer merchants who are using optimized carts out of the box. Using tools like the Google page speed tool and other independent tools like Optimizely will start to be a bigger part of the solution for these mid-level merchants looking to optimize their sites for speed. Leveraging browser caching, minifying product images, and removing features which bog down site speed will take shape in 2016.

Recommendation - If you are a smaller site using a Shopify or BigCommerce, you surely have a great site speed, or at least a very well-optimized site, thus far. The larger pressure will be on the mid-market sites which have to compete against these cart solutions with more open sourced platforms which require more development resources. We may find larger stores pulling back their resource-heavy features to speed up the site, in order to compete with these shopping cart solutions.

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Mobile Optimization

Mobile optimization, especially for search engines, is a very tough area and, truthfully, differs from merchant to merchant, size, or shopping cart solution. It also depends if you are using a mobile site or a responsive design. Either way, UX and SEO go hand in hand, because a better site design that is easier to navigation and use for the user will ultimately help with SEO. Google is able to understand how people interact with your web pages, so if you have a high bounce rate, and no one clicks on the additional links, you will soon find yourself pushed farther into the Google sandbox.

In 2016, SEOs will work closely hand in hand with website design and development, CRO, and UX services to optimize not only for the search engine, but also for the user. How can you give the user the information the fastest way possible?

Recommendation - Have your SEO team work closely with your optimizing team to make sure you are not only optimizing for the user, but also the search engine. For mobile, the main focus needs to be on how can we give the user the best experience and what they want the fastest.

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Usability Ranking

We have talked a lot about rank brain and computer learning, but one hot topic we will find in 2016 is usability. To be frank, this is more of a 2015 topic, but, since it is so relevant, we want to bring it up, since not a lot of merchants know about this.Google can score your particular web pages based on specific queries. For instance, let's say you want to rank for "Aftermarket parts for Mustangs." The people on the first page will go through usability scoring or ranking. Basically, Google will evaluate how people interact with those pages. If you game the system and get really high scores with a bunch of links, but then Google sees no one really interacts with your page from that particular search, you will go right back into the sandbox. Here is what we think are some key criteria:

Bounce/Exit Rate - Do people bounce right off your page right away? Do they click any links on the page to get more information?
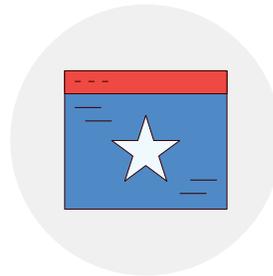
Information Acquiring - Google wants web pages to give an "ah-ha!" moment. They want the user to find their information. If your content does not give the answer to the question, or the answer to the query, you will plummet from the top.
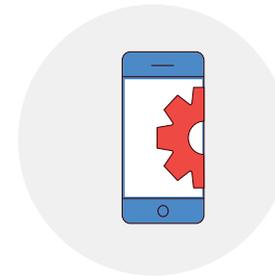
Time on Page - How long do they stay on the page? This may be the biggest one. They do not want people going to a link, not staying long, and then not clicking on a link for more information.

We do not think Google is extremely advanced with this, yet. However, we know they have to be at least using a couple from the three above. It is yet to be seen if they use any other data.

Recommendation - Focus on giving users the "ah-ha!" moment, whether finding questions from your blog/resources or the products they want the quickest. Make sure your products and categories are clear and have great information, and make sure your blog content is thorough and very informative.

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Off Page Optimization

Optimizing other websites and social platforms to increase search engine relevance.

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Backlinks Introduction
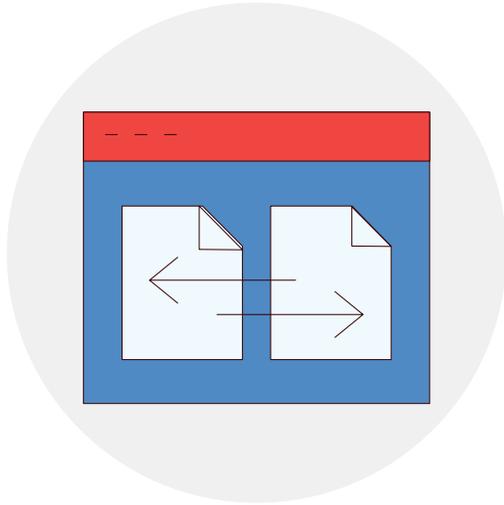
In case you don't know what a backlink is, be sure to check out our ultimate guide to backlinks. It will be useful to get you up to speed.

For 2016, the narrative will continue from 2015. Backlinks are useless if users find them useless. With computer learning and the advancement of the Algorithm, backlinks do not mean anything unless they have social signals, comments, backlinks to that backlink, and users using the content. In short, useless backlinks are a thing of the past, while good links are now more important than ever in 2016.

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Relevance

The first thing we will look at is relevance of the link. Anyone can get hundreds if not thousands of links, but all that matters is how relevant they are to you and how users use them. If it is a link on a web page without any links to it, no users, and no engagement, you will find yourself without any authority to your site. It also has to have relevance. When we say relevance, we mean the content has to do with the content of your site. If you sell aftermarket automotive parts, and get links from sites with very little to do with what you have, you will find these links providing very little impact on your site. How to judge relevance? Usually you want to look at these key criteria:
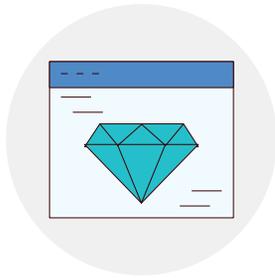
Website Relevance - Does the website have any commonalities with your website? Do you have similar keywords, meaning, do you get links from cartalk.com to your automotive parts website, or is the website something completely different from automotive? If it is, you will find very little relevance to your site and it will have very little impact.

Content Relevance - If the webpage that links to you has nothing to do with you, then you will surely not see any impact from it, at all, either. Having the content also have relevance is also important. For instance, getting a link from an automotive website, but having the webpage talk about scholarships, will not provide as much impact as an article about automotive replacement parts.
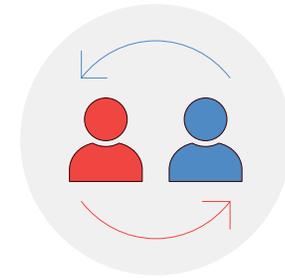
Link Relevance - The third piece is link relevance. Do the actual link, anchor text, sentence, or paragraph that link to you provide keyword support to support the link being relevant? In 2014, a common practice was to find articles and fit your link in there. Does it make sense? If not, you will see lesser impact from these links to your pages.

Recommendation - In 2016, link relevance will be very important. You need to refine your linking processes to websites that have to do with what you do, and the articles, links, and content have to be centered around your products or categories. If not, you will find your link profile will, in time, provide a lesser impact.

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Number of Links

Believe it or not, but the number of links is important, and especially how many domains point to your site. Having 10,000 links from one affiliate site has diminishing returns and, in most cases, will only help so much.

Many SEOs have always said quality or quantity, and, though this is true, this is rather misleading. Having quality links is important, but having a larger number of quality links is better. Google won't positively judge a website based on 5-10 super high-quality links unless you are in a very specific niche. Almost all large merchants have thousands of links from high quality websites, directories, forums, blog comments, and more. Having a large, good-quality link profile is important. This goes against SEO nature, as usually we want the most high-quality links, but having some non-important links is just as important.

In both studies from Searchmetrics and Backlinko, sites with a larger link profile generally do better in Google search. Google understands sites will get links pointed to them and sometimes have low-quality links point to them. Instead of disavowing every link under a DA 30 on a weekly basis, we need to embrace these links that are not built from us, and know that Google understands these links go into a healthy profile, and realize having a large number of links is a really good factor in Google search, as more websites are giving you an upvote, compared to a few.

Recommendation - We are not saying we need to build links like in 2010, but we are saying having a large number of links is a good thing and is usually easier to manage in a link profile. Stop focusing on removing the bad links, as Google doesn't usually count them, and focus on acquiring good quality links that are relevant and which users find useful.

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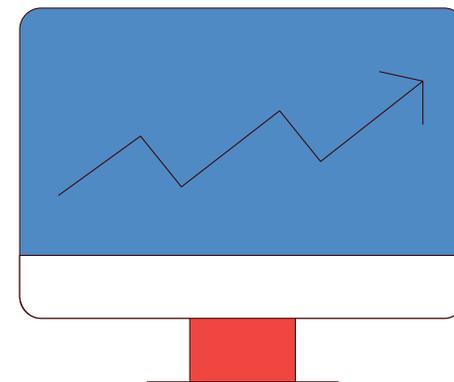
Good Sources

In this section we will cover what is a good source. There are many factors when looking into a good source of a link. We covered relevance, but there are more factors than just relevance. We want to look at the impact of the source. Here are some key criteria below:

1. **Domain Authority** - How high is their domain authority with Google? There are various tools you can use to judge this. Ahrefs does a good job understanding DA.

2. **Social Influence** - Do their social media accounts have legitimate likes, shares, and followers? The more natural social following they have, the better, and if your link gets shared on their channels it is impactful.

3. **Alexa Ranking** - You can also look at Alexa ranking to determine how well people interact with the site.

4. **Ahrefs Ranking** - Ahrefs is a great SEO tool that can judge the popularity or authority based on their backlink profile. The lower the ranking (it ranks all websites), the better the source.

5. **Influence** - This is more of an eye test. Is this an impactful website? Do people interact with it? Is there new content being published regularly? Do they have email subscribers?

Above are good criteria for looking for good sources of places from which to get links. A lot of them will require your best judgement, however.

Recommendation - When performing your content outreach campaigns in 2016, be sure to find good sources using our key criteria. A lot of them go hand in hand, because, when you have good DA, you usually are strong in the other criteria. Good source links with relevance will be more of a focal point in 2016 backlink profiles.

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What Is Impactful

In this section we will analyze what is impactful in a link in 2016. We covered relevance, but we did not cover what makes it impactful. Generally, we want to see social signals on our individual page. Getting a good editorial article published with a link to our site is a good start, especially if you share it in your social channels, and they share it in their social channels.

What we want is viral content, and to have links to our site from that viral content. It is rather simple in its nature, when you think about it, but there are other factors to look into:

1. **Link Placement** - Where is the link? If it is in a bio link, then it won't help as much as if it is at the top of the article. If you have more than one like—one at the top and one at the bottom—it is better. Of course, too many, and you receive diminishing returns.

2. **Social Signals** - This may be repetitive, but having a link that has social shares and social inter-action—meaning, people share it on social media and visit it—is impactful.

3. **Email Click Backs** - If they share it on their newsletter and get clicks back, it helps make the link stronger.

4. **User Engagement** - Similar to email click backs, the more users visiting it and interacting with it, the better the link. Useless articles are useless links.

5. **Anchor Text** - Anchor text does help, but it can hurt, so be careful with it. Backlinko does say it helps, but be careful, as you can always trigger Penguin updates.

6. **Anchor Context** - The content around your anchor is important, as well. Oddly placed anchor text can hurt your efforts and the anchor text.

7. **Backlinks** - The last and strongest factor is having backlinks pointing to your backlink. If people point links to your links from good link sources, your article will rise in relevance.

Recommendation - As above, use this criteria when forming your editorial content, content promotion, and backlink efforts. Do not try to do too much of each, but it is to be hoped that this will help you form your backlink efforts in 2016 to focus on the user and the search engine.

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Backlink Audits

Backlink audits are very important in 2016. It is a good rule of thumb to audit your backlink profile once a quarter, and go in and disavow any links that could look suspicious or hurt your profile. Even though Google has come out and said it is almost impossible to hurt a website with negative SEO linking practices, there are some best practices to look for when optimizing your link profile. Here are some key criteria to look for:

1. **Anchor Text** - This is a sneaky trick. If you have too much, or more than 5%, of one type of anchor text as a commercial phrase, you can disavow links to get the anchor text ratio to a reasonable level.

2. **Low Quality** - Low quality links from DA 10 and below can be a nuisance and should be dis-avowed if you did not obtain them yourself. This won't help you rise in the SERPs from disavowing them, usually, but it is a good practice.

3. **Non-Relevance** - If you have links from non-relevant websites, it is good to disavow these.

4. **Old Linking Tactics** - A good rule of thumb is that any link which was built to game the system, such as a private blog network, is a good link to disavow. Many SEOs spend time getting great links, only to counteract the bad links achieved from other negative efforts.

5. **Link wheels** - Any links that were built or are placed on link farms or links wheels should be disavowed.

6. **Oddly Placed Links** - Links that make no sense or which were built back in the day could be a good target to disavow.

Recommendation - Go through, once a quarter, and audit your link profile according to the link criteria identified above. Remove any links that could be negatively impacting your profiles by reaching out and emailing webmasters, or by simply disavowing them as a last effort.

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Social Signals

To understand social shares, you must understand social media. A social media channel, such as Facebook, Twitter, or Pinterest, is a gigantic website with billions of "no follow" backlinks. So, why would we want to get a bunch of "no follow" links?

The answer is: Google understands how social media works and knows when a website is popular with the social media channels. It does not count a Facebook link the same way as traditional web page backlink, but does understand social media shares such as Facebook or Pinterest re-pins. It can tell and judge popularity based on it. In short, more high-quality social shares will help Google identify your website as quality. You cannot rank your website with just social signals, but it helps strengthen your website as a "quality" website in Google's eyes.

Google also understands when people click on the social media links back to your site or your backlinks sites. For instance, let's say you write a blog, "The 20 best aftermarket parts for a 1968 Mustang." It gets 20 Facebook Shares and 150 likes. Google will understand this is a strong social link to this article, and will be more likely to rank it for "best aftermarket parts for a 1968 mustang."

What generally happens, with social media shares, is that your site rises in popularity, and you get more eyeballs on your content. From there, people could link to you from their articles or share your site on their individual social channels. Generally, if it is a good piece of content, Google will understand people came from a social channel to your blog and, if they interact with it well and read the content, then it will positively impact your link.

There are a lot of tricks people use for social signals. People create lists and use a catchy title, "20 best aftermarket parts for 1968 Mustangs - You won't believe #5." This is all in an attempt to get as many clicks as possible. They can put 5 parts on 4 pages, and that way the user has to click on 4 pages to see all of the content. In Google's eyes, it shows a lot of people clicking and interacting with the link, which makes them value your website more and like it more.

Recommendation - In 2016, e-commerce merchants must put a bigger focus on creating great content and sharing this content on their social channels to gain social media traction. Interact with your communities and followers, and garner hard-fought social signals, as this is becoming more prevalent with Google's Algorithm. Do not buy likes or fake social media interaction, as, just as with Penguin, Google can make a "Social Media update" and crush merchants who game the social channels to fabricate popularity.

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Backlinking Strategies

Backlinking is becoming difficult. As you can see with our guide above, just rating backlinks and finding the right ones is becoming even more difficult than it was in 2015. In this section we will cover great strategies to help assist you in finding relevant backlinks in 2016 and becoming a thought leader in your particular vertical as the merchant.

Please note: Our backlinking strategies are based on acquiring links through great content, content research, content promotion, and relationship building. We do not build links and acquire them through natural and innovative SEO strategies. Even though this is focusing on e-commerce, a huge differentiator for an e-commerce merchant is to use the same strategies as the SEOs that perform SEO for lead-generation-based businesses. Everything is centered around your blog and creating/promoting the best content.

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Content Research & Creation

First and foremost, if you do not know what to write or promote, how will you acquire good links to provide useful information? Guessing is the last resort you want to use. First, use a tool like the Ahrefs content tool, Buzzsumo; or, there is a new tool called Market Muse, which is more enterprise-focused (but I haven't used it yet). All of these tools can help you figure out what content has done well in the past so you are not guessing at what to do. This is super important: You must do the research to find out what consumers find most relevant or want to hear about, compared to what you think they want to hear.

Using each of the tools allows you to find relevant topics and how well they have done from backlinks and from social media signals. With this information, we can use data to create even better content, update content, or create our own spins of already successful content. Do not ever copy and paste content. Make sure it is in your own words; otherwise, Google will punish you for duplicating content, and it is just immoral to copy content. Lots of people talk about republishing or rehashing content, which we not a fan of. Make sure you are always creating unique content every time. You can always link back to old content to "revive" it.

Once you know what content you want to create, you can have content writers, yourself, designers, or marketing people create the content. Make sure you are always creating content with the "ah-ha!" moment, where you solve people's problems, either with a product, category of products, or a solution to the problem they were researching. For instance, we could create a blog called "20 best aftermarket parts for 1968 mustang." This way, we are helping people know about the best aftermarket parts, and we are showing them where to buy them (at your site).

Lastly, make sure you focus on content depth, rather than quantity. It is better to have one fantastic blog, compared to three good ones. We want the best content possible, built for the user and search engine. The search rankings will follow, as computer learning can rank content even though they do not have the exact keywords or matches in their information.

Recommendation - For 2016, focus on doing as much research as you can on content and producing content depth, finding the "ah-ha!" moment for your users. One-up your competitors on content, and produce the best content you possibly can, while being hyper-focused on what the content serves and solves. This means knowing who this is for, and what it is supposed to solve for them.

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Content Promotion

This is the most tedious practice in SEO. This is where almost everyone falls short: promoting the content. If you do not promote your content, how will anyone know about it? Google isn't going to just rank a piece of content #1 after you create a blog. You need to promote the content to the right people. Here are some tools and tips to help you. Remember, you should spend three times the amount of time promoting content as creating it. If it took you two hours to create the piece, spend six hours promoting it.

1. **Social Media** - This one is obvious. You use your social channels to promote your content and interact with other social media influencers. If you are an automotive aftermarket dealer, then find automotive blogs and interact with them on social media. Follow them, share their content, and send them your content. Good things happen when you interact with people.

2. **Email Promotion** - This one is fairly simple. Find good targets based on similar articles. If you write a blog, "Everything you need to know about anti-aging products," you will want to share it to people who have an interest in it. Google anti-aging blogs or skin care blogs to find related articles, and then email the person who wrote the article. Email them and let them know you enjoyed their article and thought they should see yours. If you do it enough times and refine your process, they could share your article on their social channels, or link to it, if it is a really great piece of content.

3. **Advertising** - This one is the easiest, but most costly. You can promote it through the display network, social media advertising (which is big), or other traditional means.

4. **Calling** - Believe it or not, no one does this. Call these influencers and learn more about them. Let them know about yourself and how you enjoyed their content. This is the most surefire way to build a relationship with their blog. This is the best and most effective method, but also the hardest.

Recommendation - Content creation and promotion is not a new idea, and, if you don't know about it, you are missing out on the best SEO off page tactic since Google was invented. For 2016, more and more competitors are learning about it, so you need to focus on better promotion ideas, and new and clever ways to promote your content. Remember, three times the time is needed to promote a piece of content, than to write it.

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Social Media

We are going to talk about social media one more time! In this section, we will talk about the different platforms and how to leverage them. One thing many merchants do not realize is that you have to invest money into the advertising tools, and it generally does not provide the black and white ROAS that a PPC campaign would produce.

Getting more likes on Facebook, more pins, and more engagement can provide long-term profits over time. It also helps for SEO. Right now, in our opinion, Google cannot tell the difference between sponsored content and organic content. Therefore, you can use the advertising tools and get social signals to help SEO off page efforts. Use your social channels to promote your retargeting efforts for products, but also use it to promote your content. And, lastly, build relationships with your key influencers in your market.

Facebook - This has the largest pool of target markets and can provide high ROAS from the advertising tool. This is the best tool for promoting your blog content with the advertising tool, performing dynamic retargeting, and sharing the links you achieve. In 2016, we will see SEOs sharing their links through Facebook and using the advertising tool to promote it.

Pinterest - This platform is very similar to Facebook, as to the way in which Google reads it. All pins have separate URLs, which makes it easier for Google to read Pinterest. The advertising platform is great, and it is fantastic for promoting products that can help them in the SEO game.

Instagram - Instagram is still popular with the younger generation and is a good branding tool. It still does not allow content promotion, but can be useful for promoting your brand, and they can go from a link in your bio to the site. As far as SEO is concerned, it is rather poor, but we should see a shift in 2016 to Instagram being more integrated with Google—as soon as it learns how to interact with Instagram.

Twitter - Very similar to Facebook; however, this tool is great for influencer outreach and relationship management. You can manage the relationships with the people from whom you achieve links. It is impactful to find key influencers in your market and follow them, share their content, and interact with them. A good retweet from them can dramatically benefit your content.

Recommendation - Make sure to use your advertising tools to promote content, products, and categories. Of course, you want organic, but, with every change the platforms make, it is harder for commercial entities to earn organic value compared to non-commercial entities. Always leverage your tools to build relationships, and utilize those relationships to get strong social media signals.

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Editorial Articles

Editorial articles (also known as guest posts) have been around for some time. The big difference in 2016 is focusing on the factors we mentioned above, and being very detailed about how to get them and how the link is rated. Creating content with the highest quality is, obviously, very important. Spending as much time as you can on one piece is better than producing hundreds of articles.

A good example is one client who wrote an article which took a great deal amount of time and research. We won't mention who it is, but they ended up getting 147,000 Facebook shares, and the blog piece ultimately garnered 5 million plus—and counting—visits to the blog. The reason it was so successful is that a key influencer (an old Star Trek cast member) shared it on his Facebook account.

The more time you spend, the better, with an obvious breaking point. You cannot spend 100 hours on one piece, but the more research and thought goes into it, the better. Plus, the more thought that goes into it, the more likely it will be picked up as editorial content. For 2016, building relationships with content editors through social media is more and more important. These are real people with requests for publishing articles on a daily basis. To stand out from the crowd, you have to do your homework on who they are and what they want/like. Learn from them via social media and interact with them. Then create amazing content just for their website, and pitch to them why it will make them better by having your content on their website.

Recommendation - For 2016, focus on building relationships with content editors through social media, and really spend the time to build these relationships. More and more merchants are using SEOs and editorial content tactics. The competition is tightening up, so, to compete, you need to advance your methods and be more tactical with them. Do one-on-one emailing with personalization, compared to mass emailing.

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Thought Leadership

Becoming a thought leader is ultra-important for any merchant. It gives your store more credibility and gives you a better chance of having your products purchased, if someone relates with your content. Make sure, when you create content, that it is of the highest quality and solves people's problems or answers their questions. Creating content can also be spun into designs, where you design content to give it the Wow effect.

With more and more competition, it is important to become crafty, and even to use traditional means to become a thought leader, such as publishing articles in traditional magazines or even becoming known as a speaker on your subject.

SEO is now, more than ever, becoming incorporated with PR and is becoming less of a technical art of manipulation, and more of a value-adding art.

Recommendation - Promote yourself as the thought leader for your niche through the content creation and promotion tactics above. Remember, SEO is becoming very integrated with PR and other traditional marketing means. Long gone are the days of manipulation; the focus is now on value adding.

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Conclusion

This concludes our guide on SEO for e-commerce in 2016. We hope you found this guide insightful and thorough. We know some of this seem new or strange, but this is our professional opinion from running many SEO campaigns with e-commerce merchants. If you ever need help or have a question, the Visiture SEO team is here to help!

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