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THE IMPORTANCE OF SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION (SEO)

– Why it's important and how it may change in the future

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This thesis is about Search Engine Optimization (SEO), the benefits it provides and what the future of SEO may look like based on current trends and primary data collection. The goal of the thesis was to gain an in-depth knowledge of the topic of SEO and examine how effective utilization results in many benefits for websites wishing to place highly on search engine results pages (SERPs).

Primary data in the form of interviews with SEO experts working for marketing companies in Turku was used, which was supported by secondary data mainly from online sources. Online articles and blog posts from experts in the field of SEO were the main sources for relevant information on this topic, as published books were outdated due to the constant evolving nature of SEO.

The basics of SEO are examined first, looking at how search engines rank a website's relevance to search queries. This is based on factors such as keyword distribution and density, backlinks, anchor text, URL structure, meta tags and descriptions, how easily search engine crawlers or bots can index websites and how the searcher spends time on the website. Once the basics were explained, the benefits could be discussed.

Research and primary data collection revealed the main advantages associated with SEO, which are in short; higher online visibility, better customer perception and brand image, increases in organic page visits over long periods of time, low cost compared to paid advertising methods, website credibility and the ability to understand your audience better through the use of analytics.

The future of SEO will likely include voice search and local search at its core. Typed searches will continue to be relevant and increase in volume, but currently the industry is gearing towards higher voice search adoption and improved user experiences on smartphones. Search behavior today will shape the future of SEO, but as with anything involving technology and the Internet, changes are very difficult to accurately predict.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CTR	Click-through Rate
HTML	Hypertext Markup Language
SEO	Search Engine Optimization
SERP	Search Engine Results Page
SSL	Secure Sockets Layer
URL	Uniform Resource Locator

1 INTRODUCTION

I completed my practical training with a Finnish software company and during this time I learnt about Search Engine Optimization (SEO). The company utilizes SEO to place well in Search Engine Results Pages (SERPs) and also offers SEO services to its clients. This was a topic I was not familiar with and when it was suggested to me by a colleague as a potential thesis topic that could benefit the company I was excited and motivated to begin more in-depth research.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) can be defined as "the practice of increasing the quantity and quality of traffic to your website through organic search engine results" (MOZ, 2017). The use and importance of search engines as a means of finding information has continually increased over time and will continue to do so. Therefore, it is important for organizations to understand how they can become more visible online and show up when an existing or potential new customer enters a search query. Developments in technology mean more and more people have access to the internet through a wide variety of devices, thereby increasing an organization's potential customer base and online visibility, if effective SEO techniques are utilized.

I enjoyed my practical training and wanted to complete my thesis on a topic that would be useful, relevant and bring some value to the company through my research and findings. There are plenty of experts working for the company so I would also have access to professionals with a great understanding of the topic that could be interviewed as part of my data collection.

SEO is a low-cost long-term method that organizations utilize to increase their visibility online and attract business to their pages. Quality content that is properly managed can keep driving business to a website for long periods of time, but it may take time to begin working. SEO is more of a long-term strategy but the benefits can be monitored over time to analyse the continuos added value and new business that is generated.

During my research I found it interesting how search engines, such as Google, determine page relevance and how results are sorted for search terms according to several different factors. I will go into more detail in upcoming sections of my thesis.

The goal of this thesis is to achieve a greater understanding of SEO, meaning the factors that determine good placement in SERPs, how organizations utilize SEO effectively and

how current trends will shape the future in this field. Another goal is to complete work that will remain relevant in the near future, which is challenging as the online world is constantly changing and evolving, whether search engine algorithms are being altered, trends in searches are changing or general onine behavior is moving forward. For example, an area of interest for the future of SEO is voice search, which will be discussed later in this thesis.

I will discuss the various features and benefits of SEO throughout this thesis and I hope the reader will have a good understanding of the topic by the end of it. Firstly, I will go into detail about what exactly SEO is and how search engines determine the relevance of the search results they show for search terms, then I will explain how organizations can place better in SERPs and why SEO is so important, both today and in the future. The benefits of SEO will be identified and discussed, and based on these findings the likely future of SEO will be discussed.

1.1 Research Objectives

In order to achieve the goals set for this thesis I will need to complete the following research objectives:

1. To explain the basic features of SEO
2. To explain the concepts and practices required for effective SEO
3. To explain how SEO increases an organization's onine visibility/digital footprint
4. To explain the advantages of SEO
5. To discuss the likely direction/changes of SEO in the future
6. To collect and analyze relevant data that supports findings

By using these objectives as a guideline to structure my thesis I will address all relevant points and cover the topic in detail.

1.2 Research Questions

To compliment the objectives previously stated, research questions will ensure that this thesis provides answers for the most important questions regarding the topic of SEO. They are as follows:

1. What is SEO and how does it work?
2. What are the main advantages of utilizing SEO?
3. How can a company or organization begin using SEO to improve online visibility and generate more organic website visits?
4. Why are so many companies increasingly relying on SEO to drive business to their websites?
5. What does the future of SEO look like?
6. What do Finnish marketing companies in Turku think about SEO?

By considering these questions and aiming to answer them at each stage of the thesis I will ensure that my work remains on topic and will not stray away from the most important areas.

2 SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION (SEO)

Search Engine Optimization (SEO hereafter) is a marketing discipline with a focus on improving the visibility and placement of organic, non-paid search engine results (Moz, 2017). When entering a search term you should notice paid ads at the top of the results page or to the right, with organic (non-paid) results below them. SEO techniques can make your website more visibile by improving its placement in these search results. Below is a screenshot to illustrate a basic search engine results page (SERP).
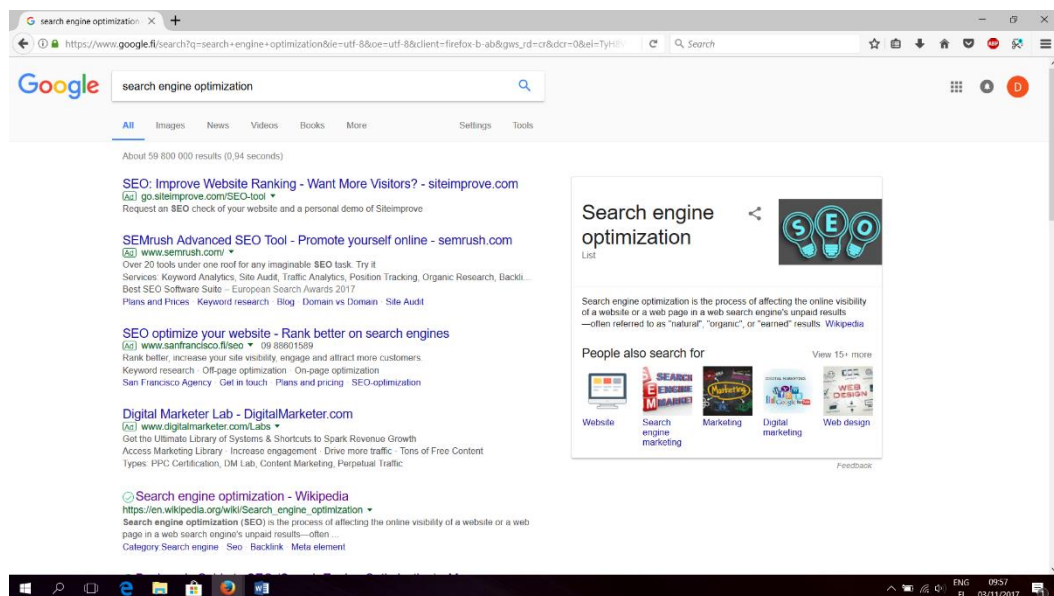
Picture 1. An example of a Google SERP

As Picture 1 shows, the first 4 results are ads, which have been paid for, and the first organic search result is at the bottom of the page, from Wikipedia, a fairly reliable and popular source for basic definitions. To the right is a "featured snippet", which provides a small sample of a website's content on a SERP, usually with the purpose of answering a question or providing a definition for a term (Breikss, C., 2011). More details on featured snippets will be discussed in chapter 4 of this thesis.

Details on the most important aspects of SEO will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

2.1 Search Engines

Search Engines, such as Google, Bing and Yahoo are used by people to find information or websites online. More than 6 and a half billion (6,586,013,574) searches are made each day, with Google dominating the market with over 77% of all worldwide searches (Smart Insights, 2017). This amount is hard to imagine and highlights the current and future importance of SEO. While it may still be necessary to consider other search engines and their page ranking factors, the majority of traffic will be driven to your website and content from Google search results, so efforts should be made to understand how to effectively utilize SEO with a primary focus on Google.

2.2 Keywords

According to the MOZ website (2015), "Keyword research is one of the most important, valuable and high return activities in the search marketing field". Ranking well for the right keywords is a huge benefit in a very competitive online marketplace. Users enter keywords into search engines and expect to be taken to the most relevant websites, often ready to complete a transaction or spend money. Understanding how to rank well for keywords associated with transactions being completed is obviously a massive advantage. For example, someone searching for "shoes" online is most likely just browsing, whereas someone searching for "best price Nike Air Max size 12" is ready to spend money to acquire the product. Therefore, it is worth taking time to research and understand the right keywords for your business (MOZ, 2015).

Keyword research and analysis not only drives traffic to your website, but it can also lead to the "right" traffic viewing your content (MOZ, 2015). While more views can be a positive thing, the primary goal for websites is to receive views from their target audience or target market, i.e. potential customers ready to spend money or companies willing to do business with them. Most websites are found through keywords entered into search engines, so in order to be visible online, keywords must be used effectively.

According to de Valk (2017), too much repetition of keywords can result in a lower ranking website, as filters such as Google Panda penalize "low quality" websites and prevent them ranking higher up on SERPs. If the keyword density is too high it can trigger spam filters and result in penalties, so the best approach is to include the

appropriate keywords but make them appear naturally within the text. Synonyms are also often recognized and can help your website appear under different search terms (de Valk, 2017). Repetition of the same keyword or phrase also results in poor readability and therefore a low quality user experience, which can mean traffic quickly returns to their SERP to find a better website.

Crawlers are programs used by search engines to scan and analyze websites to determine their importance and ranking in SERPs for certain keywords (Search Metrics, 2017). Therefore, websites need to be easily crawlable for these programs in order to place well in SERPs. Google's crawler, Googlebot, is very active and may visit a website several times in one day to check for new information or updates (SEO Marketing World, 2017). Keyword density and keyword relevance can be determined by crawlers, so attention must be paid to website layout and the frequency that keywords are placed within the text.

2.3 Title tags, meta tags and URL structure

Website titles and URLs (Uniform Resource Locator) help users determine whether the results shown on SERPs are relevant and suitable to meet their search needs. Below, Picture 2 shows another example of a Google SERP, but zoomed in to allow the URLs to be seen more clearly.
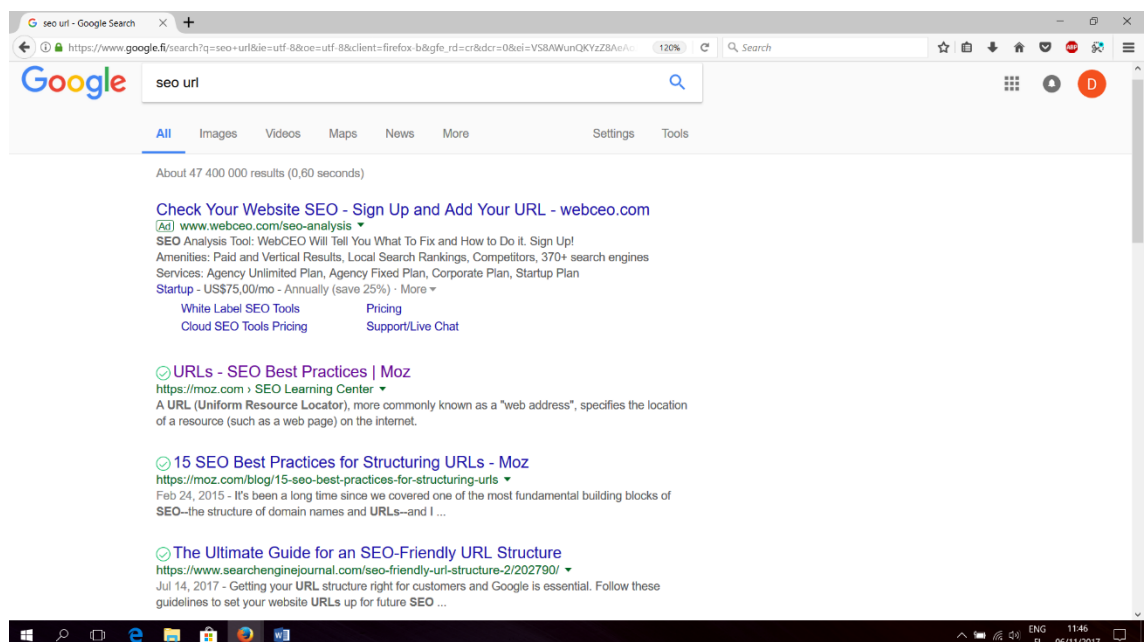
Picture 2. A Google SERP zoomed in

Here you can see that the title tags are visible above the URLs. It is beneficial to utilize readable URLs, which aid both humans and crawlers. The use of "–" between words means the URL can almost serve as a second page title and guide the user towards the page, thereby improving the user experience, as the URL refers to what the page is about. If the URL was just a series of random letters and numbers it would be impossible to know what the website contained, resulting in a lower click-through rate and a lower placement in SERPs. Title tags help explain to search engines what your page is about and they give the first impression of your page, so it's important to make them accurate, well-written and interesting. Title tags also appear at the top of your web browser, which helps when users have several tabs open at once. Finally, the title tag will be displayed when URLs are shared on social media, so a good summary of the page is likely to encourage more visits to that page. (MOZ, 2017)

Picture 2 also shows that the first result, an ad, has the www. format for its URL, while the next 3 results have https://. The "s" here stands for secure, and is only included in the URL if the website has a Secure Sockets Layer (SSL). This means an encrypted connection is established, making the website safer for the user (Digicert, 2017). Using https:// communicates that the website is safe and trustworthy and encourages higher click-through rates, although it is not known for sure if the ranking algorithm takes this into account when ranking websites. As Internet security is an important issue for many around the world, it may be worth acquiring an SSL for your company's website. Traffic can be monitored after making the switch to see if the change was worth the money, but it may take time for sufficient data to be collected for analysis.

Meta description tags summarize the webpage content and should appear underneath the URL on SERPs. Although Google stated in 2009 that these tags have no impact on their ranking algorithms for web search, they encourage users to click through to your website, and these clicks do factor into Google's ranking algorithms (Google blog, 2009). Therefore, these descriptions or tags can be written in ways to advertise or entice users towards your content and improve a website's click-through rate (CTR) (MOZ, 2017). However, sometimes a meta description provides enough information to the search engine user that they do not need to click through to the website. Although no new visitors have viewed your webpages, the description may have provided an answer to a query and therefore provided a positive user experience, which may result in a page visit at a later date.

2.4 On-site & Off-site SEO

On-site SEO refers to optimizing elements on a website in order to rank higher and gain more relevant traffic from search engines (MOZ, 2017). As previously discussed, keywords are one of many elements of on-site SEO. Many crawlers are unable to index images so they should be given "alt tags", which describe what the image is and what purpose it serves. For example, an image of a flower would be given an alt tag "flower" to make it indexable to crawlers. These alt tags can help sites rank higher, as keywords used can be seen through ranking algorithms and it helps website designers stay on-task; if it's difficult to create an alt tag for an image and describe it's relevance to the article maybe it shouldn't be included. Keywords should not be spammed into alt descriptions, as they may incur penalties in the same way that they would in sections of text. Google algorithms are leaning more towards page relevance rather than keyword density now, so including alt tags for relevant images will most likely improve the website's overall ranking. (de Valk, J., Yoast, 2017) (MOZ, 2017)

Good content is an important element of on-site SEO. Crawlers can determine the relevance of your website to search terms but high-quality content will attract people to the website, thereby increasing click-through rates and increasing the time spent on the pages. There's not much point utilizing SEO techniques to rank highly in SERPs only to have poor content that users do not want to view, as this will over time decrease the website's ranking anyway. Bounce rate is the term used by Google when a user clicks back and navigates away from content after only viewing one page for a short time, and this information factors into their ranking algorithms (Google Analytics, 2017). Interesting, well-written content can attract readers year after year, which is why many successful websites have blogs that can be shared through social media to reach more people.

Webpages should also be user-friendly and easy to navigate, with information presented clearly through easy-to-use menus and site navigation. Optimization for mobile-friendly websites is currently an important factor for improving user experiences, so redirects to mobile versions of all pages should be in place. According to Yoast's Mobile SEO Guide (2017), smartphone users have a higher buying intent than desktop users. This is perhaps because users searching on their smartphones could be searching for the cheapest place to buy a product they need, or they could be in a shop searching if a better deal exists online. Therefore, mobile-friendly websites are extremely important

and could lead to more sales and page visits. Ensuring that clickable icons are not too close together and that enough text fits on the smartphone screen are also important for good user experiences and therefore ranking. (Yoast, 2017)

Page load speed is another significant factor for providing positive user experiences, so image and text selection should be made with this in mind. If a website takes too long to load the user will often press back and try a different website, especially today when everyone is used to high-speed internet and search results. The final component of on-site SEO is making content reliable and trustworthy. Content that is shared a lot will be deemed high quality, so good quality content that users will want to show their colleagues and friends is extremely valuable and helpful for rankings. The popularity of social media has resulted in many articles including links where the material can be shared with just one click, thereby improving the number of visitors on these websites. By continuing to produce great content websites can gain trust and become known as a reliable source of information, so blogs and published articles have become effective tools to drive traffic to websites. However, articles should not be designed as clickbait, as these will result in a lower level of trust and a higher bounce rate, which will negatively impact your website's rank and public image. (Traphagen, M., 2016)

According to the MOZ website (2017), off-site SEO refers to actions taken outside of a website to impact rankings on SERPs. Search engine and user perceptions of a website's popularity, authority, relevance and trustworthiness contribute towards off-site SEO, so optimization means improving these factors. This is accomplished by reputable websites, people, companies etc. promoting, linking to or sharing your website and thereby giving it a vote of confidence. Basically, backlinks between websites show that a website or content is valuable if many other (ideally reputable) websites or sources link back to it. (MOZ, 2017)

The process of earning backlinks to your site is known as link building or link earning, and there are several ways to approach it. Firstly, publishing good quality content will naturally result in readers sharing links to your page, or featuring it somewhere on their website. The more reputable the website that links to your own website is, the more value it carries. Secondly, if you link relevant content from another website to your blog or website, there is a good chance they will provide links back to your website, so cooperation can be helpful within the same industry. For example, a company could interview an expert within their field of interest and earn links from the expert's website as a result of this collaboration. There are other, less reputable methods of generating

links, such as including your website's URL in your signature and posting in many different blogs or forums, or purchasing links from other, sometimes spammy, websites although these are less likely to carry as much value as real links from relevant sources. (Agrawal, H., 2017)

Anchor text refers to the visible, clickable text on websites that links to other websites (Ahrefs, 2016). Search engines use anchor text as an indicator of what the website is about. For example, you could have a link to Amazon on your website with the anchor text "books", which tells search engines that this link is relevant to the search term "books". In this case, the word "books" would be blue, or a different color to the rest of the text and clicking it would take you to Amazon's online bookstore. Google previously put a lot of faith in anchor text but it was being misused, so in 2012 they launched the Penguin update to target websites that used practices against Google's publishers guidelines to improve their ranking (Ahrefs, 2016).

Below is a screenshot from the Ahrefs blog that was used to research anchor text. It illustrates the use of anchor text and also includes easy-to-use links for readers to share the article through social media.
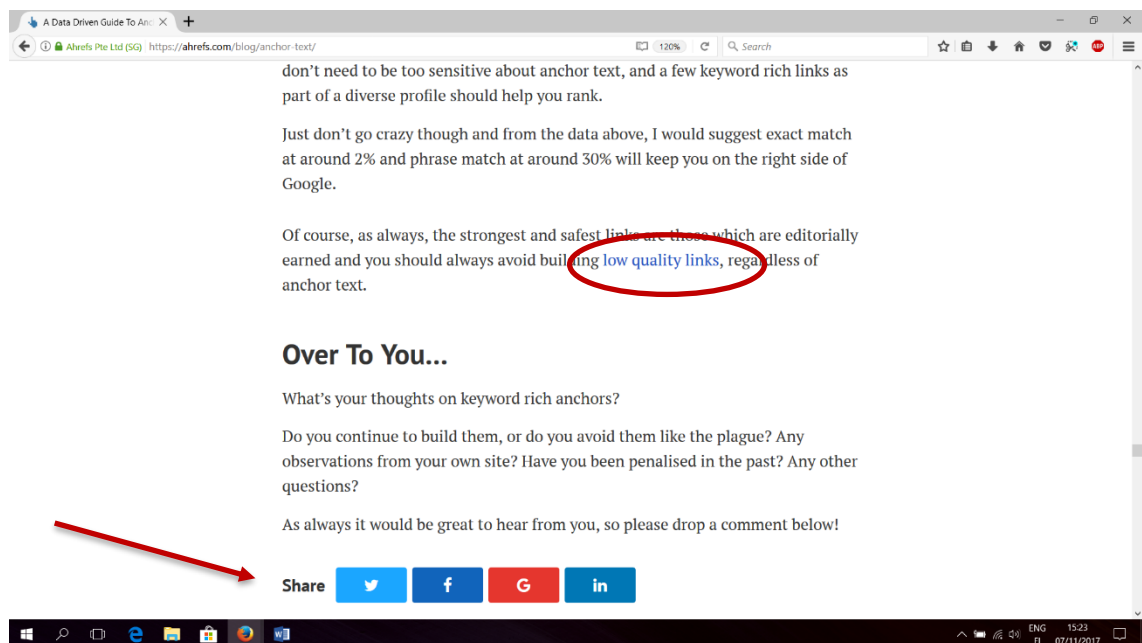
Picture 3. Screenshot illustrating anchor text and off-site SEO (sharing), taken from (https://ahrefs.com/blog/anchor-text/)

The anchor text "low quality links" leads to another blog post from the same author, McSweeney, also from the Ahrefs blog, which is a guide on link quality, link penalties

and what are considered to be "bad links" (McSweeney, D., Ahrefs, 2016). The anchor text is relevant to the article and provides more information on the topic of low quality links, so this is a great example on how anchor text is meant to be used. Anyone reading the article can click on the anchor text and find out more about the keywords used in the anchor text.

At the bottom of the article are easily clickable links for readers to share this blog post and therefore earn this webpage more backlinks. The writer also encourages comments on the page, which creates repeat visits from readers to follow-up on their comments, and it leaves a good impression for other readers. The article was well-written, informative and interesting, and the writer has taken the time to respond to the comments left by readers, which result in a strong webpage with a good rank on SERPs, which is how it was found under this topic. (Ahrefs, 2016)

This chapter has addressed the first 3 research objectives concerning the basics of SEO. Important elements of SEO have been covered and key terms have been explained with regards to how websites can place higher in SERPs and attract more organic page visits. Research objective 4 will be covered in the next section of this thesis regarding the benefits of SEO.

3 BENEFITS OF SEO

According to Statista (2016) there were an estimated 3.5 billion Internet users in 2016. The website also states that Millennial internet users spent an average of 185 minutes each day on mobile internet services, and that online retail revenue is forecast to almost double between 2016 and 2020 (Statista, 2016). This data alone shows the massive opportunity for companies to benefit from the use of SEO online. Anyone, anywhere in the world could find and access your website online if SEO has been utilized effectively. If a website includes enough good keywords within good content, supported by backlinks from reputable sources it should be fairly visible on SERPs.

SEO has become increasingly important over recent years because of the way people are using the Internet. The marketplace is becoming increasingly digital and the main way to be found by new potential customers is through search engines, which means effective SEO can place you higher in SERPs and increase your online visibility. Some of the main benefits of SEO will be discussed below.

3.1 Understanding your audience

As mentioned in chaper 2.2, keyword research and analytics allow website owners to get a better understanding of the people that view their website and content. If a company knows which search terms are used the most in their field, they can ensure that they utilize them on their website in order to attract more traffic from SERPs.

Google Analytics allows users to compare old vs new customers, gather information on visitor behavior, find out the sources of your traffic and to set marketing benchmarks and conversion goals (Boost Suite, 2017). Keyword analysis allows users to understand the most popular and therefore most lucrative search terms in their industry and those most likely to result in higher click-through rates. Tools such as Google Analytics can be used to assess the quality of your own webpages, and also those of your competition on both a local and global scale.

Google Analytics can be used to monitor overall organic traffic over time, in addition to tracking individual keywords. This data can show any seasonal variations in traffic for your website and correlation between promotional activities or other link building that

may have resulted in increased traffic. The use of data can show clearly what works and what doesn't, allowing the company to focus their efforts on the most effective techniques for them. Landing pages can also be analyzed, showing how potential customers have found your website. A landing page is any page that someone can "land" on by clicking on a result from a SERP, and common examples are product information pages or homepages. Landing pages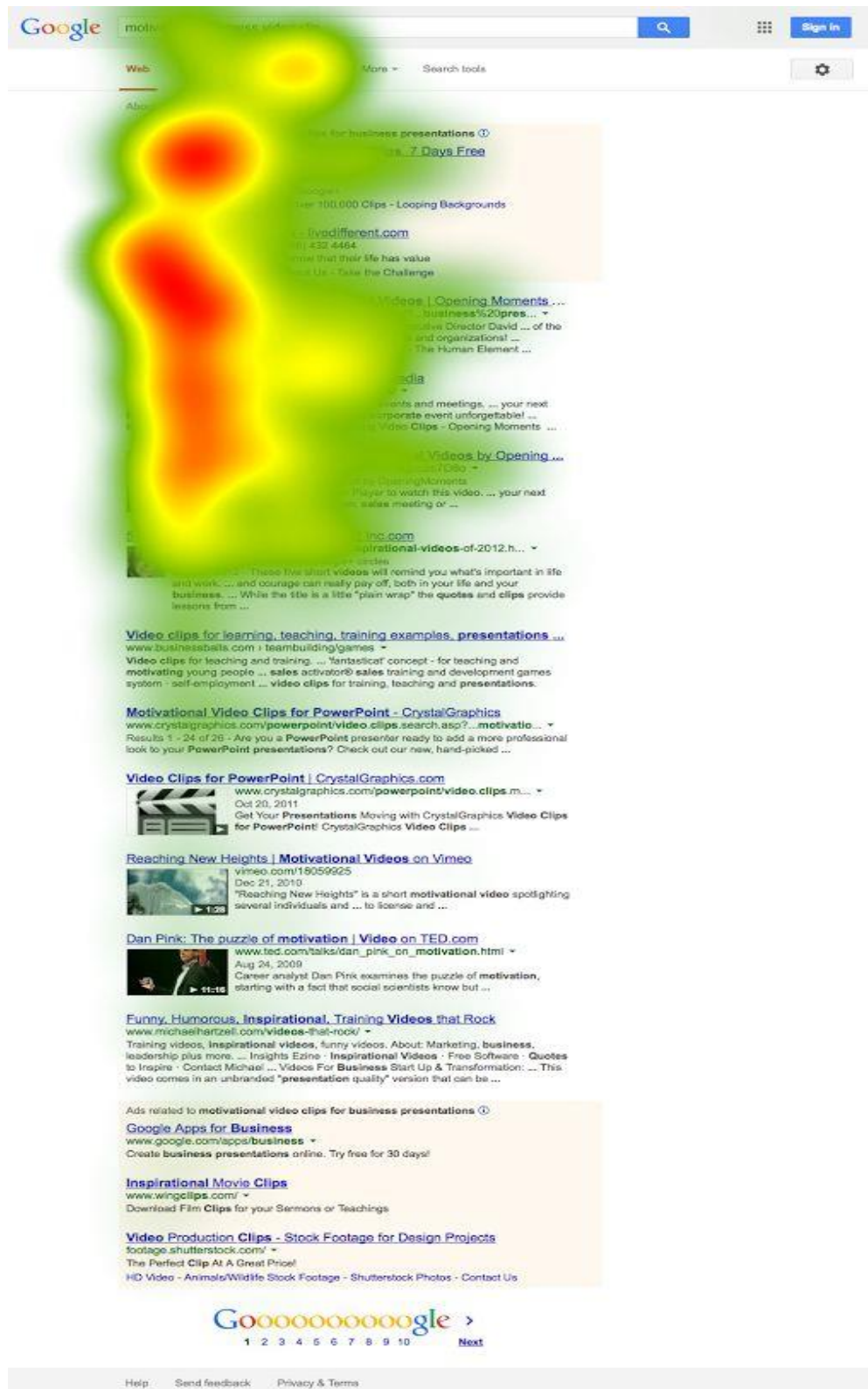 should have a clear "call-to-action", which could be the "add to cart" button or subscribing to a newsletter. A call-to-action should be the focus of landing pages to improve conversion rates, so payment options should be clear and easy to use. It can also help if the landing page has a security certificate to encourage trust. Customer reviews and ratings can also improve conversion rates, so making them visible is a good method of envoking trust and encouraging a purchase. (Heijmans, M., Yoast, 2016)

3.2 Online visibility

Effective SEO places websites higher up on SERPs, making them more visible to searchers. From personal experience most readers will know that their attention is mainly focused towards the top of the SERP, usually skipping the ads and locating the first organic results. Below are the results of eye-tracking studies as discussed by Maynes, R. in 2014 on the MOZ blog. The first image, taken from Mediative's study conducted in 2005 illustrates "Google's Golden triangle". The second image shows the results of a similar study from 2014.
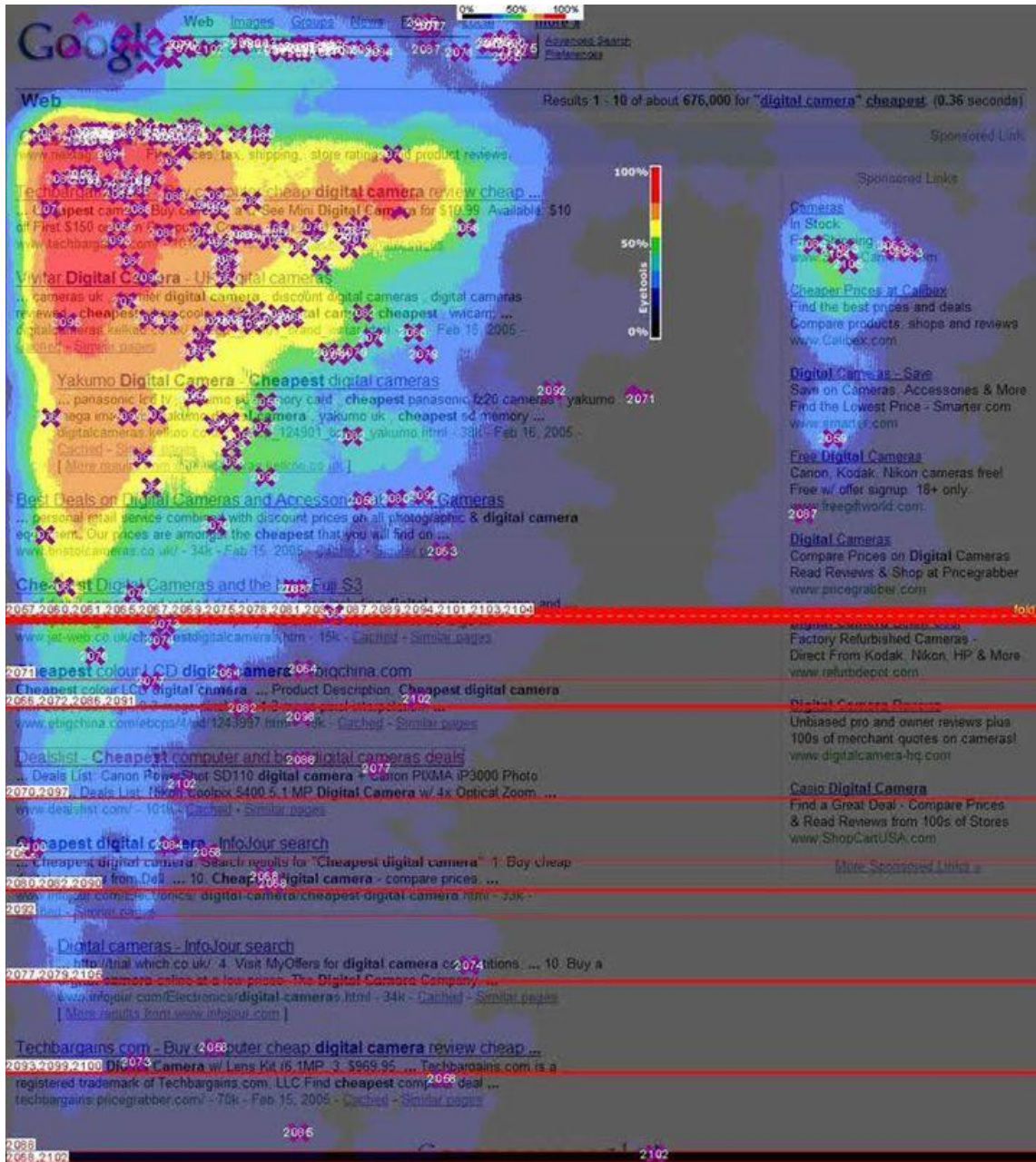
Picture 4. Results from Mediative's 2005 eye-tracking survey, taken from (https://moz.com/blog/eye-tracking-in-2014-how-users-view-and-interact-with-todays-google-serps)

Picture 5. Results from an eye-tracking survery conducted in 2014, taken from (https://moz.com/blog/eye-tracking-in-2014-how-users-view-and-interact-with-todays-google-serps)

As the images show, search engine user behavior has changed along with SERPs. The way in which results are displayed is now different, with the inclusion of paid ads, featured snippets, related images, local search results etc. The more recent study was conducted in 2014, so significant changes would still be evident if another study was completed this year, in 2017. In 2005, the eye heat map shows concentrated gazes focused in a triangle shape starting in the top left corner, where the organic search results were displayed. Back then, if a website was in the "Golden triangle" it would have a very high probability of being visited (Maynes, R., MOZ blog, 2014).

In 2014, organic results were not always the first results as paid ads took the top spots, so people looked down the SERP more vertically to determine which websites were ads and which were organic results. Depending on the search term, today searchers scroll down the page vertically too, but more experience of the Internet allows them to filter to the results more quickly and determine what is most relevant for their search queries. Smartphones have much smaller screens than desktop computers so the eye-tracking results would be similar to the 2014 survey results, with users scrolling down the SERPs vertically to find relevant information.

Maynes (MOZ blog, 2014) refers to the Mediative study findings, which stated that everything above the top 4 organic search results (paid ads, local listings, knowledge graphs etc.) combined captured 84% of clicks. This may seem like a huge percentage, but considering the volume of internet users, the remaining 16% still accounts for a significant amount of web traffic. SEO can be utilized to aquire better rankings in SERPs, which in turn means higher visibility for your website and therefore a higher click-through rate and more page visits (Maynes, R., MOZ blog, 2014). Better online visibility for a company will improve brand recognition and credibility, which will be discussed below.

3.3 Credibility

Consistently providing high quality content on your website and/or blog will engage people and encourage them to revisit and refer your website to their friends. Social media can be used to give a face to a brand and relate to readers on a more personal level. For example, the use of photos of blog writers helps, and taking time to respond to comments on blogs or on social media can improve the brand image and engage a wider audience. Being perceived as an expert in your field will increase trust and lead to more page visits and sales, so it is essential to provide accurate and useful information. Keeping a

schedule, being consistent to your brand, encouraging reader and employee participation and incorporating influencers or experts can all contribute to improving the overall brand image, credibility and trust of a website (Nite, J., Top Rank Marketing, 2016).

Another way of improving credibility is content marketing, which involves creating and sharing valuable information, usually for free. Content related to a website's products or services will place well in SERPs, provided SEO practices have been effectively applied, thereby allowing readers to be led to browse and possibly purchase what a website is selling. Searchers tend to trust Google, so placing well on SERPs is the first step to being perceived as a credible source of both information and products. Content marketing can allow websites to place better for a wider variety of keywords, possibly in less competitive markets, so a website's potential audience can be increased significantly through sharing knowledge and expertise. (van de Rakt, M., Yoast, 2016)

3.4 Cost-effective and long term

Now, in 2017, SEO is still an effective method of generating traffic to websites and increasing online visibility with trends suggesting that this is unlikely to change any time soon. Audio and video searches still rely on keywords and properly optimized title and meta tags, so investing in SEO will continue to benefit websites in the long term. Paid methods of advertising can effectively supplement and support SEO, but SEO should be viewed as the foundation of creating a strong online platform for websites or companies. Many aspects of SEO can be implemented without the need of hiring a professional, but even if a company paid an expert to optimize their website and content, the costs are likely to provide a much better return on investment (ROI) than pay per click (PPC) advertising, social media advertising or purchasing leads for email marketing campaigns (Olenski, S., Forbes, 2014).

According to Appendix 1 (Interview with SEO Expert Tatu, 2017), "evergreen content" on the company's blog is still generating traffic to their pages, meaning if content is interesting and properly optimized, it will continue to rank well on SERPs and bring new readers to the website, potentially resulting in a conversion to sales. Tatu also stated that SEO results can take as long as 1 year to show, but they are usually a long-lasting and a reliable means of increasing online visibility and revenue generating traffic. Good content is the key here, as there will always be a demand for high quality content from

companies with an expertise in their field. Topics can go in and out of fashion so some keywords could become more relevant again in the future, meaning the content you have already created can continue to improve online visibility, making SEO excellent value for money when compared to paid ads or pay per click (PPC) campaigns, which end at a predetermined amount (Appendix 1).

The cost of various ad campaigns will vary depending on industry and how much visibility is desired, but the visible "ad" tag next to the search result can still dissuade searchers from clicking on a website, as some people have subconsciously conditioned themselves to ignore paid ads. Organic results can appear to be much more relevant and encourage more trust and authority, but these highly competitive spots can only be attained through effective SEO. (Wardle, N., Tribute Media, 2017)

This chapter has achieved research objective 4 concerning the benefits of SEO, with the next section aimed at research objective 5, the future of SEO.

4 THE FUTURE OF SEO

The online world is contstantly changing and in most cases the future is difficult to predict. However, based on the history of SEO and existing trends and changes it is possible to prepare for the future in a number of areas. Changes in the way Google algorithms rank pages are likely, and SEO professionals will have to adapt to any new metrics put in place. Below are some key areas where SEO has already experienced significant changes, with more to come in the future.

4.1 Local search

In 2017, a basic SERP already looks very different when compared to one even a few years ago. Below is an example of a SERP displaying local search results as well as customer ratings and a map.
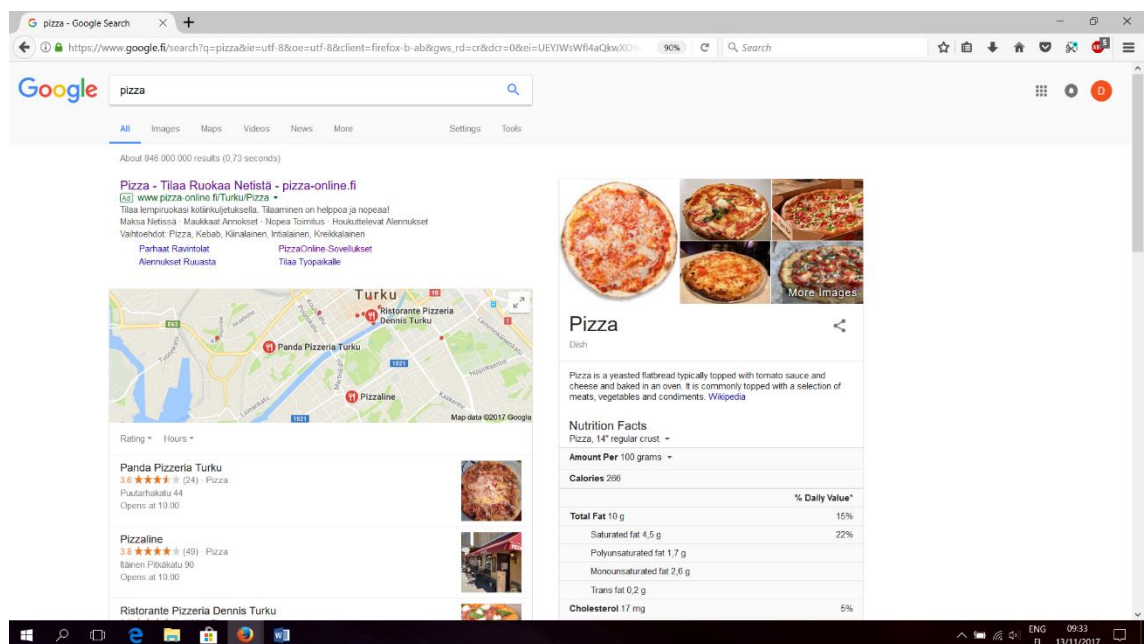
Picture 6. Example of a SERP displaying local results

Picture 6 illustrates many newer elements of a SERP for a basic search term "pizza". No location was entered into the search bar but, as is the case for many of today's electronic devices, GPS services are enabled, therefore allowing Google to know the location of the search query. Certain search terms, such as those related to food or drink, are often entered immediately before completing a transaction, for example, by a family planning

to order some food or finding a suitable restaurant nearby. Therefore, it is very important for local businesses to be visible in order to capitalize on these searchers ready to spend money.

Customer reviews are also very visible on the SERP, so efforts should be made to ensure high levels of customer satisfaction and an easy-to-use platform for submitting these reviews, such as a link to Yelp or TripAdvisor. In many cases potential customers may be willing to travel a bit further for a restaurant with better reviews rather than visiting the nearest one. This example of social proof gives the searcher confidence to complete a transaction or action based on the experience of many others. A local phone number and accurate information on opening times are also important elements required to perform well on local searches. (Charlton, G., Search Engine Watch, 2015)

A Think With Google article from 2015 stated that 50% of consumers that conducted a local search on their phone visited a store within a day, and those planning to visit restaurants often search for information about an hour before their visit (Lawson, M., Think With Google, 2015). The article also highlighted the popularity of searches ending with "near me", which are perhaps now unneccesary due to advances in Google's location-based services, as illustrated in Picture 6, where no text other than a food type was entered into the search bar, but results were still local. People searching with their smartphones are often in the final stages of the buying process, perhaps searching for the nearest location where a product is in stock after already making the decision to purchase. Local search will most likely become even more significant in the future as smartphones become more sophisticated as well improvements in the location-based features of Google and other search engines.

4.2 Voice search

According to Google Data, in May 2016, 20% of searches on the Google App are done by voice (Think With Google, 2016). Voice recognition has improved significantly since the early days of voice search, allowing search results to be more accurate and relevant than ever before. Currently, in 2017, voice is about 90% accurate and therefore sometimes disappointing, but as this figure gets closer to 100% the uptake of voice search is likely to increase dramatically. Voice search will not replace traditional typed searches, it will most likely exist alongside it, and typed searches will still probably grow due to the increased use of search. The natural conversational nature of speech will

mean quite different searches when compared to typed queries, which should be considered when optimizing for voice search. (Penson, S., MOZ blog, 2017)

Advances in voice search technology will allow the main players (Google Assistant, Apple Siri, Amazon Alexa and Microsoft Cortana) to react more conversationally and naturally, predicting the direction of conversation. It is worth noting that Siri, Alexa and Cortana default to Bing search for general information retrieval, while typed searches are dominated by Google. This may encourage websites to consider Bing's ranking factors more carefully than before as voice search grows in popularity. To use the example from MOZ's voice strategy guide (MOZ blog, 2017), when buying a new lawn mower you may use voice search for the best mower under $500, to which the voice assistant would reply with a list of options. In the future, the voice assistant could ask follow-up questions regarding the size and shape of your lawn or which type of mower you would prefer to provide better, more relevant search results. Searchers may also inquire about the ratings for options presented by voice assistants, so these need to be incorporated into the programming and coding of voice assistants, which should become a reality in the near future. (Penson, S., MOZ blog, 2017)

People today are more likely to multitask, so improvements in voice search present a significant opportunity to gain more website traffic and conversions. Voice searches can be completed while driving, or while the searcher is out with friends, and hands-free equipment make this more and more natural in everyday life.

4.3 Rich snippets and Featured snippets

Rich snippets show parts of a website on a SERP to provide more details about the content of the webpage. Rich snippets often include images of the authors of blogs or texts, ratings for restaurants, images of food or drinks, calories and preparation time for recipes and other additional information of this nature (Breikss, C., 6s Marketing, 2011). Picture 6 shows rich snippets in the form of average rating scores for pizza restaurants and their opening times, which are visible underneath the map of the area where the search was performed. This information is often valuable and relevant to searchers so it is worth including in website code to encourage more traffic. Images can entice more visits to webpages, especially those concerning food, where a positive ranking and an appealing image of the food served can influence more visits both to the webpage and physical location.

Rich snippets may have a bigger impact with voice search in the future if the trend involves asking voice assistants to list the highest ranking results for your search query. Rich snippets may not directly improve website placement on SERPs based on their algorithms but they encourage higher click-through rates and therefore higher volumes of traffic, which will in turn improve a website's ranking.

Featured snippets are answers provided by Google when certain search queries are entered. They serve the purpose of providing an answer to a question or providing information to the searcher. These snippets "ranking zero" usually place above all other organic search results, so securing this position can really help a website's visibility (Fishkin, R., MOZ, 2016). Below is a screenshot showing a featured snippet or answer box for the search query "seo best practices".
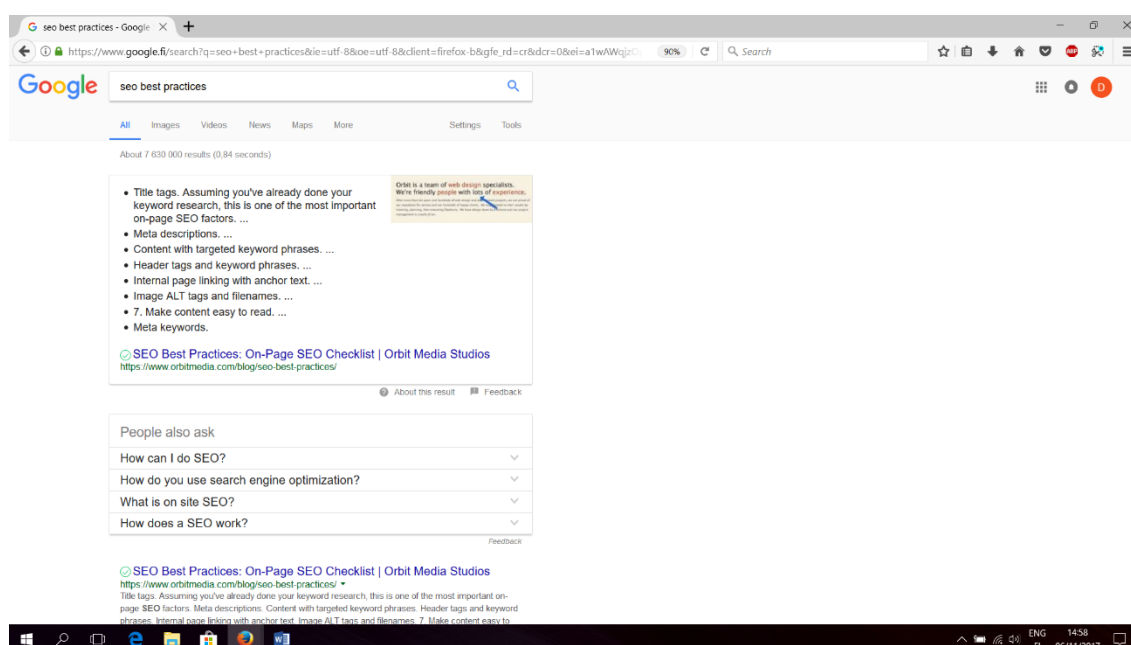
Picture 7. Example of a featured snippet for a search query

Picture 7 shows a list of the best practices for successful SEO. Underneath this are related searches, followed by the first organic search result, which is the same website the featured snippet is taken from. Therefore, this website effectively ranks in both position 0 and 1, dominating the first page with no other websites visible without scrolling down. This gives the searcher the impression that this website carries great authority and is trustworthy. The blog post was written in 2012, but the comment section has comments from 2012 to 2017, highlighting the evergreen nature of quality blog content and the long term effects of effective SEO. The basic principles mentioned in the blog post still hold true today, although some aspects could be considered slightly out-of-date.

However, today in 2017 it still holds a very impressive ranking position for the search term "seo best practices" and has driven traffic to the website consistently since it was written in 2012. (Gant, A., Orbit Media Studios, 2012)

If a very simple search is performed, Google may provide the answer without any citation or link to a related website. For example, a search related to the current exchange rate of Euros to Dollars will most likely just provide the answer based on Google's own knowledge or data. Therefore, it is important to consider the opportunity for featured snippets when conducting keyword research or when checking page analytics. Tools such as MOZ's Keyword Explorer can show which search queries are likely to result in featured snippets. Websites should check if their competitors feature in any snippets, as opportunities to provide better answers could result in your website placing in position 0. (Fishkin, R., MOZ, 2016)

People today have become used to a wealth of knowledge available from a few clicks or a simple voice search, so featured snippets will likely continue to be of great importance in the future. The opportunity to place at the very top of a SERP for a keyword or search query is the goal of any SEO professional, so expect these top spots to continue to be extremely competitive.

4.4 New ranking factors

Search engines will continue to tweak and change their ranking algorithms to provide the most suitable results for searchers, while also penalizing those that attempt to rank higher using unethical practices. No one outside of Google's inner circle may know what changes will definitely be implemented, but SEO will continue to evolve and develop as it has done since search engines started being used to find information online.

Emphasis on keywords, links and content has shifted over time, with each factor being considered the most important at one point in time. An interesting blog post by Rand Fishkin from MOZ (2017) discusses a potential new most powerful ranking factor – "searcher task accomplishment". This approach considers whether the websites or results are actually solving the problems the searchers are seeking answers for. Factors such as bounce rate, time spent on the page, user interaction on the page etc. can be used to determine how useful a website was to the searcher. Fishkin (MOZ, 2017) describes the path searchers take as:

Expression of need → Underlying goals → Evaluation of results → Selection → Evaluation of task completion → Discovery of additional needs.

Every search completed is done so to accomplish a goal or fulfil a need the searcher has. With more and more data available to Google and other search engines, they can more effectively determine which results were of most use to the searcher and rankings may shift because of this. For example, if a page has somehow managed to rank on page 1 for a keyword due to keyword stuffing or buying links from spammy websites, the searcher will most likely click back immediately after visiting the website, thereby giving it a high bounce rate, which negatively affects rankings. In contrast, if the searcher spends time on a website they clicked from a SERP and navigates around the website for some time it was more likely to have been of use and will therefore score higher in Google's ranking algorithms.

Websites that provide answers or information that the searchers want or need are often not optimized for conversions. A website optimized for conversions may have a call-to-action such as "enter your email for the best tips on whatever the search query was related to" which means they withhold material in order to make a conversion. However, by providing good content that users find relevant can often have better long-term effects and encourage more page visits over time. If Google is more likely to be able to determine whether searcher tasks have been successfully completed, SERPs may begin changing with pages that are the most relevant and useful climbing towards the top rather than those that have implemented the well-known SEO techniques the most effectively. This could mean that in the future SEO can, in essence become less complicated if the website can focus more on the content that matters, rather than on anchor text and meta tags. (Fishkin, R., MOZ, 2017)

The future of SEO is an interesting and exciting area to think about. Improvements in technology both on Google's end in terms of their coding, algorithms and programs and at the consumer end, where people have access to smarter technology than ever before. Location-based services on smartphones have already impacted and improved local search query results, providing masses of relevant local information almost instantly for the user. Voice search is sure to increase in popularity as its accuracy improves and as attitudes change. For example, if using voice search in public becomes the norm and more socially acceptable, its usage would increase significantly in a very short time. Websites need to anticipate changes in the field of SEO and be able to adapt to potentially rapid changes in both voice search and typed search. Understanding search

engines and how to accomplish the goals of searchers will continue to be an integral element of success in the online marketplace for companies of all sizes.

This section addressed research objective 5 and the future of SEO, with the next sections focusing on primary data collection and the final research objective.

5 METHODOLOGY

13 different marketing companies in Turku, Finland were identified through Google searches for "Marketing Turku" and visited on 20.11.2017 to conduct semi-structured interviews. At locations where the appropriate employee was absent from the office or too busy to be interviewed, an email was sent offering to reschedule or requesting answers to the interview questions, which were attached on a Word document.

2 companies were interviewed in person on 20.11.2017, 1 phone interview was conducted on 21.11.2017 and 3 companies emailed their responses to the questions that were sent to them within a week of the attempted interviews. 3 companies responded that they do no currently offer SEO services to their clients so they were unable to be interviewed, and some companies did not respond. Therefore, 6 complete results were available for analysis.

The marketing companies were selected based on their placement in SERPs and their relevance to the search query "Marketing Turku". Turku was selected as the area of focus due to its proximity to Turku University of Applied Sciences and based on the high number of office buildings located within the city. The companies that placed well for the search query were mainly marketing companies that offered SEO services for their clients, in addition to using it for their own websites in order to place well and be found on SERPs. Placing well in SERP organic results shows evidence of good SEO practices based on findings presented in previous sections of this thesis, which is another reason these companies were selected for interviews.

The method of semi-structured interviews was chosen due the desire to gain a better understanding of SEO, specifically its importance, benefits and likely future trends. Although research was conducted for several months prior to the interviews, the topic is fairly complicated and ever-changing, so face to face interviews allowed elaboration on points that were unclear and additional information to be collected, as experts in the field were contacted. The input from professionals added value to previous secondary research and the literature review, as the findings were similar to the statements made in earlier sections of this thesis.

Primary, qualitative data was collected in order to prove or disprove the assumptions and statements made in Chapters 3 and 4. Semi-structured face to face interviews were

chosen as the method of data collection, but email responses were received from people that were busy or out of office at the time of the visit.

A qualitative data collection method was selected as research on the topic had already been conducted in Chapter 2, so this type of data would support the earlier sections of the thesis better than numeric, quantitative data. This deductive approach also provided an opportunity to network and view first hand the type of companies in the Turku area that are involved in SEO and marketing. A combination of open and closed questions allowed the responses to some questions to be accurately compared, while also allowing the collection of valuable data from experts involved in SEO and marketing on a daily basis.

Quantitative data could have been valuable to show more concrete evidence of the benefits of SEO in terms of website visits and click-through rates, but the required contacts, permissions and ability to analyze such data was not readily available at the time of writing this thesis.

6 ANALYSIS

The results were not biased, as the companies had no reason to provide false information and the questions selected were not leading in nature. The companies were all located in Turku and each response involved a person knowledgeable about SEO, meaning the data collected should be of a high quality, reliable and valid.

The results show strong correlation with regards to the importance of placing well on SERPs, with each company stating that it is very important and several mentioning that people rarely check beyond the first page of search results. The main benefits of SEO according to each interviewee were very similar, with high visibility/findability, low cost, appearing trustworthy to searchers, offering the ability to keep up with competitors and providing long-lasting results all mentioned more than once. This supports findings presented in Chapter 3 of this thesis, where the main focus was on understanding your audience through SEO, achieving higher visibility, establishing credibility and being a cost-effective long term solution for generating more traffic to your website.

With regards to the future, the main predictions include rich snippets and featured snippets becoming more important as Google tries to answer queries on SERPs, improved mobile optimization, more importance on content and usability, and a higher volume of voice searches. Several companies had no concrete plans for the increase in popularity of voice search, but when advances in voice recognition are made they will adapt and focus on factors that may improve voice search visibility, such as more emphasis on rich snippets. The predictions for the future of SEO support Chapter 4 of this thesis, as the main sections discussed there appeared frequently in the primary data collected.

The importance of local search, especially for small companies, was highlighted in the data collected, which was also a topic covered in detail in this thesis. Overall the interviews and questions were an effective method of collecting data that supported the statements made earlier in this thesis. A larger sample size would have improved the vailidity of the data, but 6 responses was enough to see correlation and make valid conclusions. More in-depth questions could have added value but a longer interview may have been more challenging to find participants for, so a relatively short interview was created to cover the basics of SEO, the advantages and how the future may look in this field of study.

Quantitative data such as keyword analytics or statistics related to website visits would have added value to these findings, but the companies interviewed have access to this type of information and they will have considered it when answering the questions presented to them.

7 CLOSING CHAPTER

Before a conclusion is written it is important to acknowledge some limitations and issues that presented themselves during the writing of this thesis. Firstly, most of the sources used were websites or blog posts as it was very difficult to find recent enough literature to support the main themes. SEO is fairly new as a marketing technique and many of the books that were found would not qualify as relevant at this time. Efforts were made to consult the most relevant and trustworthy sources of information, but most of these were online sources, so this should be taken into account. However, SEO takes place online and it is constantly changing and evolving, whether the search engine algorithms are being tweaked or people understand the ranking system better, or new developments in technology change the course of SEO practices. For example, mobile SEO is now a key aspect of effective SEO due to changes in Internet usage behavior, which resulted in significant efforts by website owners to keep up and improve their rankings on SERPs to accommodate site visits from smartphones.

Moreover, the topic of SEO has been researched for several months to give the writer an in-depth knowledge of the subject, meaning some terms or themes may not be completely clear to the reader even though efforts were made to make the text understandable for a wider audience. SEO is a complex process, with many, more technical elements not examined thoroughly in this text.

SEO is extremely valuable as a tool for increasing online visibility, communicating authority or expertise, encouraging trust, increasing organic search traffic to webpages and improving sales and conversion rates in the long term. Significant time and effort is required for effective SEO, but the long-lasting results mean it should be part of every website's marketing strategy, often to serve as the foundation upon which paid ads or other marketing campaigns can be built from. Many elements of SEO can be implemented without hiring professionals and the basics are not too complicated to grasp. The use of analytics and raw data mean results can be tracked extremely accurately and this is a huge benefit in a very competitive online world, where marketers often need to fight for their share of the company budget. Most successful websites have invested time and effort into SEO to rank highly on SERPs and attract organic traffic, but it can provide benefits for companies of all sizes, with local search in particular offering opportunities for smaller companies. It is a continuos effort to keep up with changes in

search engine algorithms and to remain visible, but the benefits and value for money that SEO provides make it one of the best marketing activities a company can invest in.

The primary data in the form of interviews supported the findings made through research into the topic of SEO. The research was conducted first to gain an understanding of SEO and identify the main factors that determine placement on SERPs, the benefits of SEO and what the future may hold, then primary data was collected to prove or disprove the statements that were made. The data collected supported Chapters 3 and 4, thereby improving the validity and quality of this text. 6 interviews were sufficient to justify the statements made, but further research would have been required if there were conflicts between the primary and secondary data. For example, if a major advantage of SEO was mentioned during an interview that was not previously mentioned in the text, it would have been explored in detail. The goal was to cover the most important features and benefits of SEO, and the correlation between primary and secondary data collected confirms that this has been achieved.

The future of SEO is difficult to predict, and technological advances or innovations could change the way search results are deemed relevant to search queries, but the practice of SEO itself is sure to be of significant value long into the future. Voice search and AI technology already rely on basic SEO principles to provide relevant information to searchers, so the platform for SEO to continue to become even more essential is already in place.

My research on this topic has been extremely interesting and I look forward to seeing how my future workplaces integrate SEO into their operations and how I may be able to offer valuable insights as a result of this research process.

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Appendix 1. Interview With SEO Expert Tatu

----- Today September 1st, 2017 -----

David [10:30 AM] Hi Tatu, thanks for agreeing to answer a few questions for me

Tatu [10:30 AM] Sure

David [10:30 AM] Firstly, What aspects of SEO would make my thesis interesting from your point of view? Any particular areas that you or the company would be interested in?

I would like it to be relevant and interesting for the reader and I don't have a specific focus yet.

Tatu [10:33 AM] Technical SEO is pretty well known in Finland. Although we need someone to do it in our new website I don't find that area interesting.

David [10:34 AM] Ok cool I can look into that, but I'm not sure what the title of my thesis would be - maybe just about how important SEO is and how it will change in the future.

[10:34] Next a basic question: What are the main advantages/benefits of SEO?

Tatu [10:36 AM] SEO is earned media, you have to put a lot of effort into it. You can't buy visibility in SEO (you can pay someone to do SEO but it's not instant like buying ads is). Results can take time even as long as 1 year to show but they are usually long lasting results.

SEO has high brand awareness value and it's a very reliable source of revenue generating traffic.

David [10:38 AM] :thumbsup: How important is SEO for creating new business online?

Tatu [10:41 AM] That depends, if there is lots of high good keywords, it is important because SEO is free traffic.

[10:41] Content here is key, without it SEO can't work.

David [10:42 AM] cool, next: What are the current trends in SEO? Moving towards mobile-friendly browsing, voice search, social media, ease of sharing, local searches etc.

Tatu [10:43 AM] Voice search is trending, in US almost 20% searches are done by voice.

Google is also trying to give answers faster in form of rich snippets that answer questions without the need to go into a website. Good example is Job listing that will display open jobs inside google search result

[10:48] Third thing that SEO is moving is AI-based results. In the past SEO was 40% technical 10% creativity 60% links, now links are overused and Google is moving from valuing links to valuing user experience. One way they are doing this is tracking did the website answer my question fully or not. Another way is the use of technology like hummingbird

David [10:48 AM] nice, sounds interesting :slightly_smiling_face:

How do you see the future of SEO / How is SEO likely to change in the future? (New trends – advances in voice search interaction with user?)

[10:49] you already answered some of this, just wondered if there was something new that hasn't started development yet

Tatu [10:51 AM]

Fake news is big issue, most likely search engines are gonna address this in the future by themselves.

I think they will follow in the footsteps of Facebook that has third party partner who will validate news articles if they are fake news and then remove page from search results

David [10:57 AM] How has SEO helped this company? How does the company provide SEO as a service for others?

then the final question was: Can you think of any theories I could link to SEO? Marketing or psychological.

Tatu [10:59 AM] SEO has helped the company to get brand awareness and leads. We have some evergreen content in our blog that is still generating traffic to our pages.

The company is providing SEO as monthly container. So we do x amount of hours for y amount of euros. This is standard model in digital agencies in Finland.

David [11:01 AM] Ok cool, thanks for answering my questions!

Tatu [11:03 AM] For theories I suggest you check out Rand Fishkin whiteboard friday video, those usually contain cool theories how SEO works today, maybe you can apply one of those as your thesis

David [11:04 AM] sounds good, I've been reading through the MOZ blog.

Tatu [11:05 AM] https://moz.com/blog/searcher-task-accomplishment

Moz

Is the New, Most Powerful Ranking Factor Task Accomplishment - Whiteboard Friday

There's a new ranking factor in town, and it's one that will affect almost every aspect of your site optimization. Check out why searcher task accomplishment is such a big deal in today's Whiteboard Friday. (469kB)

[11:06] Like that is one good video.

David [11:06 AM] thanks :thumbsup:

Appendix 2. Empirical Data Collection Surveys

Company name: Mahon Digital Marketing

How many employees does the company have? 2 in Turku, many globally

Does your company offer SEO for clients?

yes

What are the main advantages of SEO?

Better organic reach, increasing organic visits, utilizing potential traffic flow through optimization

How important is it to place well in search engine results pages (SERPs)?

Very important, depends on customer and their needs

What are the main reasons your company uses paid ads? (If they do)

Yes, to compliment SEO

Do you have plans for the increase in popularity of voice search?

Exploring opportunities now, no implementation just yet

How do you see SEO and SERPs changing in the future?

Usability, content becoming more important. Changes for more mobile use

Does local search help generate more in-store/office visits?

Yes, very important

Are rich snippets or featured snippets something you're using or would use in the future?

Already in use in the UK office, discussing with clients now for use in Finland

Company name: Parcero

How many employees does the company have? 20+

Does your company offer SEO for clients?

No, but the interviewee does SEO for another company

What are the main advantages of SEO?

B2c ecommerce – 2/3 of sales come from Google, organic traffic, no cost if you do it yourself, some investment of time and software, can start with low budget, people rely on organic search results (more trust)

How important is it to place well in search engine results pages (SERPs)?

Really important, only about 2% of people check page 2

What are the main reasons your company uses paid ads? (If they do)

Yes, for other companies in addition to SEO

Do you have plans for the increase in popularity of voice search?

Yes, he uses only voice search on mobile. Often Google uses Wikipedia results to answer questions, important to place well to be visible on voice results. Be an expert in some areas.

How do you see SEO and SERPs changing in the future?

Changes to ads and layout for mobiles, Google wants to answer queries on the SERP. Smart TVs and other devices, interactive tables at restaurants.

Does local search help generate more in-store/office visits?

Yes, local optimization helps small companies a lot, Google MyBusiness

Are rich snippets or featured snippets something you're using or would use in the future?

He likes using ratings, especially for products. Excellent for social proof, encouraging trust. More and more snippets will be coming to Google in the future. Phone number snippets for example are becoming popular.

Company name: The Zeeland family

How many employees does the company have? 170

Does your company offer SEO for clients?

Yes, through partners

What are the main advantages of SEO?

Findability, easy to combine with Adwords, to keep up with competition that also use SEO

How important is it to place well in search engine results pages (SERPs)?

Very important, 2 or 3 page rule applies (searchers generally don't go past page 3 of SERPs)

What are the main reasons your company uses paid ads? (If they do)

Yes, visibility and it's a part of marketing nowadays for most companies

Do you have plans for the increase in popularity of voice search?

Yes, plans in development

How do you see SEO and SERPs changing in the future?

Difficult to predict but the company will keep up with whatever happens

Does local search help generate more in-store/office visits?

yes

Are rich snippets or featured snippets something you're using or would use in the future?

Yes, more usage in the future

Company name: Mainostoimisto KMG Turku

How many employees does the company have? 21

Does your company offer SEO for clients?

Yes

What are the main advantages of SEO?

Companies and their services are better found in search engines.

How important is it to place well in search engine results pages (SERPs)?

It is very important as people do not search for many pages, especially in mobile.

What are the main reasons your company uses paid ads? (If they do)

Our clients do – To stand out with certain marketing messages and promotions in search results. To stand out from the competitors. Goals: drive traffic to their websites, make people act / complete conversions, for example sales.

Do you have plans for the increase in popularity of voice search?

We are thinking about it, not plans yet. It is interesting, and I reckon, the volume of voice search will increase in the future.

How do you see SEO and SERPs changing in the future?

It will be normal "procedure" to optimize and use SEO for every company. SEM will be continuous way of marketing for plenty of advertisers.

Does local search help generate more in-store/office visits?

I don't have experience on that. But in according to Google yes.

Are rich snippets or featured snippets something you're using or would use in the future?

I have not yet taken those in use, but maybe in the future. It is an interesting programmatic supplement.

Company name: ID BBN

How many employees does the company have? 30

Does your company offer SEO for clients?

Yes

What are the main advantages of SEO?

Raise awareness, increase interest, structure web presence, create new leads, improve customer satisfaction

How important is it to place well in search engine results pages (SERPs)?

Very important, since that is directly tied to visitors, suspects, prospects and leads

What are the main reasons your company uses paid ads? (If they do)

To raise awareness

Do you have plans for the increase in popularity of voice search?

No

How do you see SEO and SERPs changing in the future?

Yes

Does local search help generate more in-store/office visits?

Probably, but not important to us, we don't have clients walking in

Are rich snippets or featured snippets something you're using or would use in the future?

Probably more in the future

Company name: Sofokus

How many employees does the company have? 48

Does your company offer SEO for clients? Yes, we have offer consultation with SEO.

What are the main advantages of SEO?

SEO is cost-effective way to drive big volume traffic and sales. Compared to other channels you don't need media budget to constantly drive traffic and sales. Investment in SEO will generate results for long time period after the the investment has been done. Results usually gotten in 2-6 months period which is shorter than some other channels like email. Around 80% of buyers start their research from Google before buying, placing you in the right place at the right time when someone searching for product, solution or service.

How important is it to place well in search engine results pages (SERPs)?

Getting top ranks is very important but it is not highest thing. Top 3 search results usually get around 50% of all the clicks. 4th-9th ranks get around 10% of clicks. Page 2 of search results get even less.

Better ranking gets you high amount of clicks but you have consider things like keyword relevance to determine if keyword will generate revenue.

What are the main reasons your company uses paid ads? (If they do)

Speed and increased sales. You deploy fast results on keywords that you are not ranking well yet. Also if competition is hard in some keywords, having two links instead of one is always better.

Do you have plans for the increase in popularity of voice search?

Increase in voice search does not effect much search engine optimizer. Only thing that is changing is way method how users are doing their search. There is some things that we can do to improve search results but those are things that we are already improving.

How do you see SEO and SERPs changing in the future?

SEO is always changing. Recent changes has been increased rich snippets and user experience like features to determine search engine rankings. In (near) future we will see

more AI controlling search engine rankings. Voice search will increase thanks to speech recognition software able to understand better languages.

Does local search help generate more in-store/office visits?

Yes, local search helps to generate more instore visits. Google Maps is at top 10 search engines and plenty of people use that to find restaurants and stores.

Are rich snippets or featured snippets something you're using or would use in the future?

Rich snippets are becoming more and more important in SEO. Google wants data to be in format so it can show inside google instead of driving traffic to your site. Even though is bad for SEO, it does drive more traffic if you have rich snippets enabled.