



Ongoing series: Affordable ways to increase inbound traffic and revenue | part 2 of 3

Getting ranked by Google

Elevating news stories in search results to increase organic traffic

It's no longer enough to simply produce compelling, authentic journalism. News organizations must do everything possible to get readers to those stories, not only for the sake of spreading the news but also to monetize their business.

To stay top of market, publishers have always needed to build trust with their audience. Today they must also build trust with Google.

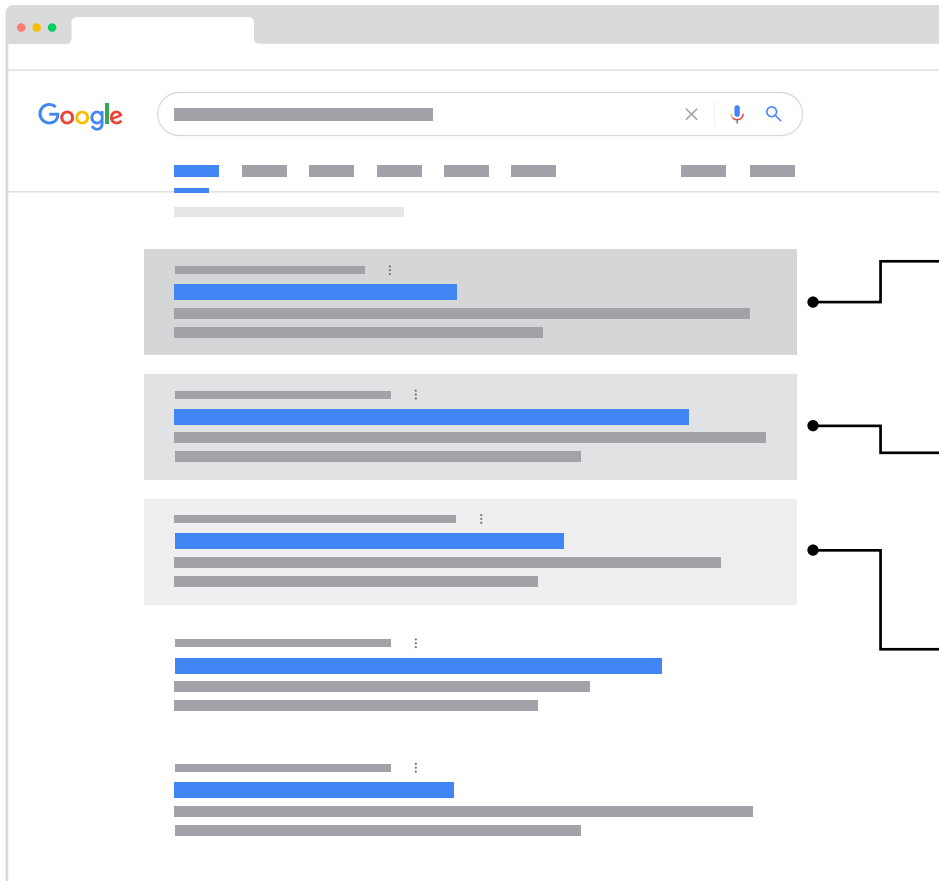


92% total global search engine market share
(Statcounter)

Why SEO is important

The position where a site falls on Google's search engine results page (SERP) has significant impact on the amount of organic traffic that gets funneled to the site. Raising just one position in the list could mean thousands of viewers.

Average click through rates on Google's SERP:



Position 1:

28.5%

Position 2:

15.7%

Position 3:

11.0%

(Sistrix)

What matters most in rankings

Google uses more than 200 factors in their ranking algorithm. A few rules of search engine optimization (SEO) are universal, while others are particularly important to news websites. We'll provide guidance for each topic that should be top of mind for digital publishers (in no particular order):

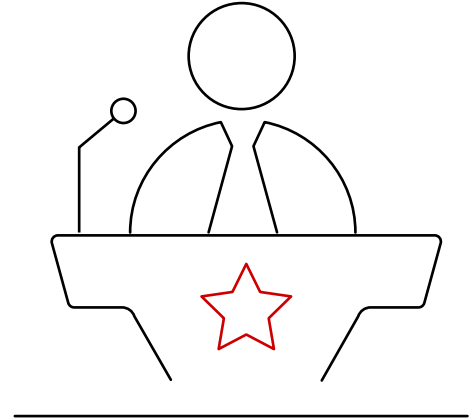
- 1 Brand authority
- 2 Evergreen content
- 3 Mobile
- 4 User experience & accessibility
- 5 Keywords & Google Trends
- 6 Site structure
- 7 Crawl speed
- 8 Page title
- 9 Popularity (aka backlinks)

1 Brand authority

What is brand authority and why does it matter?

Brand authority means the level of expertise a site has on a particular topic. Your goal should be to become the expert on local topics of interest to your audience.

Brand authority is one of the most important factors influencing where a site falls within the list of search results.

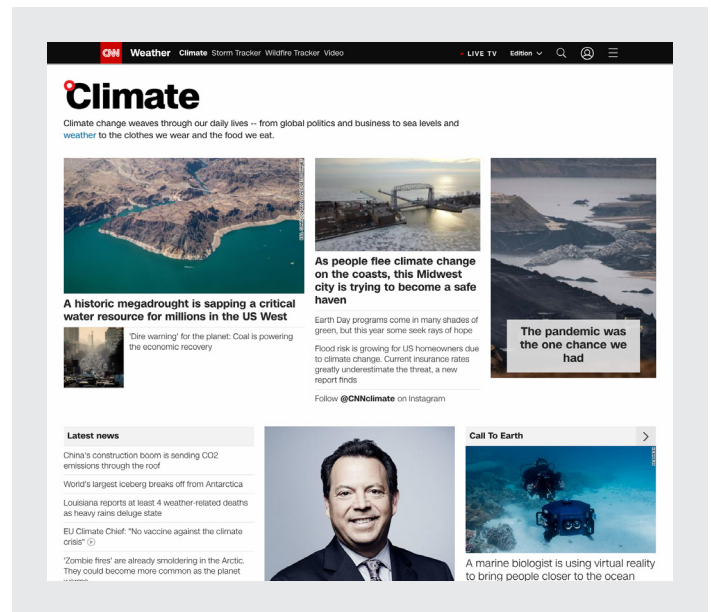


Google uses many ranking factors to determine a site's authority relative to the topic being searched, including:

★ Number of visits to the site	★ Time spent on the site	★ Frequency with which the site covers the topic
★ Brand name mentions	★ Social media mentions	★ The nature of the content per Google's Natural Language Cloud
★ User comments that demonstrate engagement	★ The content author's background	

6 ways to build your brand authority

- 1 Original.** Strive to be the first to break a story online in your local market. Google rewards original reporting.
- 2 Expert.** Stick to the local areas and topics you know. The more often you produce focused content tied to these topics, the greater expertise you build in the eyes of Google.
- 3 In-depth.** Cover a topic comprehensively. Depth is good. Don't be afraid of length.
- 4 Transparent.** Include author names for each article and link to a bio. Building and demonstrating expertise from reputable authors helps build page and topic authority.
- 5 Local.** Focus on hyper-local topics. The national news media will hold more authority over broader news stories.
- 6 Unique.** Avoid duplicating content from other sources.



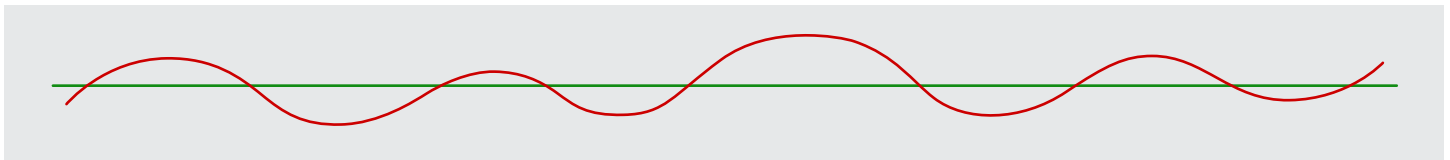
3
seconds

increase in time spent on site that correlates to ranking a single position higher
([Backlinko](#))

2 Evergreen content

What is evergreen content and why do you need it?

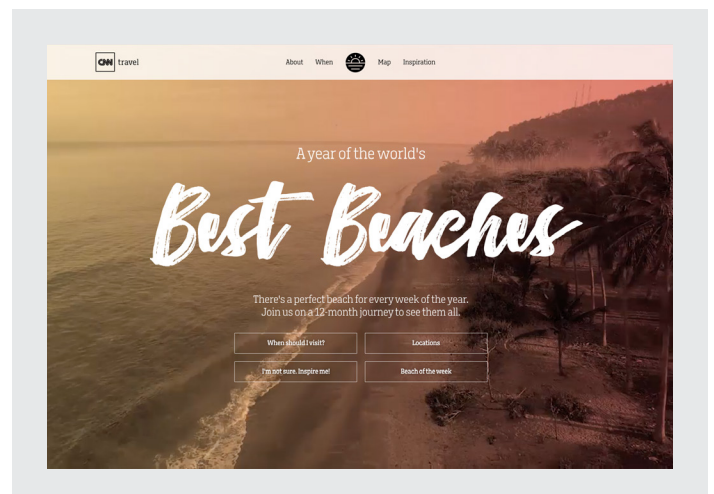
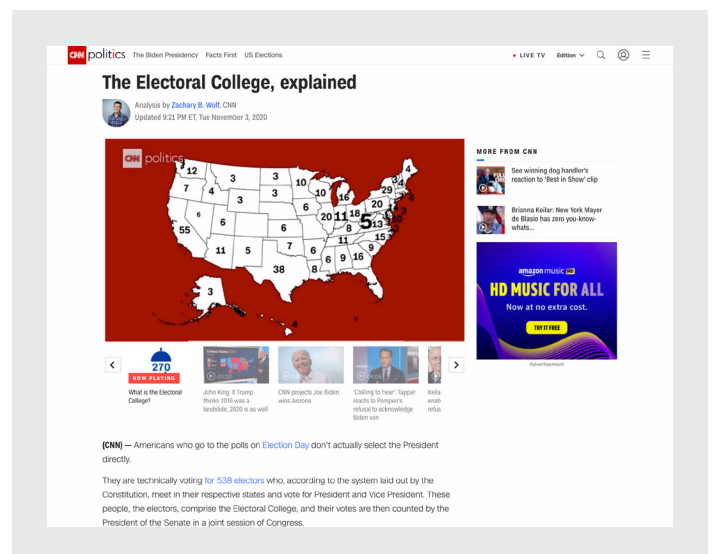
Evergreen content is helpful information that stays “fresh” over longer periods of time. Think background on recurring local topics or destination information, for example. It enables news sites to counter-program the ebbs and flows of the news cycle. It gives users a reason to visit when there’s no breaking news.



— Peaks and valleys: Traffic from breaking news — Level: Traffic from evergreen content

5 ways to create meaningful evergreen content

- 1 Trends.** Use analytics and [Google Trends](#) to research what’s resonating with your audience. Identify trends that can fuel background content and resurface over time.
- 2 Ownable.** Create content that will distinguish you from other sources. Include original reporting or research and statistics when possible.
- 3 Think visually.** Visual content is easier to digest and it gets shared more often on social media. Original photography and infographics increase differentiation and share-ability.
- 4 Go deep, not wide.** Own all angles on a story or topic. Be the official source of information over the course of time.
- 5 Refresh.** Update your content as the story or topic evolves. Updates will be recognized by Google which will elevate content in results.



3 Mobile

Why does mobile matter?

Mobile usability is important for all websites. It's even more critical for news sites. There are more people viewing news on mobile than any other device, so optimizing news sites for mobility will positively impact where Google ranks the site in its search results.

57%

of U.S. adults often get news via mobile versus 30% on desktop or laptop
[\(Pew Research Center\)](#)

61%

of users said that if they didn't find what they were looking for right away on a mobile site, they'd quickly move on to another site
[\(Google\)](#)

53%

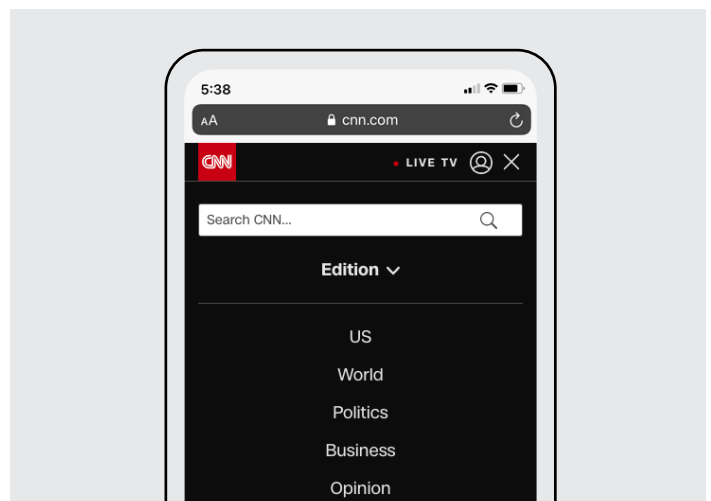
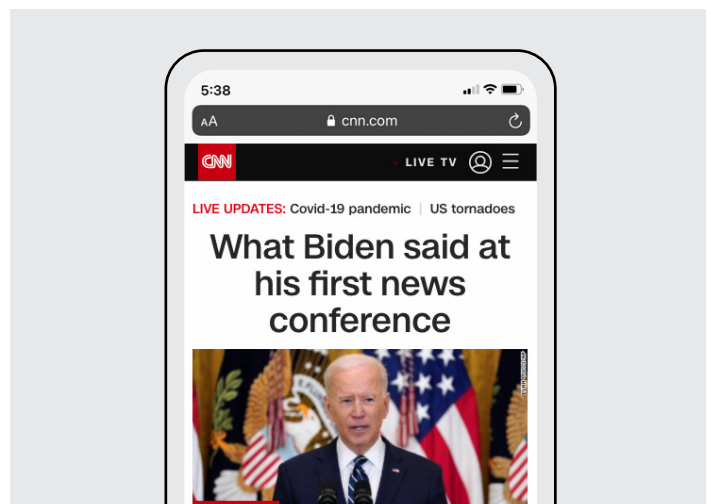
of mobile site visits are abandoned if a page takes longer than three seconds to load
[\(Google\)](#)

90%

of users reported they stopped using an app due to poor performance
[\(AppDynamics\)](#)

5 ways to improve your mobile experience

- 1 Responsive.** At minimum, use responsive design principles to have your site template adjust to the user's screen size.
- 2 Scale.** Design for finger scrolling and tapping. This requires content to scale appropriately to smaller screens, including the size of copy, buttons, and links.
- 3 Visuals.** Ensure images and videos can be seen on mobile and that images can be enlarged as needed.
- 4 Loading speed.** Keep image file sizes as low as possible and make sure there are no other technical barriers that may slow down loading on mobile devices.
- 5 Navigation.** The standard is to embed it into a "hamburger" menu icon at the top of all pages. Clicking it provides universal access to all key pages in a small and unobtrusive manner.



Consider experimenting with Google's AMP stories format

Accelerated Mobile Pages (AMP) are similar to Instagram and Facebook stories. Google has a dedicated section for featuring AMP news stories in search results.

Characteristics of AMP stories:

- Combine images, video, and text on a series of cards to tell a news story.
- Content is often visual with text appearing as captions.
- The interface is easy to tap.
- Hosted on the publisher's site, which means they do not disappear after 24 hours.
- Easily shared across platforms.



4 User experience (UX) & accessibility

What is user experience and why does it matter?

User experience refers to the overall experience a person has as they interact with a website. Some common questions include:

<p>?</p> <p>Is it easy for a person to find what they are looking for?</p>	<p>?</p> <p>Are there too many barriers, like popups, that get in the way of using the site?</p>	<p>?</p> <p>Is the site and its navigation structured in a logical way?</p>	<p>?</p> <p>Is the user journey through the site intuitive?</p>
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In May 2020 Google announced it was going to start including user experience as a factor in its results algorithm. This means publishers must create intuitive, user friendly experiences that are easy for humans to navigate.

In the U.S., even when people love a company or product:

59%

will walk away after several bad experiences ([pwc](#))

17%

will walk away after just one bad experience ([pwc](#))

Accessibility

An important part of the user experience is ensuring all people have access to the same rich content regardless of disability. Following best practices in accessibility guarantees that assistive devices are able to interpret web pages and makes it easier for other tools, like search engines, to understand your content.

61

million adults in the U.S. live with a disability — that's 26% ([CDC](#))

10.5

million men in the U.S. are color blind ([Iris](#))

6 ways to improve your user experience

- 1 Streamline.** Create logical navigation. Organize pages along a clear narrative rather than overwhelming the user with many options.
- 2 Scannability.** Use callouts, bulleted lists, and short summaries where possible. People scan pages, so think “at-a-glance.”
- 3 CTAs.** Provide clear calls to action (CTAs) in links and buttons. Describe what users should expect if they click on something.
- 4 Priority.** Elevate key information to the top of the page. Don’t require users to hunt for what they’re seeking.
- 5 Ease of use.** Choose colors, font faces, and font sizes that are easy to read. Users will abandon a site with words that are difficult to read.
- 6 User testing.** Undertake usability testing to understand how users are currently experiencing your site and where there are opportunities for improvements.

The importance of meta data to UX and SEO

Meta data is information that gets associated with webpages, images, and other files that help a machine interpret the content. This benefits search results, as well as people using assistive devices to browse the Internet. The following meta data are particularly important.

Meta title and description

This is the page name and description that appears on the search results page.

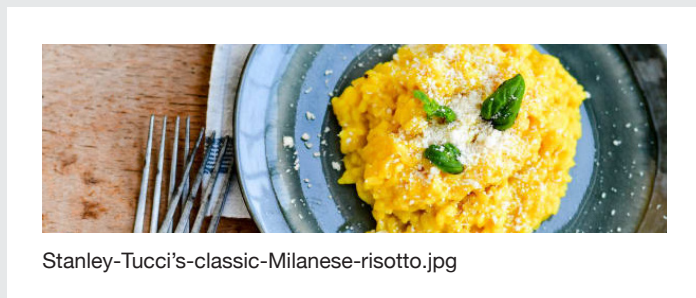
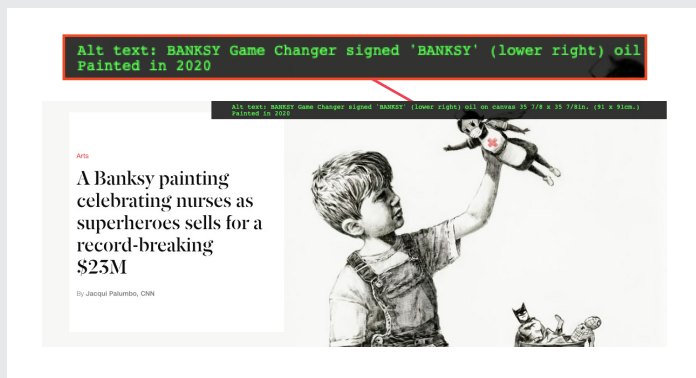
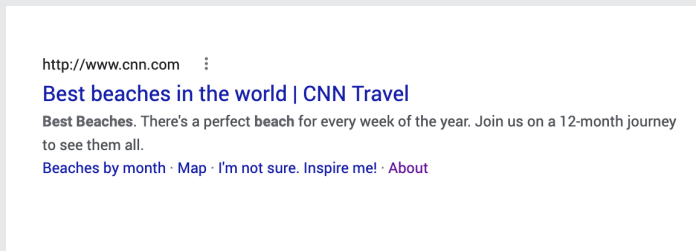
- The meta title should be less than 60 characters.
- The meta description should not exceed 156 characters.
- Make sure they both contain keywords a person might use when searching the topic. See more [Title Tag](#) tips below.

Alternative text

Alternative text or “alt text” appears in place of an image when it fails to load. Alt text is read by search engines to help them understand the context and meaning of a picture. Vision impaired people who use screen readers also need alt text to describe the contents of an image.

File names

It’s important to be as descriptive as possible when naming image and video files. This can provide additional context to machines. File names are often incomprehensible - just a series of letters or numbers. A better approach is to be more descriptive like: “Dr-Brown-speaking-about-diabetes.jpg.”

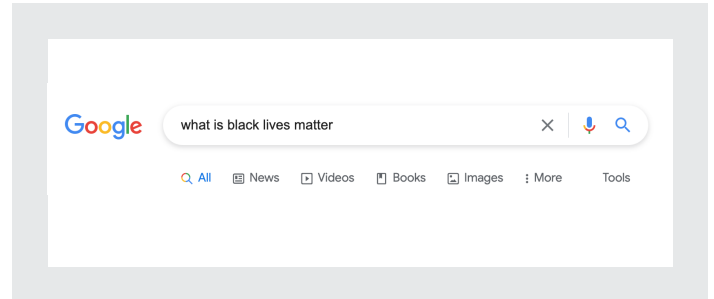


5 Keywords & Google Trends

What are keywords and why do they matter?

Keywords are words typed into the search bar when performing an online search.

It's important to identify the most logical keywords that are tied to your content and target those within search to elevate your content as high as possible on the results page.



Many users type a question into the bar. They typically search for news around five entities:

- 1 Person**
Who did what
- 2 Event**
Details about something that happened
- 3 Organization**
What an organization or company did
- 4 Place**
Where an event is taking or took place
- 5 Concept**
An idea or movement (e.g. Black Lives Matter)

Identifying the best keywords

When constructing pages it's important to include the main keywords for each article in the page title, URL, article headline, and first paragraph of content. But how do you know which keywords hold the most power?

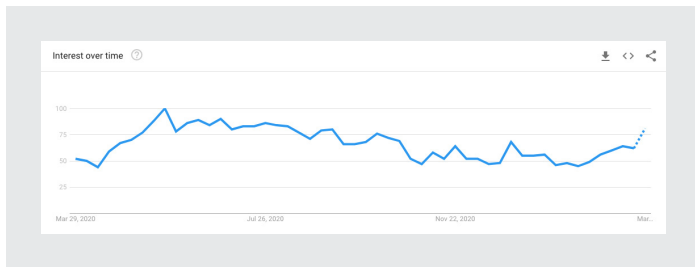
[Google Trends](#) is a free tool that tracks popular search terms. You can enter any keyword(s) and see the volume of searches for that term over time, the regions in the world searching for it, and related topics and queries. This combination of data can help publishers identify topics that are growing or declining in popularity in their local area.



10 ways to use Google Trends

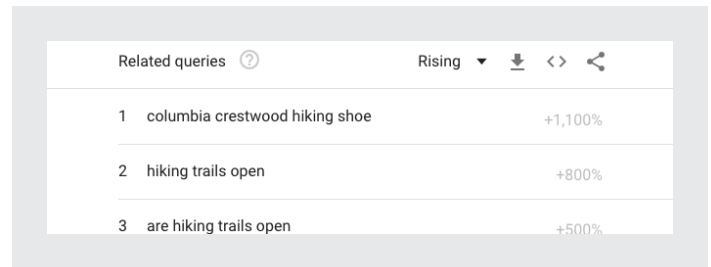
1. Trend graph

By expanding the trend graph to 1-2 years, publishers can research keywords commonly associated with their content, looking for seasonal spikes. For example, searching for “hiking” as a trend, you’ll see the largest spikes tied to holidays. These spikes represent opportunities for publishers to create evergreen content aimed at that topic.



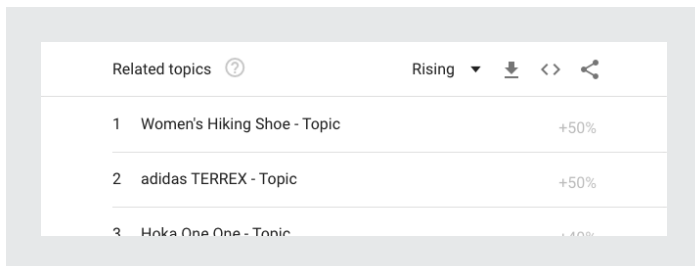
2. Related queries

Related queries show related keywords to your original search. This is important because it may uncover keywords that your audience is looking for that you hadn’t thought of. It can also show related keywords that are gaining in popularity, thereby highlighting new ways people are searching for a topic.



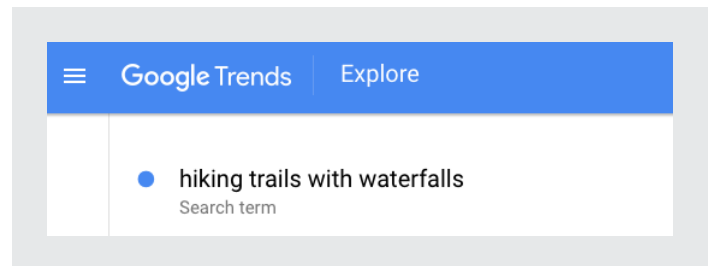
3. Related topics

Similar to related keywords, Google Trends can show broader topics that are related to the keyword you entered. These can be handy for thinking about ways to expand your coverage of a local topic.



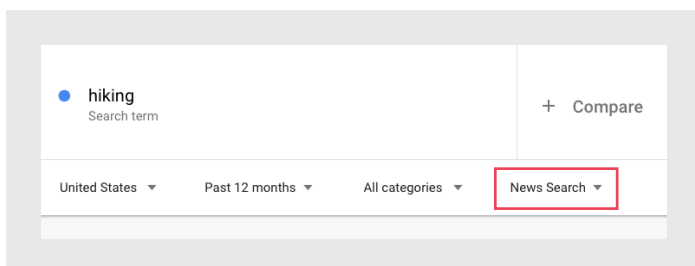
4. “Long-tail” keywords

A long-tail keyword is much more granular – for example, “best men’s running shoes for marathons” instead of just “shoes.” You may find a high search volume for a more focused topic and there’s a greater chance that you could “own” a long-tail keyword.



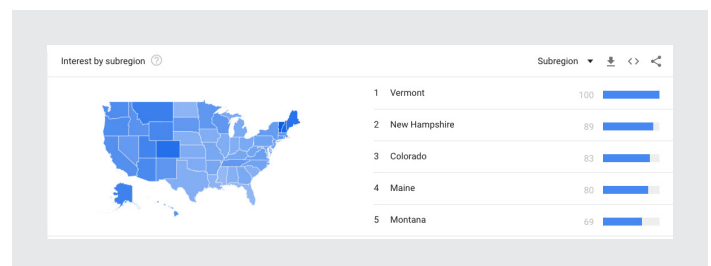
5. News search

A dropdown above the trend graph defaults to “Web Search.” Clicking it opens a list with other types of searches, including “News Search.” Selecting this filter will show trends in the types of stories people are searching for on Google News.



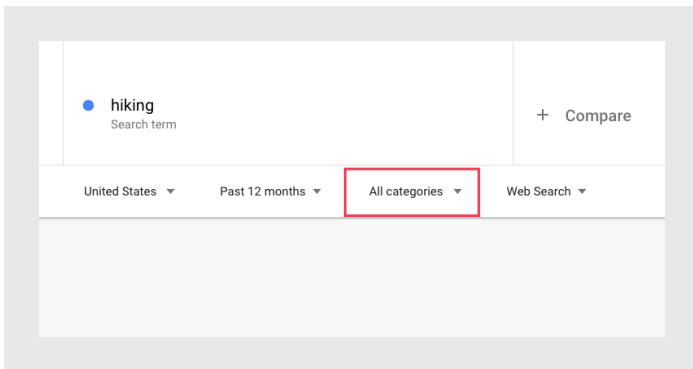
6. Location

Beneath the trend graph is an “Interest by Subregion” map that shows which areas of the country are searching for a keyword. By clicking a state, you can see which regions are performing the search. This enables you to get very focused on trends specific to a local market.



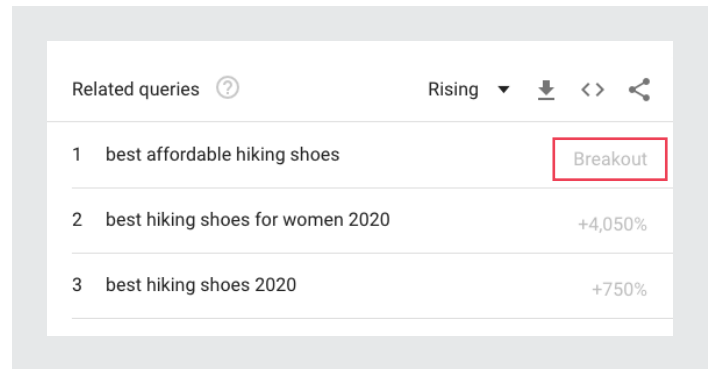
7. Category

Use the Category filter to fine tune your keyword results. For example, if you are searching for “hiking” you might want to narrow the category to “Hobbies and Leisure” or “News” rather than something like “Shopping” or “Computers & Electronics.” Selecting the correct category can sharpen the trend lines relative to the story you want to tell.



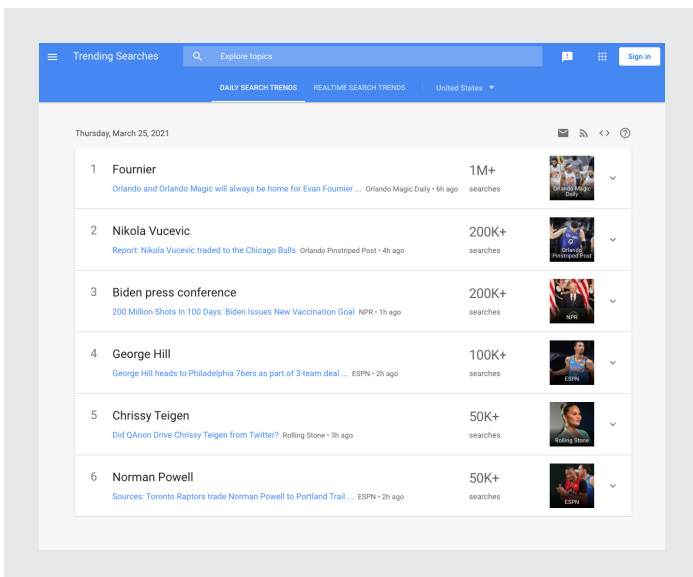
8. “Breakout” topics

In the Related Topics or Related Queries list Google sometimes replaces a % growth with the word “breakout.” Breakout means that Google doesn’t have enough search volume data to measure meaningful growth. Any search term that’s growing more than 5000% is marked as breakout. Pay attention to these to identify recent high volume searches. Then ask yourself if it’s a fad or a topic you could build content around.



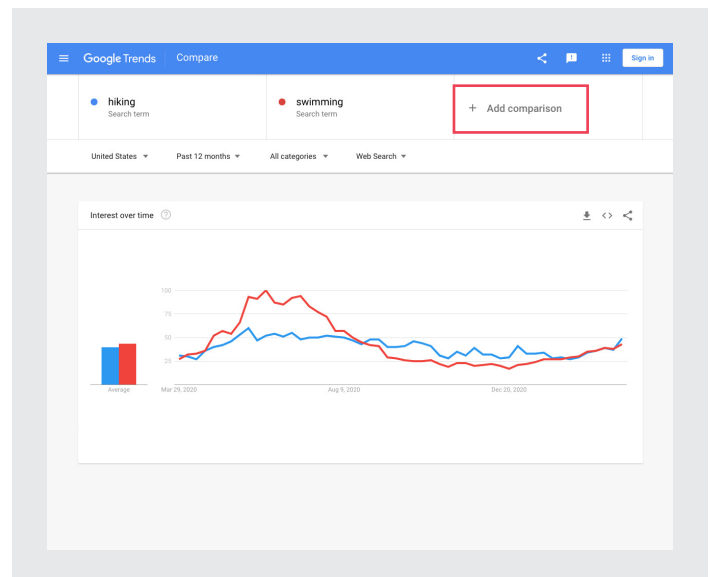
9. Trending

The Google Trends navigation has a section titled “Trending Searches.” These are search terms that are seeing high volume spikes in a short period of time. They are typically fads, but it’s worth browsing the list daily to see if there’s anything there that might inspire a story that could have legs during the week ahead.



10. Compare

If you’re considering multiple keywords, you can use the Compare feature found to the right of your keyword at the top of the page. This will compare multiple keywords in the trend over time graph to give you an idea of how popular they are or if there are differing seasonal spikes.

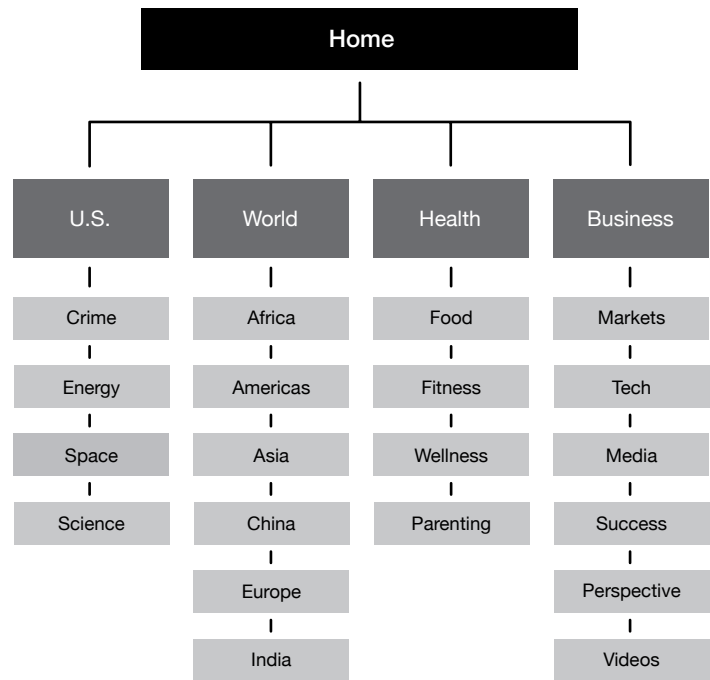


6 Site structure

What is site structure and why does it matter?

The site structure is simply how your site is organized – the categories and tags that house articles and other content.

News sites pose a special SEO challenge because they're usually large, deep, and constantly growing. This means that staying on top of your site architecture is very important in terms of maintaining navigability for readers and searchability for search engines. Organization is paramount.



4 ways to improve your site structure

1

Tags. Assess your tagging strategy. You should have plenty of stories for each tag. If not, consolidate. Separating stories by tags provides category context to Google.

2

URLs. Avoid using lengthy URLs. Do not use connecting words like 'and' or 'or.' in your content URL. Make sure the URL contains words relevant to the article.

3

Depth. How many clicks does it take a user to get to useful content? This number should be as low as possible. Search engines crawl a site by following links from one page to the next. The "shallower" a site is, the more likely it is that every page will get indexed.

4

Headings. Use heading tags to create more scannable blocks of content – for readers and search engines. This improves the ability for Google to understand page hierarchy.

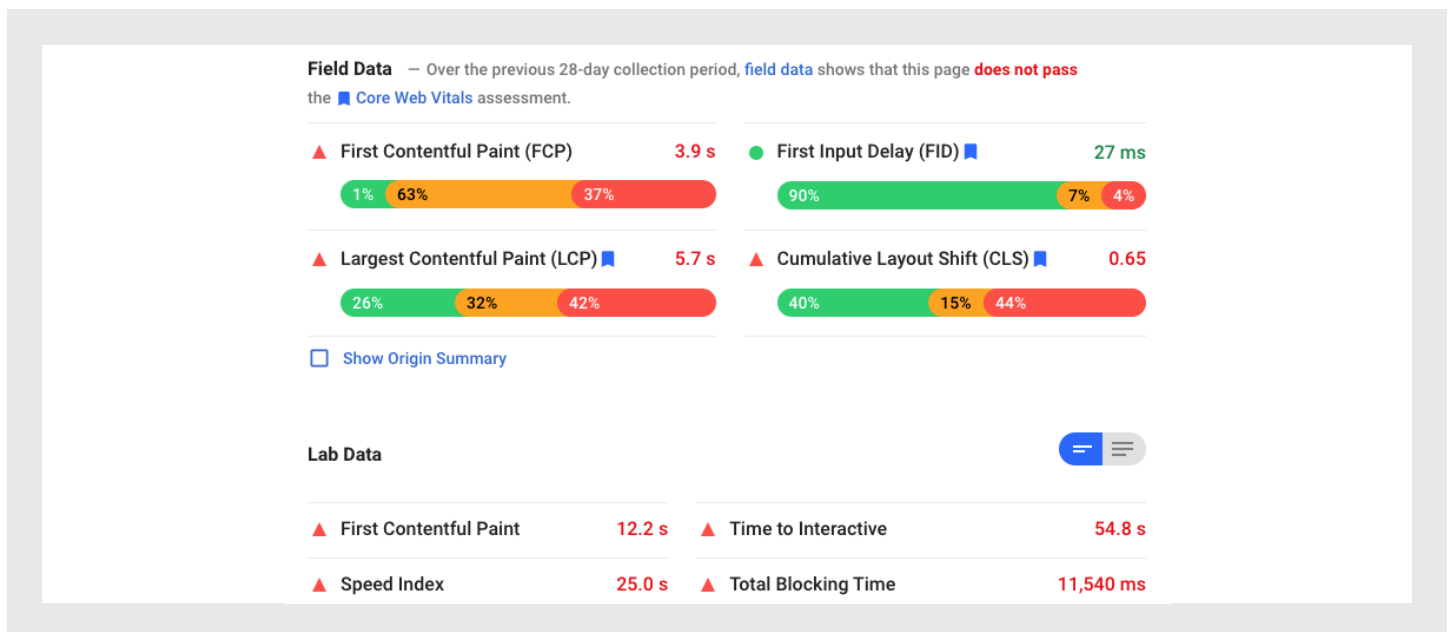
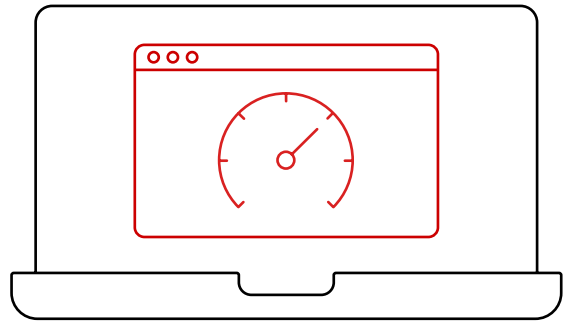
7 Crawl speed

What is crawl speed and why does it matter?

Crawl speed is the period of time it takes a search engine to crawl and index a site.

When it comes to news media, the faster a search engine can index a site on a regular basis, the more likely it's pages will appear high within search results.

Note: Crawl speeds can vary between desktop and mobile so do not neglect the mobile crawl speed.



5 ways to improve your crawl speed

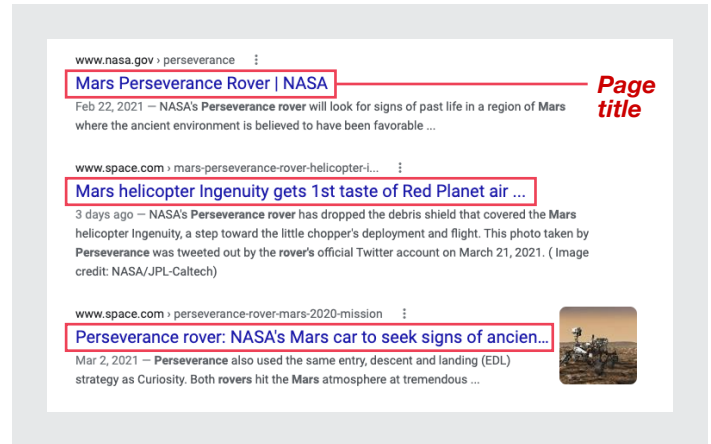
- 1 Visibility.** Avoid duplicating pages and block unwanted pages with robots.txt/robots meta to ensure optimal crawl speed.
- 2 XML sitemaps.** Continually update your news sitemap with fresh articles as they're published to keep Googlebot interested. Limit your sitemap to 1,000 URLs. Break it into multiple sitemaps if needed. Do not exceed 50,000 sitemaps.
- 3 Frequency.** Publish new articles frequently. If Googlebot consistently finds new articles it will keep returning to look for more.
- 4 Pagination.** Linking to older articles through pagination on topical index pages provides a path for both users and search engines to get to a higher volume of content.
- 5 Page load.** Use a tool such as [Google PageSpeed Insights](#), [GTmetrix](#), or [Pingdom](#) to check your page load speed and uncover any issues.

8 Page title tags

What is a page title tag and why does it matter?

Page title tags represent the title of a web page. They typically appear as the primary page name on search results and in social media posts that link back to a site.

Title tags are a major factor in helping search engines understand what the page is about. They also serve as a tease to get users to click through to a full page on your site. Think of it as a first impression.

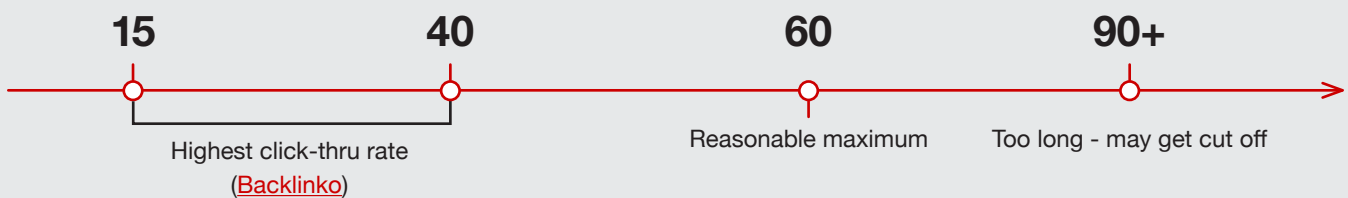


7 ways to optimize page titles

- 1 Voice.** Write for humans, not search engines.
- 2 Case.** Use either sentence case or title case. Do not use all caps.
- 3 Branding.** Include your brand name. A recognizable brand typically performs better than no brand.
- 4 Uniqueness.** Make sure every page has a unique title. It provides distinction for search engines.
- 5 Consistency.** Try to have the page title match the article headline to avoid confusion for users.
- 6 Keywords.** Include one or two keywords a user might employ in a search. Use Google Trends to determine which keywords best relate to the topic.
- 7 Limit.** Do not repeat keywords or phrases multiple times in the hopes of improving ranking. It actually has a negative impact.

What's the right length?

Here are some guidelines for page title character counts (including spaces):



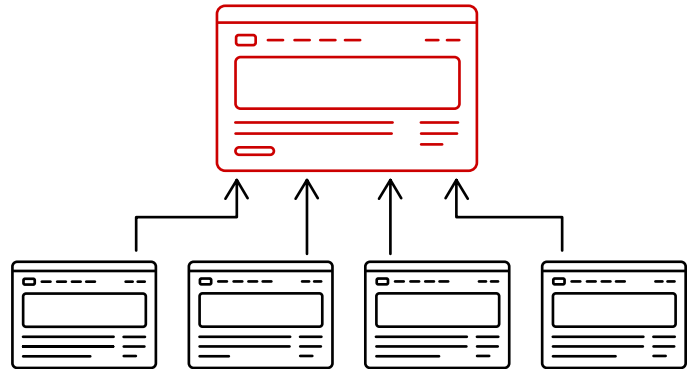
Why doesn't Google always use the title I crafted?

You might have noticed the page title for the same article may vary based on the search term. Google can construct a new title from heading tags and content it finds on the page to better target it to the query.

9 Popularity (aka backlinks)

What are backlinks and why do they matter?

Backlinks refer to external websites that link to your content. Backlinks from reputable and trustworthy sites inform Google that the content is of value to others, thus increasing your ranking on the results page. The more backlinks a page has, the more organic traffic it gets from Google.



77.2%

more backlinks go to long-form content than short articles

[\(Backlinko\)](#)

76.7%

of social shares correlate to longer headlines of 14-17 words

[\(Backlinko\)](#)

43.7%

of top ranking pages in Google contain reciprocal links

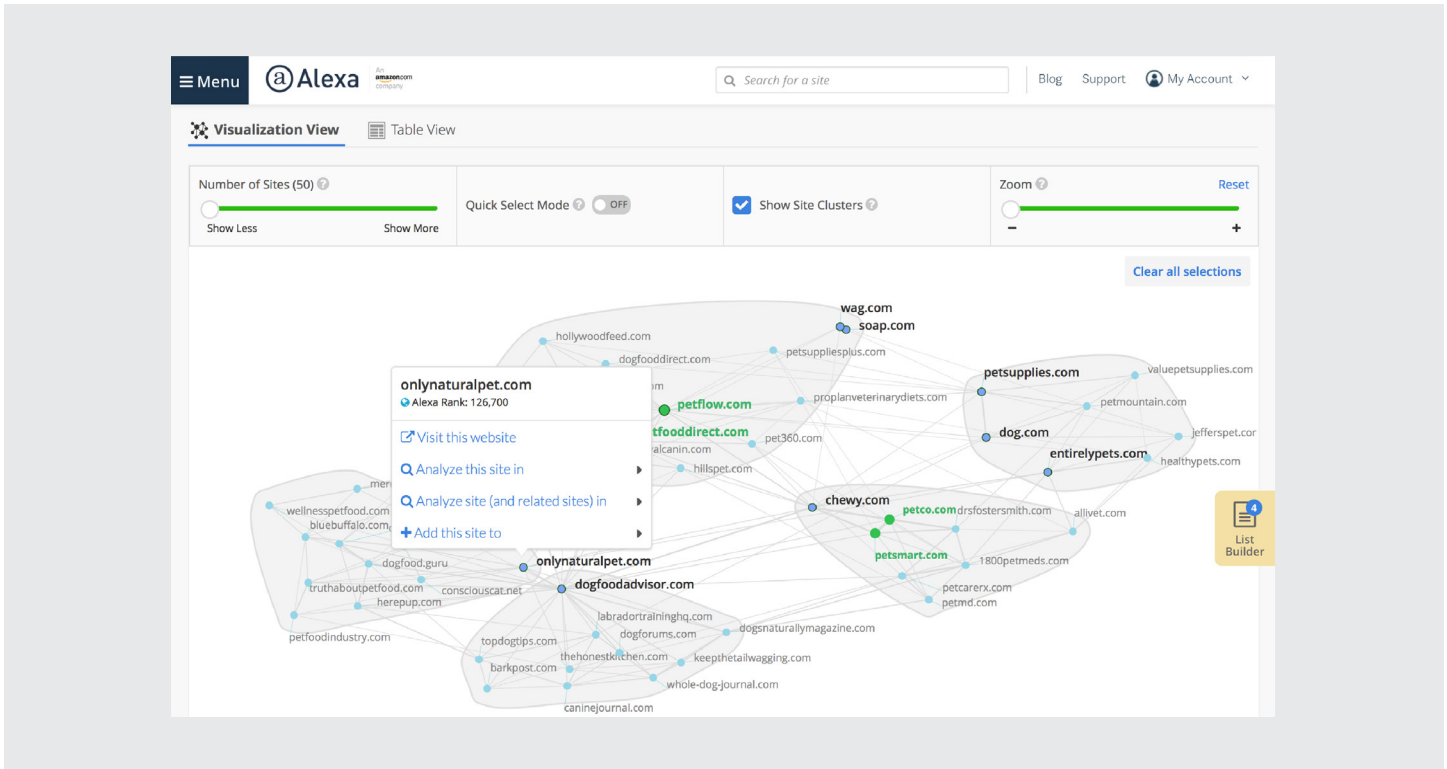
[\(ahrefs\)](#)

5 ways to get backlinks

- 1 Go deep.** Write comprehensive articles about local topics you can own. Unique content will capture more backlinks.
- 2 Announce it.** Notify other organizations and bloggers that may see value in linking to in-depth content about a particular topic related to their area of expertise.
- 3 Use social.** Post links to your original content on social media. Viral content is appealing to Google.
- 4 Publish lists.** The scannability of lists has made them hugely popular. Condense content into bite-size “top x” lists to capture this audience.
- 5 Reciprocate.** Link to sites related to your content. The best relationship is where both gain visibility and traffic.

Amazon's Alexa Competitor Backlink Checker

Try [this tool](#) to identify sites that are linking to your competitors. If they're already linking to your competitors, there's a good chance you can get them to link to your site as well.



The takeaway

We've covered a detailed list of tactics and techniques for improving a local news site's positioning on a Google search results page. These topics share a common thread – understanding user needs. Publishers who are surviving and thriving are the ones who've taken the time to consider readers' behavior, demands, and engagement preferences. Use your own analytics data to track which

stories and topics resonate with your audience and give them more. Use tools like Google Trends to identify which keywords are being searched locally and tailor your headlines and content to those keywords.

CNN Newsource understands what it takes to win in the digital space. We work closely with our network of 1,000+ local news partners to offer valuable insights relevant to the news business while providing powerful, trusted news content.

