

4 Reasons On-Site Search Fails and How to Overcome, Improve & Drive More Business

Tim:

Well, hi, Steve. How are you?

Steve:

I'm doing really well, Tim. Looking forward to a video podcast, this is breaking new ground for us.

Tim:

Breaking new ground for us. This is exciting stuff. As I've long been told, I have a face made for radio.

Steve:

Indeed.

Tim:

Using videos going to be an interesting thing.

Steve:

Yeah, we both have great hair, so.

Tim:

We both have, exactly right. Wow. Hopefully we have a lot to talk about today, so people will focus on things other than our hair.

Steve:

Indeed.

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Tim:

But with that said, you presented not too long ago at the MarTech conference and you were talking about a number of different things with regard to that discussion in terms of how people can make onsite search work, and how they can use onsite search to personalize their experiences of people coming to the site and things along those lines. One of the things that really resonated for me and really like got my attention was when you talked about all the reasons why onsite search fails. Right? Given that people fail, I mean, onsite search fails, what, 70% of the time?

Steve:

About 70% of the time. Yeah.

Tim:

About 70% of the time. That seems like a good place to start today. Let's talk about why onsite search fails. What's going on there?

Steve:

Yeah. Everybody always wants to talk about what can I do, right, what can I do to get better? The first step, of course, in any program for improvement is recognizing you have a problem. Right? Then the second thing is, all right, really understanding the problem, because you can't work on and solve something unless you really have a deep understanding of it. To it, the first thing, kind of the first response that many folks have with regards to their onsite search is saying, "I have a technology problem." Now, some people do have a technology problem. For example, we're responding to two RFPs now of search engines that are going out of support, their vendors have abandoned them. That is, in fact, a technology problem.

Tim:

That's a legit technology problem that you have no other option but to fix that or else not only is your site search going to fail, your site search isn't going to exist.

Steve:

Exactly.

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Steve:

Those folks, start with the technology you bet, because you do in fact have a technology problem. There are kind of four dimensions to kind of onsite search failure. I take it from the approach of what people focus on and maybe what they shouldn't focus on. Let's start with the technology. I think very often there is far too much focus on the technology. If only I had this new widget or if only I had AI. Right? If I could have AI in my search engine, boy, wouldn't it be better?

Tim:

Like shiny object syndrome. Right?

Steve:

Exactly. Exactly. By the way, you certainly want AI in your search engine.

Tim:

Of course.

Steve:

But starting with the technology is often an error, because what really drives great search at the end of the day is great content. Often, the problems that we feel that we have with the technology, what's showing up on the search results page that's not satisfactory often goes back to the content. If everybody started with the content, I'd say, "All right, that's probably a better place to start than everybody starting with the technology." Still not the right place, but a better bet.

Tim:

Sure.

Steve:

I think when folks kind of look at their search programs and why they're failing, it's too much of talking to the IT folks and saying, "Why isn't your IT working better?"

Tim:

Right.

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Steve:

Because at its core, search is about so much more. I think the actual place to start, if you're going to start in one place, would be with the content. That focus on IT is probably one of the greatest failures of search programs, not enough focus, honestly, on the content.

Tim:

Sure. Makes total sense. That's perfect. If content is one place to start, I mean, we are still fond of saying content is king and the like, but if content is one place to focus, what's another one?

Steve:

Yeah. The thing is really understanding like what does failure mean. Right? Why is our search bad? You quoted a number at the top of the podcast, which was that 70% number. Why do we know it's 70%? Well, because we measure it.

Tim:

Right.

Steve:

It's interesting, I'm responding to an RFP right now and they're asking about dashboards and whatnot. It's kind of clear from the questions that they're asking is they're interested in dashboards about like are the disks spinning, are the lights blinking on the servers, what's our response time? And those sorts of kind of tech focused things.

Tim:

Right.

Steve:

Again, tech focus. What we measure, what we focus on is the customer experience. That's where we get this 70% of searchers fail and about 30% succeed. That is because you're measuring the wrong things.

Tim:

Right.

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Steve:

At best, you're perhaps measuring clicks of people who click on something. Okay. Well, great. They found something to click on, so it must have been a successful search. I think as we know from our behavior on Google or the few people who use Bing, that we click on a lot of things that aren't the answer to our question.

Tim:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Steve:

Are you measuring the right things? I think that is kind of the second reason we see search programs struggle is because they're focused either on technical measures or they're focused on things that honestly aren't meaningful. Right? They're kind of interesting within the walls of search, but at the end of the day the goal of search is to get somebody out of search as quickly as possible to the thing that is actually going to help them solve their business problem, progress their journey, and perhaps maybe do business with your company. Measuring those right things is critically important.

Tim:

Well, it's funny, you raise a great point. I remember when we first kind of stumbled across this insight a few years back. I think this is really important about the point of when people do a search and they get a search result and they click and then they come back and then they click again, that's a failure. Right?

Steve:

Yes. Absolutely.

Tim:

If somebody gets a search result and they don't click, that's a failure also.

Steve:

Yeah, absolutely.

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Tim:

Yet your analytics typically are going to show you that you had two searches, you had two clicks, everybody's fat and happy. Right? It's all working like it's supposed to. Right?

Steve:

Right. Exactly. Yeah. What's really meaningful to look at, and it's the thing that we focus on is what's the behavior after search. Right? What happened after search? Now, if you were in a commerce environment and somebody clicked to put something in a cart and bought something, well, that's a real easy way to measure was the search a successful search. There's a lot of other use cases, especially most of our customers are large enterprise B2B customers. There's not that cart experience. There's not this super satisfying metric at the end. What we're looking at is the visitor behavior, because if they clicked on a contact form. Okay, great. That's another view. If they downloaded a white paper, et cetera, maybe they found what they're looking for, but it's really looking at those behaviors and more importantly, not at the events that you can track, which are those clicks on the downloads or whatever. It's really looking at the behaviors as they navigate through the website.

Steve:

It's especially tricky in large enterprise, because is usually they're high consideration products. The buying cycle is long. Somebody might have to come back to the website three or four times as they kind of go through their journey. What you're looking for is at least that progression, that connection with content in a meaningful way. There's lots of different things you can measure as people kind of navigate your website, lots of behavioral data that you can gather. What we've found is there's certain behavior data that is really indicative of a successful interaction, a successful search. That's what we're looking for. Focus on those measures. Right? Where you can, measure the events. Where you can't measure the events, focus on the behavioral data, because that's really going to tell you whether a searcher was successful or not.

Tim:

Makes tons of sense. Okay. Technology's number one. Metrics are number two. What's number three?

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Steve:

Too much reliance on humans. Now, I think one of the biggest impediments to great search is it starts with, I have three people on my IT team and one of them spends four hours a month on search. Right?

Tim:

Yeah, yeah.

Steve:

I mean, that's kind of one end of the spectrum. Right? You're just super constrained from a resource perspective. We have clients and we've talked to companies who are prospects, that these are relatively large companies, \$500 million-billion dollar companies. What's interesting is even these relatively larger companies are super constrained from an IT resource perspective.

Tim:

Sure.

Steve:

That's usually where search lives. Right?

Tim:

Sure.

Steve:

If you have a technology, so now we're kind of making some links to the technology. If you have a technology that requires lots of hand holding, lots of configuration, and yada yada, yada, you're dependent upon how many hours each month, each week can the IT team focus on it.

Tim:

Sure.

Steve:

The solutions that, we recommend that our prospects look at, and of course we recommend our solutions, our search box, search engine, shameless plug.

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Tim:

Shameless, utterly shameless plug.

Tim:

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Steve:

Exactly.

Tim:

Anyway, you were saying, Steve. I don't know where that came from.

Steve:

Our approach is if you have good data. Right?

Tim:

Yeah.

Steve:

If your engine is throwing off or your analytics or throwing off good behavioral data, can you use that data then to automate the improvement? There are some very simple ways of doing this. Is there data you can, say, feed back into your index that tells or the relevancy ranking algorithm, when somebody searches this keyword, show the result that has the highest success metric in association. That's kind of a brute force way. You can just dump this data into your index, where for every page, for every kind of basically line in index or document, we know what keywords, this is the answer for. Every time we get that keyword, show the correct answer.

Tim:

Right.

Steve:

If something over time becomes a better answer. Well, now start showing that one.

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Tim:
Right. Right.

Steve:
Yeah. A data driven approach, but that data is not put on a dashboard for analysts to use, but instead is put into an API and fed over to your search engine.

Steve:
Using that automation can deliver a better customer experience, more likelihood of success, without having a human, one of your IT people do the work. I would also say, and something that's become more relevant to our customers or to the people we talk to especially in the selling process is we think of our product as search as a service, not as software as a service.

Tim:
Right.

Steve:
A lot of vendors out there, they're going to host your search engine, but they're going to give you an admin ID and are going to say, "Go. Go configure it and go work it yourself." Another way you can kind of leverage the people is also to think about search as a service. Almost every one of our clients, I'm trying to think of one that doesn't, but almost every one of our clients, basically we run their search engine for them. It's as a service. Right? Customer success person interfaces with them, but it's on us, right? The work is on us to help our clients have a better search experience, basically through a combination of SaaS and a managed service. That is another way that you can kind of take the people, at least your people, out of the equation, stop that from being a bottleneck to better search and leverage the resources that are at your vendor. That is another critical way is if not automation at least make it somebody else's people doing the work.

Tim:
Yeah, of course. Absolutely. I'll bet, not to take people too far behind the curtain, but I suspect there's a reason why, if it's our people, we like automation too. Right?

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Steve:

Oh, absolutely. Yeah. Everybody wins here. Right?

Tim:

Everybody wins. All right.

Steve:

Yes. It is a good equation.

Tim:

All right. Technology.

Steve:

Measurement.

Tim:

Content.

Steve:

Yeah.

Tim:

Making sure that we're not using the people in the wrong way, make sure we're automating. What else we got?

Steve:

Yeah. Number four, and I really think of these as kind of the big four. It's kind of a people thing as well. We talked at the top of this about content really being at the heart of great search. I mean, we have this one client, I think they of the highest success rate we've ever seen. It was actually very easy for them to get to that. I think it's 56%. 47% of their visitors fail, 56% or 53%, whatever the number is, do the math,

Tim:

44 and 56.

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Steve:

I just have an accounting degree, so you never did math, but yeah. I think it's 56% so that would be 44.

Tim:

Yeah. Yeah.

Steve:

It's 56%. When we looked at it, I mean, we'd like to say that, "Hey, our technology's awesome." But what it turns out is our technology's awesome, but they have fantastic content. They've done a really good job of authoring the content, great purpose. I think what Google says all the time is if you want to rank great in SEO, just have great content, great relevant content for your visitors.

Tim:

Right. Now go.

Steve:

Now, again, we know that's very self-serving for Google to do.

Tim:

Of course, of course, of course.

Steve:

When we looked at this client's, tried to get at the why behind this, that's what we found is they just, they have really good content that helps deliver. Number four kind of has to do with that part of the equation. It really is about the stakeholder community. You have to have, I mean, a great search is team sport.

Tim:

Of course.

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Steve:

It's technology people, and it's not just the search technology, whether you're doing it yourself or you have a vendor doing it, it's the folks who run your website and how they're doing at the technical side of making sure the website's speedy, et cetera. It has to do with the content folks. Right? Those are generally the product marketing people or the comms folks, or whoever's developing your content out there in the organization. There are as many models as there are organizations. It really is having this community because the number of times that I have run into clients and prospects who are struggling with, as a matter of fact, I heard it last week talking to one of our clients and she said, "One of our greatest challenges is that basically the product marketing people kind of publish content once a year on the product side."

Tim:

Oh, sure.

Steve:

They just let it go. Right?

Tim:

Right.

Steve:

They're just like, "This is the product information. We're never going to change it."

Tim:

Right. It's done now.

Steve:

Right. Right. I get it for the speeds and fees of your product. Right?

Tim:

Of course. Of course.

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Steve:

But, gee, if we could tweak the opening paragraph in the description of the product to get better SEO, to get better site search, to get better everything, why wouldn't you do that? They don't do that.

Tim:

Right.

Steve:

Part of it is, I think, because there is this kind of separation of church and state that, there and in many organizations. I don't want to kind of highlight this one problem because it happens all over the place.

Tim:

Oh sure. Of course.

Steve:

Yeah. Nobody wants to play with the IT folks and the IT folks are irritated with the content folks and it just makes for an environment. Recognizing that it's team sport and bringing people together is kind of a critical aspect of great site search. It is making sure that you have those stakeholders integrated. Again, I don't expect that they're going to shed themselves of their day-to-day responsibilities so site search can be great, but if at least you can get into their management system, into their governance model, bring them into your governance model, you're going to have, make it more likely that when they're creating content, they're considering it and of course, when you're making IT investments, you're considering kind of what their challenges are and making sure those things come together in a very neat way. That, again, is when you look at poor site search, sometimes it's dysfunctional organizations.

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Tim:

Sure. Well, and I don't want to bury the lead here by any stretch, because obviously we're talking about site search and how you make site search better and things like that. If you do these things better, it stands to reason things like your off site search will work better. Right? You'll show up better in Google, if you have better content and you have a faster site and you have the right measures of whether or not this content is working or not. All of those can *only* benefit you in other areas. Right?

Steve:

Yeah, absolutely. That's one of the things that one of our clients, we're actually working with them on their SEO, as a matter of fact, several of our clients we're working with them on their SEO. One comes to mind as I was making that comment though. Yeah, this notion of co-optimization, right, if you fix one, you fix the other, so yeah. Better site search always yields better SEO because the focus starts with the content. Right?

Tim:

Right.

Steve:

How do you make sure that you have the right answers to the questions that are being asked in your search engine? Of course, when Google indexes that same content, they're going to make sure that they pick up the right answer as well.

Tim:

Well, that's fantastic stuff, Steve.

Steve:

Yeah.

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Tim:

Now, as I look at where we are timing wise, I mean, you talked about technology, you talked about measures, you talked about automation, you talked about communication or breaking down the silos. Obviously, all of this in the service of great content that serves the needs of customers. Are there any other parting words of wisdom you want to leave for folks, or maybe give a little tiny spoiler, a little tiny tease for where we're going to go next week?

Steve:

Well, I do think that those four things are the most critical. Right? Don't focus on the technology. If you're going to focus anywhere, start with the content. Second, measure the right things. You may be able to get good data out of your analytics system if you tease that right, but look for vendors like SoloSegment that kind of look at search as a customer experience and measure that in ways that that data can be used, automate the heck out of everything. That's everything from analytics to fancy AI stuff, those capabilities that take that data and do something interesting to make the customer experience better. Then, finally, build that stakeholder community, put in place a governance model. Those are the four things that I think are most critical.

Steve:

Looking forward then and we'll talk about this next time perhaps, but it's what can you do to actually make the ... To kind of solve some of these problems. I'll just rattle them off right now. We'll talk about them in more detail next time. The first and foremost is focusing on that stakeholder community, how do you build a good governance model that's going to help you get to the next place? What are specifically some of the measures that you can look at to incorporate either in your analytics to automation, of course, using that data, number three would be to automate the heck out of it.

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Steve:

Something I like to think of is AI the right way. Where are you using AI? Because AI can be kind of, like you said earlier, a shiny object, but using that AI in ways that make for a more meaningful customer experience and a more meaningful or more greater likelihood that they will achieve their goals. Then, finally, this notion of search as a service, that's how you're going to have a force multiplier is when you outsource the who. Right? Most companies outsource the what, "Oh, I'm going to go get a piece of software." But you really want to outsource the who. Thinking about search as a service. We'll explore those in more detail next time we talk.

Tim:

If people want information about this in the meantime, they can go to solosegment.com/searchbox. You can check out obviously past episodes of the podcast there. You can go to solosegment.com/blog to get all of our great blog content and the like, but solosegment.com/searchbox if you're interested in learning more about search as a service and how it can help you. Steve, with that, is there any parting words of wisdom you want to leave our fine folks with?

Steve:

All the wisdom is gone, Tim. Thanks very much though.

Tim:

All right. It's always a pleasure. Steve. Talk to you soon.

Steve:

You bet. Take care.

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