

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO PRESS RELEASE SEO 2016 EDITION

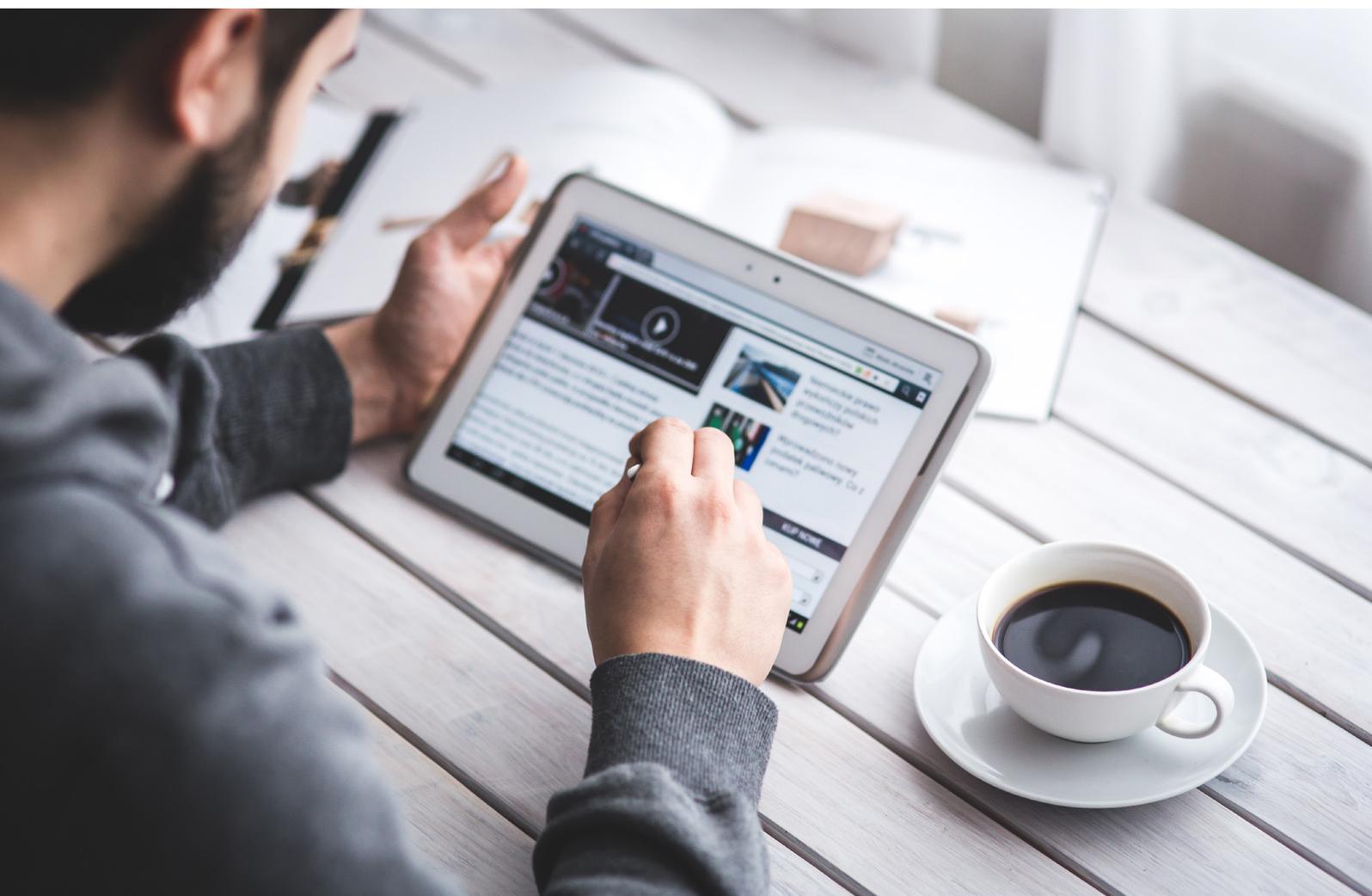
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THE ROLE OF **SEO IN PRESS RELEASE DISTRIBUTION**

No matter what a press release aims to do — promote a story for coverage, provide effective reputation management, or disclose financial results — the key to achieving that end is to tell compelling stories about your business through clear, concise writing. Coverage from the media and analysts can help your company build recognition in the marketplace, and press releases remain a powerful tool to distribute news and start conversations. But for that to hold true, your press release must be newsworthy, visible, and interesting.

The headlines that most consumers read today are accessed from queries on search engines like Google, Yahoo! and Bing, which in turn pull them from social media sites like Twitter and Facebook. In response to this shift, a new generation of PR pioneers began to optimize their press releases for search engines, using frequently searched “keywords” to increase a release’s visibility within the user search results. Today, PR professionals have no chance of maximizing the reach of their press releases without adopting this approach.



3 MAIN BENEFITS OF OPTIMIZING YOUR PRESS RELEASES

Though there are many advantages to optimizing your PR efforts for search engines, they generally fit into one of three categories:

- 1. Improving your company's visibility**
- 2. Attracting media interest, analyst coverage, and investors**
- 3. Direct and indirect positive impacts on your website within Google's algorithm**

What are these “direct and indirect positive impacts”? It’s almost certain that social media performance directly affects how search engine algorithms rank a given piece of content — Google refuses to comment, but the evidence supporting this notion is overwhelming. Actions such as likes, shares, and retweets will send a signal to the search engine that your press release and, by extension, your website are online authorities for a given topic. The more visibility your press release has, the more social traction your release can garner.

As for the indirect impact, user pathing and click-through rate are equally important algorithmic factors. Providing relevant, targeted linking within the press release can drive readers deeper into the website, leading them to content that serves their specific needs.

This tells Google that your website provides a good user journey and can drive up organic visibility and, in turn, the number of customers on your website. Exactly how highly your release ranks for a given search query depends on how well it anticipates and plays into a given search engine's ranking algorithm. These algorithms are used to determine how often and on what sites a certain release appears online. Google keeps the number and influence of factors involved in each algorithm highly secretive and often alters them to prevent people from "gaming" the system, but the search engine giant has released a set of "Quality Guidelines" by which you can judge your releases:

- Was the content edited well, or is it sloppy and appear to have been hastily produced?
- Does the content provide a complete or comprehensive description of the topic?
- Does the content contain insightful analysis or interesting information that will engage the audience?
- Are the articles unsubstantial, or otherwise lacking in helpful specifics?

THE IMPACT OF GOOGLE'S PANDA UPDATE

In the past, an important part of what made an optimized press release so valuable was the embedded links that channeled link equity back to the target URLs (e.g., your corporate website). It was a convenient and easy way for optimizers to manufacture authoritative links and inflate the value of their link profile, driving up their rankings. But Panda, an update to Google's algorithm meant to punish these exploitive tactics, neutralized the impact of those phony links.

That doesn't mean that the value of optimizing press releases has been eliminated — it's simply been changed. An engaging, well-optimized release encourages other credible sources to construct their own content based on that release (i.e., write a story about your announcement). This derivative content will also be shared over social networks, and any links established from those sources have potential SEO value.

THE IMPORTANCE OF **KEYWORD RESEARCH**

The first step in the process of drafting any well-optimized press release is to identify your target audience and build out a keyword portfolio that aligns with the message you want to convey. While it may be tempting to get the substance of your release on paper first and fit your keywords in afterwards, the result often reads as stilted and inauthentic. Readers can perceive when terms have been shoehorned into a piece where they otherwise don't belong, and you should ultimately be writing for readers, not search engines.

It's much more expedient to start by gathering the terms that should figure prominently in your release than it is to write without those terms already in mind. The result will be a more organic and well-written (and therefore more optimized) press release that builds your company's credibility as a news outlet.

Above all, make sure your keywords don't prevent you from speaking in plain language. One benefit of relying on commonly used search terms is that you're incorporating words you know your audience cares about and understands.

OPTIMIZING YOUR PRESS RELEASE THROUGH KEYWORD SEGMENTATION

The first step in optimizing a press release is to segment potential keywords into separate categories. A keyword category is a topic, product, or story that people use search engines to find out more about. For a new product release, your keyword categories would include phrases involving both the name of the product you're launching and the fact that it's being released: "new Prius released" would be a good example here.

Initial keyword categories are easier to predict, provided that your press release is on a rather straightforward subject, such as the disclosure of financial results or the announcement of a new location. If you're writing a press release for Nasdaq announcing its third quarter results, it's easy to get a sense of what most of your readers will be searching for: "Nasdaq third quarter results" or "Nasdaq Q3 2015 earnings." Good keyword categories for

this release would be general ideas like “Q3 Nasdaq,” “third quarter Nasdaq,” and “Nasdaq earnings.”

Of course, there are many other kinds of press releases that demand the use of different keyword categories. If your release is about a **product or service launch**, consider:

- The name of the product
- The kind of product it is, plus its main selling point. For instance, if you’re a financial institution promoting a new form of overdraft protection, try “low-fee overdraft protection.” In many cases, customers will be searching for a version of your product or service that is either low in cost or high in quality.

If your release is about an **executive appointment**, consider:

- The year, the name of your company, and the title of the position being filled
- The names of the executive being replaced and the person replacing him or her
- The name of the new executive’s former employer if he or she was hired from another company or institution

If your release is about an **acquisition**, consider:

- “(First Company Name) Merger with (Second Company Name)”
- The name of your industry, plus “merger,” plus the current year

If any of these seem obvious, it’s because they should be: creating your keyword categories ought to be a simple act of word association that identifies what your readers are looking for on a fundamental level.

A word of caution: just because your users are searching for a given term doesn’t mean it’s a good idea to try to shove that keyword into your release. If users are searching for “health care mergers 2016,” you probably won’t be able to find an appropriate use for those keywords until the intro paragraph of the release.

NICHE KEYWORD CATEGORIES

After you’ve found these basic categories, you must also seek out a few good “niche” categories—search terms that a more select group of readers would use and that could earn significantly more clicks. This could take a bit of research, and it helps to think critically about who your audience is and what they want.

For example, you might find that people searching for “Nasdaq” tend to also search for “Nasdaq Stock Market.” While your press release might not directly involve the stock market, working it into your language could help its search engine results page (SERP) ranking.

When there are two or more common ways of saying a word or phrase that is central to your press release (e.g., “Q3” versus “third quarter”), it’s important to maximize your ranking for your targeted keyword by sticking to one iteration. This maximizes your use of that root keyword — there’s a good degree of diversity in the way that each of us searches for a given subject, but it’s better to be the first result for one search rather than the fourth or fifth for several.

For more information on effective SEO and keyword research for press releases, please consult the appendix.



HOW TO WRITE YOUR **PRESS RELEASE** FOR MAXIMUM EXPOSURE

The more things change, the more they stay the same—yes, it’s a cliché, but it’s also a helpful thing to keep in mind when writing a press release. The first goal in constructing a release should be to tell an informative, concise, and clear story, even if that story is about your company’s financial performance.

Adhering to the tenets of writing and journalism, then, has become no less important in the age of the internet. Search algorithms change frequently in order to keep pace with spammers, bots, and content farms. As a result, search rankings tend to favor pieces that are actually well-written and pass over ones that have been stuffed with irrelevant keywords. With that in mind, let’s cover a few of the basics of writing a strong press release for internet audiences.

WRITE LIKE A JOURNALIST

While some writers still get paid by the word, you should write as if each word is costing you something when writing your press release. Especially for an earnings release, where your readers will be clicking on your post seeking very specific financial information, there’s no better strategy than getting straight to the point.

This kind of writing requires selective or minimal use of adjectives, especially ones that are overtly promotional. Words like “groundbreaking” and “interesting” might be common fodder for headlines these days, but superlatives like “one-of-a-kind,” “premium,” and “best-in-class” are almost always associated with advertising.

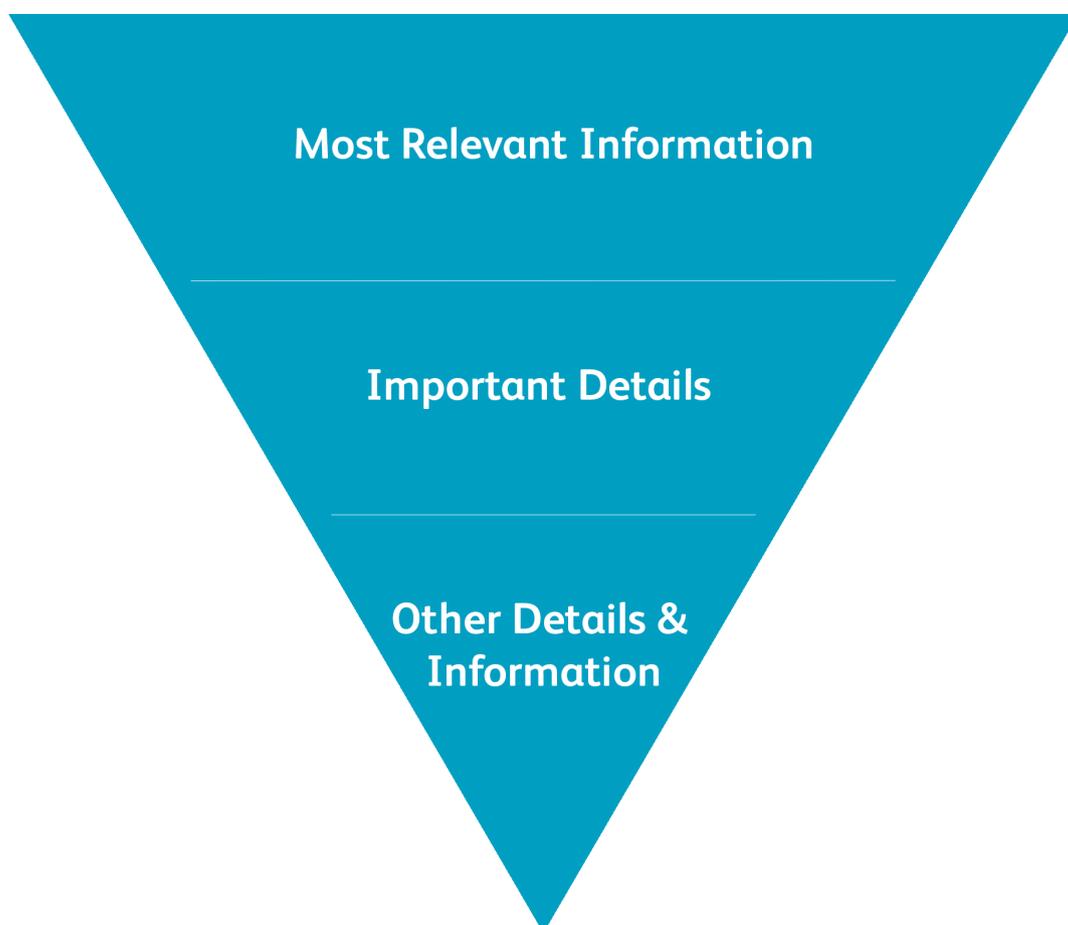
Your sentences should be short and declarative, concisely stating the facts that are most relevant to your reader. This is especially crucial near the start of the release, which should establish the context and purpose of the announcement (we’ll return to the proper structure of your release in a moment). Declarative sentences not only sound more journalistic, but tend to be more “tweetable.” A short sentence that doesn’t require much additional context will always gain more traction in the world of digital news.

The tone of your press release ought to be somewhere between editorial and academic, though it’s generally better to err towards the latter. That said, while your press release

should stick to the facts, there are ways of coloring your audience's impression of them. For instance, if your company is undergoing a change in executive personnel, it's advisable to use language that emphasizes progress, rather than drawing attention to potentially negative circumstances that led to the change.

Another key to writing like a journalist is to quote your sources. Doing so adds an additional human element to your release, makes it more compelling (as long as your executive's quote comes across as authentic and not as a jargon-filled talking point), and identifies potential spokespeople to the media.

THE INVERTED PYRAMID



Writing for the New York Times, Frank Lohr pointed out that one of the most enduring standards of journalistic writing, the inverted pyramid, evolved from the needs created by a new technology: the telegraph. "Putting words on telegraph wires was costly," said Lohr. "So reporters made sure the most significant points were made at the start."

Similarly, the rise of SEO and web-based news services has led to a renewed emphasis on the inverted pyramid. SEO takes the logic of the inverted pyramid quite literally: use the

words that your readers are searching for as early as possible, only getting more general and digressive as you get deeper into the article. This approach not only achieves the immediate practical end of drawing eyeballs to your release, but makes the piece more readable. Those seeking one or two relevant facts get what they want quickly, while readers with a more sustained interest in the subject at hand are free to absorb more information.

WHERE TO PLACE KEYWORDS WITHIN YOUR RELEASE

Hopefully, you've already made an effort to include targeted keywords in your press release. Once you're done, however, it's good to review the following checklist to see if you've put valuable search terms where they're needed most.

HOW TO STRUCTURE YOUR PRESS RELEASE HEADLINE

The key to optimizing the headline of your release for search engines is to move imperative language to the beginning. Remember: the first line of your Google Search Engine Result Listing is going to be pulled from your headline and will be limited to about 55 characters, including spaces. You want that listing to compel readers to click through, so plan accordingly.

Short headlines also helpfully force you to prioritize relevant keywords, which in turn maximizes your visibility to search engines. Just as you should take advantage of valuable (but relatively attainable) keywords, you should minimize your use of "filler" words — anything that wouldn't be capitalized in your headline won't do much for your release's SEO value.

Instead of "Luna Equity to Hire Executive of Competing Firm as CEO," try "Luna Equity Names New CEO." It conveys all the information necessary for a headline, and there's very little in it that you wouldn't want to rank for in the SERPs. And while it's a tempting convention in journalism, you should be careful about using puns or witty phrases in your headline that may confuse search algorithms.

SUBHEADING

Keywords are much easier to place in your subheading, but that doesn't mean you should be tempted into keyword stuffing. Use Autocomplete to find search terms that are closely

related to the ones you're pulling from your research (see the Appendix for more on Auto-complete).

Say your headline is, "Luna Equity Announces Annual Meeting." When you type "annual meeting" into the Google search bar, one of the first things that comes up is "annual meeting agenda." While the word "agenda" may not belong in your headline, it might fit snugly into your subheading: "2016 Agenda to Cover Recent Litigation, Other Topics."

THE FIRST 100 WORDS (INTRO)

Your release will rank higher for keywords when they're placed in the first 100 words than it will when they're placed later in the text, but again, don't overuse your keywords! Panda updates notwithstanding, repetition makes your piece less readable and makes it seem as if your press release is more for SEO than it is for communicating news.

Just as your release's headline becomes the title of your Google SERP listing, the first sentence of your release becomes the description (the two lines below the headline). Again, you want a description that will compel readers to click through. It's important to note that Google limits that description to about 155 characters including spaces — so be concise and place the most important content up front.

The intro represents an opportunity to incorporate semantic variation and supporting language into your release. Thanks to regular Panda updates and machine learning, the Google algorithm can associate contextual language with a broader, main topic. That means that you have the ability — and even the imperative — to incorporate natural language. For example, in the first few sentences of the press release you could use language like "Executive of Competing Firm" as a variation of "New CEO" (your main topic and a part of your headline).

ANCHOR TEXT LINKS

If you want to link to a target web page in your release, you should include your primary keyword phrase in the anchor text of that link. This increases the probability that, if other sources lift content from your release for use in their own web content, they will link back to your target page and use the exact keyword phrase for which you want to rank.

Your anchor text keywords can both be related to the content of the release and instruct the reader where it's taking them. For example, good anchor text in financial disclosure statements might read, "Click here for video of Luna Equity's official Q3 statement," in contrast with, "Click here."

While anchor text can be a great vehicle for driving traffic to your site, a press release shouldn't include more than one or two links. Since readers may discover your release on

a website to which it's been syndicated (e.g., Yahoo! Finance, Reuters.com), you'll want to take an opportunity to link back to a relevant page on your corporate website. If your release announces an executive appointment, or if it covers a topic on which someone in your company is considered a thought leader, consider also linking to their blog, executive bio, and/or LinkedIn Influencer page.

IMAGE METATEXT

Compelling images are bound to make your content more clickable, and including keywords or related search terms in the metatext for your images increases your chances of being found via Google Images.

Once you've found a relevant image to include — such as a logo or the headshot of a new executive — make sure it has a standard file extension name such as .jpg or .jpeg. In this case, it's also important that you name the file something that both includes keywords and effectively describes the image in question (e.g., new-nasdaq-coo-adena-friedman.jpg).

However, we advise not to include an image just for the sake of doing so — only choose a photograph if it's directly related to the content of your release. Additionally, Google stresses that the image should be at least 60 by 90 pixels. Those are minimum requirements, and a high-resolution image is always more useful to media outlets.



THE KEY TO

SUCCESSFUL PR:

PROCESS MAKES PERFECT

Let's run through some key action points to take away from this guide, as well as a few practices to avoid when writing and distributing your releases.

SEO Dos

- ✓ Identify your audience to create relevant keyword categories, which should describe what that audience wants to learn from your release.
- ✓ Maximize your piece's optimization for a single keyword phrase, rather than for several iterations that mean the same thing.
- ✓ Use short headlines (25-55 characters) that feature your most highly-targeted keywords.
- ✓ Write an introductory sentence or paragraph that concisely summarizes all the most important information your press release is going to convey.
- ✓ Use the "inverted pyramid" writing style that places the most important information first and related details and digressions later.
- ✓ Write with short, declarative sentences that state the main point(s) as concisely and simply as possible. Just as the piece itself is organized to convey the most relevant information first, so should each paragraph and sentence within that piece.
- ✓ If you're quoting someone within the company, take this opportunity to link back to their blog or LinkedIn Influencer page to boost their status as a thought leader within your organization.
- ✓ Use compelling, relevant images in your release that are at least 60 by 90 pixels in size.
- ✓ Link back to your company website to improve its traffic. Your anchor text for this link should be your primary keyword phrase so that, when other sources use your content, your website's ranking for that phrase is improved.

SEO Don'ts

- ❌ Shoehorn as many keywords as possible into your piece at the expense of clarity or brevity.
- ❌ Spend your energy trying to rank for generic, extremely popular keywords (e.g., technology).
- ❌ Use superlatives like “one-of-a-kind” or “groundbreaking.”
- ❌ Insert generic anchor text, such as “Click here.”
- ❌ Include more than one or two “filler” words in your headline that you aren't trying to rank for, including conjunctions. Any word that wouldn't be capitalized in a headline is a “filler” word.

Developing a strategy for creating, optimizing, and distributing press releases can seem at first like a daunting task, but the process becomes more streamlined once you've set it all up — the rest of the work is in fine-tuning your approach. Frequently publishing releases will do a lot to establish your company as a trusted news source, but how quickly you're able to do that will depend on how you manage the entire process, from the first draft up until the moment it goes live.

The truth is that SEO is constantly adapting to changing consumer trends and search engine algorithms, but what remains constant is the strength of compelling content. With the tips in this guide, you will improve the optimization and visibility of your releases, which can lead to additional media coverage and generate greater interest amongst analysts and investors.

APPENDIX:

MORE ON SEO RESEARCH

Keywords are crucial to getting your message seen by as many people as possible, and getting your release in front of the maximum number of eyeballs — including those of journalists and analysts — requires keyword research as an initial step.

To do that, you'll need to put yourself in your audience's shoes and brainstorm a few keyword categories that address the kind of searches they will perform when trying to find news about your company or a related topic. While we've provided some helpful strategies for creating keyword categories on your own, you'd be surprised how often your own expectations differ from what consumers are really typing into search bars. Let's look at some useful tools that take much of the guesswork out of keyword planning.

SEO TOOLS

AUTOCOMPLETE (SEARCH ASSIST)

As soon as you type something into almost any search engine, this feature (called Auto-complete for Google and Bing, Search Assist for Yahoo!) will instantly suggest four to ten potential search queries. It provides a quick and easy way to find out what people are searching for that's related to your company or the story you're telling.

GOOGLE ADWORDS KEYWORD PLANNER

The AdWords Keyword Planner is the industry standard in SEO tools, able to deliver millions of potential keyword combinations with data that is highly accurate and objective. While the platform was designed with marketers in mind, it remains an indispensable tool for all communications professionals.

The Keyword Planner feature of AdWords has two tools that are useful for doing SEO research:

1. Search for new keyword and ad group ideas

If you haven't done your keyword category brainstorming yet, or if you need some more fresh ideas, this will be an incredibly useful tool for you. Type in the keyword ideas you already have to get related keywords, enter your landing page to get keywords specific to your company, and input your industry in order to get crucial "niche" keywords.

2. Get search volume for a list of keywords or group them into ad groups

Once you've got your long list of keywords, punch them into this tool to see exactly what the search volume is for each. This will allow you to see which keywords are higher priority. If you see something that's a little awkwardly written but gets a lot of searches, it might be worthwhile to try and work it into your release.

When selecting keyword phrases generated by AdWords, keep in mind that the terms with very high search volumes are commonly entered, but very difficult to win. A crucial part of any keyword strategy is to set realistic goals and expectations, as it's better to achieve modest success than it is to miss your lofty ambitions and come out with nothing.

Many keywords are simply too popular for you to realistically top the search results for them — others are put out of reach by the Google algorithm. For example, a company that sells "analytics software" may be tempted to optimize and rank for the term "analytics." However, a quick scan of Google's results of that search shows that, in an effort to serve users only what it anticipates they'll want to see, the engine does not include businesses in this space, and it's therefore not a term worth pursuing.

But that doesn't mean you shouldn't strive to create unique content that will appeal to a niche audience. Try to choose fairly industry-specific keywords with moderate search volumes that are related to more coveted, general ones. This method results in what are referred to as nesting doll keywords.

A nesting doll keyword is a long tail keyword that contains other, more general keywords within them. This allows you to maximize the overall SEO value of your press release and score for high-volume keywords that might not otherwise have been worth aiming for.

For instance, it's much easier to score for "Nasdaq newswire service" than it is for "newswire service," but by using the first, you're able to score for both. The same goes for "newswire service" and "newswire." The lesson here: nesting dolls allow you to make the most out of your limited space on the page.

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