

How Improving Site Search Can: Help Your Teams, Increase Revenue, and Offer Greater Value to Your Customers

Tim:

Well, hi Steve, how are you?

Steve:

I'm excellent Tim. It's summertime. It's warm, it's not cold. And I had a vacation a couple of weeks ago, it was nice.

Tim:

That's fantastic. Vacation, you'll have to tell me what those are like someday.

Steve:

It was very unusual and very much needed.

Tim:

Well, and very much deserved, if I may.

Steve:

Oh, thank you very much Tim.

Tim:

Oh, you're quite welcome. You've been putting in a lot of time getting our business going in the right direction and things like that, and thinking about the future of our business. And thinking about what our customers tell us about our business. And it's funny Steve, now that we're talking about what customers tell us about our business, it leads me to think about what our customer's customers tell them about their business, how they do that. And of course, one of the ways that they do that, which we are very fond of here on SoloSegment Search Chat, is on-site search, and what people do there. So we tend to think that this is an undervalued channel. And probably because people don't really realize the value enough. So I thought it might be interesting for us today to talk about the value of site search to your business. What do you think about that?

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Steve:

Well, it really depends on what your job role is in the organization. Because it is interesting when we talk about traditional martech, we're often talking about technology that lives in the marketing function, often is managed by the marketing function. And so when we talk about personalization, when we talk about engagement, a lot of that is really owned by one part of the organization. But when you talk about site search, there's a variety of different owners of the customer experience of the use cases related to those experiences. And then of course, ultimately to the technology itself.

Steve:

And so this is one of those, I don't know, it's hard to describe, but anybody who's worked at a large company knows what it's like, IT versus everyone else. Because if you're an IT person, a lot of demands are being made on you. And so you're trying to figure out what does the business value and how do I deliver that in the most efficient way possible. So often when you're talking to the IT portion of the company, the value prop is how do we operate this thing more effectively? I was talking to a sales prospect last week, by the way, this was a marketing person, and they were talking about their IT counterpart.

Steve:

And they saw their journey to a new search engine as a way to alleviate the pain that the IT folks were feeling. And that pain comes in a number of ways. First and foremost, it's the complaints. When somebody in the C-suite hears from a big customer that they're dissatisfied, they couldn't find something on your website. Well, certainly there's some value to alleviating that pain, but how you alleviate that pain, especially in the IT organization, is you make the technology easy to use. That you don't make it a big, complex undertaking that is very costly in times of tight budgets, and in IT budgets are always tight.

Tim:

And if I can jump in there for a second. When you say easy to use, you mean for the people who operate the sites.

Steve:

Correct.

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Tim:

Obviously you make it easy to use for the customer. But it's about making it easier for the IT team that do the work that they have to do. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Steve:

Yeah. Yeah, you bet. So, I mean, there's basically two dimensions to that. The first dimension when you're boarding a new technology, is what does it take to board it. So how do we get this thing up and running? And the second dimension to that is, all right, now that it is up and running, how do we make sure that it continues to deliver what we thought it was going to deliver in those first 90 days? Because many times-

Steve:

Yeah. Yeah. But many times you make those investments, and it's all great that first quarter, first year maybe that you're using the technology, but then it gets hard. And so from an IT perspective, that value prop is, is it easy to get started? Is it easy for them to achieve the business case or alleviate the pain that the business is feeling, as quickly as possible? And that startup comes in a number of different ways. I was talking with somebody who uses one of our competitor's technologies and they said, "Yeah, we started. But we really haven't started because now they've got to go into this very lengthy configuration exercise and coding content and all of that other stuff."

Steve:

So those startup expenses are non-trivial, as they say, and it is a key destroyer of value, honestly, when you think about boarding any new technology. And then the other dimension to that, as I mentioned, is the operational cost. So how many people do you have to have sitting at keyboards and answering phones and writing emails to make sure that the thing continues to deliver the business value that say the marketing folks expected that it would achieve.

Tim:

Yeah. And I know we'll get into this in a little bit. And I don't want to turn this into a commercial for our products yet. Not that I will do it later, but at the moment, but when you talk about delivering the business value that people expect and all. Can you talk a bit about that? What does that mean? Typically, what kinds of volumes are we talking about? How many customers are we talking about that are affected by this?

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Steve:

Yeah. So I mean, a lot of that depends on how big your company is. Now we primarily work with large enterprise companies. And so these were companies that are getting hundreds of thousands, if not millions of visits a month, and certainly millions a year. And when you do some pretty simple math, it depends on their business model, how transactional their businesses are. But you generally find that between 5% and 10% of visitors are searching and when you're talking a million, that's a pretty large number of visitors who are using your search engine.

Tim:

Right. 50,000 to 100,000 people per whatever period you're talking about.

Steve:

Yeah, you bet. So now you have some sense of the scale of the challenge. And one of the things I love to hear from a customer is, "Well, yeah. We're going to focus on search, but it's really only 3% of our visitors who use and who visit search." And yeah, sure. But when you think about all the pages on your website. A page that attracts the attention of 3% of your visitors, probably your homepage might be higher than that. But your search results page is definitely top five and it's probably in the top three. It is a highly traffic page, highly utilized asset.

Tim:

Well, and if I recall correctly, there's something special about those folks who search as opposed to the folks who don't search.

Steve:

Yeah, you bet. I mean, you can look at a bunch of different dimensions of the data on this. There are certainly your biggest fans. These are the people who really want to do business with you. And we see that first and foremost in the marketing data, when you look at visitors who use search, they are actually the ones most likely to convert. Now, as you've pointed out to me in the past, it's not because they're searching that they convert, but these are people who have converted or will convert. There are people who want to do business with you.

Tim:

Right. They know what they want enough to ask.

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Steve:

Yeah, indeed. Indeed. And the great thing is they didn't ask Google where your competitors live. They asked you. So if these folks who are really want to do business with you, think you have the solution to their problem, and they're asking you instead of Google, you definitely want to get their attention. You want to solve their problems.

Tim:

And if I can jump in there for one second. On average, in our experience, or if there's an industry number that you prefer to site, but I think we pull this from our data all the time.

Steve:

This is our data. Yeah.

Tim:

Yeah. What percentage of the time do they actually get a good answer today? If you're just anybody off the street, just existing website today, what percentage of the time does site search actually return a positive result?

Steve:

Best case is about one in three. So about 30% of the time. Best case.

Tim:

Best case.

Steve:

And we've-

Tim:

So two thirds of the time-

Steve:

No answer.

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Tim:

So two thirds of the time - of the time, the answer is not what people are looking for.

Steve:

Yeah. And that's as high as we've seen. I think our highest was a 94% search failure rate.

Tim:

Right. So just to put this in context, so somewhere between one in five, excuse me, one in 10 to one in 20 people are conducting a search. These are people who really want something you make. And 94% of the time, this specific company was going, "No."

Steve:

Yeah, exactly. And those people, hey, maybe they did go back to Google and they found the answer and they came back and did business with these companies.

Tim:

Maybe.

Steve:

I say the likelihood of that is low. Because I mean, it's also an important signal. You're sending an important signal when you have awful search results. It's a customer experience signal. And it's very hard to measure something that's somewhat intangible, like customer experience, but it is an important signal. Oh, so-

Tim:

Well, and an important signal to Google. I mean, it's this thing called pogo-sticking where if you're on Google and you go to a site and then you go back to Google and click on another link on Google, you've told Google that the place they sent you the first time, wasn't the right answer. So that's got a whole ball of wax all rolled up in there as well.

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Steve:

Yeah. And that's a third dimension of the value. Let's come back to that SEO thing, because it is important. The second dimension that I like to think about also, is just the whole notion of conversion. I'm sorry, not conversion in the marketing sense, but likely to do business with you. And there's a variety of studies on this topic. But I think the low-end of the data point is 43%. So searchers are 43% more likely than non-searchers to actually do business with companies. And some of the studies say as high as I think 600% was the high watermark on that. But again, it just supports this thesis that people that are using search, are your best prospects. They're the people you should be treating the best out of pretty much all your visitors. And so how do you make sure that you're able to capture that value through your search engine and not just let it run off back to Google?

Tim:

Right. So since you bring up Google, and since we started to have this a second ago, you did say that SEO was the third dimension. You want to talk about that just a little?

Steve:

Yeah. So organic search SEO, search engine optimization, the things that you do to make your site search better, have benefits in SEO as well, because while the Google search engine algorithm is inscrutable, we do know some basic things about it, that it's looking for the best answer. And that's what your searchers are looking for on your website, is the best answer. And that best answer has a lot of characteristics that are very common. It has characteristics like, is there a good page title? Is there a good description? Does the content have the right ratio of contextual information, keywords and such? And so all the things that you do to make your search engine better, help make SEO better. So not alone do they help you keep and progress the traffic you've already attracted to your website, but it also helps you then attract more traffic to your website. So focusing on site search not only has the added benefit of again, making visitors more likely to progress, but also has the benefit of hopefully increasing the volume of prospects and visitors coming down the funnel.

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Tim:

And I know we've talked about this before, but I think in this context especially it's worth bringing up. I mean, given that that's the case, given that there's some relationship between SEO and site search, you would think that Google would have a solution to this problem. They would make a search engine that you could just install on your website, allow you to do that. And that isn't always the case.

Steve:

Yeah. Well, I mean, they did do that for a number of years. And I think they sunset that, I don't know, four or five years ago, but they gave people the ability to actually use the algorithm on your website. And I think they ran into the very same problem that honestly, a lot of our customers, a lot of the people we want to do business with run into, which is, I have this finite set of content to some very specific questions. And so whether you're the technical manager or a marketing manager who is focused on search, that is the biggest challenge you face, is that you have to basically attract people with the right questions so that your answers can appear in your search engine. Google has the luxury of using everybody's content. So it's an infinite repository of answers. And so they can handle a lot of very general questions. And so-

Tim:

There's always something they're going to find.

Steve:

There's got to be something. Of the billions of pages on the web, they want to find some answer to your question, even if it's not the right one. But as marketing managers, we've got a very specific domain, a very specific set of content. And so that is the challenge, is how do you deliver a more effective search experience, recognizing that you have limitations that Google does not.

Tim:

Right. I mean, even if you have a 100,000 pages on your site or a quarter of a million pages on your site, how many pages are you going to have about any one specific topic? It's not as a rich an environment of answers as it is with Google.

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Steve:

Right. And you actually have somewhat of the inverse problem. Because if you are a copper pipe manufacturer, you don't face the problem of not having the right answers about copper pipe. Hopefully you got a ton of content.

Steve:

Yeah. But your problem is you have so much content about a very narrow thing and Google has trained people to ask pretty broad questions. So if somebody comes in and says, "I need quarter inch copper pipe." Well, what's the application? And straight? Do you need it curved? Do you need an eight foot length or a seven foot length? And the question we would ask Google, if we asked that on any website, it's hard because you've got so much content about a very specific thing. The general questions, generally, aren't going to do the trick. Now there's a lot of user experience techniques that you can use to help sift and sort, and enable people, things like facets and those sorts of things to help make it easy for your visitors to find the thing we want. Google abandoned site search, I'm sure because they couldn't sell ads. That was part of the downside. But the other side was, it's a really hard problem to solve.

Tim:

Right. Well, and as I understand that, and I may be adding something here that's not a 100% percent sure, and I certainly don't want to add to the amount of disinformation in the world, but it wasn't good for their brand neither. I mean, people expected Google Search was going to be perfect and site search, as we've described, can be very, very challenging, like all the things that make Google great don't work when you're talking about, "Okay, now just look on one specific website." And then of course make money.

Steve:

Indeed.

Tim:

Okay. So we've talked about the customer experience thing. We've talked about the conversion thing. Excuse me. We'll try that one more time.

Steve:

All right.

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Tim:

Okay. So we've talked about the business value. We've talked about the customer experience benefit. We've talked about the SEO benefit. How does somebody get started with this? If you got a search engine today and the search engine today is producing a positive result, let's say 35% of the time, but you're still wrong two thirds of the time, how do people get started? Where do they go?

Steve:

So the best place to get started is to understand from a data perspective that customer experience. Now, we have a very unique and proprietary measurement algorithm that helps people understand search success, but there are ways for you to actually just be able to go out to Google analytics, even Adobe. You can configure reports that tell you something about search. And I think that's really important is to try to begin to get beyond the clicks, beyond the no results page, really understand what your problem is because you might find that... There was this one company that never became our customer and met them at trade show, had a chat with him, went to their website. And as I looked at their search experience, which was arguably awful because you couldn't find branded items. It was shocking to me.

Steve:

And I was able to discern this just by looking at their search results and doing a couple of searches, was they had all their brand names in the titles of their pages. And it was obvious that they had zero or very low weighting on titles. And so I just sent them an email. I said, "Hey, I think I have the solution to your problem. Go talk to your tech people and change the weighting of the keywords and titles." And I got back and pretty much immediately, "Oh, that was the answer." But it's because they didn't understand A, the search technology and B, the data about their searches. They didn't know that it was branded searches that weren't getting the clicks or weren't getting-

Tim:

Right.

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Steve:

So you really have to start with data and we take that a little bit further. We look beyond the click. We look at actually, what is the visitor behavior after the click and how are they interacting with content? Because that's really at the end of the day the right signal to look at. How are they interacting with the content? If you had a cart experience, are they dropping it in a cart? Most of our customers don't have carts to B2B. But are they downloading the white paper? Is the dwell time up? Those sorts of things are the signals you look for. So I think it always starts with a better understanding of what the problem is.

Tim:

And I would imagine it's things like looking at how much volume to start with and whether or not those folks convert. Get a sense of where does this fit in your universe from a business perspective.

Steve:

Yeah, absolutely. And something that a lot of folks don't do often enough is just go look at your search results. There's one company, they are willful anti-searchers. It's a large tech company. I have tried to get their attention from a sales practice, process and perspective, but they're a company that when you go look at their search experience, it's obvious to anybody who understands their industry, that they're not giving the right answers. And it's so bad that it's clearly willful. They're just not doing anything about it. And so maybe they've done the value, they've done the math and they've decided that it's not worthwhile. But if you're in marketing, you know whether your site search is bad or not, because you know something about your products, you know something about your services. And if you go search for them, you will see that the wrong answers are there. And in a like sense, do you know if you're the technology person? And this was my experience back working at IBM, you know when something's going wrong because your business stakeholders are complaining. So it's usually pretty obvious when you have a search problem.

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Tim:

Right. Right. Well, and I mean, not to get inside our business too much, but I mean, one of the reasons we don't do e-commerce work as a general rule is not because there's any problem with it or because it's not an interesting space, but because obviously on an e-commerce site search is a primary behavior. Most of the folks we're dealing with that know how often people search-

Steve:

Exactly.

Tim:

...because that's what the gig is.

Steve:

Right. Right.

Tim:

Right. Yeah, totally. That makes sense. Okay.

Steve:

Yeah. And by the way, the success signals are very obvious. Did they drop it in the cart?

Tim:

Or did they actually buy or didn't they? Exactly. Yeah. No, that makes perfect sense. So, obviously this is a weighty topic and there is a lot that people can learn about this. And a lot of places they could go in and I'll do the quick commercial for us. We believe that SoloSegment SearchBox is a fantastic replacement for your search engine and a fantastic enhancement for your search engine if you already have one, to make it work better. So they should go to solosegment.com/searchbox if they want to learn more about this. But if they don't want to go to the website yet, or things along those lines, and they want to learn more and hear more of your words about this, your voice, Steve, where could they hear more from you coming up in just a few weeks about this very same topic?

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Steve:

Yeah. So they don't have to wait long. So in early September, I will be speaking at MarTech. And MarTech is a free conference again this year, so they're doing it virtually. So you won't see me in person and you won't be able to go to a Red Sox game. I think they were there in Boston in the fall. So I'm really bummed, but-

Tim:

Let's be fair, more importantly, you won't be able to go to game.

Steve:

Oh, there you go. That's a fair point. So yeah, September 14, 15th. It's a virtual conference. I'll be speaking at that conference. And I will be speaking on basically the whole notion that when people put something in a search box on your website and they search for something, they're telling you something about them right there. When does a customer ever unprompted tell you what they're looking for. And so that search as a listening tool and search as a technology that helps you progress discussions with your clients. I mean, that's how people should be thinking about it. And so I'll be talking about that topic in general. We'll talk a little bit of that was today about the value proposition of site search.

Steve:

These are the people who are more likely to convert. These are the people who are more likely to do business with you. And when you look at the ROI of a search engine that helps you achieve those results, it's pretty high. I think one case study we did was 190% in the first year, our ROI on this. We're going to talk about why search fails, and some of the ways that you can mitigate those. And I think we've talked about five methods in our methodology that help you progress a visitor's journey. And then I'll also share a framework that heck, even if you don't buy our technology, that you can take a few steps forward. And we'll also talk a bit about the SEO benefits. So it'll be an action-packed half hour.

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Tim:

That's fantastic. And I'm going to oversell this, but I'm the marketing guy, that's my job. I always think about it in these terms. Google, the last quarter they reported earnings and we are recording this just before Google's next earnings call, but this will come out after Google's next earnings call. But they are Q1 earnings. Their net income was \$18.5 billion. You know how they got to \$18.5 billion? Because people told them what they wanted every day, 3 million times a minute. So why not just do what Google is doing and listen to what your customers say?

Steve:

Absolutely. That is exactly right.

Tim:

And they can learn more about that at martech.com. Is that the URL?

Steve:

Boy, that's a great question. I think I have the answer to that. Martechconf, C-O-N-F. Martechconf.com.

Tim:

At martechconf.com. And of course they can learn more about SoloSegment and all the wonderful things that we do with search at solosegment.com/searchbox. With that, Steve, any parting words of wisdom you want to leave us with?

Steve:

No, that's all the wisdom I have for today.

Tim:

All right. Fantastic. Well, as ever, a delight speaking with you, Steve. I do look forward to talking to you next time.

Steve:

Thanks very much, Tim.

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