

HOW 20 SEARCH EXPERTS



BEAT RISING COSTS

BY BRIAN MASSEY

This study was commissioned by Conversion Sciences LLC.

www.ConversionSciences.com

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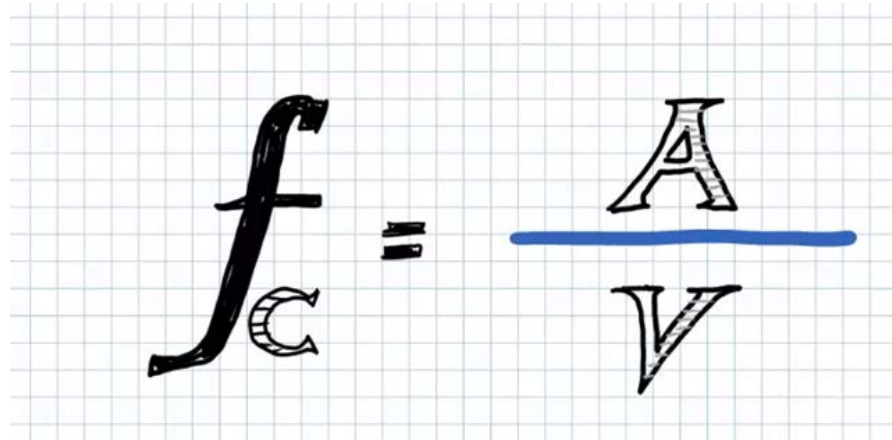
Introduction

There is a blue line running through our websites.

This blue line runs through all of our websites, microsites and landing pages. It slices our visitors' tablets, phones and computers, separating them from taking action.

We bring the visitors to our sites. We charter the digital planes, trains and automobiles that deliver our visitors to us.

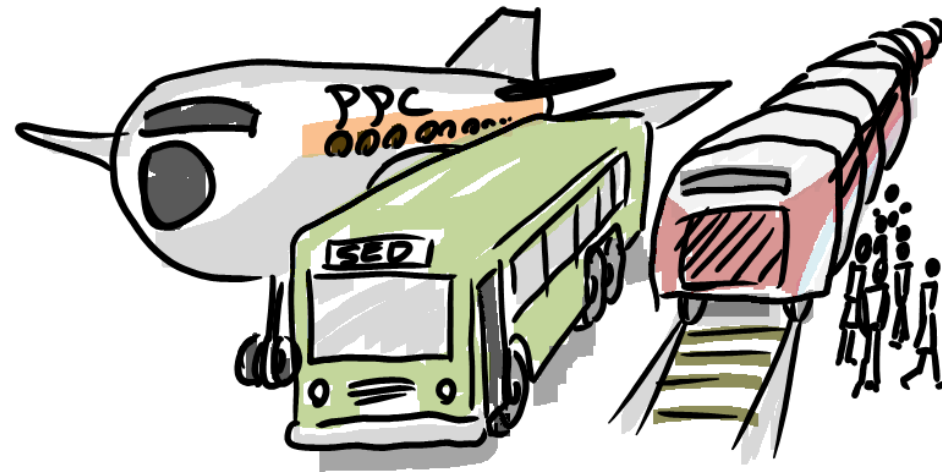
The equation to calculate conversion rate is well known: Conversion Rate is the number of conversion actions divided by the number of visitors.



A hand-drawn equation on a grid background. The equation is $f_c = \frac{A}{V}$. The letter 'f' is large and bold, with a small 'c' at its base. The letter 'A' is above a blue horizontal line, and the letter 'V' is below it. The equals sign is in the middle.

This equation tells us that there are two very important components to our online business.

- The **visitors** who come to our site
- The **blue line** that separates them from becoming customers, leads or subscribers.



This is not an inexpensive undertaking.

We assume that if the *quality* of the visitors we bring is good, they will find a way to rise above the blue line, and move our business forward.

It's time to check in. Is it getting harder to find those qualified and valuable visitors that will drive our online businesses forward?

Is search advertising going to become just another medium for high-spending brands to dominate while small businesses are satisfied with guerilla techniques?

Is it time to be investing in website optimization, to get more of a shrinking audience above the blue line?

Summary of Findings

We researched the current studies on search marketing and online marketing. We also assembled a panel of nineteen practitioners in the search engine marketing industry.

For our study, we combine search engine optimization (SEO) and pay-per-click search advertising (PPC) under the umbrella of search engine marketing (SEM).

As you will see, there is a lot more under this umbrella.

Together, the reports we reviewed and the input of our experts paint a fairly consistent picture.

1. The costs of search optimization services are not rising.
2. The costs of search optimization strategies is rising.
3. The cost of a paid search click is rising.

4. Search marketing has changed fundamentally.
5. Search marketing has become a key tool more than a business goal.

Is the Cost of Search Going Up?

Search marketing has been under fire in the last several years. Google's algorithm updates have radically changed the way search engine optimization (SEO) is approached. Many marketers now worry that they'll "do SEO" wrong, which could lead to harsh penalties if another algorithm update targets their specific tactics.

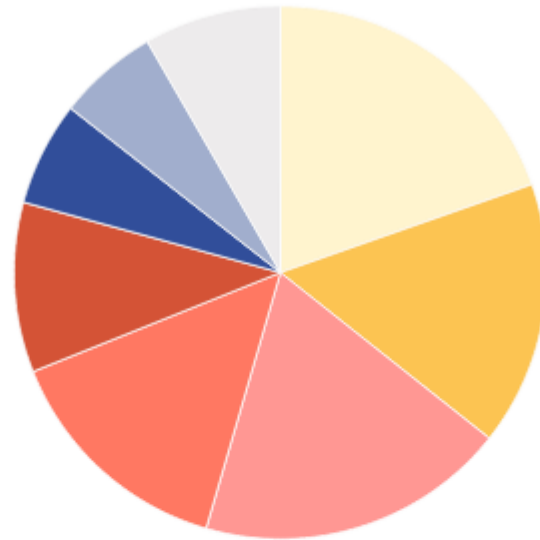
Understandably, people are shying away from SEO. Some marketers are even spreading the word that SEO is dead. Don't listen to them. Search is far from dead.

As Rand Fishkin says in [The Beginner's Guide to SEO](#), "You can build a perfect website, but its content can remain invisible to search engines unless you promote it. This is due to the nature of search technology, which relies on the metrics of **relevance** and **importance** to display results."

Search is alive and well. It has simply changed. But has it become too complicated, too risky, or worse yet, too expensive to pursue?

To find the answers, we talked to experts in SEO, PPC and conversion. We asked them if they felt search costs were rising and what trends they are seeing. We also asked them to share tips for getting the most out of search today.

Overall Ranking Factors



- Place Page Signals (19.6%)**
(Categories, Keyword in Business Title, Proximity, etc.)
- External Loc. Signals (16%)**
(YYP/aggregator NAP consistency, Citation Volume, etc.)
- On-page Signals (18.8%)**
(Presence of NAP, Keywords in Titles, Domain authority, etc.)
- Link Signals (14.4%)**
(Inbound anchor text, Linking domain authority, Linking domain quantity, etc.)
- Review Signals (10.3%)**
(Review quantity, Review velocity, Review diversity, etc.)
- Social Signals (6.3%)**
(Google+ authority, Facebook likes, Twitter followers, etc.)
- Behavioral/Mob. Signals (6.1%)**
(Clickthrough rate, Mobile clicks to call, Check-ins, Offers, etc.)
- Personalization (8.3%)**

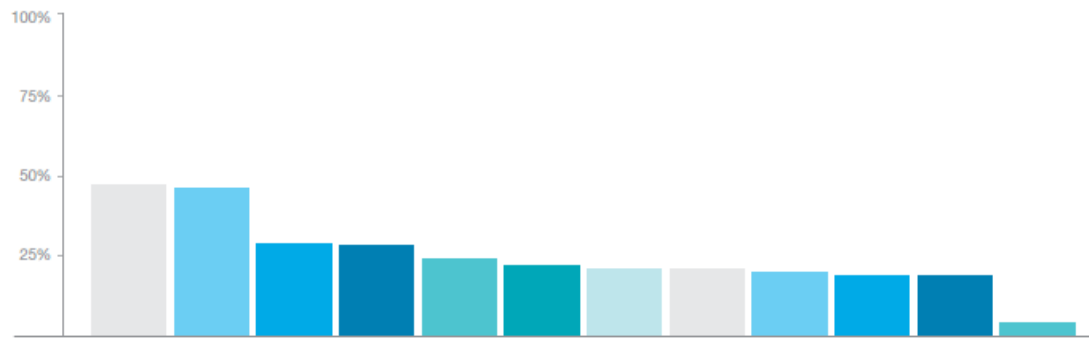
SEO Today

There’s no question that SEO has changed. The Panda, Penguin and Hummingbird updates have definitely taken some of the “game” out of search engine optimization.

A report from Moz.com is telling. The report, entitled [The 2013 Local Search Ranking Factors](#), states that on-page (keyword-oriented) optimization now impacts less than 20% of your rank. It’s the off-page SEO—links, authority, social media, etc.—that has the biggest impact on your ability to rank well in the search engine results pages (SERPs).

The conversations that take place around SEO have changed dramatically. For instance, SEO is no longer considered a stand-alone business goal.

What do we mean by that?



- 47% **Driving increased conversion rates**
- 46% **Increasing & improving brand awareness**
- 29% **Collecting, measuring, & using behavior-based data**
- 28% **Subscriber acquisition**
- 24% **Improving measurement & results of digital channels**
- 22% **Channel expansion** (adding new digital marketing channels)
- 21% **Testing & optimization**
- 21% **Leveraging actionable data**
- 20% **Data acquisition** (improving/expanding data collection efforts)
- 19% **Organizational alignment** (increasing collaboration between business units)
- 19% **Campaign attribution** (identifying campaign's role in sales)
- 4% **Other**

In the early days of search optimization, a business might list SEO, or being found online, as a stated business goal.

According to [MarketingCharts](#), marketers are focusing on other top strategies, none of which are directly related to search. The top three business goals are:

- Increased conversions
- Brand awareness
- Proficiency in using “Big data”

These goals don’t focus directly on search, but being found online remains critical to any online property.

Why the shift?

The changes in search have made it clear. If Google recognizes you as an authority, your brand may rank well. You’ll be seen and noticed by your ideal prospects.

To be seen as an authority site, you must focus on your customers and create a trustworthy, usable site. In short, you need to build a reputable business.



Top Three Success Metrics



- 67% **Conversion Rate** (sales directly attributed to digital marketing campaigns)
- 64% **Engagement Rate** (opens, clicks)
- 61% **Return on Investment**
- 35% **Lifetime Customer Value**
- 30% **Audience List Growth**
- 28% **Social Activity** (likes, shares, retweets)
- 13% **Incremental Value**
- 3% **Other**

Keeping that in mind, let's look again at the top three business goals being pursued by businesses today.

1. Working towards **higher conversions**. Fix usability and design issues to improve your sales funnel. This could lead to more page views per visit, which can help search engines see you as a trusted site.
2. **Search engines reward authoritative sites**, so simply improving brand strength can help you rank better.
3. **Big Data helps you find and fix issues** in traffic and conversion, which, again, can impact your standing with search engines.

Ultimately, the goal of SEO is to generate traffic. But today, simply focusing on traffic does little to encourage it. Instead, building a respected, customer-oriented business does wonders to impress search engines and customers alike.

This concept is confirmed by the top success metrics listed in The State of Marketing report.

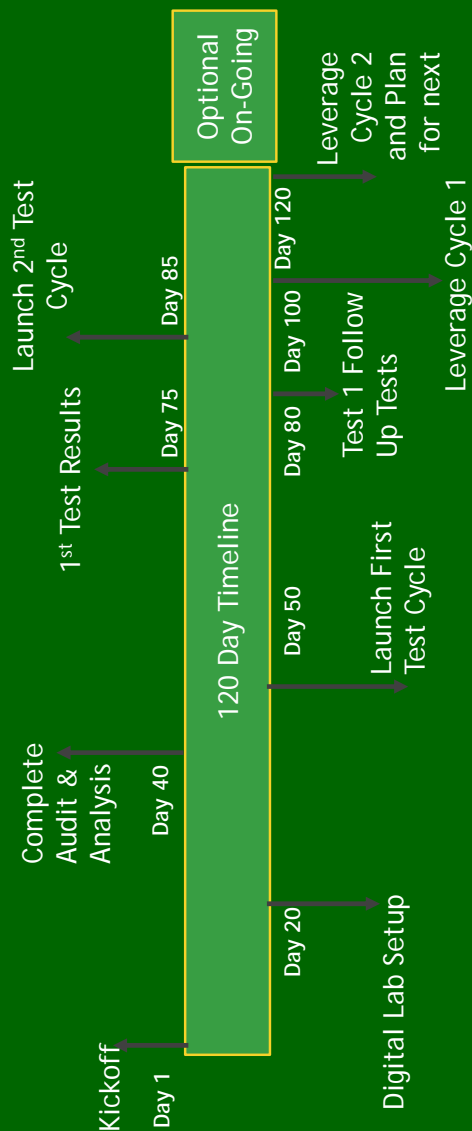
True success in any marketing strategy—SEO or otherwise—is bottom-line profits. That’s why conversion optimization tops the success metrics, along with customer engagement behaviors, such as clicks and opens, and return on investment.

Has SEO dropped in importance?

Conversion Optimization Consultant Jeremy Smith didn’t mince words in our interview with him.

“Unless you have your SEO ducks in a row, you might as well not even be in business.”

SEO is no longer considered a stand-alone business goal.



120 Days to Conversion Optimization

Conversion Sciences offers the Conversion Catalyst™ a proven 120-day program designed to get your Conversion Optimization program off the ground and finding revenue.

The Conversion Catalyst is a complete turnkey service. We handle the creative and coding. All you have to do is implement our winning changes.

The program delivers:

1. A review of your analytics setup
2. Setup of the software for your digital conversion lab
3. A detailed hypothesis list ranked by expected ROI
4. Two complete test cycles administered by us
5. The revenue to make the program a no-brainer

Call to see if you are ready for a Conversion Catalyst jump start.

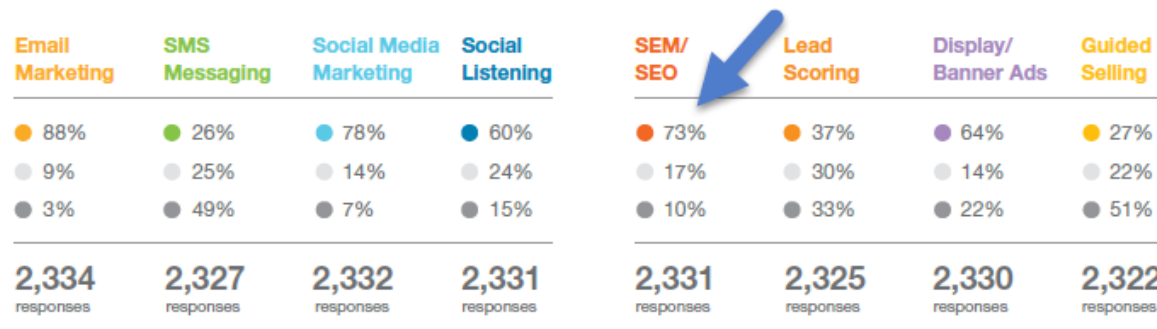
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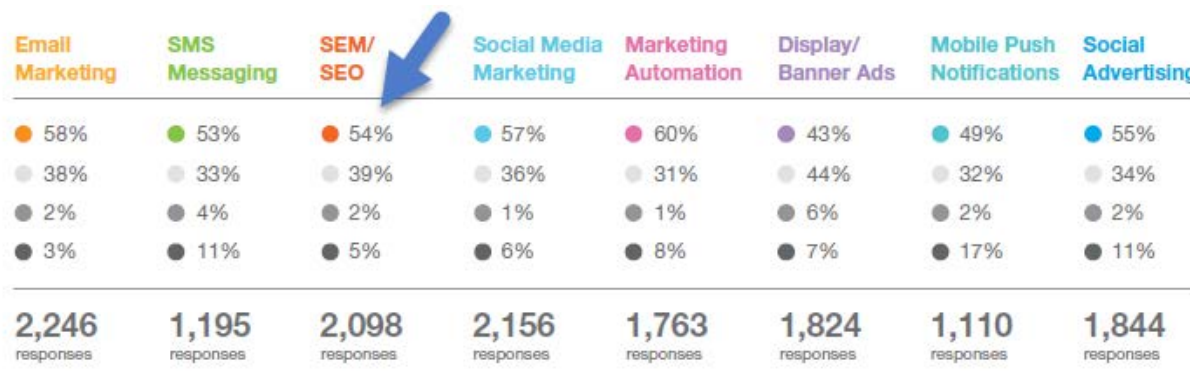
Email: theLab@ConversionSciences.com

ExactTarget's [2014 State of Marketing report](#) seems to bear this out. Marketers do continue to see the value of SEO.

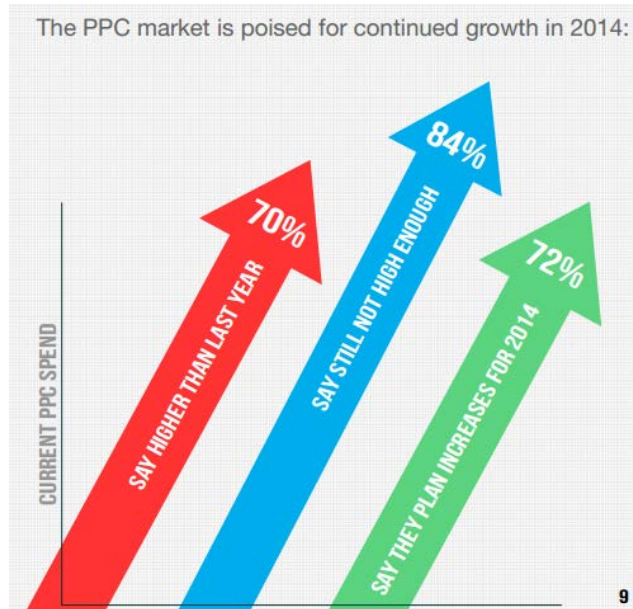
Nearly three-fourths (73%) continue to use SEO to help them reach their business goals.



More than half (54%) are increasing budgets for SEO:





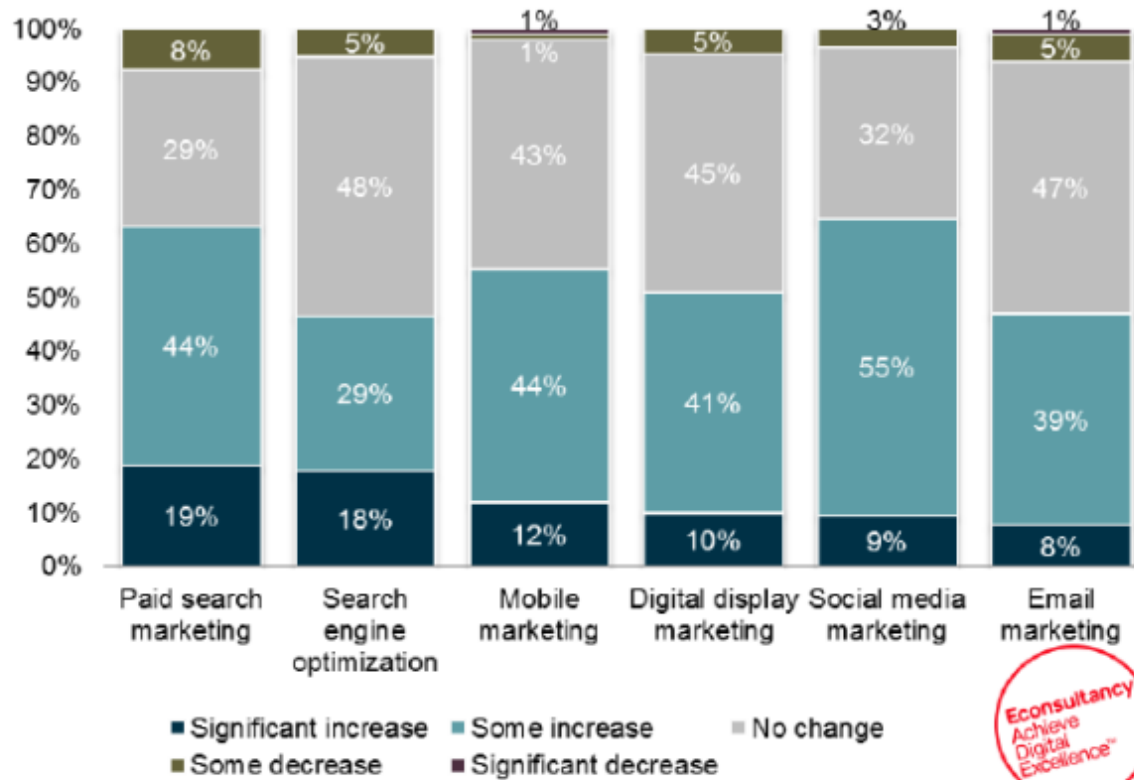


Paid search (PPC) is also gaining popularity as a traffic generator. According to [Hanapin Marketing](#), 84% of marketers said they need to spend more on PPC.

Search spend is increasing

According to the ninth annual [State of Search Survey](#) by SEMPO and Econsultancy, 63% of companies expect to increase their budget on PPC, while 47% plan to do so for SEO.

Companies: How is your 2014 spending in these channels expected to change?



SEMPO :::



Is the cost of search going up?

The cost of SEO has traditionally been measured as the cost of an outside firm to optimize an online property. These costs don't seem to be rising significantly.

Businesses are allocating bigger budgets to search, but this doesn't necessarily mean that costs are rising. It could, in fact, reflect that these businesses are seeing a return on investment.

Long-time industry siren Angie Schottmuller doesn't think SEO rates are rising.

I've not seen any evidence that the cost of SEO is

rising. Rates have remained fairly static the last several years. Businesses are budgeting for more SEO, but that's not the same as a rising cost. The latter notion suggests a decrease in ROI, which isn't accurate. We have loads of

clients that are radically able to reduce paid search budgets through SEO efforts that deliver the same or more traffic.

Author Ian Lurie of Portent sees shorter SEO engagements with more up-front costs.

I am not sure SEO costs are rising. Instead, I feel we are seeing a restructuring. Four years ago, our typical SEO engagement was monthly, retainer-based, with the cost evenly spread across 6 to 24 months. Now, we tend to see more project-based work, with a large startup payment and then smaller monthly payments for a period of 3 to 12 months thereafter.

Consultant Mark Johnson identified the components now integral to an SEO program.

SEO hasn't strictly become more expensive. The real difference is that SEO now means something different. When most people talk about SEO they are referring to the whole process of internet marketing.

This includes all of those popular activities such as:

- On-page SEO (all the technical stuff)
- Content strategy and marketing

- Brand building and outreach
- Social media marketing
- Conversion rate optimization

It's more complex to calculate the cost of SEO

SEO has changed, and with it, the understanding of what it takes to attract traffic. To assess the true cost of SEO, we have to calculate the cost of these efforts.

For instance, the cost of SEO now includes much more than keyword research:

- Creating search-worthy content/being awesome – cited by 7 experts
- Manpower to create content, monitor data, strategize, educate, etc. – cited by 5 experts
- Investing in appropriate marketing software/tools – cited by 3 experts
- Keeping up with the changes – cited by 3 experts
- Remediation, if algorithm updates affect you negatively – cited by 3 experts
- Proving value to upper management – cited by 1 expert

Let's take a closer look at how these changes are impacting SEO and PPC differently.



Focus on SEO

As mentioned above, SEO is no longer a separate, distinct strategy. It's only as successful as your ability to integrate it with other marketing strategies. In some ways, this makes SEO more complicated, because it becomes an element of every project. But in other ways, it simplifies it, because it requires less individual focus. No matter how you approach it, though, it still requires a big investment in terms of time and effort.

Here are the factors driving higher SEO costs.

Increased Competition and Complexity

Search marketing professional Shelley Ellis says external forces are making SEO more difficult.

Companies need to recognize that the increase in cost is not because of inflation but because **SEO just continues to get more competitive and complicated**. As it evolves, SEO is turning more and more into an integrated approach where expanding your social and content marketing are no longer stand-alone strategies. They now feed your SEO.

There are more players in the search ecosystem every day, and the demands for high ranking continue to grow.

Ian Rhodes agrees. This online marketing veteran believes that more businesses now understand that SEO is a “game changer,” and are entering the organic search channel. He believes that this *is* driving the cost of SEO up.

The costs of SEO have increased because you and your competitors are properly aware of its importance. With the ever increasing AdWords bill in hand, you know there’s a cost to ambitious marketing. **SEO demands granular study. It requires creative input. It’s led by strategic direction.**

It’s no longer a platinum package you enlist “off the shelf.” It’s a game-changer that demands investment—internal or outsourced. Your SEO costs are rising and there’s a considerable stake placed on its results. Business success.

Increasing Cost of Content

Most of the experts we interviewed sited the imperative of creating content as a primary driver of new SEO expenses.

Jeremy Page summarizes how things have changed since 2011.

Before 2011 there was much less guesswork with SEO. If you built the right article, directory and social profile links for your client, you'd get them pretty good rankings.

It was cost-effective and scalable.

Today, **the biggest cost increase is the process.**

Nowadays, SEO is outbound-content driven, and a single content piece can cost our in-house team \$3,000 - \$5,000 (factoring in the design, content and promotion). That would be unheard of for an SEO department in 2010.

The message we heard was that quality content is necessary, and at some frequency.

Justin Rondeau of Which Test Won says,

In my opinion [the increased expense] is due to **the increased need to create search-worthy content.** We

hear all the content marketers talk about the importance of content, but they never really talk about the cost or resource constraints. There is a reason content agencies exist, it is hard and expensive to do in-house.

This leaves you with two choices, hire a firm or build and hire a content team.

Marketing Man-power

Where is this new, quality content coming from? How is the process being managed? Kurtis Bohrnstedt of Moz.com believes that the man-power needed to drive inbound programs is a driver in the rising cost of SEO.

Most of us think of cost being measured relative to units of currency. With the rising cost of Inbound in mind, that could translate into the cost of marketing software, and tools used in our daily workflow. But another way to look at it is with manpower. **Think of the daily cost of marketers doing the day-to-day work, and the ever changing industry.**

Content marketers spend a lot of time strategizing, creating, and educating.

Failure to properly plan for the required time and effort needed to put towards content efforts places a lot of pressure on the content marketers, social media marketers,

69% of content marketers surveyed said having a lack of time/bandwidth is one of their biggest challenges.

and the SEOs involved. It is common for one person to be in charge of all of those jobs, stretching them thin. According to [Content Marketing Institute] CMI, 69% of content marketers surveyed said having a lack of time/bandwidth is one of their biggest challenges. Producing enough and producing the kind of content that engages were the other top challenges mentioned. In general, marketers in these positions experience a lot of pain around content marketing.

In our experience, understaffed marketing departments are nothing new. However, those businesses that see marketing as a competitive advantage have and will continue to thrive.

Remediation

Jeremy Smith pointed out a relatively new SEO task: Remediation. The Penguin algorithm changes have penalized sites with what Google sees as irrelevant back links. These include links garnered through link swapping and purchased links.

Removing and disavowing these links can take a considerable amount of effort. In short, businesses must spend a great deal just to get back to zero with Google.

Jeremy sums up the costs of SEO nicely.

I know for a fact that SEO is expensive. Here are a few of the ways in which SEO costs are way up:

- Recurring Monthly Fees
- Link building
- Remediation
- Content Marketing

My point in listing these issues is to tell you one thing: It's worth it.

Less Data from Google

Since 2011, Google has been encrypting more and more of the keywords reported when visitors come to your site. Today, organic keywords are no longer provided, ending a key data source for search engine optimizers.

Justin Rondeau highlights the impact of these changes.

SEO has always been a fickle beast to deal with, algorithm changes, content demands, whether alt-text and meta-tags really increase rankings, the list goes on. With the drastic changes to Google's organic reporting, e.g., (Not Provided), not only has SEO become more elusive to do well, it has become more expensive.

Promoting Content

The days of increasing your rank by buying links, swapping links and doing directory listings is passing away. Keywords stuffing is less effective and more difficult to implement without good keyword data.

Adam Connell of Linkology notes that it isn't sufficient to produce content. To get the back-links and authority you need, you must promote your content. This adds more expense.

While managing a marketing agency here in the UK, I have witnessed the change in a big way and been at the forefront of developing new processes to replace old ones.

With the number of tactics available to us (that won't put our clients at risk) dwindling, more time has to be invested in finding other tactics that can get results.

Together with the evolution of the industry and the competition in the marketplace the content that we do has to be at a much higher level and more time has to go into promoting that content.

Again, the content is critical to SEO success.

Focus on PPC

Jim Leichenko of AdGooroo.com has the most compelling evidence we've seen that the price of paid search clicks is rising significantly.

Figure one shows rising costs for each of nine industry segments, rises of between six percent and fifty percent.

Here at AdGooroo, we've collected data on the average cost per click on US Google AdWords across nine major industry categories for Q1 2012, Q1 2013 and Q1 2014. As you can see, between 2012 and 2014, **cost per clicks (CPCs) increased an average of 26% across all 9 categories.**

Rise in Average Cost Per Click on U.S. Google AdWords by Industry Category									
	Automotive	Education	Financial	Health	Home & Garden	Legal	Shopping & Classified	Telecommunications	Travel
Q1 2014	\$1.57	\$4.30	\$2.61	\$2.16	\$1.30	\$5.82	\$0.77	\$1.35	\$0.91
Q1 2013	\$0.91	\$3.35	\$2.48	\$1.54	\$0.95	\$3.01	\$0.72	\$1.08	\$0.84
Q1 2012	\$0.86	\$2.95	\$2.35	\$1.52	\$1.01	\$2.91	\$0.72	\$1.00	\$0.77
% Increase	45%	31%	9%	30%	22%	50%	6%	26%	15%

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Adam Kreitman of Words That Click believes that, as SEO has become more difficult to implement, businesses are turning to paid search.

In many of the AdWords accounts I'm managing (in a number of different verticals), **I have seen CPCs rising more in a shorter time frame since the beginning of this year than I've seen before.**

I think at least part of what's going on is that when businesses got whacked on the SEO side of things with Panda and Penguin, a lot of them turned to PPC. And that makes total sense. If you've been sitting pretty on the organic side of things for a while and then you see your rankings on the first page of Google disappear, where's the first place you turn? AdWords of course! (A fact I'm sure Google's been very well aware of for a long time.)

The Impact of Mobile on Search

Jeremy Smith points out several drivers of higher click costs.

- Lazy marketers
- Increases in mobile searches
- Smaller mobile screen real estate

In short, he sees a general increase in competition for search ad space.

Many marketers are lazy about tracking results. They spend until the budget is used up instead of relying on data to direct their efforts. **This, combined with a huge increase in mobile searches, less screen real estate on mobile devices and more competition for ad space, has indeed increased PPC costs across the board.**

PPC Works

Search Marketer David Rothwell points out that PPC costs are going up because PPC advertising works.

With PPC, you can direct visitors from any Internet-connected device, anywhere in the world, to any landing page URL you want, via any ad message you choose, 24 x 7 x 365 at will, and only paying a maximum amount that is under your control.

The nice thing is, **when you're buying at a profit, budget considerations go away.** (My PPC clients have unlimited budgets because their campaigns are essentially profit centers.)

In addition, PPC gives you valuable information. In the process of buying clicks, you are identifying real-world and

almost real-time market research data. This will show you not only what works but, just as importantly, what doesn't.

Trends to Be Aware Of

Our research and interviews with industry luminaries has revealed some very important trends in search marketing.

SEO Is No Longer a Stand-Alone Strategy

SEO is a tactic that is an integral part of many other marketing strategies. As SEO becomes more expensive to implement, businesses must consider conversion optimization, content development and content promotion that make everything work.

Consultant Mark Johnson highlights the risk of depending on organic search traffic.

While SEO was once a technical discipline that could work on its own, now it is simply not possible to do those technical jobs in isolation. You have to have a varied and balanced marketing strategy. Otherwise, it just doesn't work.

Worse still, even if it does work, you risk putting all of your traffic in Google's basket, and when you do that, you face a

very real chance of losing your entire business overnight when they decide to update their algorithm.

Adam Connell notes the changing role of SEO in his marketing agency.

SEO went from being a primary focus in our business to a smaller cog in otherwise more in-depth campaigns with much larger scope. While it used to be about getting a link for the SEO benefit, it's now about more than that—it's about branding, visibility and traffic.

Content Is the New SEO

The most resounding message from this study is that quality content is critical to high search rankings.

Conversion optimization pioneer Chris Goward states it best.

The old reliable methods for goosing search ranking don't work anymore, and with the accelerating deluge of content marketing, marketers are pressured to essentially run a publishing company to get SEO value. All of this means bigger marketing budgets to attract the same traffic volume.

Entrepreneur Marcus Sheridan likens internet marketing to a digital land rush. Those who staked their claim early and have already built an

authoritative site have a significant advantage. Here's how he talks about that.

[The digital land rush is over.] I would predict this to mean two major things for all businesses:

The Digital Sooners—companies like River Pools—will dominate their industries for years and years to come, gobbling up all the digital real estate they possibly can.

Future businesses—companies that have yet to form—are going to have an incredibly difficult time rising to the top of their niche due to the extreme disadvantages of being late to market.

Sure, as with anything else, the cream will generally find a way to rise to the top. But that path to the top will be monumentally more difficult due to the fact that they were late to the game, often times through no fault of their own.

So while content is the name of the game, it's important to keep in mind that early adopters have the advantage. Do you give up on content marketing? No. Your best bet is to go beyond content. Create the best content possible, but deliver it in a spectacular way.

Traffic Isn't the Goal – Visitor Experience Is

Search is no longer about the clicks. It is about the ad, the click, the landing experience, the educational experience and the purchase experience.

Search marketer Colby Phillips redefines the term SEO.

It is a transition from SEO as
Search Engine Optimization to
Search Experience Optimization

For SEO, it is a transition from SEO as Search *Engine* Optimization to Search *Experience* Optimization. It is not enough to just get visitors to the website, you have to manage the visitor's experience all the way from initial search to final conversion.

So, SEO is branching out beyond just search engine optimization to include user experience optimization, conversion rate optimization, and anything else that would influence or affect a visitor completing a conversion action.

The days of just using website traffic or keyword rankings as a primary measure of success are over—they can be supporting measures of performance, but traffic without a conversion action of some type is wasted effort in most cases.

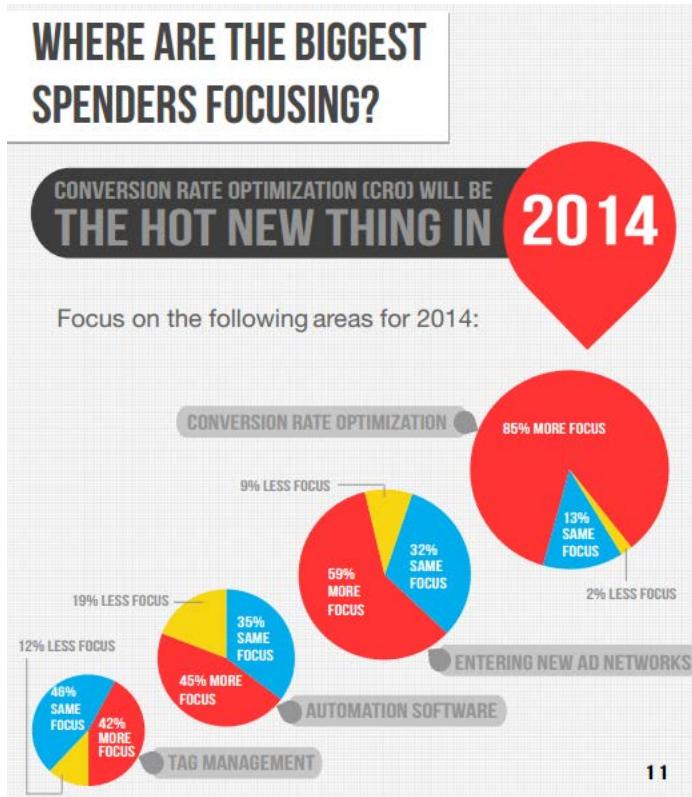
Mark Johnson sees the changes as an opportunity.

It's actually a pretty exciting time for the industry because, now that those less-than-ethical tactics don't work (for the most part), we don't have to worry about them. Instead we can focus on tasks that not only help to improve rankings, but also help our clients to make their websites better.

If SEO used to be about MAKING websites rank, now it is about making websites DESERVE to rank.

The Best Strategies to Capitalize on Changes in Search Marketing

According to [The 2013 State of Paid Search Report](#), big spenders in search are focusing on these areas:



- Conversion rate optimization
- Entering new ad networks
- Automation
- Tag management

This aligns well with the goals of businesses, which we talked about at the beginning of this guide. If you remember, the top three business goals are higher conversion, better brand management, and optimization of Big Data.

Search marketers are in alignment, listing conversion rate optimization as a top priority. Branding is apparently a lower priority for SEOs, though it may show up in their interest in ad networks. (Branding is an element of advertising.) Similarly, the need for better and more precise data may be driving the focus on tag management.

Take a Long-Term, Integrated Approach

Adam Connell believes that businesses can “future proof” their online properties despite Google’s aggressive moves.

Google has a nasty habit of applying penalties retroactively so if you did something questionable in the past, your business might end up paying the price.

Ultimately, by taking a ‘future proofing’ approach to your marketing, you will find that the short term costs can be high, but the long term costs definitely pan out.

How do you “future proof” your business? Coby Phillips speaks to that:

One thing businesses need to remember is that SEO is not done in a vacuum. You can't turn it on and do it for a few months, and then turn it off and expect to remain at the same level of visibility in search. If you are not doing SEO and your competitors are, then you are moving backwards.

Search engines reward constant activity and improvement. SEO has a very long-term ROI, and it should be an ongoing, data-driven activity. SEO improvements are often incremental, but they build on each other over time, and performance improvement should be measured in months and years.

Use PPC as a testing ground

With paid search advertising, you can get the important keyword data that the search engines are holding back. David Rothwell drives the point home.

Use PPC to test keywords, offers and landing pages.

It's important to succeed first with paid, "instant" traffic before safely implementing SEO best practices to scale your reach. Then, based on tested and successful (by that, I mean *profitable*) ad messaging and landing page content, you will know the best keywords, page titles and descriptions to optimize for.

Google has always been an "identity" platform, so you'll often see quite different search results when logged into your Google account.

And increasingly, as these social signals are incorporated into Google's search results, it's important to *know with confidence* that whatever time, effort, money and resources you put into your long-term SEO strategy are going to be profitable.

The only way to do that is to use PPC and landing pages as your laboratory, before going into full-scale production with SEO.

Is your business increasing its SEO budgets? PPC can be used to plug gaps and supplement existing traffic. After all, you want every single click that's profitable, right?

Are you thinking of introducing new products or services? You can test the marketplace first with PPC to be confident that your later SEO investment can be safe.

It's not a question of SEO *or* PPC. SEO *and* PPC can truly be your partners in profit.

Optimize Your Product as Well as Your Pages

Entrepreneur Luke Tillman-Young reminds us that SEO and PPC can't sell a bad product or service.

Sometimes it isn't your keywords or linking strategy that need optimizing. Sometimes, poor traffic and conversion signals that something is wrong with your product.

If responses are low, go back to the drawing board. Is your product good enough to draw traffic? By investing more time

and resources into creating a better product, you are integrating SEO directly into your product line.

Content Marketing plus Social Media Deliver Back Links

Neil Patel is perhaps one of the most experienced and successful content-oriented search marketers. That's a mouth full, but he answers the question, "So, how do you build thousands of links naturally and get thousands of social shares? Through content marketing."

While we have documented an increase in the cost of SEO, Neil thinks it is still a bargain.

Content marketing is the cheapest and most effective way to do SEO these days. Not only does writing high-quality content produce links at a quicker pace than building them manually, but it's also cheaper. Plus, your content will naturally get shared on Twitter, Facebook, Google+ and Pinterest.

Luke Tillman-Young notes that selling content internally is a challenge for marketers.

When SEO was based on keywords, it was a quick and easy traffic solution. Now that content drives search, it takes time. For many marketers, this is perceived as a negative. To invest in high-quality content with no guarantees of improving your search rank makes [decision makers] question the validity of the overall strategy.

Marcus Sheridan seeks to answer the inevitable question, “How long will all of this take?”

“OK, assuming we do all of this stuff, how long with it take for our blog to grow, produce results, and make sales?”

Despite what any “SEO hack” might tell you, the only answer to this question is, “It all depends.”

It is an unsatisfying, but unavoidable response. To help ease the lack of specificity, Mark offers a solution that sounds like a metric.

Mark Sheridan’s Content Saturation Index

To help understand how long these strategies will take to bear fruit, Sheridan offers a metric to determine the challenges your content marketing strategy faces.

Possibly more than anything, it depends on a very important indicator that I like to call ‘**CSI**’, or otherwise stated, an industry’s **Content Saturation Index**.

To make CSI easy to understand, it works like this—**The more content an industry/niche has written about it, the harder it is for a blog to make headway and find success in that field.**

And when an industry has very little online content available to the masses, it can often be gobbled up within almost no time at all.

If you're wanting to know, "How long will it take?" the answer is to actually get started and do something. Unless you start producing content and pushing it out there to the masses, you'll never know how long it will take, be it short or long term.

But this much is for certain—**you need to start**. And if you do, *and do it well*, the rest will fall into place.

Know What to Measure and Why It Matters

Our research has revealed that visits from search is no longer a viable business metric by itself. As search traffic becomes more difficult and expensive to generate, businesses must be focusing on bottom-line metrics.

Colby Phillips made the point well in our interview with him.

Businesses and website owners really need to think about and understand how their website supports the business' bottom line, and align their SEO goals and strategies accordingly. A big part of that is really honing in on what

goals and metrics are important and useful indicators of performance.

Traffic and keyword rankings are no longer the primary metrics of success. So what are the best metrics of success? Well, that is specific to each business, and there will likely be many different indicators or metrics depending on where the customers are in the buying funnel, what that particular company's buying cycle is, if it's an ecommerce or lead generation website, etc.

Web analytics platforms such as Google Analytics can provide mountains of website data, but businesses can become overwhelmed or be misled by that data if they have not put the work in up front to clearly define the data sets they need to effectively inform their business decisions.

Our research indicates that your business should be asking questions such as:

- “What is our revenue per search visit?”
- “What is our lifetime value per search visit?”
- “What is our lead per search visit average?”

Jeremy Smith highlights the importance of quality score as a business metric.

Knowing what to measure and why it matters is key to any successful PPC campaign.

With the rising cost of PPC rearing its ugly face every day, we have to focus even more on search intent and also take into consideration the cross device search patterns of our potential customers. In my every-day consulting efforts, I still see digital marketers not paying attention enough to quality score for optimization purposes. Thus, the bigger the budget, the more money that can be wasted by not optimizing for quality score on a weekly basis (at the very minimum).

Integrate Search with Conversion

In truth, it is impossible to do search without conversion. The only companies that make money on clicks are Google, Bing and the other ad networks.

Our businesses make money on the combination of clicks and conversions.

Wordpress consultant Elizabeth Jamieson outlined the issue for us.

There are essentially four routes to traffic.

1. Paid Traffic – you pay someone some money, they send you some traffic
2. Organic Traffic – you output content, are found in search and you get natural links
3. Audience Building – you build community via social media or other means
4. Short cutting – you fake links, you buy expired domains, you find loopholes

The lines between traffic acquisition and conversion are blurred, so when we talk about SEO today, we really mean online marketing. We really refer to the whole process.

All traffic routes meet a single place called conversion. Time and money will be spent on getting people to visit a webpage, but it's all wasted if they bounce off. The lines between traffic acquisition and conversion are blurred, so when we talk about SEO today, we really mean online marketing. We really refer to the whole process.

Once a site owner begins to comprehend the investment that must be made in SEO, it dawns on him that the infrastructure of his online business may also require extra investment. From the quality of the site through to the speed of hosting to the graphics on the site to the content and his customer support. It's all one enormous, expensive, intricately connected system.

The enormity of the task has put pressure on costs. The size of the investment required is forcing businesses to become more organized in their approach to online marketing. They need an SEO plan. They need a marketing plan.

Justin Rondeau has reviewed thousands of split tests with Which Test Won.

My background is more in site optimization than increasing site traffic. I feel that you should learn how to convert the traffic you have before opening the floodgates. So my final thought on why SEO is becoming so expensive is this: Under-informed decision makers believe that traffic equals money. I don't believe that's true. I am a firm believer that *what you do with that traffic* is what makes you money.

Chris Goward has built one of the largest conversion optimization agencies in the world.

Google continues to reduce the space they give to natural search results, with local, maps, and ad enhancements encroaching. Less space means more competition for scarce real estate, which pushes up the cost for achieving the same SEO results.

That's why SEO marketers are increasingly investing in conversion optimization today: because it works!

Adam Kreitman offers two key strategies to his clients.

In response to rising PPC costs, I recommend two things to clients. First, you have to get your conversion house in order. If you're going to be paying more for clicks, you have to make sure you convert as many of them as possible and that's the job of your website and conversion optimization.

Second, I'm recommending they focus on other types of traffic besides Google. There are a lot of other options out there that are really coming into their own of late that can drive quality traffic: Facebook ads, PPV, email marketing, retargeting, etc. I've always believed that you're in trouble if you only rely on one source of traffic. And that's truer today than it's ever been.

Our Experts

A special thanks goes out to our experts, who took time from their busy schedules to share their insights and experience. If you haven't already, visit their websites and follow them in Twitter.

Kurtis Bohrnstedt @kourteous
Moz.com

Adam Connell @AdamJayC
[UK Linkology](http://UKLinkology)

Shelley Ellis @itsjustshelley
AdviceInteractiveGroup.com

Chris Goward @chrisgoward
WiderFunnel.com

Elizabeth Jamieson @lizzydiy

GenesisClub.co

Mark Johnson @Think_Traffic
ThinkTraffic.co.uk

Adam Kreitman @wordsthatclick
WordsThatClick.com

Jim Leichenko
AdGooroo.com

Ian Lurie @portentint
Portent.com

Brian Massey @bmassey
ConversionSciences.com

Jeremy Page @Jeremy_Page
MultipleStreams.org

How 20 Search Experts Beat Rising Costs

Neil Patel @NeilPatel
QuickSprout.com

Colby Phillips @realcolby
360Partners.com

Ian Rhodes @iRhodes
iRhodes.com

Justin Rondeau @jtrondeau
WhichTestWon.com

David Rothwell @DavidRothwell
RothwellMedia.com

Conversion Sciences

Angie Schottmuller @aschottmuller
ThreeDeepMarketing.com

Marcus Sheridan @TheSalesLion
TheSalesLion.com

Jeremy Smith @JeremySaid
JeremySaid.com

Luke Tillman-Young @xamlit
TechRudder.com