



SIMPLEVIEW STATE OF SEO

FOURTH EDITION



STATE OF SEO: FOURTH EDITION

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When the last edition of Simpleview's State of SEO report came out in mid-2021, we had just been through the most eventful year-plus in destination digital marketing (if not our lives). Website traffic that cratered at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic had just begun to soar to record levels when we published the report.

Fast forward to today, when the world, the industry, and the digital marketing discipline have been much calmer — but that doesn't mean we've been in stasis. Multiple traffic trends have come and gone, with DMOs riding high on organic search gains before slumping and then recovering back toward growth. Through it all, destination marketers have sought to understand the broader trends affecting them and find growth opportunities.

We've updated this guide with fresh content that we hope you'll use to learn and implement best practices for search marketing, demonstrate the value of your marketing efforts to stakeholders, argue for more resources where needed, and understand your destination's performance in the context of the broader industry.

Some significant updates for late 2022 include:

- **Google Analytics 4 (GA4):** Check out the chapter "Tools for Web Analytics" for a big update describing what GA4 is and how you can expect it to change things. This has been one of the hottest search topics all year since Google announced that the current version of Google Analytics will sunset in summer 2023.
- **DMO search traffic overview:** Look here for stats and analysis on DMO traffic since summer 2021, including some exciting new charts that break down how DMO rankings grow and fall across destinations.

- **Revised content guidelines:** With the rollout of Google's Helpful Content update in August 2022, the rules for writing search-friendly content have once again shifted. Check out the "Content Creation" section for more details.

Those are just the highlights. I, along with Simpleview's team of over two dozen digital marketing experts, have used our decades of combined experience working with DMOs to ensure that this is the best possible guide to succeeding at search marketing in this industry. The entire team is certified in Google Analytics and collectively spends 30,000 hours annually optimizing DMO websites for organic search.

More than 160 destinations rely on Simpleview for SEO, making us the largest provider in the space and giving us the unique ability to compare our clients against the industry and their region. Because we only work in the tourism vertical and share knowledge through regular team brainstorming sessions, we are confident that we're providing top-tier best practices in all we do.

We've all gained a great deal from helping destinations get their message out to travelers, and we hope our efforts will make your work that much more effective, enjoyable, and rewarding. Please reach out with any questions or suggestions so we can make the next edition even better.

Thanks for reading!

PAUL MCLEOD | Director of Analytics
SIMPLEVIEW



DMO

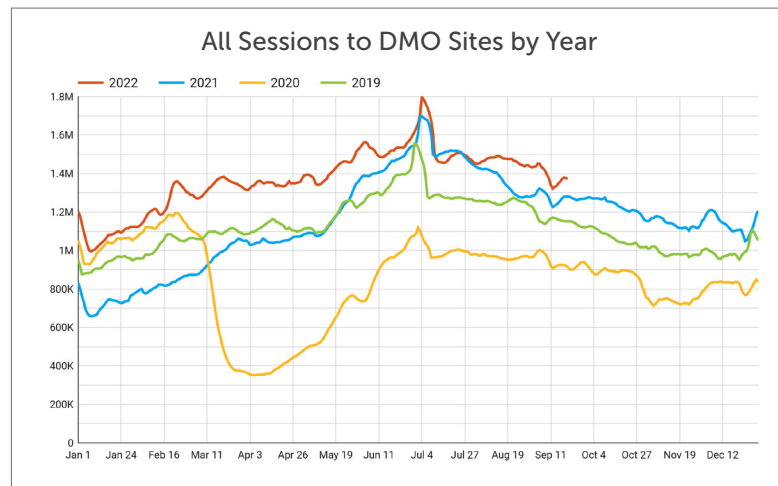
SEARCH TRAFFIC OVERVIEW

DMO SEARCH TRAFFIC OVERVIEW

The DMO search traffic climate has calmed considerably over the past year and a half. It's been refreshing to enjoy strong growth in DMO site traffic numbers after the disaster of the pandemic and be able to report good news fairly consistently after all the stress.

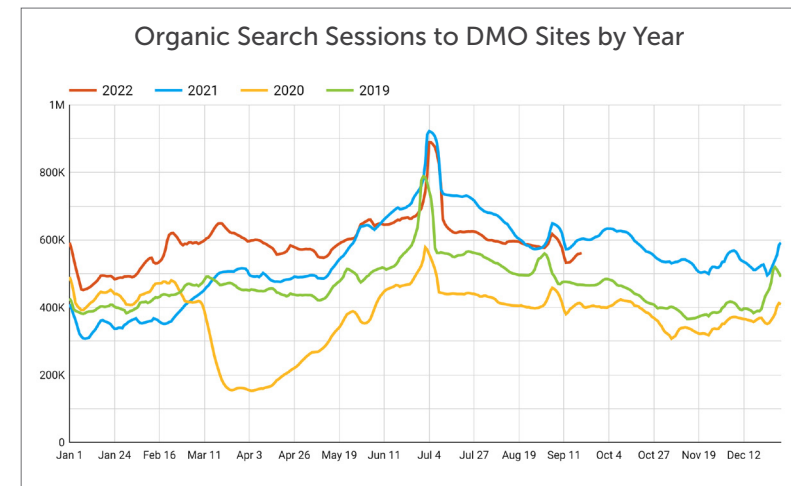
But in the summer of 2022, overall sessions began to weaken in year-over-year comparisons. This weakening signaled a true return to normalcy, in which economic and market factors can push growth up or down from time to time, with new developments always waiting to change the trends. Let's explore how they've been going in detail.

Overall Trends in Site Sessions



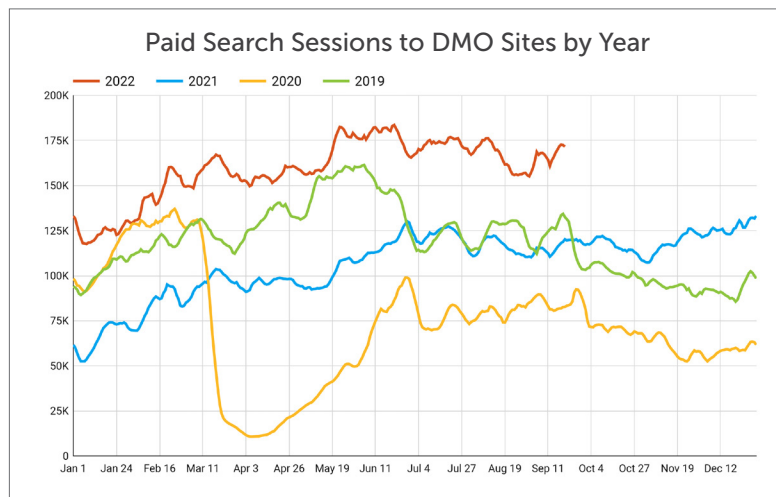
DMO site sessions went on a tear from Memorial Day, 2021, to Memorial Day, 2022, reaching close to the levels they would have if 2020 had been a typical year. With travel demand, particularly to outdoor destinations, pent up from the pandemic travel restrictions, traveler interest in DMO content exploded and drove record session levels for more than a year.

However, that trend gave out in the late spring of 2022. While "All Sessions" have remained largely ahead of 2021 levels, the lead narrowed dramatically over the summer. And as we'll see, that's more a product of strong DMO digital marketing spending than organic traveler interest.

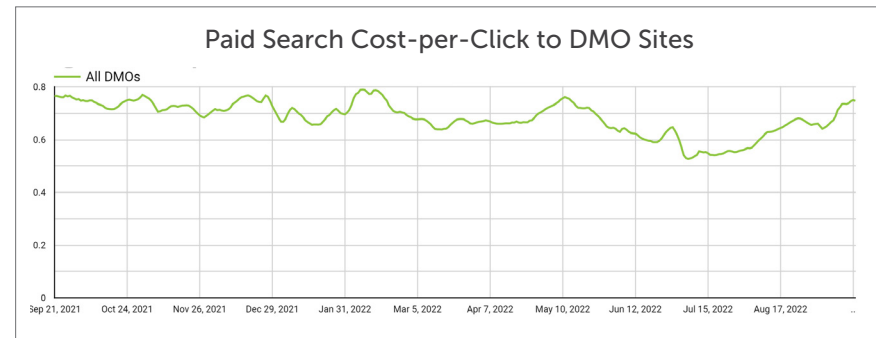


The weakening of DMO site reach becomes apparent when you drill down to organic search sessions, which provide over half of all site activity. By Memorial Day 2022, they had fallen even with 2021 and would lag the previous year significantly throughout July. The industry drew nearer to parity in August, but a small gap remained.

These trends have covered various content topics and keywords, suggesting that larger trends are at play. The most obvious are macroeconomic, as inflation, oil scarcity, and labor shortages have pushed up the cost of everything, including travel. In the face of these headwinds, and having drawn down the cash balances that accrued during the pandemic, travelers seemed to express less interest in DMO content over the summer.



Here we see how overall sessions have remained so strong despite the weakness in organic search traffic. In 2022, DMOs have invested more in paid search traffic than ever. And they've done it with reasonable prices and clickthrough rates.

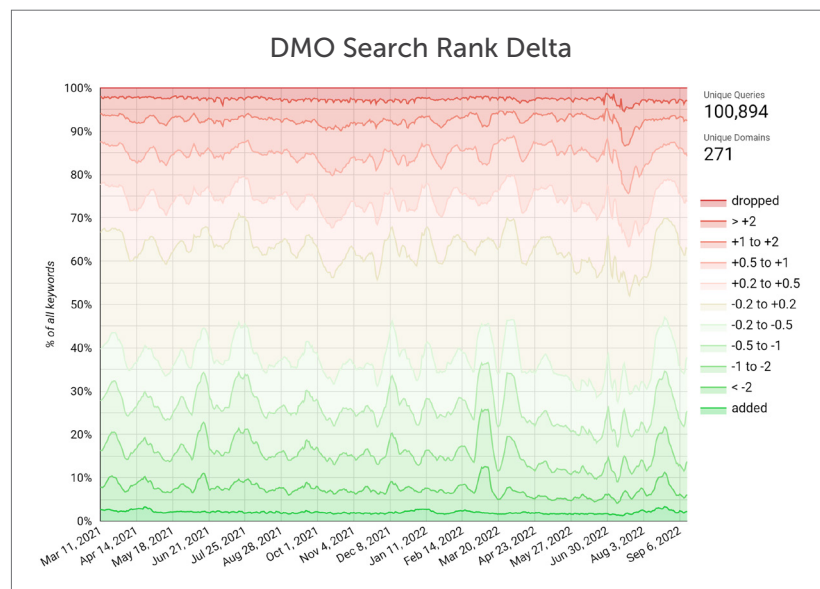


Despite bidding at higher volume than ever, DMOs have not had to pay higher prices for their increased traffic.



Organic Search Rankings Trends

We covered some of the macroeconomic reasons why tourism audiences might've been smaller this year above. There appear to be technical factors at play as well, which we can see when we look at data on how DMOs have ranked on relevant searches throughout the period since traffic began to recover. To do this, we'll introduce a new kind of chart, a Search Rank Delta visualization.



This chart may be a little confusing at first, but it allows us to survey a great deal of information quickly and flexibly. Let's explore what it means. The data comes from Google Search Console and covers almost 300 DMO sites. **From the set of all keywords for which DMOs rank, we've filtered it down to those meeting these conditions:**

- Earned at least **10,000 impressions**
- Entered the **top 10 of the rankings** for at least a day
- Has at least **three weeks** of consecutive data

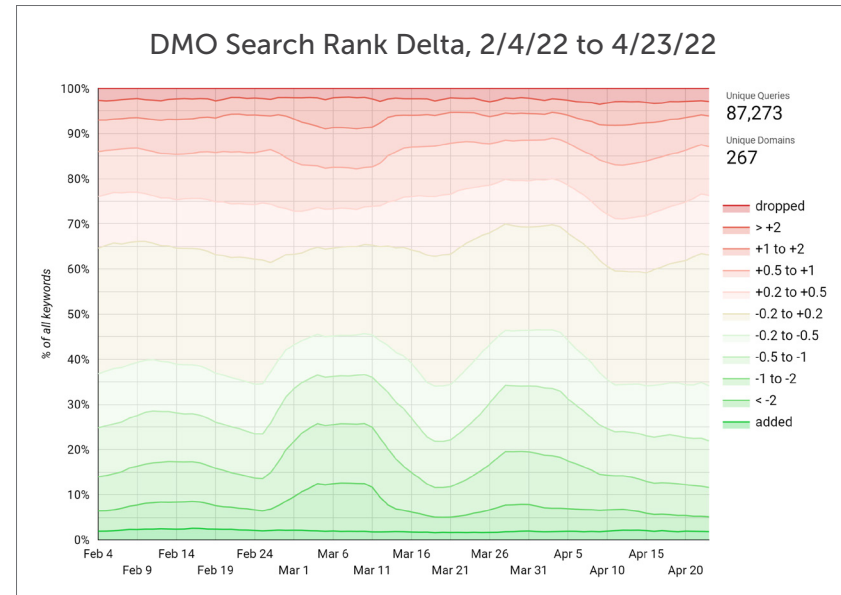
These conditions allow us to filter out keywords too small to have stable rankings and for sites that never ranked high enough for it to matter. The restriction on the consistency of the data allows us to focus on more stable keywords.

With that set of over 100,000 keywords in hand, we go day by day calculating the change in that keyword's rankings from the data two weeks prior, averaging both current and past rankings over a seven-day period. This calculation is useful because it allows us to look at short-term changes in rankings without getting distracted by day-to-day rankings noise. Individual keywords may still be volatile, but with over 100,000 of them, we can see clear trends emerge.

We take those two-week changes (or deltas, to use math jargon) in rankings and drop them into buckets depending on how large they are. Large negative deltas (which are good; we want our rankings to go down towards 1) are colored dark green, and smaller ones are colored light green. Keywords within 0.2 average positions of their previous rank are put in the pale yellow bucket, and keywords that have lost ranking position are colored red. Keywords that join the set on a given date are marked "added," while those that depart the set are marked "dropped." We also order the bands so that the best, darkest green ones are at the bottom, and the worst ones are at the top. Thus, trends in overall ranking improvement or decline become easily visible. The higher the peaks of the green area climb, the better DMO sites are ranking.

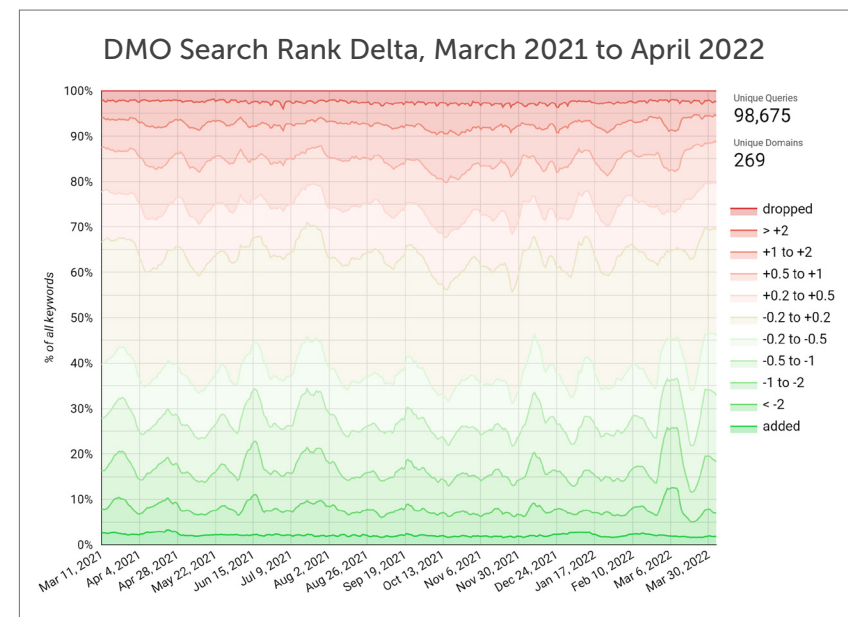


The first thing this chart shows us is how much rankings naturally fluctuate. On a given day, over half of all DMO keywords (even in this dataset that filters for relatively more stable ones) will have shifted more than half a position over two weeks. In the top five, even a shift at the bottom of that range can significantly affect a site's clickthrough rate. DMOs and their competitors are constantly changing their content tactics, and Google is always tweaking its algorithm. The result is that rankings frequently shift.

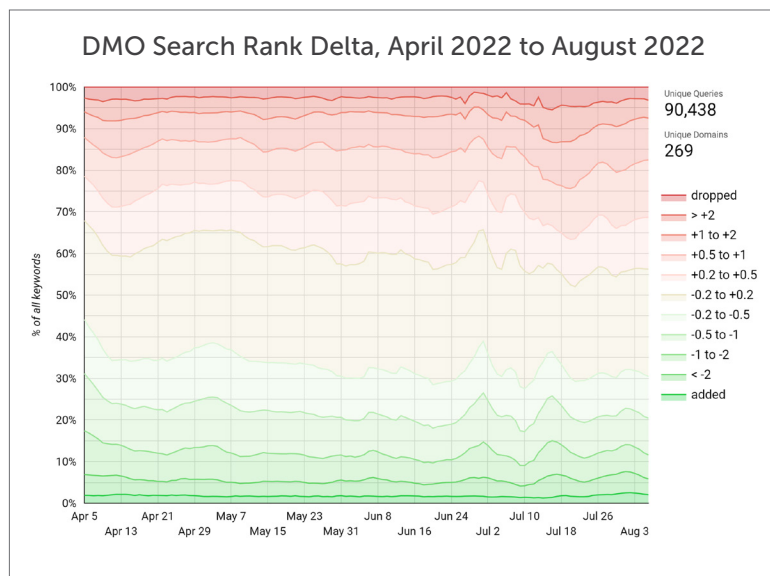


Moreover, the degree and direction of rankings shift is constantly fluctuating. Focusing on this 10-week period makes that clear, with a half dozen different ranking trends materializing as it goes along. Barely a week after February 25, the number of keywords that have improved by two positions or more nearly triples, with a smaller corresponding rise in the number of keywords losing at least two positions. During that period, we would say that overall ranking volatility is increasing. Meanwhile, the next bump in growing keywords a few weeks later has no matching increase in keywords that are losing rankings, so DMO fortunes are unambiguously improving in that period.

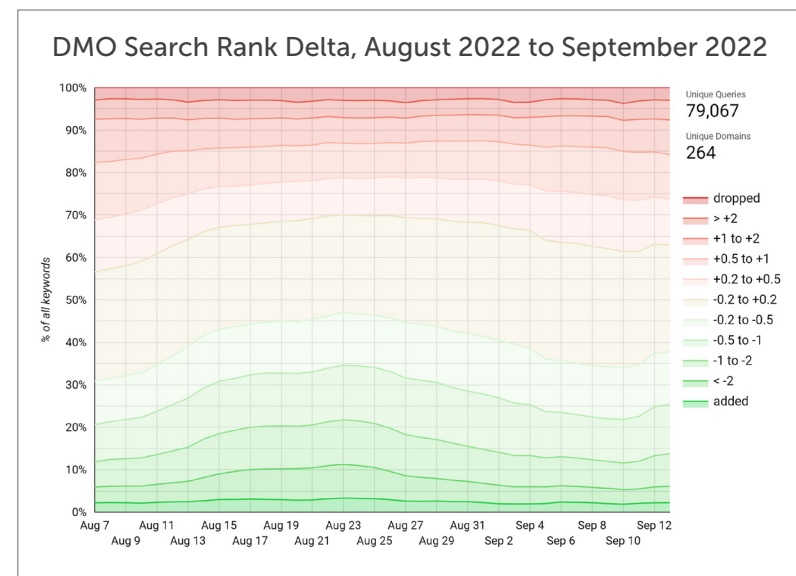
You can visually identify many of these little trends by examining the full dataset. What causes them? Most are minor fluctuations that arise and seem to give way to an opposite trend immediately after. As we'll see, they often occur across many sites in many markets and affect content addressing a wide variety of tourism topics. This makes it seem most likely that the source of these shifts is the Google ranking algorithm itself. If it were individual DMO strategies or those of their competitors, we would expect more variation across destinations than we see.



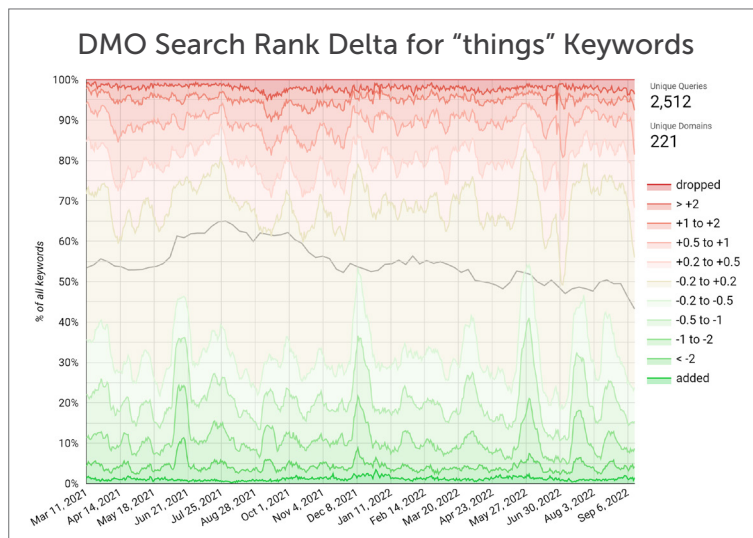
Three general periods in the full Search Rank Delta chart are worth discussing. The first goes nearly a year through early April 2022. During this period, throughout which DMO organic search traffic grew very strongly, rankings went through little ups and down but always returned to a stable trend, with about a third of keywords growing each day and about a third dropping. Overall, rankings got slightly better, and the industry reaped the rewards in traffic.



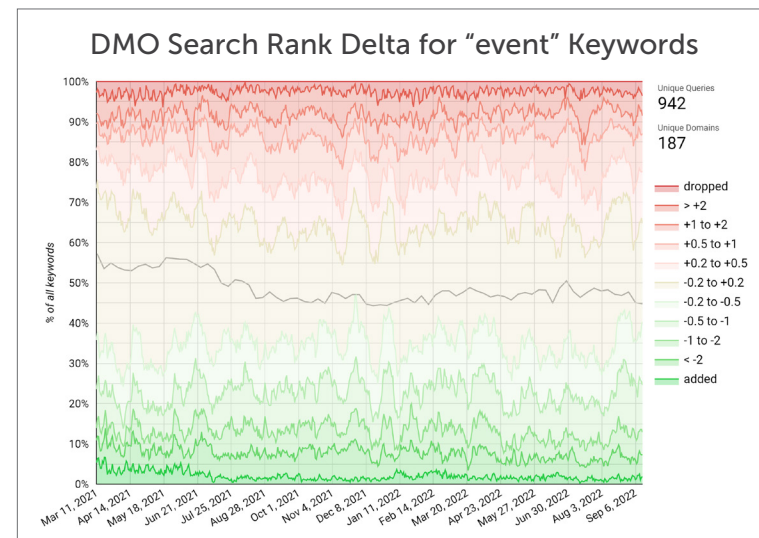
The next period is much shorter, and it's grimmer. DMO rankings fell, with 40% of keywords losing rankings versus only 30% gaining them by the time summer set in, and some dips worse than that. Again, this drop is visible across destinations and topics, suggesting that Google tended not to like DMO sites during this period. The result, along with the negative macroeconomic factors, was the drop in organic search traffic described above.



After all that decline, though, comes good news. DMO sites grew strongly through the first few weeks of August, only returning to stasis for a couple of weeks while Google's Helpful Content Update rolled out (see "Content Creation" for more details). Growth seems to return toward the end of the dataset.

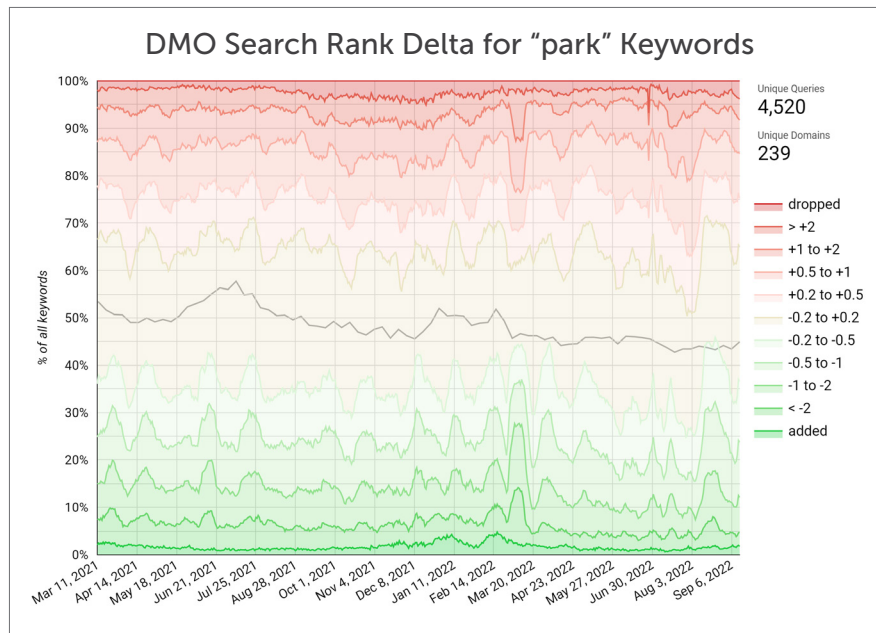


We can also filter this dataset for particular keyword pieces, here the word "things" so that we can look at performance on the popular "things to do" keyword set. We've also added a dark grey line that represents the overall trend in DMOs' clickthrough rates for these keywords over this period (not its absolute value, which does not correspond to the axis on the left). We would expect CTR to rise when the green rankings growth areas are larger, and that's generally what we find, though some short-lived spikes seem to come and go with little impact. Some of the big shifts follow those seen in the overall chart (see those in late-March 2022, early-April 2022, and mid-August 2022), but some, such as the one in late July, are specific to the keyword. Overall, the clickthrough rate has declined more from last year than the rankings changes would seem to merit.



In contrast to the "things" keywords, "event" keywords are much more stable. Most likely, this results from fewer sites competing for this traffic (TripAdvisor, in particular, fights for every "things to do" ranking it can find). In 2022, much has changed, but DMOs still dominate search traffic for topics related to local events.





The last subset we'll look at is keywords that include "park." For many DMOs, state and national park names are major traffic sources, and they became especially important in the outdoor-focused tourism market in the summer of 2021. This year, they've acted like the overall dataset, with extra volatility around March 2022 and extra growth in August 2022. Many DMOs that gained a great deal of traffic from this source in 2021 have suffered by comparison in 2022, and because Google has added many new features to the search results for parks (see the "Rich Results in SERPs" section), it will be an interesting indicator to watch.

CONCLUSION

Based on traffic patterns to date in 2022, we advise DMOs to expect weak organic search traffic as long as poor economic conditions persist. That said, the declines experienced by many DMOs throughout the summer have been exacerbated by changes in Google's algorithm that seem to have demoted DMOs for a few months. The trend has reversed recently, and many rankings have begun to recover. Organic search traffic is running only a little behind trend now and has the legs to recover fully when the economy does.



USER DEVICE & PLATFORMS:

SEO FOR MOBILE, TABLET & DESKTOP

IN THIS SECTION:

- Device and mobile internet trends
- Guidance on design and writing for multi-device experiences
- Implications of voice search
- Metrics for a mobile-first world
- New and near-term technologies

NEW IN THE 2022 REPORT:

- Updated charts and commentary on mobile device share and engagement on DMO sites
- Updated information on future trends in mobile device usage

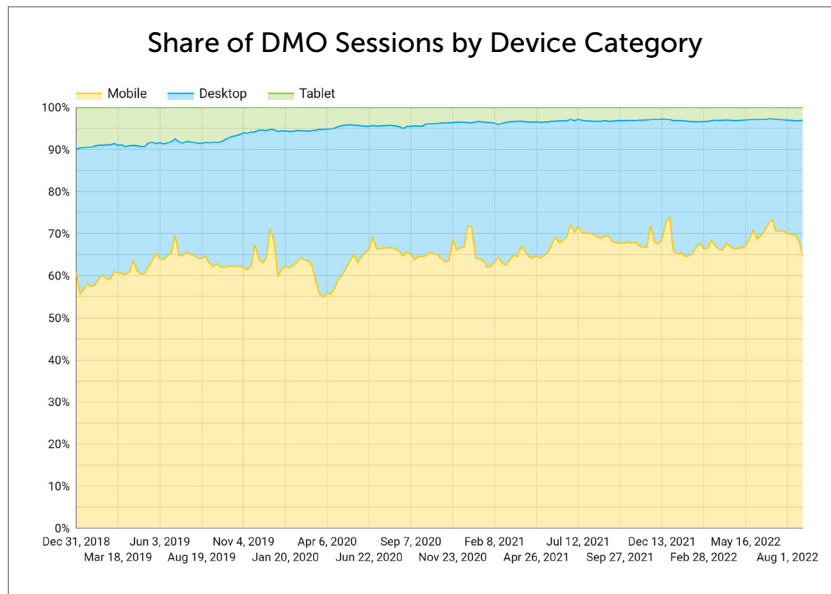
In October 2016, mobile and tablet internet usage surpassed desktop usage for the first time worldwide. In 2019, mobile commerce (m-commerce) overtook standard e-commerce. That lead continues to grow: in 2021, mobile-based purchasing increased across all age cohorts, including by six percentage points among adults aged 57-76 (aka “Baby Boomers”).

For DMO websites, the importance of mobile internet is even more significant, with phones comprising nearly 70% of sessions.

Mobile devices have pushed desktop traffic below 30% for some DMO sites, and this pattern aligns with Google research showing that users will often search on mobile devices in short bursts for travel information. Often, they do more quick informational searches on mobile devices, but they’re liable to show up on your site on any device at any stage of the conversion funnel.

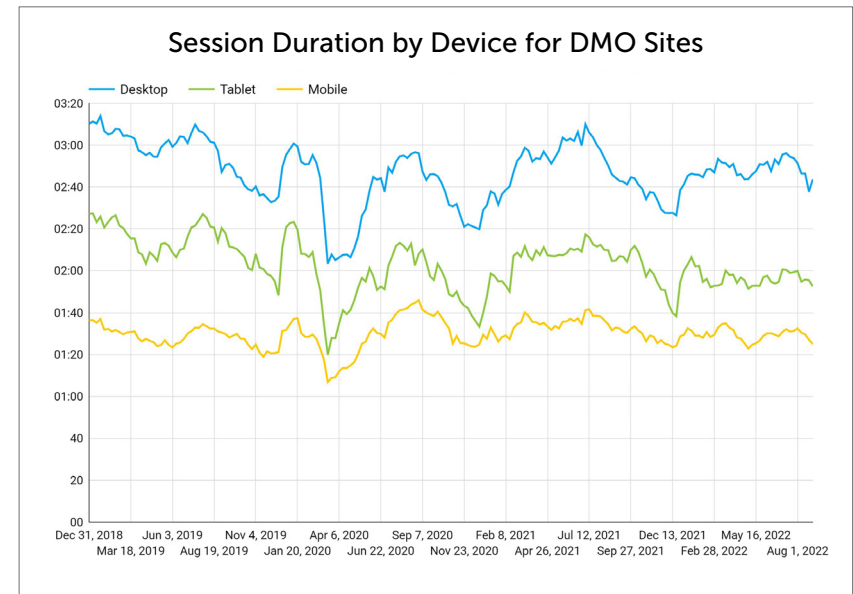
These findings converge in a clear, fundamental takeaway for destination marketing: ensuring fast page loads and consistent functionality across all three major device types is critical for reaching a global audience.

Mobile Usage on DMO Sites



Since 2019, mobile devices have continued to increase their share of DMO sessions, with tablets dwindling below 5%.

For the first ten years after the introduction of the iPhone, the share of traffic from mobile devices increased steeply and steadily before settling to a more gradual growth rate over the past few years. At the start of the global pandemic in 2020, mobile traffic to DMO websites fell significantly while desktop usage increased, likely because many users were confined to their homes and few were exploring destinations while in-market. Tablet traffic peaked several years ago and is now negligible.



Device-specific session duration levels have held steady for a few years, aside from the pandemic.

Engagement metrics for DMO sites such as bounce rate, pages per session, and session duration have been holding steady since the early stages of the pandemic, after falling badly during the initial trough and rebounding. If anything, desktop duration is on the uptick, while mobile has been about the same for a while. The upcoming shift to GA4 will change these trends noticeably, with average duration, pages per session, and bounce rate all likely to improve in the new tool. Having said that, new metrics such as engagement time may replace them. See “Tools for Web Analytics” for further discussion.

MOBILE-FIRST INDEXING

With the prominence of mobile internet usage worldwide, it's not surprising that Google moved to mobile-first indexing in 2018 and based its search result rankings on content optimized for mobile devices. It's critical for organizations to maintain distinct desktop and mobile sites to each contain the same content in order to maintain rankings in search results.

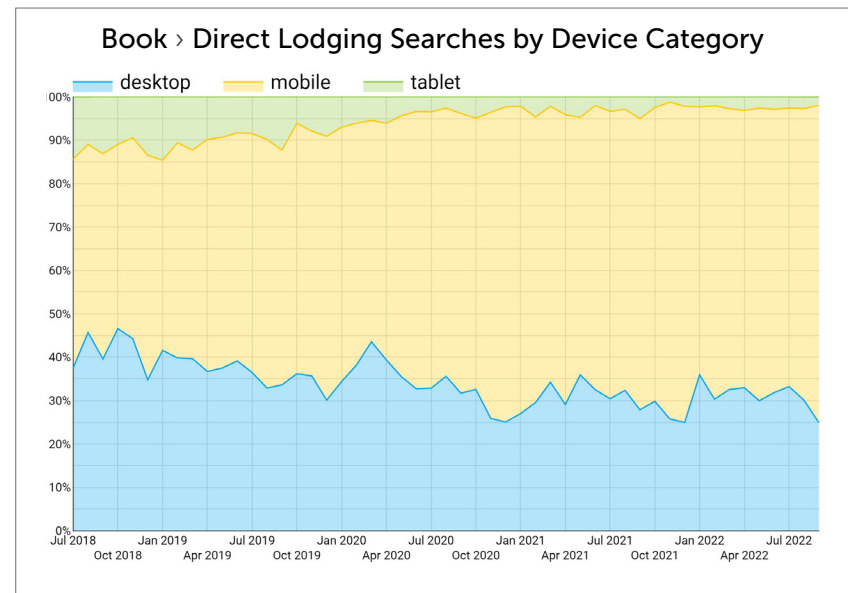
At the same time, the user interface can be altered to provide the best user experience on different devices. Mobile versions should take advantage of "read more" text and accordion elements to offer entry points to more content in a smaller space.

Hiding nonessential widgets and interface "noise" is another effective design technique for mobile and tablet devices. Combined with fast technology, these techniques are the best way to optimize for Google's mobile-first indexing.



MULTICHANNEL EXPERIENCE

According to Zebra's 14th Annual Global Shopper Survey released in 2022, 77% of shoppers have used a mobile device to complete an online purchase, up 7% from 2020 and 15% from 2019. Meanwhile, on DMO sites, users still spend more time on content when on the desktop, but they complete booking searches more and more on mobile devices. Data from Simpleview's Book > Direct referral engine shows up to three-quarters of lodging searches now occur on mobile devices, and that share has continually grown.



MULTICHANNEL EXPERIENCE (continued)

Because users frequently switch between devices to complete their travel research and booking, it's critical to ensure that their experience is relatively seamless across devices. Because UI and functionality may cause someone to abandon a task on mobile to complete it on desktop, plan your design to accommodate when a user might need to pause a task on one device and continue on another.

Design and optimize for each device's strengths and limitations. As well, ensure that the feel and interface are consistent between them. Users shouldn't feel like they're on a completely different website when switching between devices. Instead, they should feel that each version is a natural adaptation for a given device. If your site accommodates experience bookings, it's even more critical to ensure that the mobile experience is well-crafted.

WRITING FOR MOBILE

When writing content for mobile devices, keep in mind the limitations of a smaller screen. While people can quickly understand short, simple text regardless of the device, reading slows down on a mobile device when the text is difficult.

Make sure content is informative and entertaining. Maintain readability by writing for a general audience. Users are willing to scroll, but removing unnecessary words and paragraphs is crucial when writing for mobile. Get straight to the information that will provide answers while also inspiring users' desire to travel. Avoid fluff and marketese language.

RESPONSIVE DESIGN

When designing responsive websites, it's essential to design for mobile first. At the same time, not all mobile design elements should be transferred to the desktop design, so when creating a new website, take care not to simply port the mobile design to the desktop. You'll want to consider the differences in behavior for desktop users.

For example, a menu button might be essential on a mobile device due to the number of top navigation items your website has, but the button might add unnecessary clicks for desktop users, hiding an important UI element. Not all mobile design points work well for the desktop; the reverse is also true.



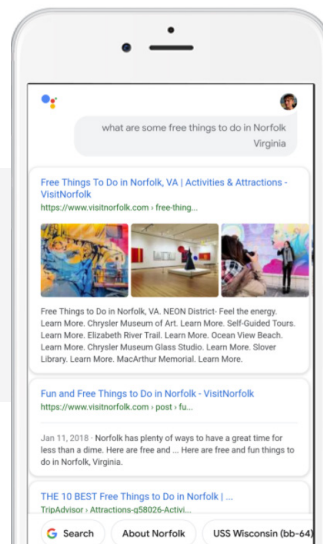
VOICE SEARCH

Voice search is the act of verbalizing a search request to a device-specific virtual assistant. Examples include Siri, Alexa, Cortana, and Google Assistant. (Note that this is distinct from using the dictation feature on a device for our purposes. Asking a virtual assistant, "What are some free things to do in Norfolk?" is a voice search, while dictating, "What are some free things to do in Norfolk?" into a search engine is essentially a "typed search," though using dictation to input the request.)

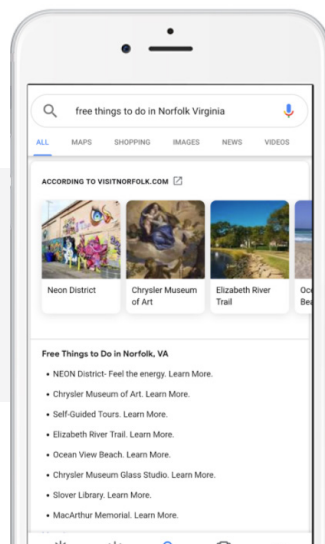
Voice search tools use one of the major search engines (usually Google) to rank and return their results. So while optimizing webpages for voice search generally is not very different from optimizing for search, the two methods yield different outcomes.

Let's compare the voice and text search processes step by step for a mobile user:

Voice Assistant Search



Typed Search



STEP

VOICE SEARCH

TYPED SEARCH

Query entry

Spoken to virtual assistant
Tendency toward longer phrases in a more natural style

Typed, swiped or dictated
Queries tend to be brief, without inessential connecting words

Query parsing

Transferred to search engine
Search engines largely discard the extra "conversational" words and phrasing from both voice search and typed search

Results collected

Drawn from regular organic search rankings
Note that all leading virtual assistants use Google, except for Cortana, which uses Bing

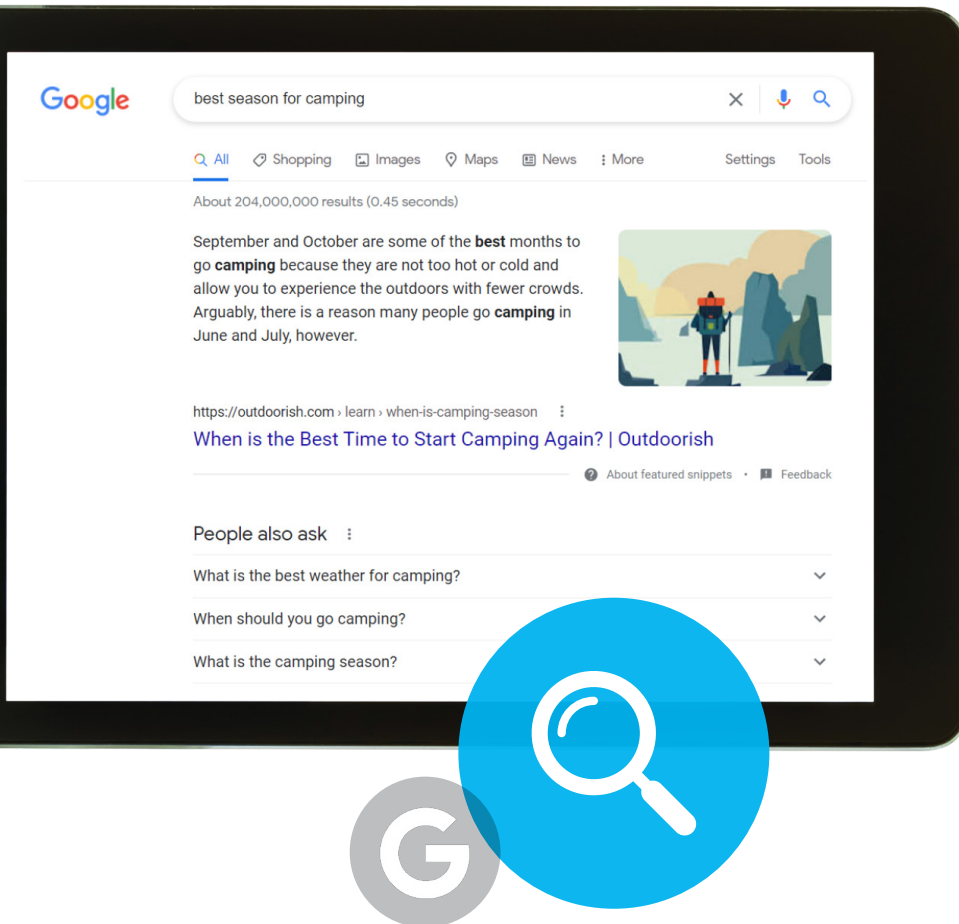
Results presented

Read aloud and/or published on screen
The virtual assistant may read aloud a "featured snippet" and/or declare that results are on screen

Published on screen
Results are displayed on screen

As these screenshots illustrate, **voice search and typed search results are typically different**, though they come from the same sources, which parse the queries similarly.

To appear in results for a voice search, it's essential to rank first for the search phrase because the top-ranked result is often the only one the virtual assistant offers. Because the "People also ask" (featured snippet) feature usually powers results for voice search, optimizing for these natural-language queries is also a good strategy.



MOBILE MARKETING METRICS

In today's mobile-first world, digital marketers might need to adjust their marketing plans and the way they measure success.

Analyzing metrics such as conversion rate, session duration, and pages-per-session separately for desktop and mobile users will provide more accurate insight into your site's effectiveness. Create distinct reports, dashboards, and plans for each set of users to increase conversions and engagement and advance your marketing goals.

New and Near-term Technologies

GOOGLE'S CORE WEB VITALS

In May 2020, Google announced Core Web Vitals, a set of metrics to assess speed, responsiveness, and visual stability. This tool is part of Google's continuing move to improve search results by evaluating what a page delivers in terms of user experience.

The page experience signal became part of Google's search algorithm last year, and Google rolled out new tools for monitoring page experience sitewide in Google Search Console. These measures are primarily targeted at ensuring users enjoy a good experience on mobile. See our section on "Algorithm Updates" for details.

AMP

Google's Accelerated Mobile Pages (AMP) initiative attempts to develop open-source coding protocols and techniques that enable content — even rich content like video, animations, and smart ads — to load instantly on mobile devices. It aims to deliver an optimal experience for mobile users, but accomplishing this entails significant restrictions on the amount of content a page can contain and how complex the code can be.

While AMP was once required to get into Google's Top Stories carousel in the SERPs, that is no longer the case. Momentum and official support for the AMP protocol seem to have died down.

Simpleview CMS has supported AMP for many common DMO website pages since 2019 (enabled via work order) and is available for blog posts, listing detail pages, event detail pages, and coupon detail pages. Google has been selectively serving up the AMP versions of DMO content to users, but these versions might engage users less well if not optimized. Design tweaks and links to related content are good countermeasures.

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

WEARABLES, VIRTUAL REALITY, AND AUGMENTED REALITY

Smartwatches are increasing in popularity and functionality, now offering functions for common travel activities such as boarding flights and unlocking hotel doors. In 2019, Carnival Cruises introduced its Ocean Medallion wearable with sensors to facilitate boarding activities, social interactions, personalized service, and keyless entry.

Virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) are increasingly used in the travel space for virtual tours of hotel rooms, cruise ships, and entertainment venues. Eventually, these technologies could lead to content marketing and user-generated content opportunities as their use becomes more common and costs decrease.

SOURCES

[Zebra: The Next Wave of Retail Fulfillment](#)

[BGR: Mobile Internet Usage](#)

[Smart Insights: Mobile Marketing Statistics 2021](#)

[Cisco Annual Internet Report White Paper](#)

[TechJury: 45+ Internet Usage Stats](#)

[Google Search Central: Evaluating](#)

[Page Experience](#)

FURTHER READING

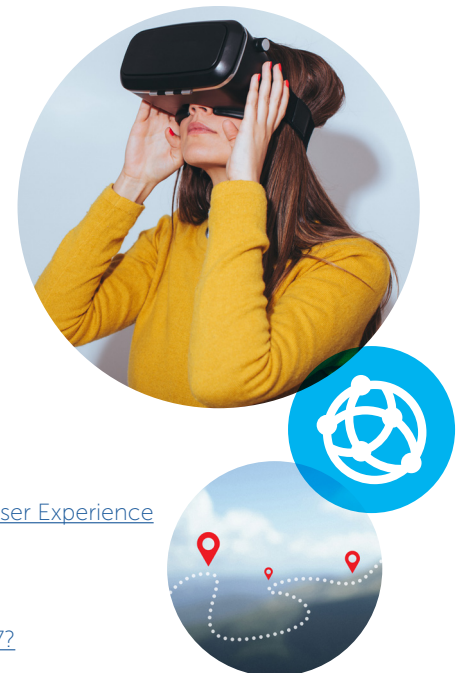
[NN/G: Seamlessness in the Omnichannel User Experience](#)

[NN/G: Reading Content on Mobile Devices](#)

[NN/G: Mobile First is NOT Mobile Only](#)

[AMP Becoming a New Trend in SEO in 2017?](#)

[Unit4 ERPx](#)



DOMAINS

BEST PRACTICES FOR DMO SITE URLs

IN THIS SECTION:

- URL protocols and subdomains
- Best practice domain names
- Choosing your top-level domain
- Foreign-language content
- Domain authority
- Impact of changing your domain

NEW IN THE 2022 REPORT:

- Updated charts and statistics
- Updates to guidance on top-level domain (TLD) selection

Since the dawn of the consumer internet, domain names have been a source of fascination and speculation for publishers. A good domain communicates succinctly what the site is about and serves both a functional and branding purpose critical to the site's success.

Your domain is also one of the most important factors that users weigh in search engine results as they consider whether to click through to your site. Given this importance, it's no wonder that domains have sold for mid-eight-figure values.

There are several best practices you'll want to follow when choosing a domain for a destination marketing 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 address and choosing a trusted TLD (top-level domain, the part after the final dot).

In addition to the marketing benefits noted above, getting all of these elements right also helps your site build authority by encouraging other reputable sites to link to it.

SECURE AND NON-SECURE PROTOCOLS

The first part of your domain that precedes the colon and double forward slash is the protocol, usually “http” or “https.” This domain portion indicates whether the user’s browser is transmitting information to and from your site in an encrypted format. In other words, it examines if outside technologies besides the site itself and the user’s own machine can read the information if intercepted in transit.

Until the last several years, the most common protocol was http:// (short for hypertext transfer protocol). It requires the least work and expense to deploy but provides no encryption. Alternatively, a secure socket layer (SSL) certificate creates an encrypted connection, which can help to establish trust with users evaluating your site. In this case, the protocol on your domain appears as https:// — and a secure lock icon appears at the far left of the URL field, showing users that your site is secure.

Serving content securely requires registering with a third-party organization that guarantees the validity of the information your site sends. There is a small ongoing annual cost for this verification; nonetheless, it can be worth it to show users that their information is protected when asking for information such as name, address, phone number, and email addresses for visitors guides or newsletter requests.

A further benefit is that sites serving content securely via the https protocol receive a slight boost in rankings, per Google.

ASSIGNING SUBDOMAINS

Following the two forward slashes, your subdomain can be whatever you choose. By convention, it’s usually either “www” or omitted altogether. However, any other option is possible and, in theory, SEO-friendly. While some sites in recent times have dropped the “www” (going with what’s referred to as a “naked domain”), some studies have suggested that “www” subdomains perform slightly better in search. Nonstandard subdomains require some work to set up and maintain, and they can confuse search engines about the structure of your site.

For some URLs, a different subdomain can be useful for indicating that some content is separate from the rest of the domain and should be regarded as its own site (blog platforms that give a unique subdomain to each publisher are one example). For others, having some content on a separate subdomain is merely a technical consideration.

Any subdomain can be SEO-friendly if set up properly. Still, there is one important consideration to remember if choosing to use different subdomains. Out of the box, Google Analytics will count each time a person navigates from one subdomain on your site to another as a new session — a tallying that can distort your top-line reach metrics, obscure the true sources of your traffic, and make it difficult to track user paths through your site. So if using subdomains for your site, ensure that your Google Analytics has been set up for “cross-domain tracking,” which requires some technical code updates.

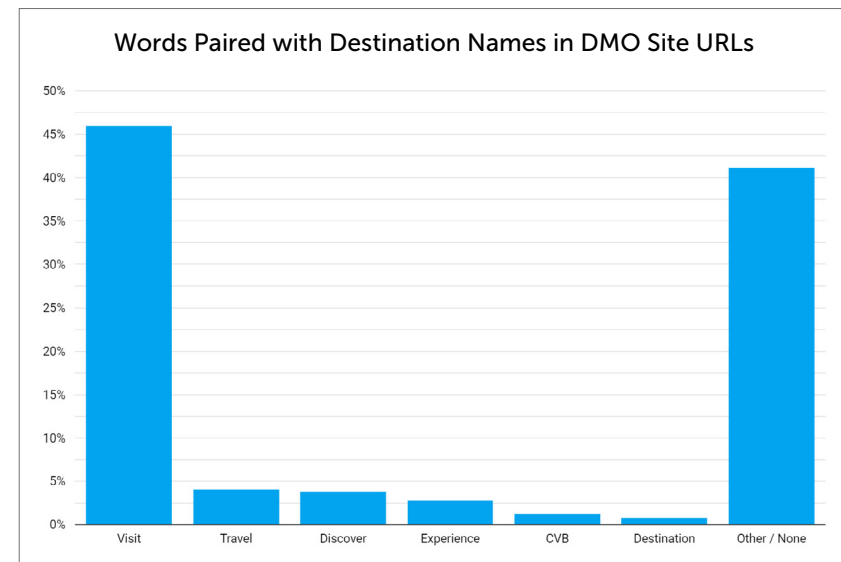
CHOOSING YOUR DOMAIN NAME

Technically speaking, the third element of a URL is its domain name (though most people use “domain name” to refer to the entire URL). **There are several things to consider as you evaluate your options for this part of your web address.** For starters, while it can be tempting to choose something catchy, it’s important for SEO purposes to pick something that contains the name by which people actually search for your destination. SEO-friendly domains also accurately label the information you’re providing. Finally, choosing something short makes it easier for users to remember your URL.

For a DMO, all of these considerations point toward securing the simple name of your destination, if possible. Over the past two decades, we’ve seen destinations switch from [destination]CVB.org to travel[destination].com to experience[destination].com and more as their organizational branding has evolved, but changing domains in this way is problematic from an SEO perspective. First of all, it has long been an SEO best practice to use primary keywords in domains, and “CVB,” “travel,” “experience,” etc., have little SEO value since hardly anyone includes them in a search query. Also, every time you change your domain, you will likely lose significant organic search traffic for a time.

The marketing benefits of bringing these words into your domain are questionable because, regardless of your DMO branding, most search engine users will look for information just using your destination’s name.

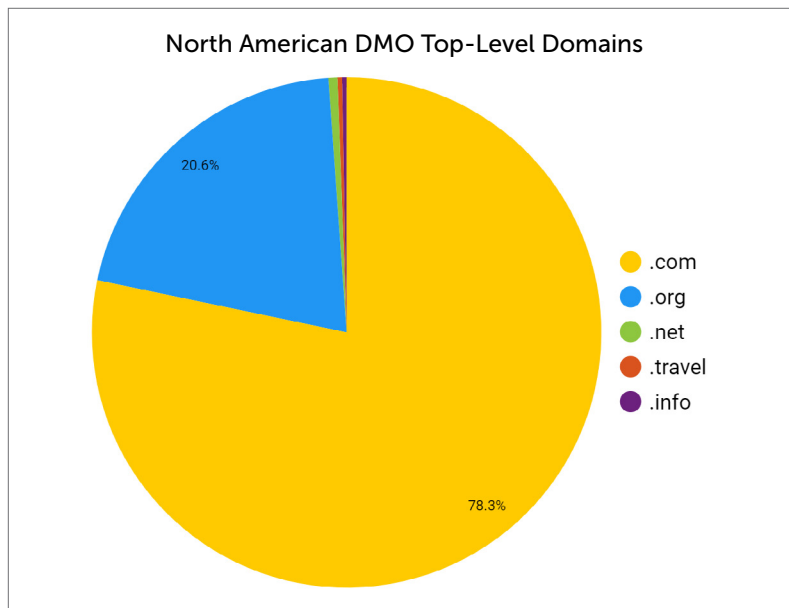
If you can secure [destination].com or .org as your domain name for a reasonable price, strongly consider it, as it will always match your brand from a consumer’s perspective, no matter what your DMO name might become. In addition, it will be easy to remember and type, and it signals to users a likely authoritative source of information.



More than 45% of North American DMOs combine “visit” with their destination name in the URL for their DMO website. Given that prevalence, while search users rarely add words like “cvb” or “travel” to their queries, “visit” may be becoming a familiar keyword for travel information.

CHOOSING YOUR TOP-LEVEL DOMAIN

The third and final part of your domain is the top-level domain (TLD), such that your domain name and TLD together are known as your root domain. It's best to use one of the most common options, such as .com or .org because these TLDs give users more confidence in the legitimacy of a site. Less common TLDs now available, such as .biz or .info or .travel, though technically just as valid, are sometimes associated with spam sites. Thus, using a less common TLD could harm your SEO indirectly, as users may not trust and click through to your site as often. Furthermore, Google has explicitly stated that keywords in the TLD have no SEO value.



Today, more than 98% of DMOs use .com or .org as their top-level domain.

DOMAINS AND FOREIGN-LANGUAGE CONTENT

Suppose you're targeting a specific audience through a language other than the primary one for your content. In that case, SEO guidelines suggest creating a subdomain or subdirectory for that specific language rather than a separate TLD. For example, if using "es" to signal content in Spanish, best practice would suggest using "es.[destination].com" or "[destination].com/es/" rather than "[destination].es."

While any of these approaches are options, using the TLD element of your URL to signal content language is less than ideal because, through convention, such TLDs have come to signal countries rather than languages for search engines and for many users. That is, the ".es" TLD signals to the search engines that you want to target Spain (España) for that page. In contrast, search engines do not read "es" in subdomains and subdirectories the same way.

TLDs give users more confidence in the legitimacy of a site. Less common TLDs now available, such as .biz or .info or .travel, though technically just as valid, are sometimes associated with spam sites.

DOMAIN 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 "Tools for Web Analytics.") It's not technically a metric that Google uses, although something like it seems to have become a factor in 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 indication of why this seems to be true. In any case, having an authoritative domain with many reputable backlinks is critical to rankings success. 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.

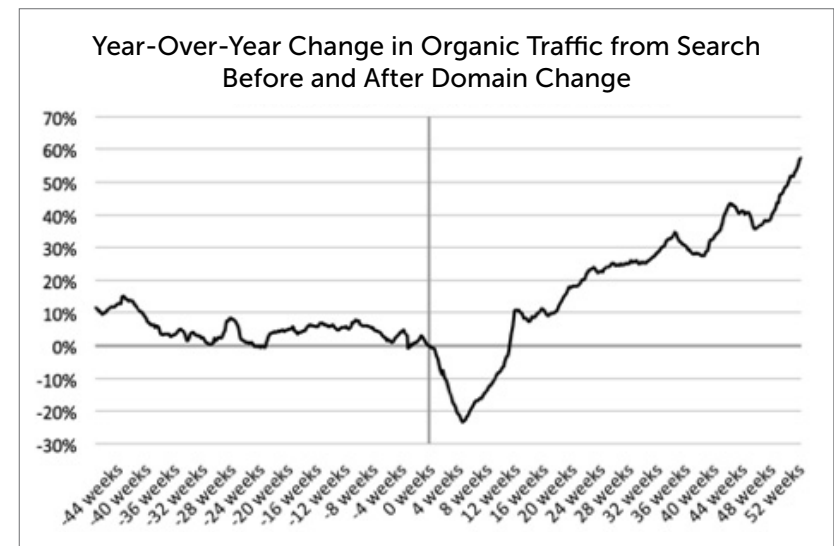
INHERITED AUTHORITY?

It was once thought that purchasing domains similar to your own (often expired domains were good targets) and redirecting them to your domain would provide SEO benefits through inherited backlinks. However, Google claims this tactic offers no benefit. Still, SEO analysts debate the extent to which Google can be taken at face value when making claims about its ranking algorithm. In any case, its pronouncement signals that the company does not want people using redirected domains in this way.

IMPACT OF CHANGING DOMAINS

When you change domains, you risk losing some of the authority associated with your earlier domain, at least temporarily. In theory, redirects transmit the full ranking power from your old domain to your new one; in practice, there is almost always a period of impaired search engine rankings for a few months after a domain change.

In the below graph, we calculated the impact for 35 different DMO sites that changed domains over the past 10 years to measure the percentage change in organic search traffic after changing domains.



Looking at organic search traffic 44 weeks before and 52 weeks following a domain change, data show that sites saw overall gains in year-over-year traffic before adopting their new URL, after which organic traffic plunged for many weeks before reversing.

Before the launches, organic search on the sites had grown at a steady clip between zero and 10% for months. Immediately after the domain change, growth reverses, bottoming out at 23% losses about four weeks after launch.

Recovery then began almost as quickly, with growth restored by about the 12-week mark post-launch. We see very strong growth after that, but this trend should be taken with a grain of salt for two reasons. First, the domain changes occurred along with a redesign in almost every case, so it's difficult to attribute the growth to one factor or another. Second, the sample gets thinner as we get further from the launch date—not all sites in the study had gone a full year since the change. While this aggregate analysis obscures quite a lot of variation from one site to the next, the overall pattern is significant and pronounced. If you're considering changing your domain, weigh the potential pros and cons carefully.

Immediately after the domain change, growth reverses, bottoming out at 23% losses about four weeks after launch.



INDEXATION: OPTIMIZING HOW SEARCH ENGINES

READ AND STORE YOUR SITE CONTENT

IN THIS SECTION:

- Bot-friendly URLs
- Understanding "crawl budget"
- Avoiding indexing penalties and traps
- Using sitemap files

NEW IN THE 2022 REPORT:

- Updated information on Google video page indexing
- Updated page information on page crawl limits

No one is perfect — not even the world's leading search engine.

In September 2020, a Google bug caused 0.2% of the company's estimated 55-billion-page index to be accidentally dropped. Fortunately, the problem was resolved for 99% of cases a few weeks later.

It goes to show that even the best of us make mistakes. But barring extraordinary technical gremlins like the one described above, search engines are still programs that follow observable patterns despite the rise of machine learning in recent years.

This observable behavior means we can understand how they work and devise tactics to encourage them to behave the way we want.

This section offers some best practices for ensuring that search engines can optimally index your website content.

WHAT ARE INDEXING, CRAWLING & SPIDERING?

Search engines continually scan the internet — a process known as “crawling” or “spidering” — for new and updated pages by sending out programs that systematically read and store websites.

Known as “bots” or “spiders,” these programs record everything they encounter, including content, code, links, and anything else they find noteworthy, in a massive index.

Google’s algorithms do many things with all this data, as discussed in other sections of this report. Here we focus on how the company gathers data and what a webmaster needs to do to ensure proper indexation.

SPEED & PERFORMANCE

Search engines spend a limited amount of time indexing a website — a concept known as “crawl budget,” determined by the number and quality of links pointing to the website’s domain. These links signal a website’s importance for search engines; more important websites get higher crawl budgets.

It follows that the “crawl budget” assigned to a large website may not be enough for a search engine to index every page. Thus, for DMO sites, it’s critical that pages can be parsed smoothly and quickly so that as many pages as possible will be indexed in the allotted “crawl budget.”

Third-party plugins, external JavaScript libraries, and unoptimized images several megabytes large are some common factors that slow down indexing. For instance, Google stated in 2022 that if a page goes over 15 megabytes of data, it would stop crawling it. Google’s [PageSpeed Insights](#) provides speed metrics and suggestions on what elements are slowing load speed. In addition, Google Search Console provides reports on its measurements of your page performance in real-world user scenarios.

For DMO websites, which often rely heavily on large-format, highly detailed photos, it’s essential to compress image files to the degree that improves performance without sacrificing quality. Your site should also serve smaller versions of images to users on mobile devices.

Third-party plugins, external JavaScript libraries, and unoptimized images several megabytes large are some common factors that slow down indexing.

BOT FRIENDLY URLS

The first thing a bot indexes is each page's web address. A URL that a human can easily understand will also optimize your page for relevant searches.

For example, a URL like **simpleville.com/?pageID=459** is unintelligible at a glance for both people and bots. A better URL would be **simpleville.com/things-to-do/hiking/**, which signals that the page contains information on things to do – specifically, hiking.

For DMOs, the biggest source of bot-unfriendly URLs is pages for individual listings, events, offers, and blog posts, all of which draw their content from databases that store thousands of similar records and differentiate them with ID numbers. That said, most modern CMS solutions avoid this pitfall.

Simpleview CMS creates index-friendly URLs for these database-driven pages using the name of the business or event in question. For blog posts, we use the post's headline as its URL, which has become a best-practice standard across most publisher platforms.

FOCUSING ON HIGH-VALUE CONTENT: THE "NOINDEX" TAG

The "noindex" meta tag is a snippet of code that tells bots to ignore a web page as they crawl. Properly applied, it helps make the most of your site's "crawl budget" by not wasting time indexing thank-you pages, for example, or system pages not meant for public viewing.

Use "noindex" tags sparingly and never for a page you want findable through search. Best practice also includes periodically scanning your entire site for noindex tags to ensure that you're not accidentally omitting content from indexing.

AVOIDING DUPLICATION PENALTIES: CANONICAL URLS

Duplicate content is an ongoing complaint of search engines. It wastes indexing time and resources without benefit to them or end-users. Some marketers also try to artificially inflate their search performance by loading a domain with duplicate content. For both reasons, search engines penalize duplicate content by default.

However, there are legitimate reasons for duplicate content across the destination marketing ecosystem. Some DMOs syndicate events and other feeds to third-party publishers to reach a wider audience. Some cross-post blog content from destination partners or provide their own blog content to local magazines and newspapers.

Since these applications add value for end-users, search engines recognize "canonical URLs" as a way to avoid penalties typically triggered by duplicate content. This snippet of code tells indexing bots the URL of the original content and has the added benefit of concentrating the SEO value of all pages combined to that original URL.

CROSS-LANGUAGE INDEXING: THE “HREFLANG” TAG

Content that exists in multiple languages should also be noted to ensure optimal indexing. In this instance, the “hreflang” tag signals to search engines that separate pages serve very similar purposes but for audiences speaking different languages.

Any page that is also available in another language should include an “hreflang” tag for itself as well as its other versions. For example, suppose your website has a Cinco de Mayo Dining page available in both English and Spanish. In that case, each of those pages should include an “hreflang” reference for itself and the other-language version.

AVOIDING SPIDER TRAPS

A spider trap is a “loop” of URLs that causes a bot to crawl endless new URLs that, although valid, 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.

SITEMAP FILES

Sites should have two kinds of sitemaps to serve two distinct purposes:

- The **HTML sitemap** is for people who visit your site and want to find a page without using search or combing through navigation menus. It displays the overall structure of your site and all its standard pages.

As a best practice, listings, events, and other database-driven pages should be left off to keep the sitemap from becoming too cluttered to be useful.

- A **sitemap.xml** file, in contrast, is strictly for search engines and doesn’t exist as a page on your site. It lets bots know when you add or remove pages and should always contain a complete list of files you want indexed.



RECENT GOOGLE INDEXATION CHANGES

VIDEO PAGE INDEXING

Google can now detect and record when a video is embedded on a page as it crawls that content. It distinguishes between videos that are the page's main content and those that merely support the other text and images.

The new Video Pages report in Google Search Console lists which video pages Google has detected on your site, the URLs of the videos they contain, and their main/supporting content status. With this tool, you can confirm that Google has recognized your video content on your site. Doing so is a good step for video SEO, as the text around your embedded video will help the search engines understand its content.

PASSAGE INDEXING

In 2020, Google began [indexing specific passages](#) of pages rather than the whole page only. This update allows them to understand which individual bits of content are most relevant to a keyword search and rank the text differently as a result. This allows Google to answer very particular questions much better, affecting the results on up to 7% of searches. **For marketers, the upshot is that longer, more in-depth pages should now be rewarded better if they're well-organized with headings, as they'll be more likely to be ranked for long-tail keywords.**

"NO FOLLOW" LINK ATTRIBUTE UPDATE

In [March 2020](#), Google stopped treating the "nofollow" attribute as a directive and instead treats the attribute as a hint for indexation and crawling. As a result of this change, the "nofollow" attribute no longer functions as a way to hide content from bots. Pages that you want to be hidden from searches should now include the "noindex" meta tag.



DEVICE-SPECIFIC INDEXATION

To keep pace with the growth of mobile internet devices, Google has adopted a “[mobile-first index](#)” strategy, and in 2021 Google stopped indexing any sites on a desktop-first basis. At this point, anyone maintaining a separate mobile site is far behind the times. All content and major functionality should be available across all devices.

URL INSPECTION TOOL IN GOOGLE SEARCH CONSOLE

If you are concerned about the indexation status of a URL, you can inspect it via the Google Search Console Inspection Tool.

The tool will report any crawl anomalies and provide other valuable insights, such as whether indexation is allowed for that URL, the most recent crawl date and time, and whether the URL is present in a sitemap. The tool can also request that Google recrawl and reindex pages, for example, after you’ve made significant changes.

SOURCES

[How Google Search organizes information](#)

[In-Depth Guide to How Google Search Works](#)

[Canonical URLs](#)

[Tell Google About Localized Versions of Your Page](#)

[Mobile-First Indexing](#)



AUTHORITY:

BACKLINKS AND OTHER FACTORS

AFFECTING RANKINGS

IN THIS SECTION:

- Best backlinks for DMOs
- Authority by domain, page, and passage
- Factors beyond backlinks
- Tools for measuring authority

NEW IN THE 2022 REPORT:

- Added guidance for evaluating a DMO site's authority against its competition
- Added a discussion of social media's impact on search authority

"Authority" is a critical concept in SEO. The term refers to all the ways that search engines gauge the quality of a site and its content, as opposed to how they gauge the relevance of the content to a user's search query.

Google developed the concept of content "authority" and metrics for measuring it because simply "reading" the contents of a page and determining whether it's a good match for a given search is relatively easy for humans but very hard for machines.

In the early days of Google, its algorithm examined all the internet's links to a page from other websites (called "backlinks"). It used that information to calculate the PageRank score for that page — once the dominant factor for determining authority.

Today, Google uses countless ranking factors to calculate the authority of a page — both to become continually better at matching content to searches and as a way to overcome ever-more sophisticated ways that unscrupulous web admins and marketers try to game search algorithms to inflate their organic search performance artificially.

WHAT BACKLINKS ARE MOST IMPORTANT FOR A DMO?

Even when backlinks were the primary driver of authority calculations, evaluating them has always been more complicated than a simple count.

For example, the more backlinks a page had, the more valuable its own links out became. Thus, backlinks from pages linked to by lots of other pages were weighed more heavily. This underlying concept persists such that even now, a page with a few high-quality backlinks can obtain much more authority than a page with many low-quality links.

Which backlinks are most important for DMOs specifically? Generally, these fall into three main categories:

- Links from legitimate educational organizations, signaled by the .edu domain
- Links from government sources, signaled by the .gov domain
- Links from your destination members and partners

Links from sites in the first two categories tend to be higher-value because those sites themselves usually have high authority — both because of their real-world authority and (for that reason) because they tend to have massive numbers of backlinks.

Sites in the third category don't carry the same real-world authority. Still, as legitimate sites discussing tourism in the destinations they serve, they tend to have high-ranking authority relevant to keywords that DMOs try to rank for.

Making efforts to earn backlinks from sites across these three categories can significantly boost a DMO's rankings.

SITE, PAGE & PASSAGE AUTHORITY

In recent years, Google has calculated authority on a per-page basis. Site-wide authority became problematic when pages with weak content began earning high rankings simply by being hosted on the domain of a high-authority site.

This problem peaked with content farms run by companies like eHow and Demand Media, which would churn out thousands of low-quality, keyword-optimized articles and rely on the overall authority of their host sites to earn high placements on search engine results pages (SERPs).

Even so, Google does evaluate some signals at the domain level — diagnostic information based on the whole of a site and everything within it. **Some factors that can uniformly benefit or harm all of a domain's pages include:**

- **Site speed**
- **Malware within the domain**
- **Domain age**
- **Domain history** (what has been published under that domain before)

Making the issue of authority even more complex, Google can now examine individual passages within a web page to better assess how relevant a page is to a search.

ADDITIONAL AUTHORITY FACTORS

Paul Haahr, a Google Senior Engineer, is just one of many sources who have pointed out that Google's authority rankings have evolved well beyond assessing backlinks. "We have no one signal that we'll say, 'This is authority,'" he explained. "We have a whole bunch of things that we hope together help increase the amount of authority in our results."

In addition to backlinks, many other off-page factors affecting page authority have been revealed by search engines or discovered by SEO analysts.

- **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 analysts believe that links from pages related to your page's topic carry more relevance in search algorithms.
- **Links from a homepage.** Similarly, some analysts believe that links from the home page of a domain carry more strength than those from other pages. This assertion is difficult to prove, but since home pages tend to have more backlinks than other pages, they likely have higher authority scores, giving them an edge in search algorithms.
- **"Do follow" vs. "NOFOLLOW" links.** Google has stated that in calculating authority, its algorithm ignores backlinks with the "nofollow" attribute, which web admins use to avoid SEO penalties in certain circumstances. But having zero "nofollow" backlinks in your profile looks unnatural and is therefore suspicious to ranking algorithms.
- **Contextual links.** It is generally believed that links within the page's content are worth more than links in a sidebar or navigation section, for instance. This makes sense, as an in-content link represents the author's stronger endorsement of the target URL.



We have no one signal that we'll say, 'This is authority,'" he explained. "We have a whole bunch of things that we hope together help increase the amount of authority in our results."

– PAUL HAAHR | Google Senior Engineer

TOOLS FOR MEASURING AUTHORITY

If you're curious about your site's authority, you can explore this measure with several tools. Two of the most popular among them are:

- **Link Explorer** (formerly Open Site Explorer):
<https://moz.com/link-explorer/>
- **Majestic SEO Site Explorer:**
<https://majestic.com/reports/site-explorer>

These tools carry a fee for use, given how many resources they require to offer the service. And it's important to note that while they provide helpful insight and guidance, none present Google's actual authority metric, which (like all elements of the Google algorithm) is a closely guarded secret.

Instead, these tools estimate page and domain authority, attempting to approximate Google's analysis by crawling as many URLs as possible, recording their links, and calculating which pages get the most backlinks from the best sites.

HOW HIGH SHOULD YOUR AUTHORITY BE?

How much authority or how many links you need to compete for keywords in your market will vary widely from destination to destination. DMO sites range from the mid-teens to the low 70s for domain authority as measured on moz.com's Link Explorer Tool, which uses a logarithmic 0-100 scale.

Despite those differences, sites at both ends of the spectrum can earn good rankings for critical keywords because they usually operate in different markets. That is, smaller destinations will have DMO sites with lower search authority, but the competition in that market (i.e., other sites with content relevant to the destination's keywords) will also have less authority. To evaluate a particular DMO site, find some local competitors going after the same keywords and compare them on your authority metric of choice. In general, DMOs look good against local competition but are swamped by the all-market strength of OTA sites and TripAdvisor.

SOCIAL MEDIA & SEARCH AUTHORITY

Since late in the last decade, there has been much debate over whether “social signals” — links and mentions within posts on social media — improve search ranking authority. Google has said definitively that social media posts do not play a role in its algorithm. Yet so much citation and sharing activity occur on Facebook, Twitter, and other social platforms that it must be a tempting source of authority signals. Depending on where you look, you can find SEO analysts saying the effect is massive, while others say it doesn’t exist at all.

While the debate continues on the direct impact of social media on search, there is no denying that social media plays a role in elevating a destination’s visibility in other ways, including mechanisms that likely do affect SEO, if only indirectly. **These include:**

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

If social posts and links are incorporated into Google’s algorithm, Facebook and Twitter are the platforms most likely to provide value. However popular TikTok and Instagram may be, their visual content is not as easily understood by Google as text, and they provide very few linking opportunities that would pass authority in any case.



REFERENCES

[What are the best off-page SEO techniques?](#)
[Search Engine Ranking Factors](#)
[How AI is powering a more helpful Google](#)

CONTENT CREATION: BEST PRACTICES TO **SERVE (AND REACH) YOUR AUDIENCE**

IN THIS SECTION:

- The essence of good content
- The importance of structure
- Best practices for content length
- Visual presentation
- Content housekeeping and consolidation

NEW IN THE 2022 REPORT:

- Added a discussion of Google's August 2022 Helpful Content Update

Quality text remains the foundation for effective SEO even as the web's visual and multimedia capabilities expand. This is particularly true for the types of informational searches (e.g., "[destination] events" or "things to do in [destination]") that have historically brought in so much of the organic search traffic to DMO sites.

When creating new content for your site, one guiding question is most critical: What are the needs of my audience?

Understanding these needs begins with keyword research to assess the full range of terms customers are searching for related to your destination. These queries can provide a solid basis for topic selection, content creation, and on-page optimization.

In addition to the guidance in this section, be sure to see our Optimization Tools section, which offers more information on keyword research techniques.

WHAT MAKES FOR STRONG WRITING?

While there are technical guidelines to be aware of, content quality is always paramount in SEO. The backbone of any good writing is a strong perspective on the chosen topic that answers or explains the questions implied in the search queries that bring people to the content.

A well-thought-out structure is vital for the kinds of informative and inspiring pieces in which DMOs specialize.

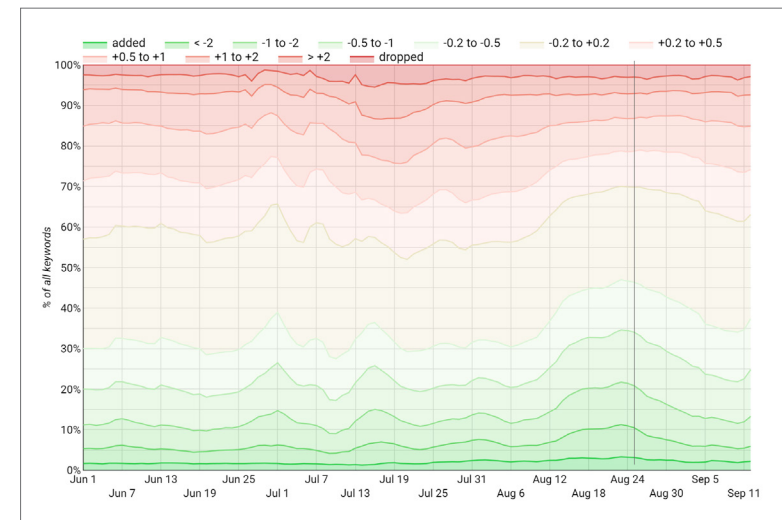
To start, outline the main subtopics and their supporting ideas within a strong, comprehensive introductory paragraph. Maintain a lively and inviting tone.

As you proceed, deploy keyword-rich titles, headings, and subheadings that summarize the content that will follow each. Research from the [Neilsen Norman Group](#) has found that “higher literacy” users like to scan the text, reading through headings, subheadings, and the first sentences of paragraphs. Thus, 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?

Style and proper grammar are both critical elements. Good writing entails grammatically correct usage and consistent use of brand voice and values. You’ll want to employ easy-to-understand sentence structures and words for leisurely reading. Aim for an eighth-grade reading level, with shorter sentences and paragraphs, fewer difficult words, and avoid jargon. Several online tools can check the grade level of your content.

When fleshing out a story, supply supporting details, including facts that build authority, sensory details that elevate and create an emotional appeal to the audience, and well-placed, goal-driven calls to action. If all of these elements come together — from 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 as well as reader engagement.

HOW IS GOOGLE EVOLVING ITS UNDERSTANDING OF CONTENT?



On each day, this chart shows what proportion of keywords have gained rankings (green, expressed as a negative number, i.e., going from rank #3 to #2 would be counted as -1) or lost them (red) vs. their rankings two weeks prior. Darker bands represent keywords moving farther from their original position. The more green, the more ranks are improving. The vertical line represents the start of the Helpful Content Update rollout, which spanned August 25-September 9, 2022.

After a gentle decline in rankings throughout July 2022, DMOs started to see their positions surge upward for most of August 2022. When the Helpful Content Update hit, though, it seems to have slowly pushed DMO rankings back to a steady state. As of the time of publication, the long-term effects have not yet become clear, but overall, DMOs have certainly not been demoted badly by the update. We will continue to monitor the situation and attempt to study which keywords and content have done better than others.

A NOTE ON DUPLICATE CONTENT

To give its users the best possible experience, Google strives to filter out duplicate content from the search results. Search engines will even penalize duplicate content, though there are simple ways to avoid those penalties for legitimate instances of replicated content. For more guidance, see the section “Indexation.”

WHY IS CONTENT STRUCTURE ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT FOR SEO?

Besides the readability factor mentioned above, there are specific effects that structure has on SEO that you should keep in mind:

- **Featured Snippets and Voice Search:** Google often uses headings while parsing pages for content to present in the Featured Snippets and “People also ask” sections (see “Rich Results in SERPS.”)

Placing a commonly searched phrase or question like “What is the best month to visit [famous local attraction X]” in a heading and then giving a succinct explanation can earn significant 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 an ongoing debate. But whether or not they receive special weight, headings are an easy and non-spammy place to put high-value search keywords to ensure they’re well represented on the page.
- While its algorithms have been able to account for search term synonyms for years, Google’s machine learning language models have become more sophisticated with every update. They can now better understand how concepts relate to words, sentences, and paragraphs within a given piece of content.

Given this technology, it’s essential to stay on topic and write organized, natural prose. Avoid synonym-stuffing and keyword-stuffing.

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR LENGTH

Given the current sophistication of search engine algorithms, word count should not be your primary goal in creating SEO-friendly content. Instead, set your sights on providing a positive user experience via quality, relevant content. It can be as long or short as it needs to be. **Below are some general guidelines that may assist you in finding the right length for your content.** 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 detail, contact us, forms, media galleries, homepage: **At least 100 words**
- Top-level navigation pages (the main page for a section of your site): **At least 300 words**
- Second- and third-level pages: **At least 500 words**
- Blog posts: Can range from **200 words** (for example, for a reminder about an upcoming event) **to a few thousand** (e.g., a listicle or an in-depth treatment of a significant topic)

- Longer pieces: Any DMO has a wealth of topics that can support 1,000-2,000 words in a single piece.

Possible ideas include:

- **In-depth guides** to major local attractions, events, and holidays (logistics, highlights, etc.)
- **Interviews with local hospitality luminaries** (e.g., chefs, musicians, and artists)
- **Local history**
- Upcoming **event round-ups**
- **Seasonal activities** (fall driving tours, for example)
- **Content for specific types of travelers** (e.g., dog-friendly, family-friendly, romantic)



VISUAL PRESENTATION

Of course, the web is a versatile visual publishing medium. While too many visual bells and whistles can be distracting if the content on offer is fundamentally text-based, you can still draw on several design options to maximize the appeal of your content.

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

Use on-brand and audience-friendly fonts and styling, with a minimum of unusual text colors or sizes. Place optimized images pleasingly among written content, using at least one image per page (which correlates with improved rankings). Ensure that your overall website design is in line with current trends and usability best practices.

While too many visual bells and whistles can be distracting if the content on offer is fundamentally text-based, you can still draw on several design options to maximize the appeal of your content.

OLD VS. NEW: WHY YOU SHOULD PERIODICALLY CONSOLIDATE YOUR CONTENT

After your website has been living and breathing for some time, you'll notice you're creating new pieces of content that are very similar to older pieces of content — a phenomenon especially true of blog posts. We recommend periodically exporting a list of your blog posts (and pages, more generally) and reviewing it for content that needs to be updated, consolidated, or removed (making sure to redirect the removed URL when possible).

After that, whenever you want to create a new piece of content, check your catalogue to see if there's a page or post that should be updated instead. For example, if you have a blog post on "Things to Do in [Destination] for Halloween," edit that same post each year instead of posting a new one. The post then has a better chance of maintaining rankings, and you aren't competing against yourself (your earlier posts) for traffic, rankings, or backlinks.

THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR WHEN YOU'RE REVIEWING OLD CONTENT:

- *Is it thin content?* **Expand it.**
- *Is it outdated, e.g., a blog post about a long-past restaurant opening or a restaurant no longer in business?* **Unpublish and redirect that URL, or update it with new and relevant information.**
- *Is it duplicate content?* **Unpublish and redirect that URL, or edit to make it unique.**
- *Is it content that has received almost no traffic in recent years?* **Update the content or unpublish it and redirect the URL.**

Doing this kind of content housekeeping can save crawl time (helping more of your site be indexed), save on website maintenance (less time correcting broken links from old posts that no one is looking at), and make for a better user experience.



SITE NAVIGATION

GUIDANCE ON STRUCTURE AND NAMING

IN THIS SECTION:

- Avoiding keyword stuffing
- Helpful and harmful backlinks
- Avoiding penalties for duplicate content
- The problems with PageRank sculpting

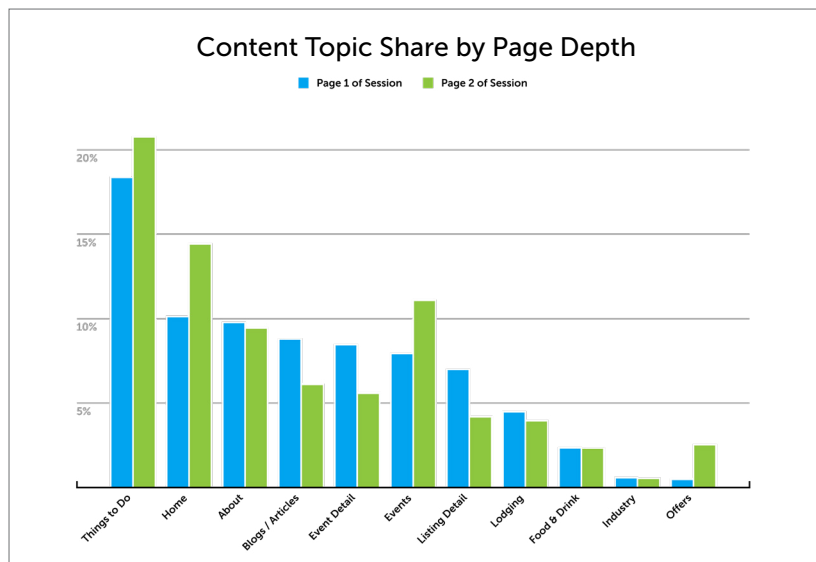
NEW IN THE 2022 REPORT:

- Added discussion of measures for guiding top navigation topic selection

At the highest level, DMOs work to bring more visitors to their destination. In doing so, most need to connect with several different audiences, including meeting planners organizing large-scale events as well as “social, military, educational, religious and fraternal” (SMERF) events; leisure travelers and business travelers; operators of group tours and travel; wedding planners; and members of the media, who can provide another valuable marketing channel.

DMOs face several challenges when deciding how to structure their content to best serve these many audiences, but having built thousands of sitemaps for DMOs, Simpleview has amassed a degree of expertise in solving the most common problems. This section offers guidance on best practices for site organization, drawing on that extensive experience.

Many details go into crafting a quality navigation structure that helps every page succeed. Start with these tips and continue to test, preferably with rigorously designed experiments, and your site’s search performance and user engagement should continue to improve with time.



This chart looks at broad topics accessed by users on their first vs. second pageview of a session. The bars represent the total pageviews for each topic divided by all sessions reaching that page depth. Note 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 to your site but are not as frequently browsed after that.

WHAT DMOS OFFER ONLINE

Some types of site content and tools will apply more to one audience than another, but DMO site users are nearly always looking for the following to some degree:

- **Inspiration:** Great content (including text, images, video, and destination exploration tools) can inspire non-travelers to travel, and it can also inspire travelers to choose your destination over others. The inspiration stage of travel planning is likely where DMO content has the greatest influence.
- **Information:** Helping audiences find hospitality businesses, events, and attractions at scale was once the almost exclusive domain of DMOs. Many others now compete in this space, including Google and sites such as TripAdvisor.
- **Planning and Booking Assistance:** Once travelers have chosen where to go, they need tools to secure transportation and accommodations, as well as to plan their schedules. Quality online tools, including booking engines, trip planners, and RFP forms (for meeting planners and group tour operators) can provide valuable assistance.

STRATEGIC NAVIGATION STRUCTURE

Connecting what DMOs have to offer with the audiences they aim to reach, we can start to understand how a DMO site's navigation should be shaped. Knowing real-world traffic patterns — drawn from analytics on hundreds of DMO sites — takes us even further.

First, a site's navigation needs to be easy to use. At the top level, this means restricting navigation options to seven or fewer items. Yet it's also important not to have too few options, which results in categories being so broad that they don't give users enough direction on where to find the information they want. **At Simpleview, we usually aim for four to six links in the main navigation.**

Because 98% of users on most DMO sites will seek content that covers leisure tourism topics, we typically recommend that the main navigation include attractions/activities, events, dining, lodging, and other tourism-oriented logistical information and tools that don't fit neatly in the other categories. Meanwhile, content for planners, partners, and media members can be made accessible through a secondary navigation bar that is less visually prominent.

As for the specific categories to promote in the top navigation, data on your existing and potential audiences will be your best guideposts as you choose them. Research your current site to find out which pages get the most views, the most engagement, and the most entrances from different traffic sources, then combine that with information on the types of keywords that people search for in your destination. From there, you can get an idea of what topics people are most interested in and which ones they're willing to trust your site for. Typically, the list will look similar to the one in the previous paragraph.





Best-practice navigation for most DMOs includes main items that appeal to most audiences who use DMO sites (leisure travelers and people planning travel independently) and secondary menu items that appeal to smaller audiences, such as meeting planners and media.

NAMING YOUR NAVIGATION CATEGORIES

Once the broad categories of site content have been identified for your navigation elements, these categories need to be named. Simpleview typically recommends functional, search-engine-friendly navigation names rather than inspirational ones. Preferring phrases like “things to do” to “play” and “hotels” to “stay” will serve you well.

While inspiring people is always good, search queries almost always use natural language. Naming your categories aligned with those search terms helps your content in search rankings and helps people intuitively understand what they’ll find in different sections of your site. Given how navigation is used, these practical factors should override other concerns when possible.

BEST PRACTICES BEYOND TOP-LEVEL NAVIGATION

These same principles apply as you drill down into your navigation. Limiting the number of options present in any one section at any one level and giving the options functional names will help users grasp the available options. Doing both also will improve your content’s performance in search.

Since a typical DMO will have between several dozen and several hundred pages to publish – not even counting blog posts, partner listings, and event postings – following these guidelines can be challenging. It often helps to keep marginal topics out of your navigation and allow Google and other search engines to bring the right audiences to them directly.

Database-driven content such as listings, events, and blogs typically do not appear in the navigation as they’re 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 even a small fraction of their pages in the navigation. Instead, navigation leads users to pages with tools that let them explore the content in those databases.

Limiting the number of options present in any one section at any one level and giving the options functional names will help users grasp the available options.

TOOLS FOR WEB ANALYTICS

UNDERSTANDING YOUR SITE'S TRAFFIC & USERS

IN THIS SECTION:

- Google Analytics 4
- Google Search Console

NEW IN THE 2022 REPORT:

- A full write-up on the big upcoming switch to GA4

As the old saying goes, you can't improve what you can't measure. Knowing the latest tools and techniques for analyzing your website's traffic is critical for getting the most out of the time and money you put into it.

This rundown of how Simpleview approaches analyzing sites and campaigns will get you started on the right track.

Each of the tools described here paints some part of the full picture. By combining tools, you can gain a significant understanding of your site performance and build a stronger digital marketing strategy on that data.

We start with the basics before diving deeper into the details of what we have found works best for this industry. Feel free to skip ahead if you already have a firm grasp of website analytics.

FUNDAMENTALS OF SITE ANALYSIS

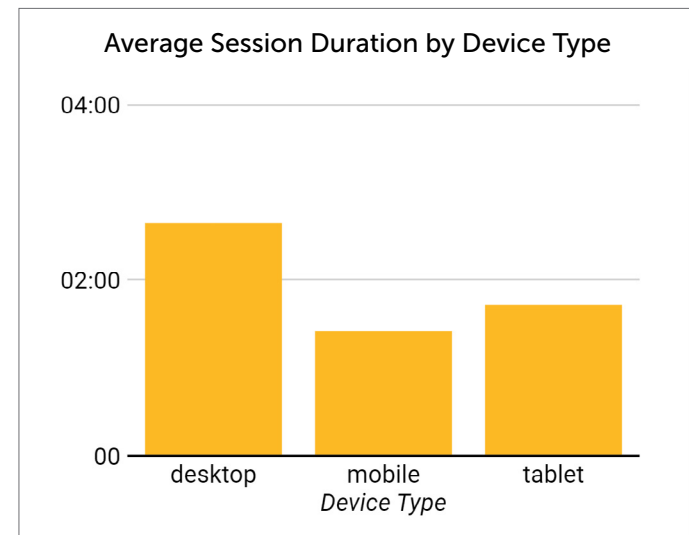
When trying to get a picture of what your audience looks like or how it engages with your content, you need a tracking system that's sophisticated enough to drive sound decision-making. You need to track users' movements and gather as much information as possible to learn what pages and functionality push them closer to desired actions and outcomes. Ideally, this ends with them traveling to your destination.

Many tools can help track user behavior, but it's essential 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")
- Bookings

These are among the more basic metrics we can use to track a user. Nearly all these measurements can also be further explored through dimensions.

For example, we generally can tell which browser someone uses to access a site. If we break down a metric like sessions, in addition to knowing the total number of sessions, we can also know the sessions from each browser, adding another dimension to our data.



Average sessions duration, like other engagement metrics, varies widely across the three major device types.

Many tools can help track user behavior, but it's essential to understand what each service does well and where there are limits.

Knowing how people engage with our content, design, and tools is necessary for better reaching our website goals. For example, looking at bounce rates might tell us that a page needs better calls to action, which can help drive a person deeper into the site. However, it's important to consider data from multiple angles: A high bounce rate could also mean users quickly find what they need on a page, and no further action is necessary.

Finding the most likely driver for data often requires looking at multiple metrics and dimensions before deciding how to optimize your content and pages.

SITE ANALYTIC TOOLS FOR DMOs

GOOGLE ANALYTICS 4 (GA4)

The big news in web analytics for the coming year is the mandatory shift from Universal Analytics (hereafter UA; this is the current version of "Google Analytics" that everyone refers to by that name) to Google Analytics 4 (GA4). At the time of this report's publication in October 2022, both platforms are up and currently installed on all Simpleview CMS sites. At the end of June 2023, though, UA will stop processing new data (it should still be available for historical record-keeping for a while).

That means all sites using the current version of Google Analytics (UA) will need to transition to GA4 by that date. Ideally, you will get GA4 installed as soon as possible so that you have continuous year-over-year comparisons available on one platform. For this reason, all clients with Simpleview CMS were set up with basic tracking in GA4 by June 30, 2022.

Everything from the tracking code to the structure of the site data that GA stores to the user interface is changing. This is unquestionably the biggest revolution in website analytics since GA launched in the first place over fifteen years ago. It's outside the scope of this report to give a full tour and tutorial on the differences, but we'll cover the important points, provide context on how some common metrics will change, and leave you with a few recommendations for action.

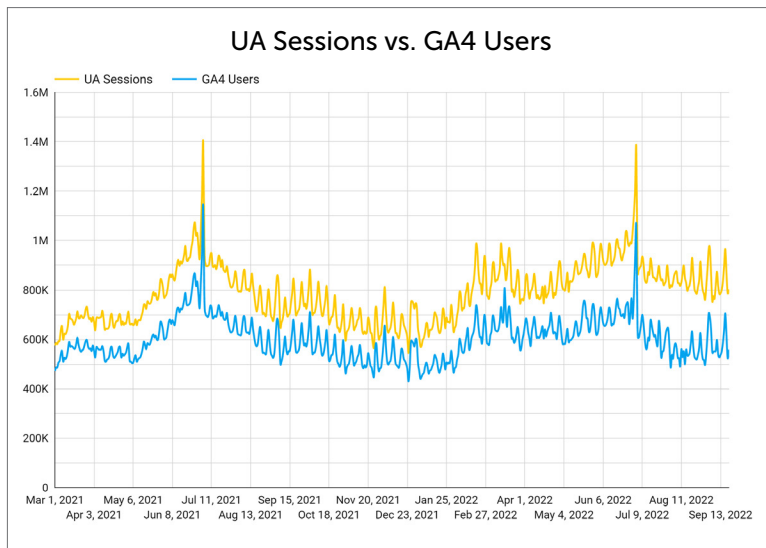


MAJOR CHANGES

- **New User Interface:** Go in and look for yourself. If you're used to the existing tool, everything about GA4 looks and feels different. It'll take some time to get used to all the changes, but the tools available for filtering metrics and slicing them up are quite a bit more flexible and powerful once you know how to use them.
- **Users favored over Sessions:** Google had already been pushing Users as the primary bulk reach metric for sites in the UA interface, but in GA4, they're going further, with Sessions still tracked but not even shown in the default home view. While you could still use Sessions as your primary reach metric in GA4, it will be cumbersome to dig that number out. We recommend shifting to Users, which has been the standard metric for publishers in other industries for some time.
- **More built-in tracking for on-page events:** Many site interactions, such as scrolling and link clicks, that require custom tracking in UA will happen automatically in GA4. That doesn't mean everything will be tracked or tracked how you'd like, so speak with your web vendor or digital marketing agency about ensuring that all custom tracking is carried over (and enhanced where possible) to GA4.
- **More powerful custom tracking:** UA's event tracking system has been completely blown up. Event tracking in GA4 is much more powerful and flexible than the old Category > Action > Label > Value system. If you have advanced tracking needs, you can do things much more flexibly in GA4.
- **Reduced sampling:** If you get frustrated by the small changes in numbers that can result from how UA samples data, you'll be happier in the new system. Sampling is greatly reduced, and if you're a real power user, you can even export the underlying GA4 records to Google BigQuery for advanced analysis.
- **More privacy compliance ... at a cost:** GA4 is designed from the ground up to be more compliant with the user privacy laws becoming ever more stringent worldwide. This is both good and necessary, but it comes at a cost. Many dimensions related to user identity (geographical location, for instance) will now be wiped out after fourteen months, making historical research on your site much harder to complete. After that time, metrics such as session duration will also be removed from the records.

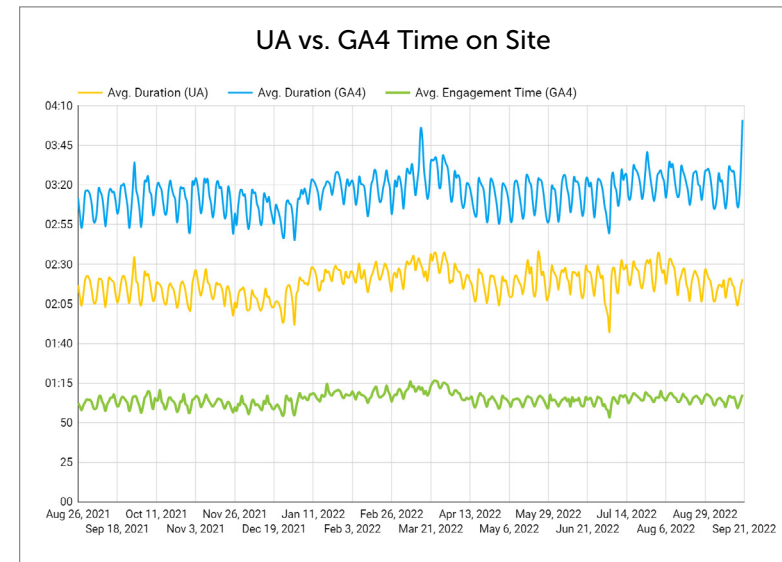
HOW MEASUREMENTS WILL SHIFT

Thanks to the industry averages we maintain of DMO website metrics, we can get a grip on how things will change from UA to GA4 with data from hundreds of sites. In particular, we have a dataset of 151 DMO GA4 accounts going back to March 1, 2021 (five months after GA4 became available). Let's look at some comparisons between metrics across the platforms.

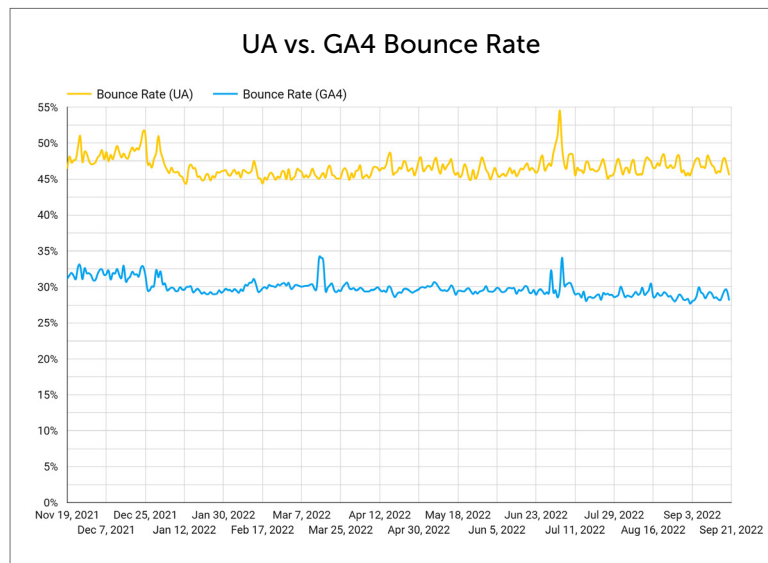


On virtually any DMO site, only about 15-20% of users ever come back for a second session, so Users and Sessions move almost in lockstep.

As mentioned above, GA4 makes it much more convenient to employ Users as your default metric of audience size rather than Sessions. For DMOs, the difference from an analytical standpoint is nil. On virtually any DMO site, only about 15-20% of users ever come back for a second session, so Users and Sessions move almost in lockstep. You can make the same business decisions about success or failure with Users as with Sessions. The only thing to do is prepare your stakeholders for your top-line reach number to be about 20-30% lower than it used to be.



If we compare measurements of user time on site across the platforms, we see differences in average level but similarities in larger trends. Because GA4 captures more user interactions, it can measure nearly 50% more time on the page/site, creating a much higher average duration. However, GA4 is pushing for a new metric to supplant Average Session Duration, namely Average User Engagement Time. This number measures the amount of time users have your site in their active window or screen, not merely in the background. The extra restriction reduces the time to less than half of Session Duration. Here again, you can make useful business decisions with Engagement Time, but you will want to prepare any stakeholders for the decline in the headline number if you decide to switch.



With Bounce Rate, the story is similar to Session Duration. GA4's ability to track more user interactions means fewer users escape your site without tracking a second interaction, and Bounce Rate declines by about a third. If you already have custom tracking that prevents users who scroll or read for a certain period from bouncing, you may not see the same level of change after switching to GA4.

ACTION ITEMS

Here are some things to do as you prepare your site for the shift to GA4:

- **Install GA4:** The time is now. If you can place tags on your site (via GTM or WordPress plugin), it only takes a few minutes. If you're on Simpleview CMS, you're covered for this step. While doing this, find the setting for Data Retention and make sure it's set to 14 months so you can make year-over-year comparisons.
- **Audit your existing UA configuration:** Check out your existing analytics for goals, custom event tracking, custom metrics, custom dimensions, and e-commerce tracking. These will likely require manual configuration if you want to keep continuous data flowing.
- **Implement custom tracking:** Anything that doesn't track out of the box needs a custom setup. Consult with your agency or web provider if you're not sure what your needs are.

- **Prepare your stakeholders:** Some metrics will change after the switch, and some will be lower. Use the charts above to prepare any stakeholders monitoring these metrics before everything happens, not after.
- **Audit your reporting:** While we're changing all the data that goes into your reports, it's a good time to review your web and digital marketing reporting to ensure that everything is still relevant. Most reports gather bloat over time; this is a chance to get rid of it.

GOOGLE SEARCH CONSOLE

Google Search Console (GSC), formerly known as Webmaster Tools, offers a powerful way to better understand how people find your site. Once you've proven site ownership (through Simpleview's CMS, it can be done in minutes), you'll have access to this complimentary suite of tools, offering data from that point forward.

For analytics, the most important element of GSC is the Performance Report. It provides organic keyword attribution data that is otherwise unavailable for analysis when people use the secure version of Google's search engine (which, for DMOs, amounts to 99% of all users over the last few years).

The Performance Report ranks which keywords bring users to your site and offers insight into how your ability to get clicks on those keywords can change with other factors. This information is immensely valuable for understanding and responding to traffic fluctuations.

The report, however, has some limitations. To protect user privacy, very rare keywords are obscured. In addition, all of the data are based on samples rather than the full set of all user interactions. Generally, resulting distortions to the data aren't significant, but they do exist.

A more significant issue is that Performance Report data is available only for 16 months. This view allows for year-over-year comparisons for recent months, but maintaining a complete historical record requires you to extract and store the data yourself as it becomes available.



ADVANTAGES

- Quick to set up
- Provides otherwise inaccessible keyword data

DISADVANTAGES

- Only shows a 16-month window of data
- Does not show user actions on your site
- Does not connect to GA profiles or demographic information
- Data provided only reflects Google searches

GSC PERFORMANCE REPORT METRICS & DIMENSIONS

METRICS

- Impressions
- Clicks
- Click-through Rate (CTR)
- Average Position

DIMENSIONS

- Queries (i.e., keywords)
- Pages
- Countries
- Devices
- Search Type (web, image, video, news)
- Search Appearance (rich results, web light results)



OPTIMIZATION TOOLS: TOOLS FOR

TRACKING KEYWORDS, BACKLINKS & MORE

IN THIS SECTION:

- Tools for site scans
- Tools for keyword search
- Monitoring indexation
- Tools for backlinks analysis
- Tracking keyword rankings
- All-in-one and custom tools

NEW IN THE 2022 REPORT:

- Updated information on Google Search Console Tools

Nearly every DMO website has at least hundreds of URLs, and most have thousands or even tens of thousands, all of which should be checked for errors and optimization periodically.

The SEO market is filled with programs and software services that make it possible to manage that otherwise daunting task efficiently.

In this section, we identify several tasks needed to keep a DMO site well optimized for search and provide insight into some of the tools that can assist in this task.

SITE SCANS

Sometimes you need to check something very simple ... but you need to do so eight thousand times! Scanning tools are critical for these tasks. A good one will start with a single URL and “spider” out through any links it finds there, repeating the process until it discovers all the pages you want to check. It should also be able to check just the URLs in a list that you provide.

Many site-scanning tools exist with different features and price points. At Simpleview, we like Screaming Frog, which can check almost anything you would want to detect in your pages, including H1s, broken links, titles, “noindex” pages, and meta descriptions.

In addition, Screaming Frog can search each page for anything marked up in code the same way. This can be extremely useful, for instance, if you want to know the heading on every page of your site, but your headings aren’t coded with standard tags.

Use Terms: Screaming Frog requires an annually renewed license, but it will save you enough time to be worth it with just a few site scans.

KEYWORD RESEARCH

You can’t optimize for search if you don’t know the words and phrases for which people are searching. A good keyword research tool will help you pinpoint the most popular keywords for a topic and can help you discover new keywords you might not have thought of otherwise.

Google Ads Keyword Planner is the gold standard tool for this task and has been for some time. 95% of people arriving at DMO websites through organic search do so through Google search, so the company has direct access to almost all of the data on what words and phrases this audience is searching.

While Google no longer gives precise information on the exact volume of searches for specific keywords, its information is still much more accurate and comprehensive than that available from providers such as WordTracker, who have to rely on data from a network of partners who run their own ads on search engines and share their information for a fee.

In particular, regarding long-tail, less frequently searched keywords, Google has better data than other services. This intelligence can be especially helpful when researching keywords for niche topics in your destination that serve a small but enthusiastic audience, e.g., “best burgers in Prescott” or “ice wine in Traverse City.”

Google's tool won't inform you of the keywords garnering your competitors' traffic. 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.

Use Terms: While the Google Ads Keyword Planner tool is free, the company wants people to start a Google Ads campaign before granting access. You can either comply or look up ways to sneak around the pay gate.

INDEXATION MONITORING

It's important to know whether Google and Bing can access your content, how frequently they do, and what they think of its quality (see the "Indexation" section for more information on this topic). You can get an idea for each of these questions by examining your server logs and looking for requests from search engine crawling bots, but fortunately, both of the major search engines offer the information via free online tools.

Google Search Console (formerly known as Webmaster Tools) provides an overview of your site's general health and basic search engine friendliness. Here you can see whether your sites have valid sitemap.xml files, how many total pages have been indexed, and where Google is encountering crawl errors. It also offers tools that report on missing or poorly constructed meta tags; however, like with other automated scans of this type, the results are superficial and require analysis before you can act on them.

The tool has added numerous other features over the years. Among the newest is the Video Pages report, which tells you which pages on your site have identifiable video content and whether it is the main content on the page or a supporting feature. Perhaps the most important is the Page Experience report, which gives you real-world data on your pages' performance according to the Core Web Vitals metrics that Google has promulgated to improve site speed and user experience. Given how time-consuming (and inaccurate) it would be to measure these metrics yourself, this function is invaluable.



Bing Webmaster Tools offers much of the same functionality as Google Search Console. While neither Google nor Bing divulges all of what it takes to achieve high rankings in their search results, they do want us to configure our sites in ways that make their products more effective for users; both companies use these suites of tools to help communicate what we can do to help them while also helping our own sites perform better in search.

Usage Terms: Google Search Console and Bing Webmaster Tools are both free. To gain access, you'll have to authenticate your ownership of your site via one of several available means. If you are on Simpleview CMS, our team can grant you access quickly with a simple request.

BACKLINK ANALYSIS

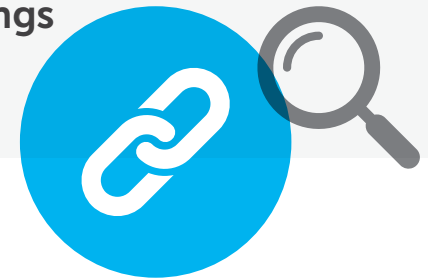
Securing quality links to your content, “backlinks” in SEO parlance, is critical for securing high rankings in search results (see the section “Authority” for more information). Knowing all the pages that are linking to yours and what those links communicate to search engine algorithms would be almost impossible without tools that collect and aggregate 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 across 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 your backlinks’ performance relative to your competitors. They also provide detailed information on individual links — information you can use to support link-building outreach to web admins who link to other relevant pages without linking to yours.

Usage Terms: Costs and plans vary.

Securing quality links to your content, “backlinks” in SEO parlance, is critical for securing high rankings in search results.



KEYWORD RANK TRACKING

It would be very difficult to track all your keyword rankings by hand. For one thing, you should almost certainly be paying attention to dozens of keywords at a minimum, and you'll want weekly, if not daily, rankings data on all of them. Also, unless you specifically configure them not to, search engines personalize the search results you see based on your own browsing and searching history, making it difficult to get an accurate view of your rankings for other search engine users.

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

Usage Terms: Costs and plans vary.

ALL-INCLUSIVE PLATFORMS

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

Moz, BrightEdge, SE Ranking, and many others provide their own versions of all the above tools, plus more. Moz, for instance, offers a keyword competition tool that estimates how difficult it is to get top rankings for a given keyword.

The basic functions that all of these tools offer include:

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



CUSTOM TOOLS

When you work within a niche industry like destination marketing, you may face SEO or website maintenance tasks that can't be addressed easily by existing tools made for a broad SEO audience. In these cases, someone with coding acumen can often create custom scripts to meet specialized needs.

At Simpleview, we have several custom Python and Excel scripts that we've written to increase our efficiency and effectiveness at tasks such as:

- Creating and verifying redirects for site transitions
- Creating and verifying redirects for dead URLs
- Keyword research
- Monitoring added and removed content
- Competitive analysis

These are just a few of the tools that we use behind the scenes every day. If you want to know more about our SEO services, please contact your client success manager.



RICH RESULTS IN SERPs: OPTIMIZING FOR

KNOWLEDGE PANELS, FEATURED SNIPPETS AND MORE

IN THIS SECTION:

- Knowledge panels
- Events & Things to Do
- Rich Results
- Optimizing images and video
- Web Stories
- The local results box
- Featured snippets
- Sitelinks boxes

NEW IN THE 2022 REPORT:

- Updated throughout with fresh screenshots and information on all that has changed. Removed outdated sections and added fresh ones.

When Google returns a search result in the simple, classic format — blue link, green URL, grey text snippet — SEO analysts refer to that as a “blue link.” That nickname exists today because instead of being the norm as they were for many years, they’ve now become hard to find above the fold on many search engine results pages (SERPs).

Now, instead of blue links, users will often see one kind of rich result or another, particularly when searching very popular keywords. These are informative or interactive SERP widgets that present machine-curated information to users rather than simply offering website links.

They often can help a searcher complete their task on Google’s own page rather than the one from which the information came (which is, one could imagine, 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.

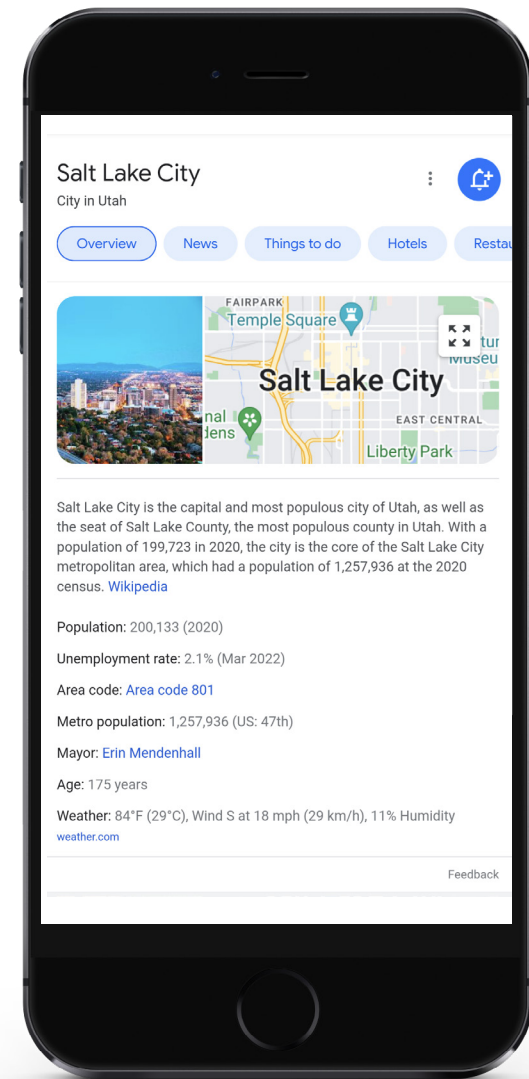
GOOGLE KNOWLEDGE GRAPH

Launched in 2012, the Google Knowledge Graph uses various sources to compile and present facts about people, places, and things, as well as how they connect. Google Knowledge Graph powers the search engine's "knowledge panels" and "rich cards," both of which are almost certainly familiar to you, though you may not have been familiar with these names.

KNOWLEDGE PANELS

The knowledge panel is a box usually located to the right of search results in desktop view or at the top of the screen in mobile view that presents information about a person, place, or thing. Various factors determine what information gets pulled into knowledge panels, including relevance to the keyword and search authority.

Recently, Google has enhanced these panels and increased their reach. They now routinely appear for national parks, major attractions, and city names. Furthermore, the addition of the horizontal navigation bar has made them much more obtrusive on the SERP. That bar scrolls sideways and remains sticky at the top of the user's screen as she scrolls down the results, taking up real estate and encouraging users to stay on Google's site rather than moving off to a publisher. When this feature was introduced early in the year, it sparked one of the most volatile periods for DMO rankings for keywords using the word "park" that we've seen.



Google's knowledge panels, often appearing top of page in SERPs for destination names, offer information about people, places, and things.

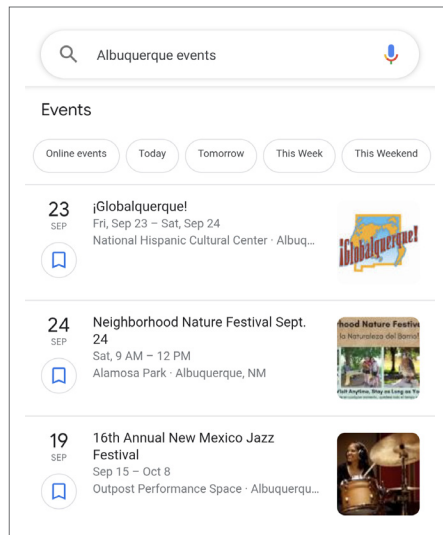
OPTIMIZING FOR KNOWLEDGE PANELS

For now, the most important DMO keyword search that typically produces a knowledge panel in results is the destination name. The panels are almost always populated with text from Wikipedia.

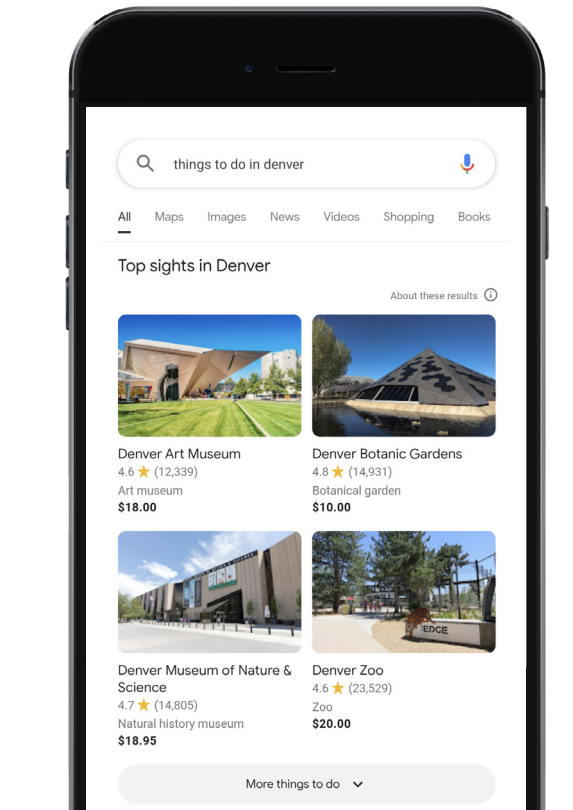
At one time, content published as Google Posts was also eligible to appear here. However, the Google Posts program has been discontinued and not replaced as of fall 2021.

EVENTS & THINGS TO DO

Two of the subjects that DMOs perform best in the search results for, “events” and “things to do,” have seen Google continuously inject and modify special SERP features. The first one was Google’s mini-calendar for events, which presents a set of previews of upcoming events.



When people search for things to do in a destination, they often see the Top Sights SERP feature.



Tapping on an event or a sight will bring up a page with further details, still on Google’s site. Only from this individual page will the user be presented with a link to the original source of information, which, in many cases, is a DMO site.

OPTIMIZING FOR EVENTS & THINGS TO DO FEATURES

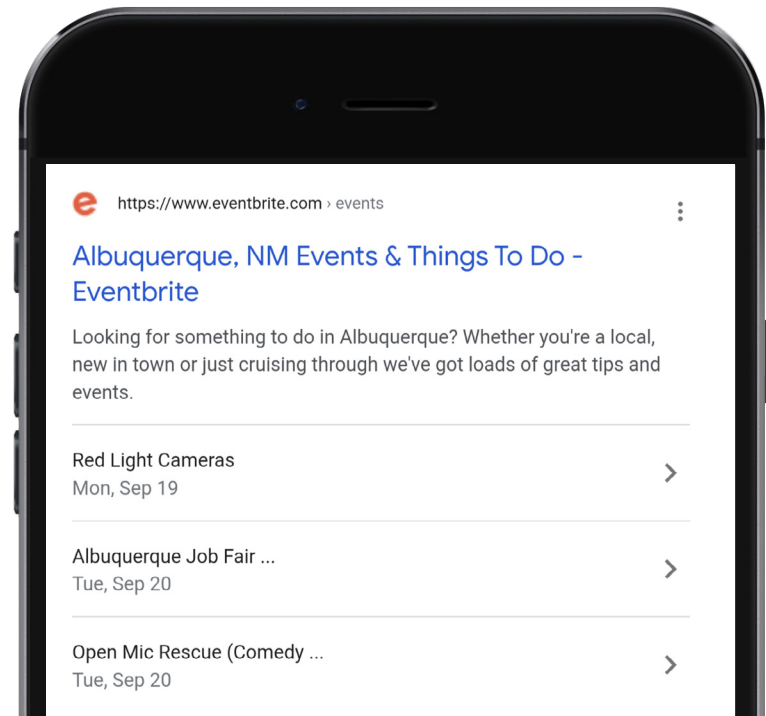
Adding these features to Google's SERPs has significantly reduced DMO clickthrough rates from these extremely high-traffic keywords. Nonetheless, they are here to stay.

To make the best of the situation, keep up-to-date listing and event data on your site, making it as thorough as possible for major ones, and ensure that your CMS publishes structured data tags for these entities (the Simpleview CMS does so automatically). You may have an opportunity to earn a few extra clicks through people browsing these SERP features.

RICH RESULTS

Rich results, in Google parlance, provide a small sample of a website within SERPs and give users a quick and easy way to access some of a site's information. Rich snippets utilize structured data markup, which can be added to your site's code to help 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.



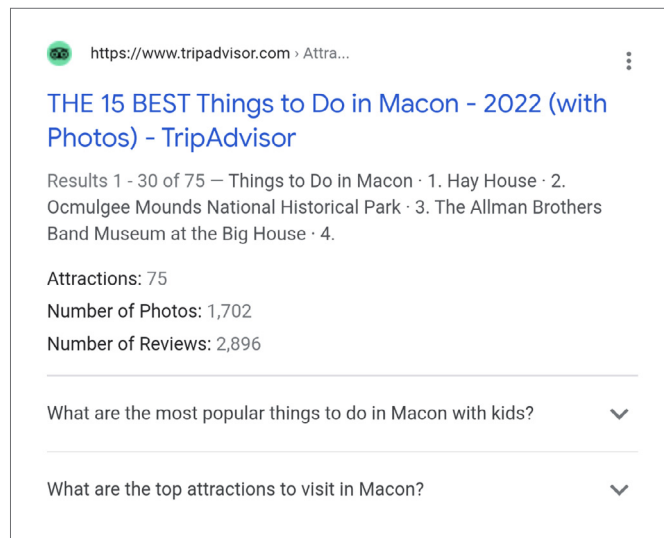
Rich snippets utilize structured data markup, which can be added to your site's code to help search engines interpret your site correctly and thoroughly.

When properly formatted, DMO events information may be presented in Google's rich snippets feature on SERPs.

OPTIMIZING FOR RICH RESULTS

Add structured data markup for detail pages for events, listings, and coupons. Simpleview CMS 3.0 automatically guides content entry optimized for rich snippets, though you may want to map your CRM categories to Schema.org event types to get more specific category assignments.

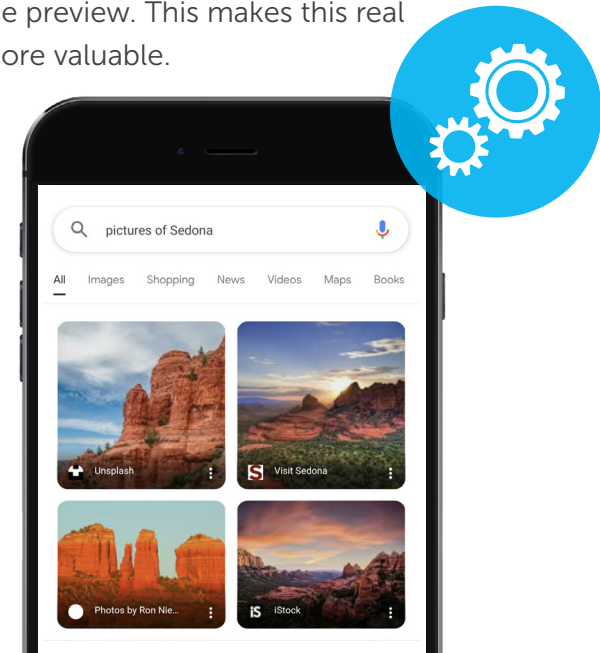
FAQ rich results now appear on individual websites within search results pages. If you are using Simpleview CMS 3.0, you can have the FAQ Schema widget added to your CMS to facilitate creating FAQs for individual pages. This content typically answers user questions about a particular topic and provides additional real estate on the SERP and easy access to relevant pages within a site.



You can now have FAQ rich snippets appear on SERPs for your own website, a process facilitated by the FAQ Schema widget in Simpleview CMS 3.0.

IMAGE AND VIDEO RESULTS

Google uses metadata, labels, and descriptors to help index, rank, and categorize photos for their appropriate search queries. In addition, machine learning has lately made it possible for Google to interpret what an image depicts and return relevant images on SERPs, even for images lacking metadata. As of 2022, Google is doing a much better job of getting credit to the sources of the images, even putting the site's logo in the preview. This makes this real estate much more valuable.



Google uses metadata, labels, and descriptors to help index, rank, and categorize photos for their appropriate search queries

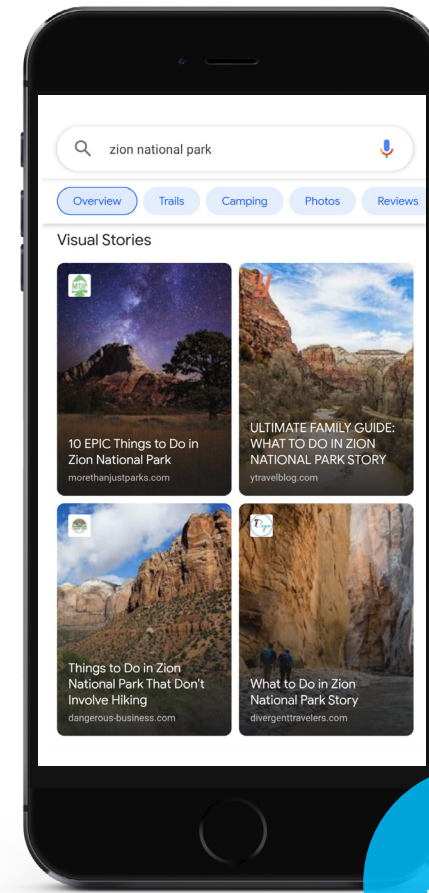
OPTIMIZING FOR IMAGE AND VIDEO

DMOs tend to have great visual assets, making them an important tool to inspire people to travel via search results. SEO for images and videos begins with including alt tags for relevant keywords, which can be done through Simpleview CMS.

Generally, publish as many high-quality images as possible and ensure they're at a good resolution. Images and videos can also be optimized for keywords by embedding them on pages that contain quality content relevant to their topics.

WEB STORIES

Sometimes labeled “Visual Stories” on the SERPs, [Web Stories](#) are Google’s attempt to compete with the Stories feature from Instagram and Snapchat while also giving content creators the ability to publish such content on the web rather than on a proprietary social platform. A box of links to such content, with large image previews, will often appear for search for destinations and attractions. It is unclear how popular this feature is or how much user interaction it gets on Google’s SERPs.

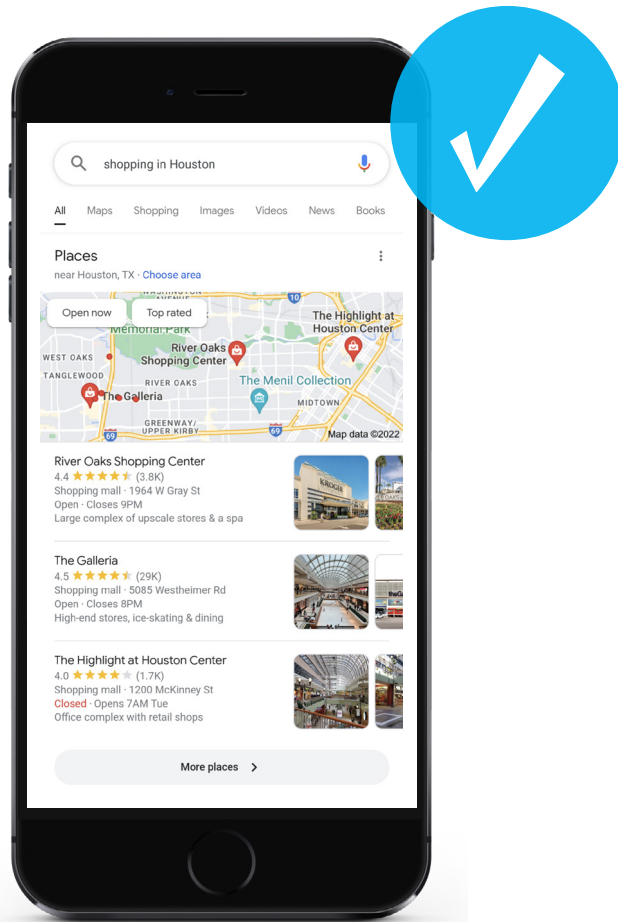


OPTIMIZING FOR WEB STORIES

To appear in the links to this content, you will need to create Story-style visual content, format it according to the technical guidelines provided by Google, and publish it on your site, where Google can index it.

LOCAL RESULTS BOX

Try searching your destination's name plus "hotels," "restaurants," "shopping," "rental cars," or many other keywords. You'll likely find a local results box at the top of the SERP. Google's local results update in 2015 changed how people found information on local businesses.



DMO's listing pages will not appear in these results because Google reserves the box for official sites of destination businesses. However, your partners can become eligible to show up in one of the three slots by first claiming their business in Google Business Profile and ensuring their information is properly optimized. Also, a DMO's brick-and-mortar visitor centers are eligible for placement in a local results box.

OPTIMIZING FOR THE LOCAL RESULTS BOX

Make sure your visitors center (physical location) has a Google Business Profile listing, verify the business location, and encourage your partners to do the same for their businesses.

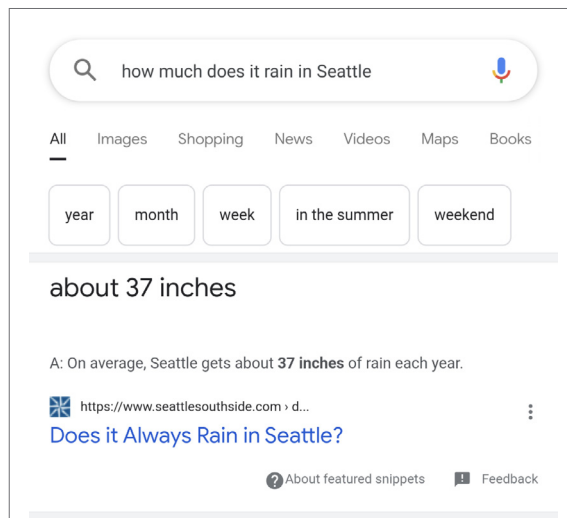
FEATURED SNIPPETS

Google sometimes shows search results in a "featured snippet block" at the top of the SERP. It includes a summary of an answer extracted from a webpage, a link to the page, the page title, and the URL. Featured snippets also form the basis of answers to questions posed via Voice Search.

FEATURED SNIPPETS

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 query. Clicking on one of these offers additional information without requiring the user to enter an additional search.

For a while, Google offered huge amounts of real estate for some featured snippets, particularly those taking the form of a list. Recently, they have pulled back, preferring to serve those queries with other rich results. Featured snippets often still appear for factual searches, though, and DMOs can see them.



Featured snippets appear more and more frequently at the top of Google SERPs. Writing content headers phrased as natural-language questions is a great way to optimize for featured snippets placement and for voice searches through virtual assistants like Siri and Alexa.

OPTIMIZING FOR FEATURED SNIPPETS

Optimizing for featured snippets begins with on-page optimization, generally, as Google appears to sift through the five top-ranked search results to find structured content to highlight.

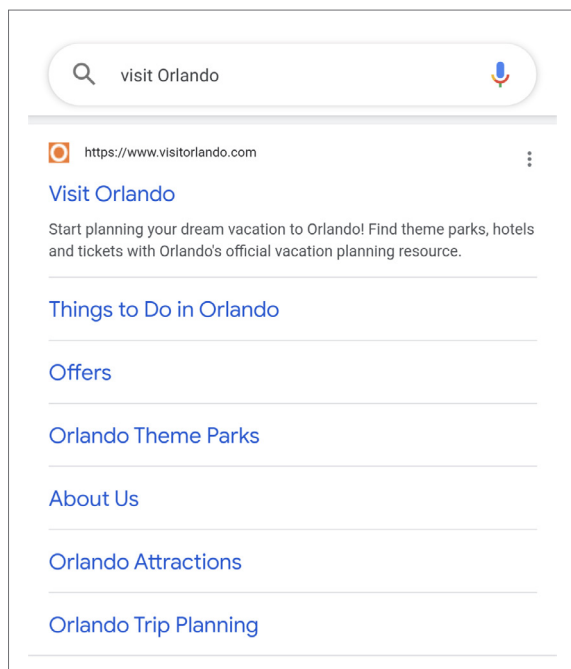
Formatting content in numbered or bullet-point lists will increase your chances of being included in featured snippets, as will using natural-language questions (e.g., “What are the best free things to do in [destination]?”) as headers within your page.

You can learn more by example by seeing what keyword searches pull featured snippets for your destination, examining the content Google highlights, and seeing how those sources format their pages.

Formatting content in numbered or bullet-point lists will increase your chances of being included in featured snippets, as will using natural-language questions

SITELINKS BOXES

Google's sitelinks boxes save users time by allowing them to find information quickly. They are formatted as a list of links (not comprehensive) below your home page link and page description. If you earn a sitelinks box, Google's algorithm decides which pages to show based on each search.



Google's sitelinks box offers several links to internal pages that its algorithm believes might be useful shortcuts for a given search query.

OPTIMIZING FOR SITELINKS BOXES

The best way to optimize for a sitelinks box is to include an XML sitemap in your site directory for indexation. Beyond that, qualifying for a sitelinks box depends on plenty of keyword-rich internal links, a clear site hierarchy, and well-optimized content.



WEB SPAM

AVOIDING BLACK HAT SEO AND GOOGLE PENALTIES

IN THIS SECTION:

- Thin content
- Avoiding keyword stuffing
- Helpful and harmful backlinks
- Avoiding penalties for duplicate content
- Problems with PageRank sculpting

NEW IN THE 2022 REPORT:

- New section on thin content in light of Google's recent Helpful Content Update

If you came of age in the mid to late 90s, you remember the dawn of the consumer-focused internet.

Along with the rise of digital storefronts, chat rooms, and online articles for the general public came — unsurprisingly — a myriad of web developers who sought to “cheat” search engine rankings by manipulating content and backend code.

Today those manipulations are known as “webspam,” and the people using them as “black hats.” Google is continuously modifying its indexing and search algorithms to prevent web pages propped up by webspam from displacing higher-quality content.

Here we explore some SEO myths, caution against SEO missteps, and share best practices for authentically improving your content's search engine performance.

THIN CONTENT

One technique that previously produced results but is now ever more likely to earn a penalty instead is to generate lots of “thin content” pages cheaply and easily. The definition of thin content keeps expanding as Google releases new updates to combat this tactic, but it comes down to this: content is thin when it seeks to earn rankings without delivering meaningful and unique value to users. Think of aggregator blogs that try to turn a few quotes from someone else’s post and a little bit of lackluster commentary into a high-ranking post or a how-to site that gives poor, low-detail instructions on some task that many people search for help on. These are the kinds of content that Google is trying to penalize with its latest Helpful Content Update (see “Content Creation” in this report).

Advice

A good rule of thumb is to ask yourself whether you have something unique or useful to say in your content. If you do, the search engines will always be happy to reward you. However, if you’re just trying to get traffic without offering value, you may fall afoul of [Google’s latest content guidelines](#). Write for the user rather than the search engine, and you won’t have to worry about having thin content.

KEYWORD STUFFING

A blatant, early version of keyword stuffing in a web page’s metadata might look like this:

Beer, st patrick, saint patricks, green, shamrocks, drinking, green beer, st pattys, 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 keyword stuffing can be more subtle, too. What might have passed as legitimate copy in years past can now work against your search performance if it’s unnaturally full of variations on a few keywords:

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.

Advice (continued)

Include important keywords in your copy and meta tags, but if you're wondering whether you've used too many, you probably have. Stick to authentic, natural language, as in this optimized description meta tag, rewriting the previous example:

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.

BACKLINKING

[Backlinks](#), also called "inbound links" or "incoming links," point to your site from other web pages. When abused, they fall into the category of [link schemes](#) intended to manipulate a site's ranking — a serious violation of Google Webmaster Guidelines and one of the primary ways Google seeks to keep manipulative content from affecting search results.

"Toxic" backlinks originate from sites that serve up malware or appear to exist only to manipulate Google's calculations of your site's authority (see the "Authority" section for more information). While malicious actors can target web pages by creating a proliferation of toxic links, DMO sites are unlikely victims of these attacks.

For most websites, a few toxic backlinks are inevitable and not problematic, but if you have a significant number, search algorithms might penalize your site. It can take months to recover from these penalties and rebuild your search performance.

Advice

Fortunately, it's difficult to unintentionally accumulate enough toxic backlinks to trigger a penalty.

For most digital marketing, that risk is primarily a consideration when bulk purchasing links to your site, and the advice here is simple: Don't.

While you might see a temporary improvement in search rankings from such purchases, if the links originate from low-quality sites, they will likely lead to penalties that can take months to reverse. Instead, invest in cultivating relationships with quality sites and request backlinks where appropriate. The process takes time, but it's one of the best long-range ways to increase your search engine performance.

DUPLICATE CONTENT

Because the search engine business model relies on serving results with relevant and distinct information, duplicate content can work against you. Whether repeating your own content or reproducing from another site, duplicate content is unlikely to be rewarded with strong rankings, and large amounts of it can lead to penalties.

Advice

If you have a legitimate reason for multiple pages with duplicate content (e.g., a page about the Eiffel Tower and a listing for the Eiffel Tower), use [canonical URLs](#) to tell search engines to assign ranking value to only one of the URLs. This will help prevent other pages from being treated as duplicate content in indexing.

See “Indexation” for more tips on avoiding penalties for duplicate content.

PAGERANK SCULPTING

Loosely defined, PageRank is a system by which Google measures the importance of a webpage. In short, a highly trusted page passes some of its value to every page linked from it via a halo effect built into the ranking system.

REFERENCES

[Webspam Report 2018](#)

PageRank sculpting attempts to manipulate the system by cutting off that flow to some pages and sending all of the value to select others. Web admins attempt this by adding a “nofollow” tag to some links, in theory cutting off their flow to concentrate the value elsewhere. This technique has largely fallen out of favor with professional SEOs.

Advice

While Google’s PageRank system remains a black box, it would certainly view artificially altering the distribution of PageRank value as an unethical practice. There are legitimate reasons for “nofollow” links, and we should assume the system attempts to discern them in order to isolate such manipulations.

We recommend not risking any penalty for PageRank sculpting for what would be, at best, only marginal gains.

CONCLUSION

Today’s search engines are highly sophisticated and becoming more so every day. It is very difficult to win lasting search gains by cheating the system, and getting caught just once can undo years of progress.

Rather than turning to such manipulations, invest your resources in building good content aligned with SEO basic best practices for long-term success.

PAID SEARCH: ORGANIZING, EXECUTING & OPTIMIZING YOUR CAMPAIGNS

IN THIS SECTION:

- Organizing your ad account
- Keyword strategies
- Optimizing messages and targets
- Remarketing strategies
- Measuring campaign success

NEW IN THE 2022 REPORT:

- This section is new to this year's report! Much of the content is evergreen, and we'll add new information as needed in future versions.

Paid search — bidding to place text ads to accompany organic search results — is a valuable channel for reaching consumers toward the bottom of the “travel funnel” when they are actively researching and planning travel.

This section offers several best practices for account organization, campaign optimization, and success measurement.

ACCOUNT ORGANIZATION

We recommend organizing your paid search accounts at the top level according to your website's main navigation items, creating campaigns for things to do, events, dining, outdoors, etc. Child pages within these main areas of your site can then become the categories for individual ad groups, e.g., free things to do, outdoor dining, festivals, etc.

In addition to these campaigns, we recommend one for simple, branded searches aimed at bottom-funnel traffic. These brand tourism campaigns target keywords such as "visit [your destination], [destination] visitor info, [destination] tourism", and "vacations to [destination]".

CHOOSING KEYWORDS

When choosing keywords for your campaigns, include the name of your destination, e.g., "things to do in houston," "what to do with family in omaha," "parks around provincetown," etc. These destination-specific keywords cost less and are directly relevant to the research and planning phase of travel. As a result, traffic from these keywords typically looks at more pages and stays longer on your site.

In contrast, more general keywords like "top beach vacations" or "best weekend getaways" will have a higher cost-per-click (CPC) due to increased competition. On-site engagement for these keywords will also likely be lower, as consumers making these queries are still looking for inspiration and not doing in-depth research.

Success in these campaigns often depends on a remarketing strategy to keep your destination front and center throughout the inspiration phase of travel.

Caveat for Hotel Keywords

If you want to bid on keywords related to accommodations, prepare to pay a premium for the resulting traffic, as high competition from online travel agencies (OTAs) and hotel chains makes these keywords more expensive.

Hotel booking conversions also most often result from a multi-touch process. Thus, similar to campaigns based on more general keywords, don't expect a large volume of hotel referrals or high on-site engagement without a comprehensive remarketing strategy.



LOCATION TARGETING

Search campaigns don't generate interest; instead, they capitalize on existing interest. Thus, when deciding what locations to target geographically, focus on markets that have historically shown interest in your destination, as well as where you're marketing via other channels, such as social, display, or video.



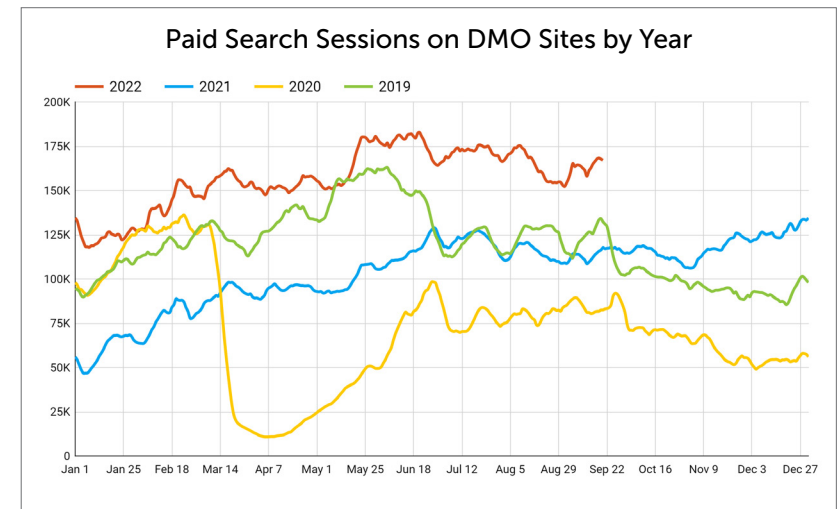
LEVERAGE YOUR CLOUT

Consumers respond well to mentioning the authority of a DMO site as the "official" travel website or source of information about a destination. Highlighting your insider's perspective is also smart, as large OTAs and review websites cannot replicate a "locals-only" knowledge. Travelers also want to find the best that a destination has to offer, whether top attractions or can't-miss dining spots, so use related terms in your ads.

OPTIMIZING ONCE UNDERWAY

Once your campaigns are running and your keywords are generating clicks, don't just "set it and forget it." Utilize search query reports, which show what actual queries matched to your keywords. To add negative keywords, expand your keyword lists and filter out irrelevant clicks to make the most of your budget.

In addition, keep an eye on performance data from your ads and ad groups to see what content and variations are performing best, and then apply what you learn from top performers to other ad groups.



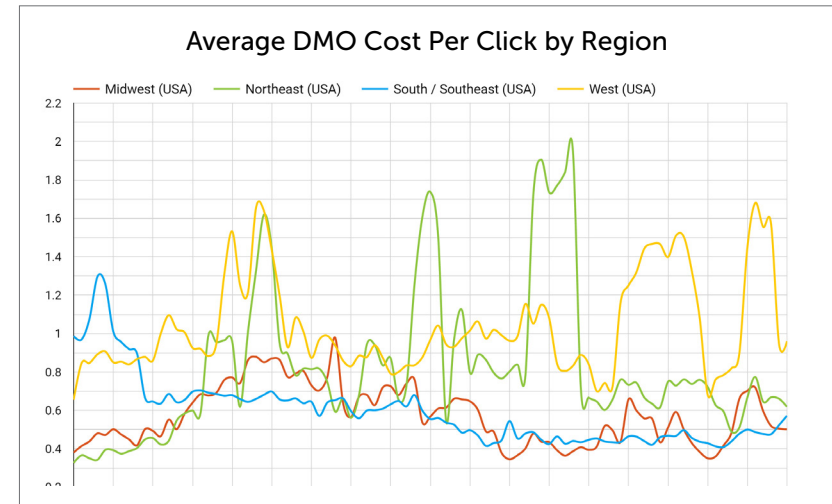
DMOs have bought more paid search traffic in 2022 than any previous year, helping to prop up overall traffic numbers despite declines in organic search traffic.

TRACKING CONVERSIONS

Conversion tracking allows you to see what actions that people brought in by your campaigns are completing on your website. At a minimum, DMOs commonly set up conversion tracking for visitor guide requests and views of online guides, e-newsletter sign-ups, and partner referrals.

These conversions also can be used for smart bidding campaigns, which optimize keyword bids for those valuable post-click actions rather than just clicks and a low CPC. We use the “target CPA” or “maximize conversions” settings most frequently when setting up campaigns, true to the old saying, “Quality over quantity.”

Note, however, that these settings give up manual control in favor of Google’s machine learning models, so keep a close eye on your CPC if automatically optimizing for conversions and allow the ad engines two to four weeks of learning before making many changes.



CPC for DMOs can be quite volatile depending on region and targeting strategy.

REMARKETING

Remarketing to previous site visitors is another way to boost conversions. While many remarketing campaigns target people who previously visited a specific area of your site (e.g., accommodations) or engaged with an upper-funnel campaign (“best LGBTQ+ museums”), as mentioned earlier, you can also remarket to an audience of all previous website visitors, for example, to promote your visitors guide or e-newsletter.

Since this audience is already familiar with your destination, they are more likely to convert and are thus more valuable targets. As such, you can use more broad keywords and higher-cost bids than you would in a regular campaign.

EXCLUSIONS

Don't forget to exclude from your campaigns users who have already converted, for both remarketing and prospecting campaigns. These converters no longer need to see ads encouraging them to visit. If you do want to re-engage with them, more appropriate messaging would be related to promoting repeat visitation or becoming advocates to encourage others to experience your destination.

If you use remarketing campaigns, you will also want to exclude previous site visitors from your prospecting campaigns. This way the remarketing campaign takes priority if it is bidding on similar keywords as those in your prospecting campaigns. Doing so helps keep your audiences separate and gives you a greater ability to target your messaging based on where they are in the buying cycle.

MEASURING SUCCESS

When it comes to measuring performance, to what should you pay attention? You'll want to move beyond focusing only on high-level metrics such as total clicks, click-through rate, and average cost-per-click. While these data points matter, they only tell half the story and offer no insights into what users are doing once they get to your site.

Average session duration, pages per session, and bounce rate are all valuable website engagement metrics that show whether users find your content valuable and relevant.

Conversions mentioned earlier, such as visitor guide requests and e-newsletter sign-ups, can be broken out by campaign in Google Analytics if you link it to your Google Ads account. By tracking which campaigns are the main source of these valuable actions, you can shift budgets between campaigns accordingly.



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