

## Transcript: The basics of SEO

Welcome to another Digital Master Class, part of Glen Eira City Council's Digital Enablement Program. Today's webinar is on the topic of: the basics of SEO (search engine optimisation). Today's webinar will introduce you to SEO, it will explain how it works, and it will show you how it may (or may not) be a useful part of your business strategy.

Today's agenda: what we're going to achieve; how does Google decide what websites to show in a search; why is search traffic important; natural search results versus paid search results; a (somewhat simplified overview) of how search engine optimisation and search engines work; does your business need SEO; and how to brief a freelancer or an agency.

This webinar explains how Google search can benefit your business: its purpose is to provide you with the confidence to brief an agency or a freelancer about increasing your Google search Traffic, through search engine optimisation. Please note: the webinar will *not* delve into the technical aspects of the Google search algorithm, as this is an immense topic that is beyond today's scope. As mentioned, it will provide a high-level (and somewhat simplified) overview of how search engines work.

How does Google decide what websites to show in search?

Consider that Google is big. Really, really big. So big that it processes an estimated 3.8 million queries per minute. To make sense of this enormous amount of data, Google uses a mathematical formula called an algorithm (you may have heard of this term before). The algorithm determines the order in which web pages are shown. When someone types a search into Google, the words used in that Google search are known as keywords.

How complex and sophisticated is the Google algorithm?

It is thought to measure more than 200 factors every time it gauges the relevance of a web page. That means, every page that you see in a search that you've done on Google has been assessed according to more than 200 different criteria. It is also worth noting that the Google algorithm is constantly changing, and constantly being updated. Why is search traffic important? For a start, search traffic remains the most widely used method for finding information online. Not only that, but the higher a web page appears in search results, the more clicks it's going to get. In addition, a business with a good position in Google, such as the first page (especially if it's near the top) can, in theory anyway, passively attract traffic. This means people simply come to you when they search for your business. Compare that to channels like email or social media, which require an active effort from the business to attract traffic. This is the reason why savvy businesses try to improve where they appear in a Google search. The practice of doing this is known as "search engine optimisation" i.e. SEO.

A note on paid versus search results. When you do a search in Google, you are going to see two different kinds of results. You will see natural Google search results, which is what we're talking about today; but you will usually also see paid ads. That is because Google lets you purchase advertisements that appear in premium positions.

Remember how we mentioned previously that having a good position in Google (i.e. at the top of a search result) is good for attracting search traffic? Google ads allow you to purchase a premium position in the best possible spot, which means you're likely to get even more clicks. The payoff, of course, is that ads will only appear for as long as an advertiser is prepared to pay for them. Once you stop advertising, those premium paid positions disappear in a search result. Note that Google ads have no influence on natural search traffic.

How does search engine optimisation work (the simplified version)? We're going to use a fictitious example to help illustrate some basic SEO principles. In this example, Greg is a florist who operates a budget flower delivery service across Melbourne. Greg decides to build a new website, and to get more visitors he decides he needs to put relevant content onto his website, so that people can find him in a Google search. He has a basic idea of what basic keywords to use, however, he wants to do some more research. He looks up what keywords people use in Google searches, using a commercial keyword research tool. Based on the information that he finds, he decides to call his website [Greg's cheap flower delivery in Melbourne].

You can see in the results, shown on this table here, that the decision to call his website [cheap flower delivery in Melbourne] is based on keyword volume found in this keyword research tool. Greg then places keywords like that in prominent places on his website, and he also publishes helpful articles on the theme. He also publishes some related pages, such as blogs or how-to articles on related floristry topics. In doing so, Greg hopes that this content will provide his website with a good position in Google searches – because when people search for these topics, he hopes Google will see that his website contains relevant content.

In principle, publishing content with relevant keywords such as these should get Greg a good position in a Google search. However, the reality is rather different. That's because the web has an estimated 4.2 billion pages. Amongst these billions of pages are tens of millions of websites, all of which are competing for the best possible spot in Google. And those websites would include many florists. This is where SEO comes into play.

SEO essentially involves companies trying to influence where Google places them in search by publishing relevant content, along with a number of technical website improvements. Here are some of the 200+ factors that Google uses, to assess when deciding where to place a page in a search. These are factors that will influence how and where a page appears in any given search. They include:

- The depth and usefulness of your content.
- The number of keywords in your content.
- The number of links from reputable websites pointing to your site.
- Also, the number of links from dodgy websites pointing to your site (beware of this, this can really hurt you).
- How well the page is set up for mobile users.
- The ease with which information can be navigated by your front page.
- The complexity of your web address structure (so, the URL).
- The speed with which images load
- And much, much more.

There are, as mentioned previously, more than 200 factors that Google uses to determine where to place a web page in a search.

How important is SEO then for your business?

No business will decline free search traffic. As mentioned, it remains the number one method for finding information online. However, your business model and objectives should determine the amount of resource (and therefore the cost) that goes into SEO. That's because SEO done properly is no small undertaking.

A pop-up café, for instance, that doesn't offer takeaway, and which relies on local foot traffic, is unlikely to benefit from a huge SEO boost, beyond the bare basics. This organisation may instead benefit from a strong social media presence, which relies on customers using check-in functions. In

contrast, an accountancy firm that can service anyone in the country via video might stand more of a chance to benefit from a substantial SEO effort. For instance, the firm might publish tax articles that people can find in Google searches.

Most businesses should try the bare basics. Google My Business is a free tool that Google offers, and which is applicable to any business with a presence on Google Maps, or which services an area on Google Maps. Similarly, a LinkedIn company page can act as a second website in a Google search. Both tools are free and require not very much effort to set up, relative to the return.

Having said that, certain characteristics are more likely to benefit from an investment in SEO if your company has them. Such as:

- Trades and professional services.
- Specialists, unique businesses, or businesses with few competitors (admittedly, a rare and enviable position to be in)
- Start-ups or online only retailers, or businesses with an online retail component will obviously benefit from having a strong presence on Google
- As well businesses that aren't solely reliant on a bricks and mortar presence.
- Destinations such as medical, food, and event-based organisations (these are places that people are likely to research thoroughly, before engaging with them).
- And ultimately, businesses that could realistically expect to be relevant to a wide audience.

If you're still unsure if SEO is the right strategy for your business, consider the following checklist.

- Is there genuine demand for Google search terms that my business is associated with? That's because there's no point in dominating the best Google search spots if nobody is searching for those terms. Do I know what I need SEO for? Search traffic should support a specific business objective, such as more inquiries on my contact page. Am I treating SEO as an investment?
- As mentioned, SEO is a long-term project. To be done properly, it requires commitment.
- Are my intentions realistic? To refer to the previously mentioned fictitious example, an independent florist is unlikely (with one new website) to outrank multinational organisations in the competitive, online, floral delivery, retail space – at least as far as basic keywords are concerned.
- And am I patient? As mentioned SEO, is a slow-burn process, and results can take months to appear.

Having said that, the payoff can yield excellent, long-lasting results when SEO is done properly. If you do decide that SEO is suitable for your organisation, here are some pointers on how to brief a professional.

As with most business decisions, it pays to be prepared. Here is what you should know before engaging a freelancer, or agency.

How do you expect SEO to meet your objectives?

- The target audience.
- Your competitors.
- Your budget.
- A realistic timeline for delivery and expected results.
- Think about how SEO will work with your other channels, such as the previously mentioned Google Ads or social media.
- Have clear expectations about process for concepts, revisions, and approvals.
- And also, have clear expectations about ongoing reporting after the site launches with its new SEO features.
- Also, SEO improvements are often a significant element of a website refresh. If you are

refreshing a website, and enlisting the services of a professional, if SEO is part of your strategy then consider doing that at the same time.

Finally, you are invited to check out these useful links.

Thank you very much for attending, we hope you found this presentation useful.