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FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE SEARCH ENGINE RANKINGS

– Case Company X

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This study investigates factors that influence higher keyword rankings on case company X website. The author explored SEO best practices that can be applied to boost traffic to the case company's website.

The research methodology applied in this thesis is mixed research methods. The data collection included in-depth interview with the CEO and competitor's data extracted from Google search engine. Google analytics and Accuranker were used to track impact of implemented changes while Google search console helped to identify crawling and indexation problem.

The findings from this research revealed factors that are responsible for higher keyword rankings. These include having readable content, unique page titles and meta descriptions, reducing the website images and optimizing them for web, improving the page load speed and building internal and external links to the website. With proper on page optimization, a website can rank better in a less competitive niche, but a good off page strategy will be required to rank in a more competitive niche.

KEYWORDS:

Search Engine Optimization, On-Page SEO, Off-Page SEO, Google My Business, Search Engine Algorithm

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS (OR) SYMBOLS

CTR – Click Through Rate

DA – Domain Authority

GA – Google Analytics

GMB – Google My Business

GSC – Google Search Console

HTML – Hypertext Markup Language

HTTPS – Hyper Text Transfer Protocol Secure

LSI – Latent Semantic Index

NAP – Name Address Phone Number

PA – Page Authority

SEO – Search Engine Optimization

SERP – Search Engine Result Page

URL – Uniform Resource Locator

1 INTRODUCTION

By 2021, it is estimated that global retail e-commerce sales will reach \$4.5 trillion (Orendorff, 2019). Hence, there is no better time for small businesses to have an online presence than now. The turbulent situation of the first quarter of 2020, forced a lot of businesses to shut down and rethink their strategy. Having an online presence is no longer considered an option, it has become a necessity.

The impact of the lockdown was felt around the world causing a shift in consumer behavior patterns. The US e-commerce sales experienced a 49% increase in daily sales, while online daily grocery sales also increased by 110% in April when compared to the previous month (Perez, 2020). One of the first beneficiaries of the situation is e-commerce stores.

Not only did online sales skyrocket, but around 90% of shoppers have become hesitant to shop in regular stores because of the pandemic, while 45% admitted that online shopping has become a norm for them (Kilcourse & Rowen, 2020). Having an online presence through a website portends a great opportunity for businesses to reach a farther audience with their messaging, products, and services. Businesses with a web presence have an opportunity to boost sales and expand to other markets without having a physical presence. Many businesses have grown beyond expectations due to the opportunity provided by the internet and e-commerce while some have not taken advantage of it.

Out of every 10 small businesses, 6 are yet to establish an online presence and get a website, therefore, missing out on online marketing opportunities. 83% of the small business owners with a website believe it gives them a competitive advantage over those without a website. While 48% of the business owners with no website have plans to build a website and they expect their business to grow by 25% or more within 3 to 5 years (Perilli, 2018).

As technology advanced over the years, webshop owners have used their websites to provide support through live chat and to get feedback from customers. This feedback mechanism helped businesses to improve their products, services, and help with new product development ideas.

During the early stage of e-commerce, it was easier to launch a website and start getting sales compared to what is obtained today due to the high level of competition. Setting up a website is not enough without having a strategy to make it visible to the target audience online.

According to Perez (2016), 79 percent of Americans make use of the internet for purchase. This makes the internet the largest marketplace that provides businesses the opportunity to thrive. The internet, like every other market, can have a high competition level that can make it difficult for businesses to get the required visibility to make the effort worthwhile.

A good search engine optimization (SEO) strategy will boost website visibility through higher keyword rankings in the search engine result pages leading to an increase in the number of visitors to the website. Submitting a website to local directories and local search engines increases its chances of become more visible in other markets. By becoming more visible, a website boosts its chances of being found which can have a positive impact on product or service sales.

According to Zubić (2020), by creating an online presence through websites and social media platforms, businesses will be in a better position to sell more of their products and services without exploring more expensive media channels such as television, radio, and newspaper publication. Social media platforms provide cost effect effective advertising option for businesses, for example, Facebook provides business owners with a unique feature to create a free online shop which is integrated with their Facebook page.

Online stores have some benefits over regular brick and mortar retail outlets. With the right software, inventory management, automated tracking of product sales, and account reconciliation are made seamless (DeBenedetto, 2020). Modern webshop applications also have enhanced features that make it possible to deliver efficient customer service. On the consumer side, a webshop makes online purchase very easy as potential buyers can easily read products and customer reviews online before deciding.

Based on the impact that a well-optimized website can have on the fortunes of small businesses, this thesis seeks to evaluate how a well-implemented search engine optimization strategy will help company X rank for more keywords.

1.1 Introduction to Company X

Company X is in the pet supplies niche with a production facility in South West, Finland; it started operation in 2017. There was a concern about the low quality of the products in the market hence the desire to reach niche audience with a better alternative. The product sold by company X was a joint effort between an entrepreneur and a designer. The initial prototype was subjected to numerous testing and was further improved based on feedback from pet owners that participated in the testing. The improvement led to final a product which is currently been sold on the webshop of company X.

Company X product is made of environmentally friendly parts, which are recyclable and easy to set up for pet use. Currently, the product sold on the webshop has three variations depending on the color of the materials used.

Company X webshop was launched in July 2017 and had struggled to get much traffic from search engines, this made the business resort to paid advertisement to gain traction online.

1.2 Research Motivation

The researcher has two main reasons for writing this thesis. Firstly, digital marketing is an area of interest and the researcher has acquired some professional experience in this field. The researcher is hoping to find employment in this field or start working as a freelancer upon graduation. This thesis will provide a good experience of what is required to work with a local client.

Secondly, since most small business owners have limited marketing budget to compete online with well-established businesses, the researcher's goal is to help small businesses implement cost-effective online marketing strategy within budget.

1.3 Research Objectives and Research Questions

This thesis seeks to evaluate the level of organic competition and what company X can do to acquire its share of organic traffic through higher keyword rankings. The study will

also attempt to create a search engine optimization strategy that can be applied to company X online store to help increase visibility in Finland.

To achieve this, company X will have to identify its sphere of influence within the Finland market and not compete with established stores with a larger marketing budget.

The current research is important to the case company since it will help evaluate the impact of website optimization on business performance. Studying this topic will also help online store operators identify factors that influence higher rankings in search engines and what needs to be done to achieve this.

The thesis will explore areas such as keyword research, on-page optimization, off page optimization, competitor analysis, local SEO, and link building to achieve the set goals.

Based on the above objectives, the research is set to provide answers to the following questions:

1. What can company X do in the short to medium term to rank higher for more keywords and increase webshop traffic?
2. How can company X compete in a market dominated by larger e-commerce stores?

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Search Engine

A search engine is a software system that analyses its database, based on a search query, and display the most relevant stored results that meet the need of the user. The process of influencing a search engine to display a stored web page is referred to as search engine optimization. The list of displayed results after a search is conducted is thus referred to as the search engine result page (Maros, 2019).

Shure (2017) believes that the main objective of search engine optimization is to strategically give search engines what they want. This he believes can be achieved by identifying opportunity gaps between user actions and what search engines want. This must be done in a way that benefits the user.

2.1.1 How do search engines work

To achieve higher keyword rankings, drive more traffic to a website, it is important to understand how search engines work. This will help to know the best way to set up a website and its content to be search engine friendly.

All search engines are capable of carrying out three important functions, to crawl, index and present results (Fishkin, 2013)

Crawling

Search engines in-built computer programs called robots (crawlers or spiders) are used to find information on the internet. They do this by scanning the internet for web servers and hosted websites content. Search engine crawlers use hypertext links to discover new sources to crawl and the cycle continues (Woodward, 2019).

Further studies confirmed that once search engine spiders reach a page with no external links, it returns. Hence, pages without any incoming links pointing to them on a website will not be visited by search engine crawlers (Enge, et al. 2015, p. 260-261). Due to this link problem, search engines sometimes have challenges crawling all the pages on larger

websites. Optimizing the crawl budget of the website usually solve this problem. Crawl budget is the frequency at which search engine robots scan a website. Optimizing a website's crawl budget ensures that search engines do not waste time crawling unimportant pages (Fishkin, 2013).

Index

Once search engine robots have completed a crawl session, the discovered content is stored and organized in a database called index. Results for search queries are retrieved from the index based on the user request and displayed on the search engine result pages. When a search is conducted, search engines scan through its index, re-order the data and present the most relevant result that solves the searcher query. This re-ordering process is known as ranking (Fishkin, 2013).

Search engines update their index regularly with new data discovered by the crawlers. Therefore, it is important to check the number of pages that have been indexed on a website (Edwards, 2020). This will help website owners to know if their content can be accessed by search engine robot. The search query "site:yourdomain.com" can be used to check the number of indexed pages on a website.

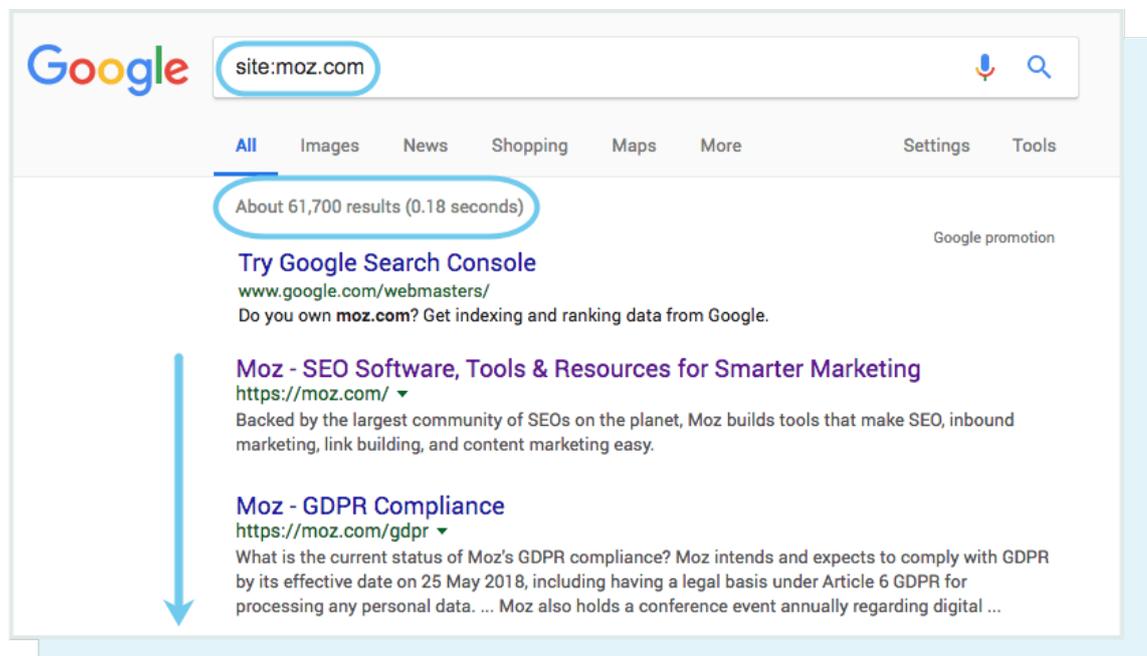


Figure 1. Moz website indexed pages (Moz, 2013).

The displayed result gives an idea of the number of pages that have been indexed in Google search engine. Google search console index report provides accurate information on the number of pages that have been indexed on a website. Google Search Console (GSC) is a tool that helps to evaluate the search traffic and performance of a website.

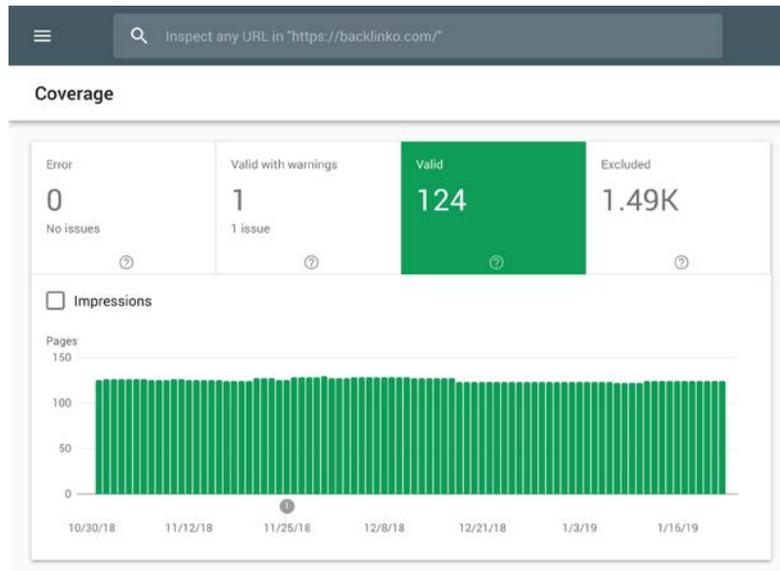


Figure 2. Backlinko.com Google Search Console index report (Backlinko, 2018).

In critically accessing website crawlability and indexation, Long (2020) argued that a search engine crawling process does not always lead to the indexation of those pages. He further argued that most search engines do not provide an explanation for this but the insights available in Google search console index reports could help fix the problem. Before a website crawling process begins, search engine crawlers look for the robot.txt file. The robots.txt file is also known as the robots exclusion protocol. It is used by webmasters to give instructions to search engine robots about what pages on a website can be accessed and crawled (Fishkin, 2013).

Here is an example of a robot.txt file basic format:

User-agent: [user-agent name]

Disallow: [URL string not to be crawled]

Where “user-agent” is the robot that you are giving instruction to, and “disallow” indicate pages or sections of a website that you want to block.

Here is an example of a robot.txt file giving an instruction to search engine crawlers:

User-agent: googlebot

Disallow: /videos

This rule would tell Googlebot, which is Google’s search engine robot not to index the video folder of a website. The same instruction can be passed to all other search engine robots by adding an asterisk (*).

Here is an example:

User-agent: *

Disallow: /videos

The asterisks sign “*” tells all search engine robots to NOT crawl the videos folder.

The robots.txt file of a website can be accessed by placing “/robots.txt” at the end of the website’s home page i.e. mydomain.com/robots.txt, where mydomain.com is the address of the website.

2.1.2 Display Results

Search engines processes and check user query against records in its index before the one that best answers the user expectations. Search engines display results in different formats such as hyperlink texts, videos, images, or maps with direction (Fishkin, 2013).

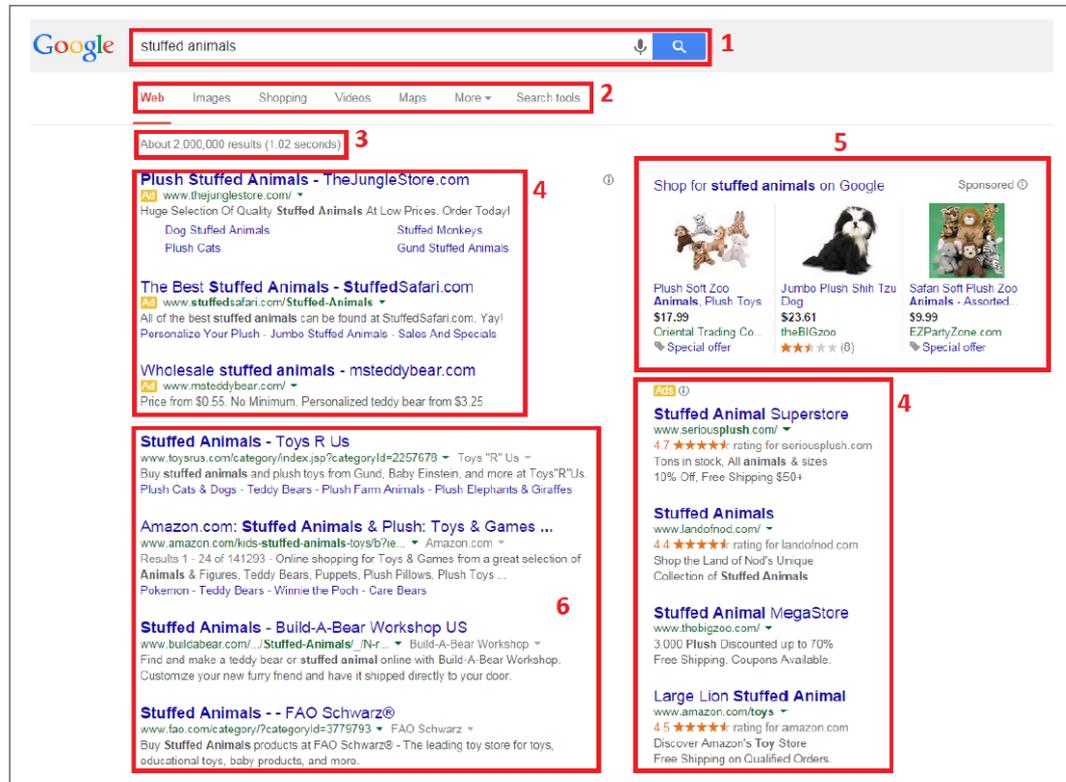


Figure 3. Layout of Google search engine results page (Enge et al., 2015).

1 – Search box

Users conduct searches by typing queries in this box and search engines get instructions about users search intent from here.

2 - Navigation menu

This shows the different categories of relevant results that matches the user query that was returned by the search engine.

3 - Results

This is the number of web pages that contain relevant information about the user search query.

4 – Paid Ads results

These are paid advertising campaigns that best answers the search query. They are retrieved from Google Ads.

5 – Google shopping results

These are results pulled from the Google shopping campaign that matches the search query.

6 – Organic search results

The organic search results are web page listings that search engines find to be the most relevant to the user's query and perceived intent.

The arrangement/ranking of the displayed results of a search query is determined by a program called algorithm. Search engines use an algorithm to determine the relevance of a result to a search query and which to rank higher.

Shure (2017) defined ranking as the process that search engine algorithms use to decide which content to display for a particular result on the search engine result pages. He further confirmed that the Google algorithm uses some factors to arrange and decide which results to display from their database (index) in order of relevance to user's search intent.

2.1.3 Search Engine Algorithm

An algorithm is a set of rules that helps search engine decide which result to display for a search query (Google, 2017). According to Melson (2018), Google regularly updates its algorithm to improve the relevance of displayed results. These updates can have either a positive or negative impact on websites in Google index. Major algorithm updates in the past have wiped out some successful website organic traffic while some websites were de-indexed. This is referred to as Google penalty. The process of reversing the negative impact of an algorithm update on a website is called penalty recovery.

Google penalty usually happen during or after an algorithm update. Most SEO professionals cannot tell exactly the cause until after a careful investigation. Some factors that could lead to this include toxic/spammy link acquisition, adding too many keywords on a page (keyword stuffing), hacked website, and content with little or no value (Churick, 2018).

Goodwin (2018) confirmed that Google algorithm updates can lead to a huge spike in traffic, loss of traffic and in other cases, it may have no effect on website traffic volume.

Regular algorithm updates have necessitated the need to monitor website performance and rankings regularly. Monitoring can be done using third party tools such as ahrefs, semrush or Google Analytics.

2.1.4 Search Engines Market Share

According to (Fishkin, 2018), Google has almost a near-monopoly of web search volume with about 90% taking place on its search engines. Google search engine is the largest of all, followed by Google Images and YouTube which are also Google's properties.

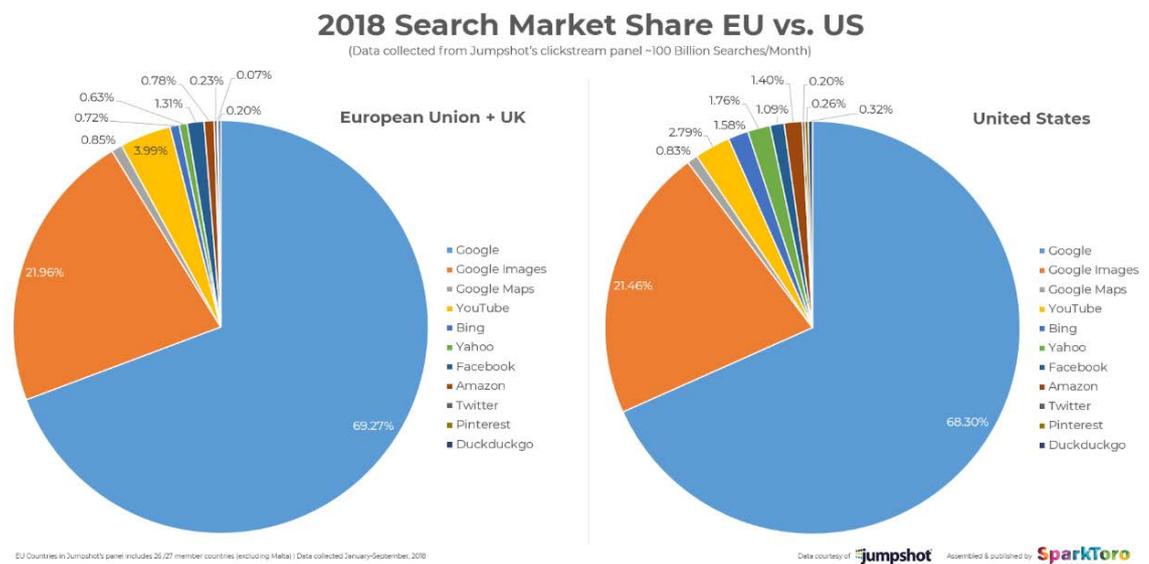


Figure 4. Search engine market share (Sparktoro, 2019).

The US market data is often an indicator of what is obtained in other countries except for Russia and China where Yandex and Baidu have the largest market share. Fishkin (2018) further revealed that Google processes over 3.5 billion searches daily making it difficult for any other search engine to compete with it. These data will help the case company decide which search engine to focus on.

2.2 Search Engine Optimization Explained

According to Shure (2017) search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of influencing natural search results so that a web page appears higher for its target keywords. SEO is not a fast process; it involves an analysis of top-ranking results and requires thorough planning and time for effected changes to have an impact on websites. A good SEO strategically give search engines what they want, which in turn benefits users and businesses. Therefore, the main goal of a good SEO specialist will be to provide search engines with what they want to achieve a higher rank in the SERPs for multiple keywords

McCoy (2018) explained the importance of high-quality content in search engine optimization. She confirmed that, since most internet users are seeking more information, it is important to have content that provide answers to their questions. This encourages visitors to engage more with a website. Content comes in different forms such as text, images, audio, and video

SEO process can be grouped into three categories, On-Page SEO, Off-Page SEO and Technical SEO. On-Page SEO happens on the website. These include content, images, videos, page description and page titles. Off page SEO are actions that take place outside the website that affect a website ranking. It include link building, guest posting, and citations. Technical SEO include the non-content related part of a website such as sitemaps and security (Yesbeck, 2018).

2.2.1 Benefits of SEO

SEO as a strategy comes with a lot of benefits. By ranking high on the search engine result page, a website has access to free organic traffic. Organic traffic is a term used to describe visitors that land on a website through clicking of web pages displayed on the search engine result page. Hence, there is a constant flow of organic traffic once a website starts to rank (Chris, 2017).

Organic search is usually the primary source of traffic to most website (Sukhraj, 2019). Since Google through its properties (Google Search Engine, Google Images, YouTube, and Google Maps) own about 93% of search traffic it is important to focus effort on ranking in Google search engine as it is a source of cheap traffic. This makes SEO cost

effective when applied as a long-term strategy. Organic traffic remains the dominant source of web traffic as it is responsible for about 54% of all website traffic (BrightEdge 2019). It is important to rank on the first page of search engine result page, because websites listed beyond page one receives little to no traffic. About 75% of organic traffic goes to the top 5 list websites (Advanced Web Ranking 2019).

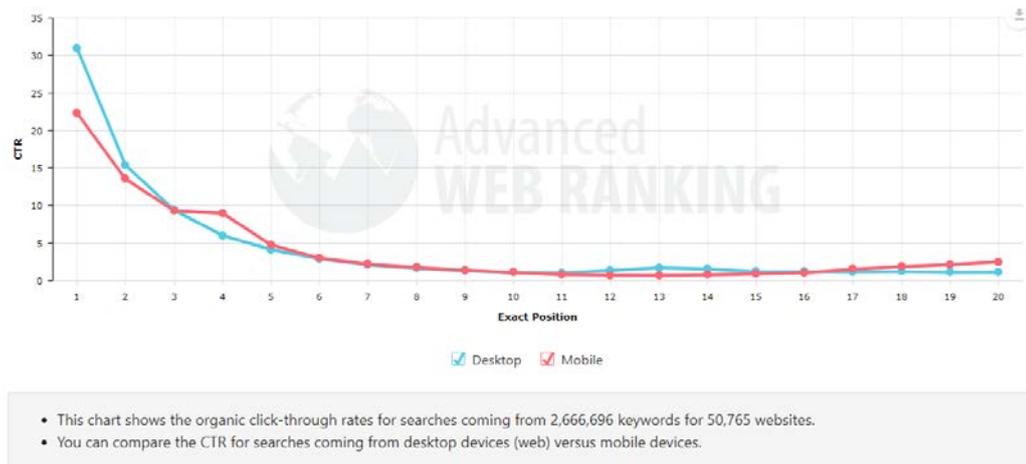


Figure 5. Organic CTR vs Ranking Position (Advanced Web Ranking, 2019).

A well implemented SEO strategy comes with a lot of benefits, which include:

Brand Awareness – Laughton (2020) explained that SEO can help businesses improve brand awareness through higher keyword rankings. If a website can rank on the first page of Google for multiple keywords, the brand becomes more visible to people that are conducting searches in that niche. Curran (2019) confirmed that businesses can also improve brand awareness by having presence on different social and media platform. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Linked, Etsy helps businesses to be more visible online while some also have features that encourages interaction with visitors. Social sites are sometimes displayed on SERP as part of results for a search query.

Market Expansion – SEO makes it possible for businesses to target audiences in other markets without having local presence. Websites can be modified to target different countries and rank for multiple keywords in those markets if the SEO strategy is well implemented (Fishkin, 2014).

2.2.2 Ranking with SEO

According to former Google CEO Schmidt (2010), the search engine giant has over 200 factors it considers while ranking a website. Although he did not reveal the list of these factors as he claimed that would amount to releasing business secrets. Roof (2016), while revealing his SEO test results, argued that Google, despite having many ranking factors, places more emphasis on just a few signals that have significant impact on a website ranking positions. Depending on the level competition, some ranking factors can move a website position by as much as 100 spots within few days while others can have little to no effect.

Over the years there have been counter claims on what factors Google lay more emphasis when ranking a website. A lot of SEO test results are subjective as there are many other factors that could affect the outcome. Hence, two similar test could have different outcome.

2.3 How to optimize for Google (On-page Optimization)

These are tactics that can be implemented on website pages to improve overall performance. These changes include, adjusting content length, adding image title, page title, meta description and header tags (Searchmetrics 2014). Since the scope of this research is limited, the most important on-page optimization process that was implemented during this research are listed below.

2.3.1 Keyword Research

Keyword research is a critical step of a robust SEO plan. It helps to identify relevant keywords that a website needs to rank for and those to ignore. Picking keywords based on search volume and competition level alone is no longer an effective strategy. Modern customer journey requires an understanding and expectation of user intent whenever they seek answers from Google (Eubanks, 2015). User intent tells us exactly what a user is searching for when a search is conducted through search engines. It goes beyond the keywords used as part of the search queries to understand the context and the intention behind those words (Radu, 2018).

Google's Haahr (2016), explained a theory of how user intent influences search result. He argues that when a user searches for local business for example, a musti ja mirri outlet, search engines assumes the searcher is looking for the nearest musti ja mirri outlet and not the headquarters.

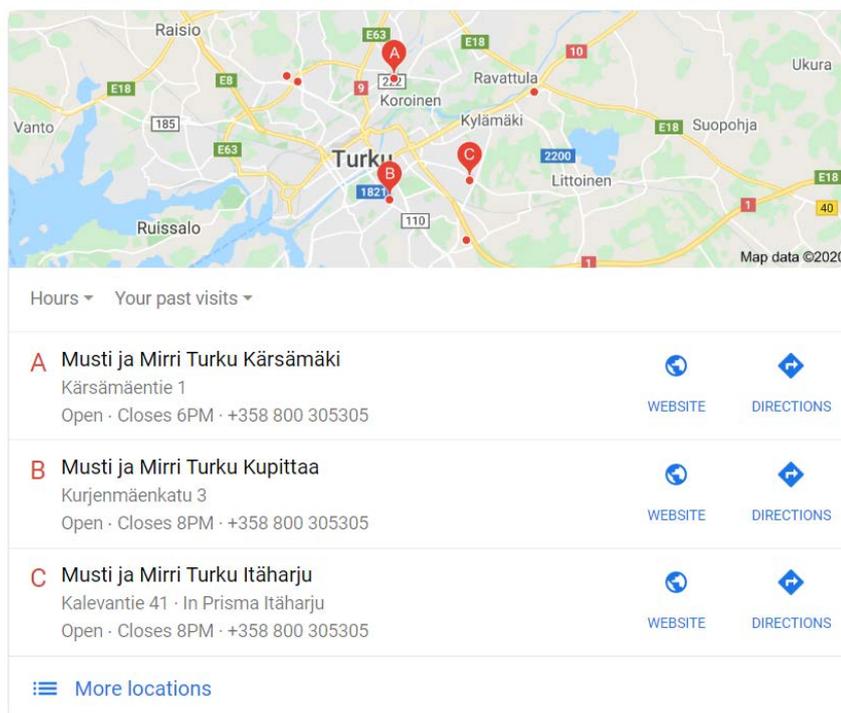


Figure 6. Musti ja Mirri local map pack results (2020).

A good SEO strategy seeks to understand how potential customers search for your product and services. Search results should provide people with authoritative and trustworthy information, and not lead them astray to irrelevant content. It should help them find what they are looking for and not surprise them with disturbing content. Since the goal of search engine is to provide the most relevant results to searchers, therefore, it is important for search engines to understand the intent behind user search queries. Zhou et al. (2006) reported that user intent is of high importance to search engine information retrieval process. The study revealed that user intent is set to achieve two goals; the user may be seeking a more focused information about the search query or may be looking for general information.

Since comprehensive keyword research was not within the scope of this thesis, the researcher only examined 3 buckets of keywords:

Conversion Keywords – These are keywords that “drive high conversion rate through a paid advertising campaign (Wordstream 2010). The data was extracted from company X Google Ads campaign.

Traffic Keywords – These are keywords that can provide high traffic volume to the website. The best way to get this is to look at the page titles, blog titles and social profiles of high-ranking competing websites (Dragilev, 2017).

Soulo (2019) suggest that, rather than competing with larger brands for high competition keywords, it is worthwhile for small businesses to target high intent long-tail variations of the main keywords with their content. Long tail keywords are more specific keyword phrases that visitors are likely to use when they are close to making a purchase decision. They usually have low search volume and convert exceptionally well.

How to find long-tail keywords

Here are few ways to find long tail variations of a keyword:

- Google autocomplete – These are automatically suggested keywords shown when a user start typing in Google search box.

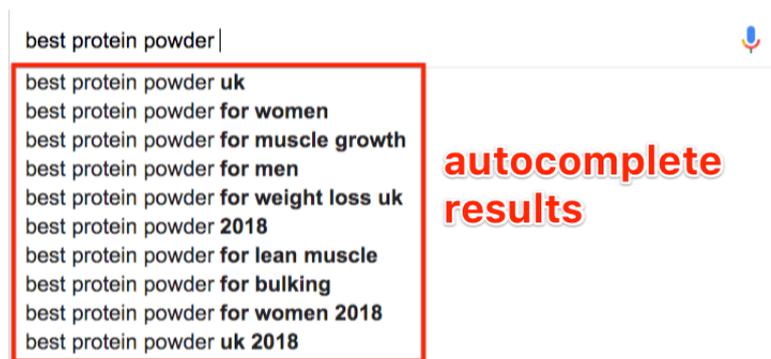


Figure 7. Google autocompletion (Ahrefs, 2019).

- People also ask – This feature is closer to the top of a search engine result page.

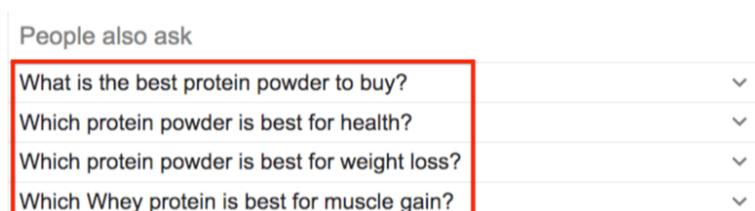


Figure 8. Google's people also ask (Ahrefs, 2019).

- Searches related to – These are related keywords suggested by Google at the bottom of the search engine result page.



Figure 9. Google's searches related to (Ahrefs, 2019).

Tools that can help with detailed keyword research include Ahrefs, SEMRush and Google Keyword Planner. These tools make the process of keyword selection easier with their in-built metrics which evaluates competition, search volume and average clicks they get.

Keyword Placement

Soulo (2019) in his study of over 2 million web pages confirmed that, by strategically placing keywords in the right places, a web page has better chance of ranking. Roof (2019) further confirmed that, for on-page optimization to be effective, it is important to identify the exact keyword to target and where to place it for best result. He identified the following areas of a website as having maximum impact for on page optimization; keywords in the url, title tag, meta description and header tags.

2.3.2 URL Structure

A URL (uniform resource locator), also known as web address, refers to specific resource on the internet. Mueller (2019) while discussing how site structure helps Google search engine, recommended that URL structure should contain target keyword, be kept short and simple to make it readable to visitors. Special characters should be avoided and dash (-) should be used between words instead of underscore (_).

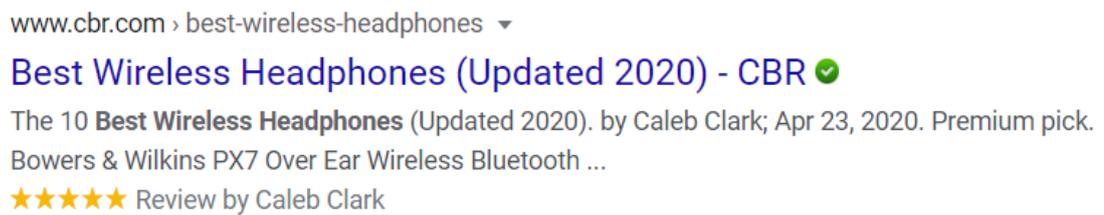


Figure 10. CBR URL Structure (Ahrefs, 2020).

Page Title

This is an HTML tag that describes the title of a page. The page title should be approximately 65 characters long and it is important to have the primary keyword closer to the front of the title (Fishkin, 2017). Every website page should have a unique page title since it informs visitors and search engines what the web page is about and also have direct impact on ranking.

Header Tags

The header tags are used to logically layout the page content and the primary keyword should be included at least once. Header tags tell search engine robots what the page content is about (Willson, 2020). Depending on the page content length, there can be multiple heading tags (H1, H2, H3, H4, H5 and H6) on the same page, where H1 is the most important and H6 the least important. H1 is used as the post/content title, while H2 to H6 as headings of the content sub-sections.

Meta Description

The meta description tag gives additional information about the web page and it is often displayed in the Google search result pages. As a best practice, meta descriptions should be 160 characters or less; primary keyword should be in the tag because it gets bolded when displayed in search result (Fishkin, 2013).

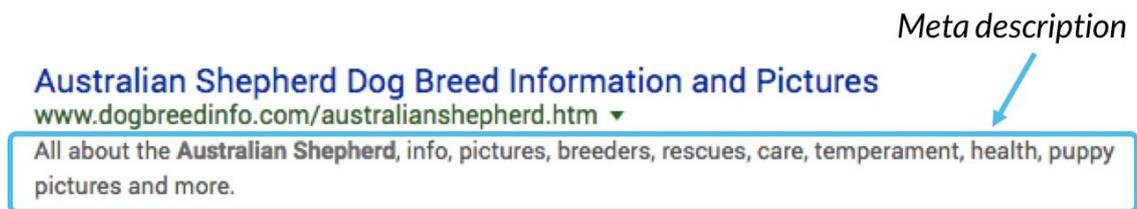


Figure 11. Meta description example (Moz, 2018).

Every page on a website should have a unique meta description. A well-written meta description should provide the summary of a page content. On its own, meta description does not impact website rankings but affects click-through rate when it is written to evoke interest (Fishkin, 2013).

2.3.3 Readable Content

Good quality content has become very important to Google search engine. Google uses different signals and engagement metrics to measure what a good content is. Emphasis are placed on signals such as average time on page, pages/session and bounce rate (Charlton, 2017). Average time on page is the amount of time a user spends on a web page. Pages per session is the number of pages a user visited during each visit to a website. Bounce rate is the percentage of single interaction visit to a web page; the data is available in Google Analytics (Carlin, 2017).

A high bounce rate is an indication of low engagement with a web page content. As a rule of thumb, bounce rates above 50% are considered high, while any figure between 20% and 50% is considered low (Peyton, 2014). A more engaged traffic is an indicator of better content. Slawski (2020) argued that bounce rate could either be good or bad. He further explained that, it could mean that visitors find what they are looking for really

quickly on a page (good results) or visitors realized a page has nothing to do with what they are looking for (bad results).

The following are required to improve the bounce rate of a web page, firstly, improving the content by checking the average content length and structure of top-ranking competing websites and making it more readable. Secondly, by avoiding the use of pop ups which irritates most visitors and thirdly by using the target keywords within the content (Patel, 2017).

Before implementing a content upgrade, it is important to analyze the type of content or pages that Google is ranking for a keyword. If a keyword search returned ecommerce content as the top-ranking pages, a blog post cannot compete with those since Google feels ecommerce content is the most relevant result that meet user intent. Also, if the top ranking results returned are inner pages, a website can only compete with an inner page and not the home page (Hardwick, 2020).

While planning a content, it is important to check the average content length of the top-ranking site to have an estimate of what will be required to compete with them. Hardwick (2020) further confirmed the importance of using LSI (Latent Semantic Index) keywords within content. LSI are words that naturally come up in conversation about a topic. These words must be related to the primary keyword and should be used naturally within your content. LSI Graph is a tool that can be used to generate ton of LSI keywords.

Meanwhile, Roof (2018) in his SEO test claimed that Google algorithm is not advanced enough to understand what quality content is. He reached this conclusion after ranking a web page made up of lorem ipsum text while having the primary keyword in strategic places. The web page outranked higher authority websites within few months. While acknowledging the result of the test, Montii (2018), claimed that the test mocks everything Google says about quality content and authority and revealed weakness in its algorithm. To douse the controversy generated by the test results, Google de-indexed the website few days after the results was made public.

While content is an important factor to rank for multiple keywords, it is very important not have the same content on multiple pages of a website to avoid keyword cannibalization. This is a phenomenon that occurs when multiple pages on the same website are ranking for the same keywords (Hardwick, 2018).

2.3.4 Image Tags

Image tags are alternative text for an image. Since search engines are not human and cannot see images, alt tags are used to tell them what the images are about (Enge, et al. 2015, p 88-89). Alt tags and filenames are just one more component of total optimization equation, as it provides a means of adding more keywords which a page could rank for. This tactic is very prone to over-optimization penalties hence, the need to use natural and descriptive language rather than keyword stuffing.

2.3.5 Internal Linking

Internal Linking is the process of linking different pages on a website. Internal links are important because it helps Google crawlers to find other contents on a website and work out the relationship between the different pages. Links between website content provide ranking boost to the linked pages and improve usability by guiding visitors to high converting pages (Hardwick, 2019). Fishkin (2013) also confirmed that internal links are powerful because it helps to spread ranking power across the website. The best way to implement internal link is to link a high authority web page to a low one. High authority web pages are those with links pointing to them. High authority websites have high domain authority (DA) and page authority (PA).

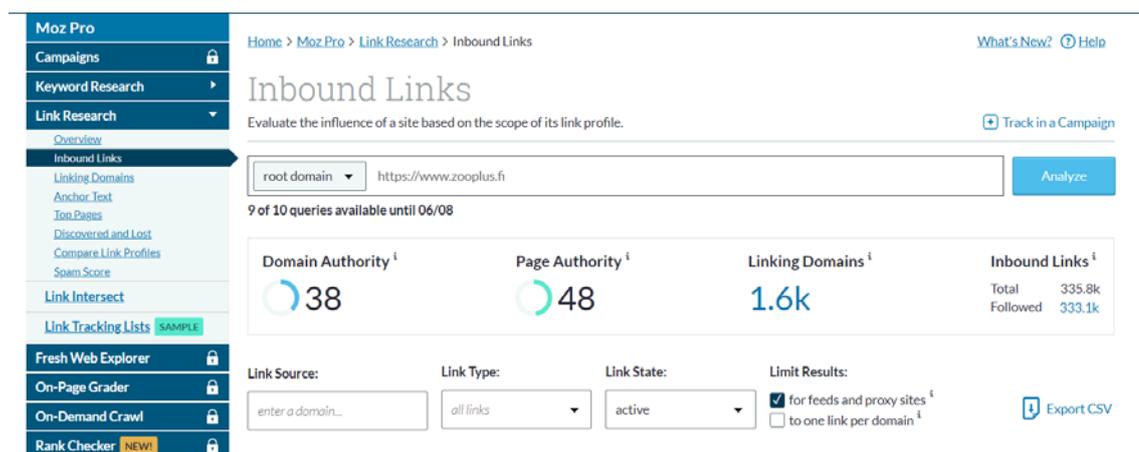


Figure 12. Zooplus domain and page authority metric (Moz, 2020).

Domain Authority and Page Authority

According to Fishkin (2013), Domain Authority is metric developed by Moz to evaluate the authority and trustworthiness of a website. A trusted website is one that Google finds highly relevant to a user query. Domain Authority (DA) is also used to predict a website's ability to rank. A DA score ranges from 1 to 100; with a higher score indicating higher chance to rank better. Mozabar, a Google chrome extension can be used to measure domain authority and page authority of a website. Page Authority is the same as domain authority, but while DA works at the domain level, PA works at the web page level.

2.3.6 Page Speed

This is the length of time it takes a website to load. Page speed is important because it impacts the experiences of users (Stox, 2020). When a website takes time to load after being clicked, most users either exit the page by closing it or click the back button. According to Jackson (2017), to improve page speed, the first step is to check the current load time of the page by using Google insight tool or gtmatrix. Suggestions on the steps to take will be provided after the analysis. Page speed test can be a time-consuming process since you have to test each page. It is advisable to start with the most important page or use advanced website auditing tools like ahrefs or screaming frog for faster results.

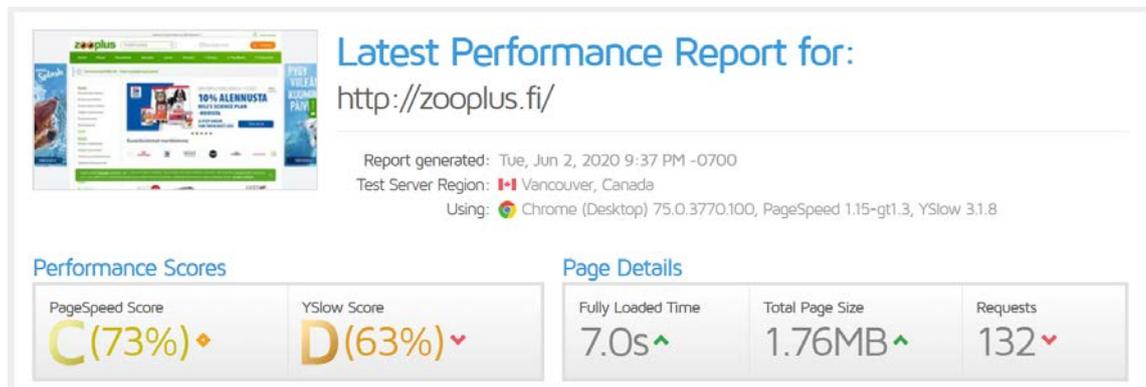


Figure 13. Zooplus website speed analysis (GTMetrix, 2020).

Google indicated that most users would leave a page if it takes more than 3 seconds to load. It is therefore important to aim for speed below 2 seconds (An, 2017). Here are some of the steps to take to reduce website page speed, firstly, reduce the image sizes through an image compressor tool. Secondly, remove all unnecessary HTML tags.

2.4 Off Page Optimization

These are activities done outside the website but have major impact on overall rankings. Getting links on other high authority and topically relevant websites is one of the most important off page optimization factor. Link building is the process of getting other websites to link to yours. Google looks at links like a popularity contest or votes. The more reputable votes a website has (i.e. links), the higher the website will rank (Stewart, 2016). Off page optimization process can be grouped into two categories, link related off-page factors and non-link related off-page factors.

2.4.1 Link-related off-page factors

These are the most important and critical part of off-page SEO. Google evaluate the quality and quantity of links pointing to a webpage and attributes varying level of trust and authority which have direct impact on rankings. Here is the most important link related off-page factors to consider:

Number of referring domains – This is the number of domains pointing back to a web page or website. The higher the quality of these domains, the better. Low quality referring domains have little impact on website ranking. A website that needs more traffic needs more referring domains (Koval, 2020).

Shelby (2020) argued that despite the importance of referring domains to ranking, if a website gets thousands of links from low trust websites, Google usually devalues those links.

Link authority – This is the value attributed to the links pointing to a web page (Page Authority) or website (Domain Authority).

“Dofollow” vs. Nofollow – According to Marrs (2019), a do-follow link passes link authority from the linking website while a no follow does not pass link authority. The html attribute (rel=“nofollow”) is used to inform search engine bots not to influence the target page ranking in search engine.

Anchor text – This is a hyperlinked text that is visible and clickable on a web page. There are five types of anchor text. Exact match anchor contains the exact keyword phrase a page is trying to rank for. Phrase match anchor contain the keyword a page wants to

rank for along with other words. Partial match anchor text contains the keyword and other words arranged differently. Branded anchor is the name of the brand e.g Zooplus (Hardwick, 2016).

Relevance - Relevancy of the domain providing the link is another important off page factor. Getting a link from the same vertical or niche will attract more trust and authority from search engines. Thus, getting a link from a travel site when the target website is about pets may not be effective David Farkas (Farkas, 2018).

The process of evaluating the link related off page factors of competing websites is known as competitor analysis. This process helps to identify competitors weaknesses, strengths and what can be done to get the same level of keyword rankings or better (Hardwick, 2017).

2.4.2 Non link related off-page factors

NAP stands for name, address, and phone number. NAP citations refer to business contact information that can be listed in online directories. Citation is any mention of a business on the web which includes any part of the business name, address, phone number and website. Citations help businesses rank high in the map pack, local search results and help with brand visibility (Shaw, 2017).

Google My Business – Is a good way of generating traffic and conversions for local businesses. GMB Optimization helps to boost business listing to the top of Google and Bing Map pack. A map pack is a business listing that is most relevant to a search. Google My Business is very important to have since it leads to a lot of inbound calls and inquires for businesses. To fully take advantage of its benefits, the GMB property must be verified and all important details such as category, business hours and photos are filled (Pearce, 2018). Figure 6 is an example of GMB map listing.

Reviews – Getting positive feedback from customers about a product or rendered service influences ranking positively. Review content also increases the chances of ranking for more keywords locally. Moz (2018) in its local search report, revealed that reviews are third most important factor required to rank in Google Map Pack.

2.5 Technical SEO

Technical SEO is the process of optimizing a website for the crawling and indexing stage. These are SEO improvement that does not fall into the other two categories of on page seo and off page seo (Chris, 2020).

Google Analytics (GA)

Google analytics shows comprehensive data about activities on a website. GA tracks a lot of parameters that can be used to make data driven decisions that can have positive impact on the health of a website. Before GA can start collecting data from your website, tracking code must be inserted into the header of all webpages. GA tracks users activities on a website as well as visitor's location, demographic information such as age, gender and keywords used by visitors to discover the website (Frost, 2019).

Google Search Console (GSC)

Search console provides insight into how Google positions the website to enable you make changes to your content or other on-page factors. It also shows website crawl rate, index status, sitemaps, and manual penalties by search engine (Dean, 2018).

2.5.1 Sitemaps

A sitemap is the list of all urls on a website such as content pages, images and videos. Sitemaps submitted to Google search console is an indication of trust and it provides insights into a website's indexation or crawling issues (Enge, et al. 2015, p. 262-266). Sitemaps acts as a roadmap map to a website and lead search engine crawlers to all the website pages.

Sitemap	Last Modified
https://yoast.com/post-sitemap.xml	2018-10-03 16:52 +02:00
https://yoast.com/page-sitemap.xml	2018-10-03 17:11 +02:00
https://yoast.com/yoast_plugins-sitemap.xml	2018-10-03 16:04 +02:00
https://yoast.com/yoast_dev_article-sitemap.xml	2018-09-21 12:12 +02:00
https://yoast.com/yoast_courses-sitemap.xml	2018-10-03 16:59 +02:00
https://yoast.com/yoast_jobs-sitemap.xml	2018-09-27 15:50 +02:00
https://yoast.com/yoast_events-sitemap.xml	2018-10-03 09:48 +02:00
https://yoast.com/yoast_employees-sitemap.xml	2018-09-25 11:42 +02:00
https://yoast.com/category-sitemap.xml	2018-10-03 16:52 +02:00
https://yoast.com/post_tag-sitemap.xml	2018-10-03 16:52 +02:00
https://yoast.com/yoast_dev_category-sitemap.xml	2018-09-21 12:12 +02:00
https://yoast.com/yoast_jobs_category-sitemap.xml	2018-09-27 15:50 +02:00
https://yoast.com/author-sitemap.xml	2018-10-01 21:44 +02:00
https://yoast.com/video-sitemap.xml	2018-10-02 10:02 +00:00

Figure 14. Yoast xml sitemaps (Yoast, 2019).

Mobile Friendliness: is another major off page ranking factor. Google and other top search engines have placed importance on this since most users now access the internet through their mobile phones. A mobile friendly website must be responsive and should automatically resizes to fit any device. The website content, images navigation menu must also be accessible (Thompson, 2020). The Google mobile friendly test tool can be used to evaluate a website's mobile friendliness.

Broken Links: are internal or external hypertext or image links that no longer exist. These types of links affect user experience, hence, not good for SEO. It is important to check that links pointing to web pages are still valid and fix any identified broken links. Internal broken links usually lead to a 404-error page which is an indicator that the link or page no longer exist (Raventools 2016).

2.5.2 Secure the Site with HTTPS

HTTPS stands for hypertext transfer protocol secure. It is a protocol used for transferring data across the internet. HTTPS ensures a user activity cannot be tracked and also prevent their information from being stolen (Pecánek, 2020). HTTPs became an important ranking factor few years back, and a website without https is labeled as insecure by Google, discouraging visitors from interacting with it. Recent data also confirmed that users trust https webpages as 84% will not complete an online purchase if the transaction occurred over an insure connection (Hernandez, 2019).

Malware Check

Malware is a term for all malicious software designed to harm or exploit a website to steal private and sensitive information. A website with malware is not trusted by search engines and will be rapidly de-indexed (Papagalos, 2015).

3 RESEARCH METHOD

SEO strategy implementation requires adequate planning and detailed analysis. It is widely believed in the SEO industry that ranking foreign language website is a lot easier than English version. This research also looks to ascertain the authenticity of this claim. For this research purpose, an action research approach was used. According to Koshy et al. (2010) action research is a method used for improving practice. It involves analysis of the current situation, action, critical reflection, and implementation of changes based on the gathered data.

3.1 Data Collection Procedure

The methodology applied in data collection is a mix method approach where qualitative data that included interview with company owner and quantitative data extracted from tools such as Screaming Frog, Ahrefs and Moz were analyzed (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009, pp. 152-153).

Qualitative research provides insights and understanding of the problem at hand. It involves research made on human behavior, attitudes, cultures, and experiences, based on observations and interpretation. The data obtained in qualitative research can be in the form of words, pictures, text etc. Qualitative research is conducted to find out underlying motives and desires with help of in-depth interviews. In-depth interview is a direct personal interview conducted with a small group of respondents to gain insights of the problem at hand (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009, pp. 151-153). Quantitative research is a type of research methodology which tries to quantify the data and establish cause and effect relationship between variables with the help of statistical methods. Data obtain here can be presented in the form of tables, charts, graphs etc. (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009, pp. 414-416).

3.2 Interview

A semi-structured interview approach was used to get information from the company's CEO. An insight into the direction of the interview was provided during a telephone

conversation, hence, the researcher did not provide interview questions in advance. An interview date and time was agreed with the interviewee.

The interview started by asking general questions about the business and background information about the interviewee. The objective of the open-ended questions asked during the interview was to understand the history of the website and what has been done to optimize it. The interview questions were structured to address the main research question:

What can company X do in the short to medium term to rank higher for more keywords and increase webshop traffic?

Answers from the interview were analyzed to address practical problem regarding the webshop. The interview process revealed how the webshop was setup, the platform it uses, the webhost and email service providers. The data from the interview session also provided information such as primary keywords to target and main competitors.

3.3 Data Extraction

In addition to the data gathered during the interview, the researcher also extracted data from the website with screaming frog, which revealed the number of pages with issues that require fixing. Organic and paid traffic data were also extracted from Google analytics. To get this data, the researcher had to rely on SEMrush, which showed the organic position of all the keywords that the website is ranking for.

The goal of the data analysis is to help identify trends. From the interview the researcher got information about previous attempt at implementing an online marketing strategy. Extracted quantitative data also revealed all the issues with the website. These were grouped into two themes which are Technical SEO, Competitor Analysis.

4 ANALYSIS

This section presents information gathered through interview with the case company, personal observation, and data extraction from search engine result pages.

4.1 Interview

The interview took place in February 2019 and the questions were open ended. The interview questions were not provided beforehand. During the interview session, company X CEO described efforts that had been put into improving the company's online visibility without much success. These include content development, taking high quality pictures of the products, distribution of flyers to identified target audience and advertisement in industry related magazine.

Prior to the research, the company attempted to optimize the website by writing few page titles and meta descriptions. Since the company already had some content available and there was limited knowledge of digital marketing, help was needed to make the website pages rank for their target keywords and also increase organic traffic

Outcome of the interview required researcher further analyzed search engine result pages to check the competing websites that are ranking for the set of keywords company X planned to target. Data from the interview and SERP research were analyzed and categorized along two themes, technical seo audit and competitor analysis.

A technical process helps to identify an existing website's SEO problems. Data from technical SEO audit helps to understand the status of a website and issues preventing it from ranking better (Enge, et al. 2015, p 166-171). The competitor analysis provides more information about the competitors, the set of keywords they are targeting and the type of backlinks helping their websites to rank better. The analysis will also attempt to look for opportunities that company X can take advantage of to rank for more keywords within budget.

4.2 Technical SEO Audit

It is not uncommon to implement SEO strategy without experiencing any positive movement. Hence the need to fix all technical problem before proceeding with website optimization. The goal of a website technical audit is to help identify existing or potential problems with a website. This is an often-ignored step in SEO project implementation and has led to failure of projects.

It is important that search engines find company X's website and all content. Despite the capability of search engines to find most websites naturally, further actions needed to be taken to speed up this process.

4.2.1 Technical Website Audit and Optimization

SEO should be an on-going process and not one-off. Regular website audit and optimization should be carried out. This will help to identify new issues with the company's website. For instance, company X recently launched a new website, but there were number of issues with the website that an audit would have revealed. The speed of the website was far above the threshold set by Google and this affects user experience. Screaming frog and other website audit tools such as Site Bulb and Ahrefs will identify other issues steps to fix them.

One other aspect of on page optimization that requires further study is the use of a content delivery network (CDN) and CRO implementation. A CDN can help to improve page speed and load time by reducing the distance between user and the server. Since the scope of the research work is limited, the technical audit only focused on what could be implemented quickly for the website to gain traction, while the non-critical issues were left out.

4.3 Analytics Tools

It is a best practice that a website has a verified Google Search Console account (formerly Google Webmaster Tools), Google Analytics account, and a Bing Webmaster Tools account. These accounts provide valuable information on site performance and issues.

The researcher discovered that the website at that point does not have Google Search Console and Bing Webmaster account setup. These two accounts were setup by the researcher and linked to the case company website.

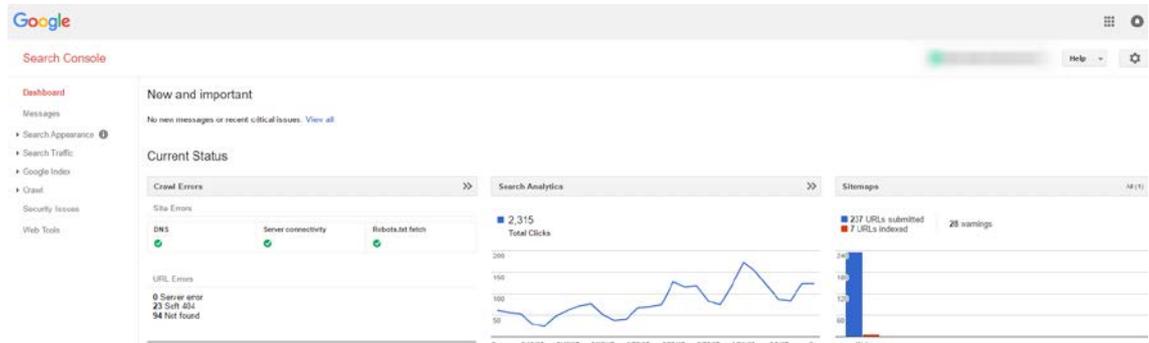


Figure 15. Google Search Console interface (Backlinko, 2018).

Sitemap

An xml sitemap was used by search engines to crawl a site while an html sitemap is used by humans to search the pages on your site. The case company website XML sitemaps was submitted to Google Search Console and Bing Webmaster Tools so that search engine crawlers could firstly, find the site quickly, secondly, find all the site pages. This was done to speed up the crawling and indexing rate of the website pages. The researcher checked the index report in search console, and everything was ok.

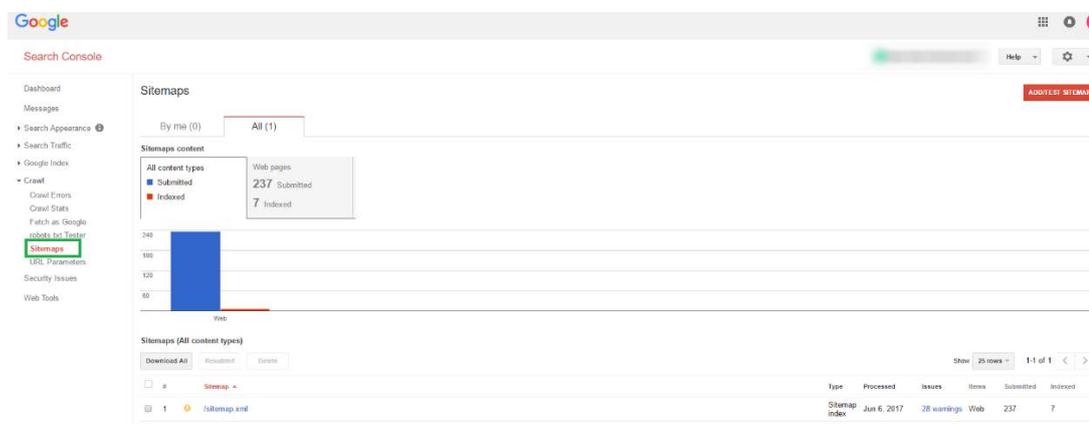


Figure 16. Sitemaps feature in Google Search Console (Backlinko, 2018).

Robots.txt file

Search engine crawlers need instructions to effectively find and index content on case company's website. A robots.txt file tells search engine which pages on a website the crawlers can or cannot index. The researcher checked company X website robots.txt file to ensure that no pages are blocked from search engine crawlers. The search query "site:companyxdomain.com" was used to check the number of pages that have been indexed.

Malware

Sites should be malware free. Sites found with malware are immediately dropped from rankings and can be completely de-indexed if the problem persists.

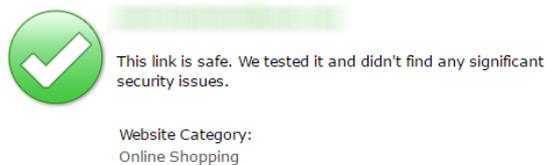


Figure 17. Malware check test result.

Manual Penalties Check

This is to check if Google or any other search engine manually reviewed the website and placed any penalty on it. Prior to the research, a manual penalty check had not been carried out on the case company website. Data from search console could not be used to determine this since it was recently set up by the researcher. Based on Melson (2018) commentary, the researcher had to review past organic traffic data in Google analytics for spikes or drop. Google search console was thus used for future checks that took place during the research.

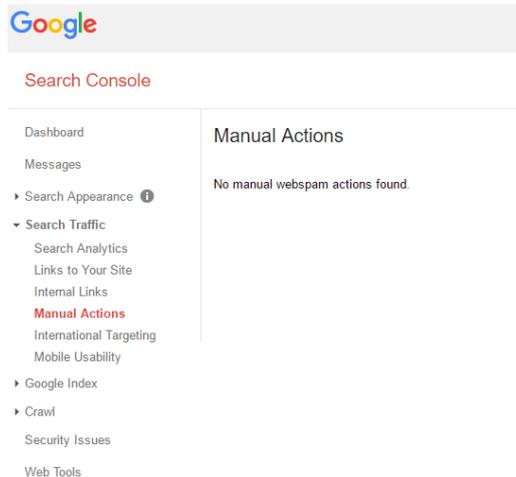


Figure 18. Manual action report in Google Search Console.

HTTP(S) and www Redirect

HTTPS is an indication that a website is secure, and this is a trust signal, Google has made https a ranking factor with less trust will be attributed to non-https websites. The index page checker query “site:companyxdomain.com” was used to check if there are unsecured indexed pages on company X website. This was done to ensure that all pages are secure which further confirms the commentary by Pecánek (2020). The researcher also ensured that all existing http web page were properly re-directed to their https version from Google Search Console.

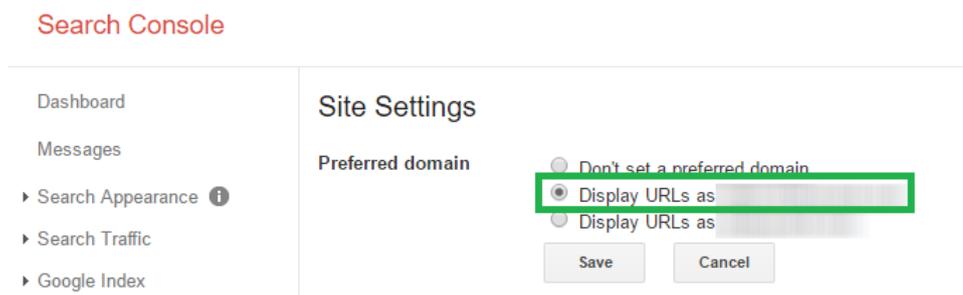


Figure 19. Redirect in Google Search Console.

Mobile Friendliness

A mobile friendliness test was conducted through the Google Mobile Friendly test tool. This has not been done prior to the research. The website successful passed the mobile

friendliness test but some image display issues were discovered. Since this could have major impact on user experience as confirmed by Thompson (2020) commentary, the researcher made necessary adjustment to the images which fixed the problem.

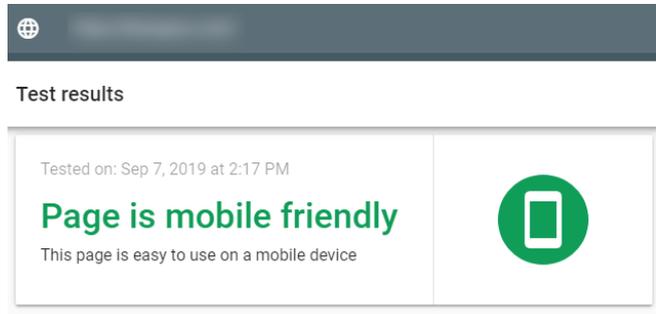


Figure 20. Mobile friendly test report.

Over reliance on a single tool is not efficient for SEO. Most tools have their strength and weakness and the researcher tried to combine different tools to get the best possible results. Apart from using Google's own tools such as Google Analytics and Google Search Console, the researcher also made use of third-party tools depending on their core strength. The tools used included:

Screaming Frog

Screaming Frog was used for focused crawls. It was used to analyze the case company website architecture to identify web pages with issues. Pages with thin content (low word count) and inappropriate URLs can easily be spotted with this tool. These pages usually have negative impact on any search engine optimization strategy. After running a crawl of company X website in screaming frog, the results returned indicated that the website had many on-page related issues. These include *46 web pages with duplicate page titles, 33 pages with duplicate meta descriptions, large un-optimized images on all web pages, and 8 pages with duplicate content in the body section.* These issues unintentionally created cannibalization, which made multiple pages on the website to rank for the same keyword. Keyword cannibalization can have a damaging effect on website ranking because it confuses the search engine on which of the page to rank. This can make search engines to rank an undesirable page ahead of a desired one.

The researcher fixed all the identified issues by writing unique page titles and meta descriptions for all pages on the websites. Changes were also made to the content, and

the images reduced, optimized and re-uploaded to the website. There was noticeable improvement in rankings of those pages after few weeks.

Page Speed Testing

The researcher observed that some of company X web pages load slowly depending on the number of images. This is an indication that a page speed test has not been carried out. To further confirm that the identified images could be responsible for the slow loading speed of the case company website, the researcher made use of GTMetrix. This is a third-party page speed testing tool. The tools identified pages with large images and gave suggestions on what needs to be done to fix the problem. Since page speed is an important on-page factor that affects user experience as confirmed by Stox (2020) commentary. The large images were reduced and re-optimized for search engines and re-uploaded to the website

Keyword Tracking

The researcher observed that company X had not been tracking the website keyword positions. Hence, there is no way to identify which of the keywords have been driving the most traffic to the website. Accuranker, a keyword tracking tool was setup to solve this problem. The data from it are stored in the cloud making it possible to track keyword movement over a period. The researcher used accuranker to track company X website keyword ranking positions throughout the duration of the research.

4.4 Link Acquisition

Despite ranking for multiple keywords after the on-page SEO implementation, most of the keywords are still not on page one of search engine. This simply means that the webshop is not getting much organic traffic because of the current ranking positions of the keywords. This can be reversed by building few quality backlinks to the website.

A website needs to acquire more quality links to improve its domain authority and page authority. Since link building is one of the most important off page factors, the webshop should explore other link building options such as local press release, guest posting, blogger outreach, broken-link building, and link roundups. The company should set google alert for its primary keywords to track mentions. By responding to such post, the

company will be building links, driving traffic, building brand awareness and handling reputation management at the same time.

4.5 Competitor Analysis

One important step taken during the SEO process was analyzing the top-ranking results to make data driven decision. Competitor analysis is an exercise for strategy; it helps to understand the niche/industry better. It also revealed websites that are having success at the keywords level and what is required to rank at the top of search engine result pages for those keywords. Hardwick (2017) in his commentary on competitor analysis revealed that it helped to identify exactly what competitors are doing to get better rankings in search engine result pages.

The reverse-engineering process during this stage will help reveal the marketing strategy of the case company's competitors, keywords they are ranking for and the level of authority the websites have. During the competitor analysis process, the researcher focused on the top 10 competitors that are ranking on Google search engine result pages for each of the case company target keyword phrases.

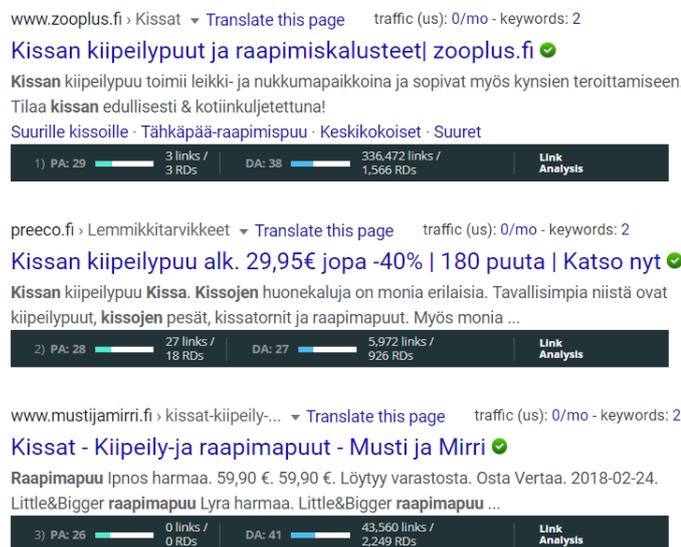


Figure 21. Search engine result page.

Moz toolbar was used to check the domain authority (DA), page authority (PA) and referring domains of each website. To estimate the level of competition, the researcher calculated the average domain authority and page authority of the top 10 ranking

websites on the first page of Google and the number of linking domains/referring domains (RD) pointing to them. The results showed that the top-ranking sites have the most domains linking to them which supports the commentary by Koval (2020).



Figure 22. Case company current domain metrics (2020).

Results from the analysis showed that company X website had a domain authority of 5, page authority of 7 and 9 referring domains. This is very low compared to the average domain authority of 35 for the top competitors. The average referring domains of the competitor websites for one of company X primary keyword was about 1800 links. This clearly showed that for company X website to compete, it will have to boost its referring domains numbers by acquiring more quality backlinks from other websites.

The same step was repeated for all the identified important keyword phrases and web pages on the case company website. The researcher visited each corresponding competitor website to check the type of content they have. The results showed that the top-ranking pages have ecommerce style content with an average length of 1,200 words. At of this time, company X website had less than 300 hundred words. Efforts were put in place to further improve the content length. Another step in the competitor analysis process was backlink extraction. The backlinks pointing to each competitor website were extracted and evaluated to check their quality and identify links that company X could also replicate. The extraction was done with the use of Moz pro and Ahrefs. The research used two different tools for this process to increase data reliability as no single tool can capture all backlink data.

The competitor analysis also revealed the keyword ranking positions for each competitor website. The keyword data was extracted, and it helped the researcher to identify low competition keywords that could be targeted on company X website with either improved content or blog post. Further analysis of the data showed that company X was targeting the right set of keywords.

While implementing this strategy for company X, the researcher also exported past Google Ads campaign data to identify search terms which can be used to boost organic search volume. Search terms are high converting keywords that users are typing in search engine to discover a website (Parks, 2018). At the time of the research, company X was paying to rank for these keywords through Google Ads which was not within the scope of this research. The extracted keywords would be analyzed and added within the content on company X website. By ranking for these keywords, the case company will boost its website organic traffic and reduce the cost of Google Ads spend.

5 RECOMMENDATION

Current analysis of website showed that 99.8% of the webshop visitors are from Finland. This indicated that with increased marketing budget and attention to the Finland market, the company has a better chance of not only selling more products locally but also dominating search engine result pages for multiple keywords. The money made locally can be used to properly fund the international expansion plan of the company.

Content marketing was identified as one of the ways through which company X can dominate the local market. Few blog content that was posted on company X blog page have been responsible for about 50% of organic traffic to the website. Current analysis showed that, while all the pages on the webshop are ranking for about 375 keywords in different positions, the blog posts are ranking for about 288 keywords. This further proves that, by adding more content to the blog page, the website stands a chance of ranking for more keywords. By ranking for more keywords, the webshop will gradually be moving towards market domination.

Before creating new blog post, a content gap analysis should be conducted. This will help the case company to spot keyword opportunities it can easily dominate. A content calendar would be put in place to encourage regular content upload. By adding more content, a website is improving its chances of ranking for more keywords which increases the number of visitors. The limitation to this approach is that, when the same search is conducted few days or months later, the results returned could be entirely different. This can be attributed to constant update to Google algorithm which affects the way Google ranks websites in the search engine result page.

Another limitation has to do with the tools used for this process. There are different tools in the marketplace for this purpose and each have varying size of index. Most of these tools have their own web crawlers and index just like big search engines such as Google. The difference in index size means that different tools will return different results. To get the best results at this stage, data should be extracted, merged, and analyzed from at least two different tools.

The competitor analysis also revealed that most of company X competitors are large e-commerce websites with thousands of web pages. It may be challenging to compete with them directly at the keyword level, but company X can take advantage of the lack of blog

pages on most of the websites. By creating more informational content, there is a high chance that company X website can rank for many low competition keyword phrases. This can be used to boost traffic to the websites in the medium term as the blog content will start ranking for more keywords.

5.1 Email Marketing

According to Rathi (2016), 98% of website visitor will not make a purchase on first visit, hence, the need to capture emails before they leave the website. The purpose of building an email list is to convert cold traffic to warm traffic. Email marketing provides a medium to build relationship with an audience before selling to them. The researcher observed there was no robust email marketing plan in place. A website that drives traffic through paid media without capturing visitors email addresses is wasting a lot of resources.

5.2 On-Page Factors

Experimental results described in Chapters 4 showed that the specific objectives outlined in Chapter 1 have been achieved. This confirmed that on page optimization is very important to website ranking. This should be the next step after carrying out an audit to identify problems with a website. To properly implement this process, it is important to create a checklist of things to do, to avoid skipping any step. The first step of on page optimization is to identify the target keyword for a page. The keyword should be placed the url, page title, meta description and H1 tag of the page. These are areas that inform search engine crawlers what the page is about. Every page of a website should have a unique page title and description; thus, any duplicate meta titles and descriptions should be fixed. The meta description should also be written in a compelling manner to attract clicks from visitors. The next step is to include the keyword within the page content.

The research also identified the importance of page content and structure. Since content come in different form, it critical to know the type of content that should be on a page. For instance, an ecommerce content should provide detailed information about a product along with reviews from previous customers. This will help visitors to know more about the product before making a purchase decision. A blog page should contain mostly informational content. This type of content should provide more information about the

niche/industry a website belongs to. For example, a webshop that sells pharmaceutical products can provide different relevant health related content on its blog page.

The blog page should also serve as a conduit for traffic to the category / product pages of a website. Content posted on blog pages have a better chance of ranking for multiple keywords which can increase the number of visitors to a website. Proper internal linking as explained in chapter 2 should be implemented. Internal links helps a web page to rank better, but it also guides blog post readers to inner pages of a website. An article posted on company X blog page has started ranking for some keywords. With more regular posting of articles, the blog page will be driving a lot of traffic to the website through various keywords it will be ranking for. This is an opportunity gap that company X can take advantage of to compete with bigger competitors.

The blog content will also improve the engagement metrics of the websites such as average time per page, pages per session and the bounce rate which are all important factors that influence higher ranking as discussed in chapter 2.

It was also discovered that page speed was an important factor that affects user experience. Visitors will find a slow loading web page frustrating to interact with. This could increase the bounce rate of a page as visitors will opt to leave than wait for it to load. A faster loading website leads to good user experience. The image optimization implemented during this research reduced the page speed of company X by as much as 4 seconds. More effort is required to reduce it further to reach the threshold announced by Google.

5.3 Off Page Factors

Once on-page optimization issues have been fixed it is important do the same to the off-page factors. Off page optimization can be overwhelming since most are not within the website owner's control. For this process to be effective is important to focus on few factors that would have the most impact on a website ranking.

High quality backlinks are one of the most important off page factors. It is an indication of trust and authority. Getting links from higher authority pages improves the chances of a website to rank better. It is also important to reverse engineer competitor link building strategy, this can be done with tools like Ahrefs, SEMrush and Moz. The purpose of this is to identify competitor links that could be easily acquired. The researcher built some

citation links during the project. These links positively influenced the rankings of company X website in local search results, but a robust link building strategy should be put in place.

Keyword	Location	Rank	+/-	URL	Searches	SoV	+/-	SERP
Keyword	Location	< 0	↑	URL	> 0	0		
kissan raapimispuu	Finland	Not in top 500			1,600	0		
kissan raapimispuu ohje	Finland	Not in top 500			10	0		
kissan kiipeilypuu puullo	Finland	Not in top 500			140	0		
kissan raapimispuu tee itse	Finland	Not in top 500			50	0		
kissan kiipeilypuu	Finland	Not in top 500			2,900	0		
kissan kiipeilypuut	Finland	Not in top 500			70	0		
kissan raapimispuu prima	Finland	Not in top 500			210	0		
tyyliläs kissan kiipeilypuu	Finland	Not in top 500			50	0		
kissan raapimispuu myydään	Finland	Not in top 500			30	0		
kissan raapimispuu osamaksulla	Finland	Not in top 500			30	0		
kissan raapimispuu tori	Finland	Not in top 500			10	0		
myydään kissan kiipeilypuu	Finland	Not in top 500			30	0		
kissan kiipeilypuu aie	Finland	Not in top 500			20	0		

Figure 23. Company X keyword ranking position (before).

Keyword	Location	Rank	+/-	URL	Searches	CPC	SoV
Keyword	Location	< 0	↑	URL	> 0		0
kissa puu	Finland	6	↑	/	170	\$0.60	15
kissan raapimispuu osamaksulla	Finland	17	↑	/toimitusehdot	10	\$0.91	0
tyyliläs kissan kiipeilypuu	Finland	18	↑	/Kiipeily-ja-raapimispuut	210	\$0.73	0
kissa puussa	Finland	21	↑	/	170	\$0.60	-
raapimispuu	Finland	23	↑	/Kiipeily-ja-raapimispuut	720	\$0.53	-
kissan kiipeilypuu ohje	Finland	26	↑	/Usein-kysytyae	10	\$0.00	-
kissan kiipeilyteline	Finland	27	↑	/Kiipeily-ja-raapimispuut	210	\$0.67	-
kissojen raapimispuu	Finland	31	↑	/Kiipeily-ja-raapimispuut	210	\$1.07	-
kissan raapimapuut	Finland	33	↑	/Kiipeily-ja-raapimispuut	50	\$0.97	-
kissan raapimispuu ohje	Finland	35	↑	/Usein-kysytyae	10	\$0.00	-
raapimispuu kissalle	Finland	38	↑	/Usein-kysytyae	70	\$0.89	-
kiipeilyteline kissalle	Finland	38	↑	/Kiipeily-ja-raapimispuut	50	\$0.80	-

Figure 24. Company X keyword ranking position (after).

6 CONCLUSION

There is no definite approach to SEO, hence it should be approached with a testing mindset. Every SEO implementation process should be a test. Implementation of expert opinion is a quick way to failure. Answers to the research question are thus provided below:

What can company X do in the short to medium term to rank higher for more keywords and increase webshop traffic?

Achieving higher keyword rankings is dependent on different factors. During the research, a major factor that improved the keyword ranking positions of company X website was on page optimization. Fixing all identified on-page issues such duplicate page titles, meta descriptions, header tags, image tags, keyword placement, url structure and improved content helped all the web pages to rank for different keywords. Prompt identification and isolation of on-page issues through regular website audit is very important. This will ensure that issues can be fixed quickly before they impact the website negatively.

It is also important to track the changes made to a website on-page factors and their effect. During the research, a lot of changes were made to the website within a short period and this made it difficult to track which factor had the most impact. Future research should be done in phases for proper tracking.

Also, the importance of quality content to ranking cannot be over-emphasized. Regular posting of quality industry related content will help the website blog pages rank for more keywords that could not be targeted on the product pages. This will help boost traffic to the blog page content. The traffic can be re-directed to inner commercial pages with a proper use of internal links and anchor texts.

How can company X compete in a market dominated by larger e-commerce stores?

Without proper on-page optimization, any other SEO effort may not have much positive impact on a website ranking positions. One interesting finding from this research was that company X website may not need as many referring domains as those of the competitors to get better keyword rankings. Analysis of the competitors backlinks showed that most of their links were from weaker authority websites. Data gathered after

the implementation stage showed that the website had the tendency to rank higher with fewer quality links. More quality links can be built through blogger outreach, link round-up, or using a service such as help a reporter (Haro).

One quick way of getting quality links is to analyze top industry or competitor websites for broken links. Broken links are links that no longer exist on a web page. Tools such as Xenu Link Sleuth or Ahrefs can be used to identify and isolate broken these links on a website. Company X can attempt to acquire the identified broken links by contacting the webmasters of the websites where the links originated. By providing value or meeting the set requirement, the links could be re-activated and re-directed to company X website. By acquiring more backlinks through different strategies, company X will increase the chances of its webshop to rank for more keywords and push more web pages to the first page of search engine results.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Interview Questions

1. Greetings and Introduction
 - a. Hello, my name is Idowu Odupitan. As part of my final bachelor's thesis, I will be investigating factors that influence search engine rankings so that I can implement them on the case company X webshop.
2. Questions for company X CEO
 - I. How long have been running this business? When did you decide to start a webshop?
 - II. Who helped you in building the webshop and how did you produce the content?
 - III. Who are your target audience? How do you currently communicate with the?
 - IV. What are the keywords used by your target audience to search for your products and related ones?
 - V. Have you done any kind of optimization on the website?
 - VI. Have you built links to the websites?
 - VII. Have you done any kind of advertisement to increase the webshop visibility?
 - VIII. Looking at the current structure of the website, do you think there are issues yet unidentified?
 - IX. Did you write a unique page title and meta descriptions for all your webshop pages?
 - X. Do you currently link the web pages together in any way? How often do you create and post new content on the website?
 - XI. How have you been driving traffic to the website? How many products have you sold through the webshop?
 - XII. Who are your main competitors? Have you analyzed their websites to know what they are doing differently?
 - XIII. Do you ask customers how they found the webshop? Have you tried to get feedback and reviews from customers?
 - XIV. Do you have a way of tracking the website keyword ranking positions?
 - XV. Do you know the geographic location of your website visitors? How often do people call to make enquiries about the products?