# Viability of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) Techniques

**Harsha Sharma**

Department of Computer Engineering, YMCA University of Science and Technology, Faridabad, Haryana, India

**Abstract**: Search Engine Optimization (SEO) Techniques often come under the scrutiny regarding their viability and ethical acceptance in the web community. Ever since internet marketing and web analytics became key components of marketing budget of a business, obtaining higher ranking in the Search Engine Result Pages (SERPs) has become highly competitive and consequently outsourced to professional firms. SEO is an evolving methodology which adapts itself to the latest algorithm used by the search engines. In this paper, we discuss the ever-changing SEO guidelines with reference to Google search engine. Current viability of old-school SEO techniques – keywords, backlinks and meta descriptions is examined with reference to regular search algorithm updates by Google. Black hat techniques targeting old-school SEO are also described.

**Keywords**: Keyword, backlinks, meta, google updates, black hat techniques.

## INTRODUCTION

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) refers to optimizing a website for higher search rankings. According to latest comScore Report [1], Google dominates the search engine market with 63.9% search queries attributed to it. The dominance of Google in the search engine space ensues in subsequent change in the viable SEO strategies with every algorithm update.

SEO techniques can be divided into two categories: White Hat Techniques and Black Hat Techniques. White Hat includes SEO strategies which adhere to the guidelines provided by the search engines. They are user driven and intend to improve the user experience and consequently achieve higher rankings. Black Hat refers to the strategies which are search engine driven and are based around loopholes in the search algorithm.

From 2003, Google has updated its algorithm regularly and each of the update included complex metrics for ranking.

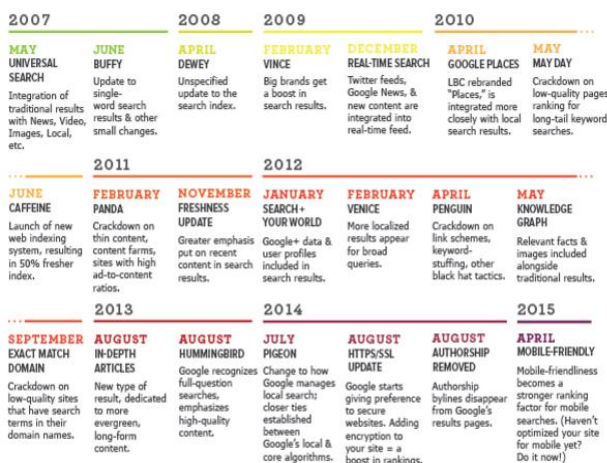Fig 1[2] illustrates the history of Google updates since 2007.



Fig. 1 [2] History of Google updates

## KEYWORD MATCHING

Keywords have been the main area of focus for SEO experts because matching keywords with the search query ensured a higher ranking in the search results.

This straightforward algorithm was thoroughly exploited by black hat techniques such as keyword stuffing, invisible text and doorway pages.

- **Keyword Stuffing -**Overusing a set of keywords in a webpage in order to increase its visibility in search results.
- **Invisible Text -**Filling the webpage with hidden text which is stuffed with keywords. Invisible text is hidden from the user but the search engines can read it. It is used to increase the search rankings without making the keywords visible to the user
- **Doorway Pages –**Doorway pages are used to boost the search listing of a website by redirecting the user to the webpage through another webpage (doorway). The doorway page contains hidden keywords which the search spider can detect.

*A. Hummingbird Update (2013)*

Google's Hummingbird algorithm focuses on the context of the question rather than the exact words in the search query. The search engine attempts to understand what the user is intending and modifies the query accordingly.

The semantic search technique employed by Hummingbird is an improvement over the exact match technique used earlier. With Hummingbird update the focus has shifted on long-tail keywords from exact and short tail keywords.

Long tail keywords are buyer specific. It targets the buyers who know exactly what they want. Let's take an example- keyword 'camera' will generate more traffic than 'digital camera'. The user searching for 'camera' is looking for all sorts of camera but the user searching for 'digital camera' is a bit more specific about his query.
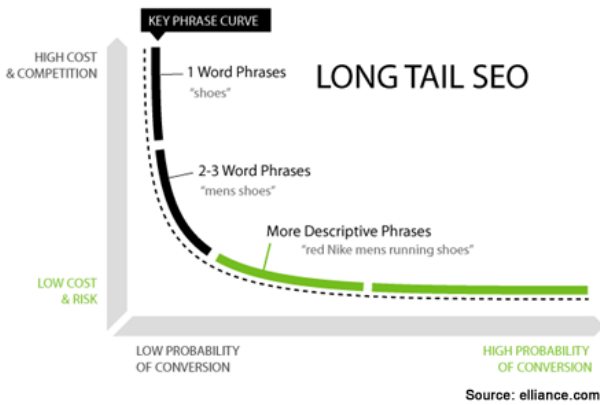
Fig. 2[3] Comparison of Long Tail and Short Tail Keywords

The keyword 'sony digital camera' will generate less traffic than 'digital camera' but the user searching for 'sony digital camera' knows about the brand Sony signifies and has a higher chance of converting into actual sale for the company.

Apart from emphasizing the importance of long tail keywords, Hummingbird Update also underlined the significance of **LSI (Latent Semantic Indexing)**.It is used to ensure that the content is relevant to the topic.LSI looks for synonyms related to the title of the page. For example if the title of the webpage is 'Pasta Recipe', the search engine would expect related words such as 'ingredients', 'method' and 'time'. The main purpose of LSI is avoid keyword stuffing and thin content.

## BACKLINKS

Backlinks or Inbound links are hyperlinks directed towards a website. PageRank algorithm, developed by Larry Page and Sergey Brin, used the number of backlinks to a website as a numerical measure of its popularity. Backlinks were considered as a definitive measure of the relevance of a website in a topical community. But, blackhat techniques such as link farms, paid links and link exchanges defeated genuine websites in SERPs.

- **Link Farms -** Link farm is a website whose sole purpose is to increase the search visibility of another website by creating inbound links.

- **Paid Links –** Links which are not organic (characterized by irrelevant and poor quality backlinks). Paid links are detected by a sudden spike in the number of backlinks to a website.

- **Reciprocal Linking -** Reciprocal linking occurs when two webmasters agree to provide inbound links to each other's websites.

- **Backlink Bombing –** Backlink bombing refers to the presence of numerous links to the same website.

*A. Penguin Update (2012)*

Penguin update of Google algorithm emphasises the quality of backlinks over their quantity for search listings. Google penalises the websites using backlinks from irrelevant and spammy sources to boost the number of

inbound links. Websites have been forced to remove or disavow low-quality backlinks in order to avoid ranking penalties.

Fig 3 [4]The number of backlinks to a website is not directly proportional to the organic searches i.e. visibility of the website. Quality of backlinks is equally important. Numerically less high quality backlinks will generate higher traffic than numerous low quality backlinks.
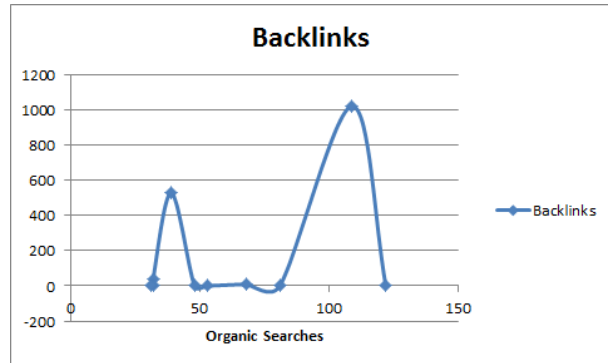


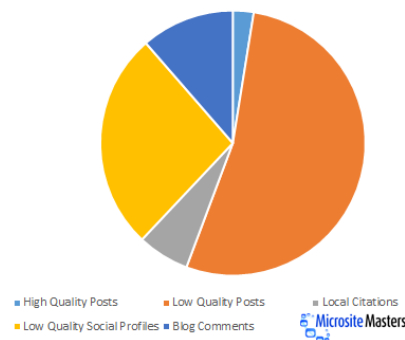Fig. 3[4] Relationship between backlinks and organic searches



Fig. 4[5] Backlinks for sites penalized by Penguin

The effect of Penguin update on websites can be illustrated in Fig 4[5]. Websites relying on low quality and spammy backlinks were penalized and their rankings demoted.

## META DESCRIPTION

Meta description refers to the snippet of text displayed below the website listing in a search result as shown in Fig 5. If meta description is left blank then Google uses the content of the webpage to display the snippet in the search listings.



Fig. 5[6] Meta description in search results

*A. Google announcement (2009)*

In 2009 Google announced that meta tags will no longer be considered as a metric to rank search pages.

Though meta tags doesn't affect search listings but they have been proven to improve click through rates. Google allows 160 characters for writing the meta description and it is a good opportunity to tell the users what the webpage is about. Some other reasons for using meta descriptions despite their irrelevance in search rankings are [7]:

- **Keywords appear in bold** - The well written meta description can encourage the user in clicking on the website.

- **Social Networks use it** - Social networks such as Facebook and Google+ use the meta description whenever we share a page. If meta tag is not specified they use the first two lines of the text which is not always the best description.

- **Social Bookmarking networks use it** – Social bookmarking networks such as Digg, BizSugar and My SEO Community use meta descriptions.

## CONCLUSION

Traditional techniques such as keywords, meta description tags and backlinks are still relevant but their importance in SEO has been redefined. Regular Google updates have ensured the eradication of traditional black hat techniques such as keyword stuffing, doorway pages and invisible text. As the complexity of Google search algorithm increases, finding loopholes in it will become harder.Certain new SEO strategies have also started dominating the SEO market such as mobile friendliness and social networks.

Is SEO dying? Since Google launched its first update in 2013, the SEO community has been split over the efficacy of SEO strategies against ever-increasing complexity of Google search algorithms. While the potency of traditional blackhat SEO techniques has been nullified but the algorithm is far from watertight.In the coming years SEO strategies will continue to evolve wherein new strategies will surface and the relevance of traditional techniques will be reformulated.

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