

A Forrester Consulting
Thought Leadership Paper
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The New SEO Paradigm Shift

How Integrated SEO Can Unlock New Areas Of
Value For The Brand — Beyond Just Incremental
Sales



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47% of respondents are continually applying SEO tactics to their assets and are expanding/upgrading their resources.



69% of SEO decision makers are not actively trying to suppress negative search results.

Executive Summary

Search marketing is a tried and true, and often very effective, strategy to acquire and influence prospects and customers. But it is time for leadership to rethink search engine optimization (SEO or organic search). Just optimizing keywords and content is no longer enough. SEO does more than just drive traffic to your site; an SEO strategy applied across marketing functions can improve your brand's reputation, reduce negative mentions, and improve lifetime customer value.

Our study shows that nearly 70% of executives associate SEO with having considerable impact on improving the perception of their brands. This leaves over 30% of executives with the opportunity to adjust their thinking. Seventy-six percent of marketers still have the knee-jerk reaction to ramp up their paid search efforts when a brand-damaging event is triggered, but too often they don't give SEO the same attention. Changing culture takes time, but marketers must start now. As the senior director of corporate marketing at a US-based technology company stated: "We all have a brand to protect. You can do that through SEO. The best defense is making sure you have a strong brand presence on your website, and that's organic search."

In October 2019, Terakeet commissioned Forrester Consulting to evaluate the need for organic search as part of a business strategy and for reputational management. Forrester conducted an online survey with 266 respondents and six interviews with SEO decision makers to explore this topic. We found that executive leadership sees the value of SEO to improve brand perception, but they need to do more to improve measurement and build a mature SEO strategy.

KEY FINDINGS

- › **Promoting positive content yields positive search results.** The SEO leaders in our study who promote positive and favorable content have also seen reductions in negative sentiment online. One CMO shared that by creating new materials and stories around his organization's philanthropic activity, his company was able to yield more positive customer sentiment. We found that only the most mature leaders are actively suppressing these results about their brand or executives. Those who are have also seen significant reductions in negative sentiment online after a short amount of time.
- › **SEO measurement is still in early stages.** Most SEO decision makers use a mix of tools that only give them part of the picture, like keyword performance, web traffic, and link tracking. Marketers need to connect those individual pieces to see the whole picture.
- › **SEO may be a longer-term play than paid, but it is worth it.** Marketers often see that customers who come to their sites through SEO tend to be more loyal, leading to greater lifetime value. They engage more and spend more time on their sites. This loyalty isn't immediate though. Conversion through SEO takes longer than paid, but firms must find a balance between immediate results and loyalty.

SEO Can Help Manage Brand Reputation

Though SEO is not new, it is still one of the most important marketing tactics. Traditionally, marketers think of SEO as improving the visibility and rank of a brand-owned website to generate online traffic. But SEO does more than just drive traffic to your site — it can also build your brand awareness and improve your brand’s reputation. SEO also has the long-term benefit of bringing more loyal customers to your business.

For this study, we conducted six interviews and surveyed 266 SEO strategy decision makers. In doing so, we found:

- › **SEO shapes consumer perception of a brand.** Roughly four out of five decision makers agree that SEO will become increasingly important to their businesses in the next year and is more important than it was two years ago. A key driver behind this increased sense of importance is that nearly 70% of executives associate SEO with improving their brands’ perception (see Figure 1).

The vice president of global digital marketing at a US-based financial services company told us: “In a competitive market, the way we present ourselves online is often our first impression. SEO is a fantastic way to make that first impression matter. Our customers are paying attention, and we want to make sure we are taking advantage of every opportunity for exposure of our brand.”

The director of digital media at a US-based telecommunication company added: “Our company has grown significantly in the past 18 months, and no one outside our company seems to know. We feel like the best kept secret in our market. We want to get the word out, so we are using SEO to break through and reach our customers and prospects.”



Seventy-nine percent of SEO decision makers agree that SEO will be more important than it was two years ago.

Figure 1

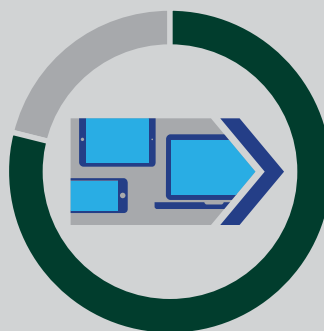
SEO Is Critical To Improving Brand Management

“SEO will become an increasingly more important priority over the next 12 months.”



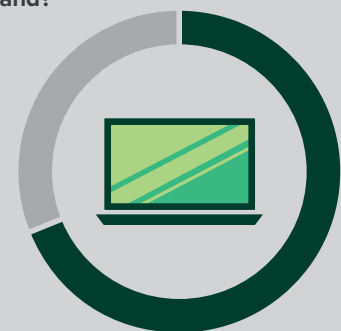
81%
Moderately/Strongly agree

“SEO is a more important priority today than it was two years ago.”



79%
Moderately/Strongly agree

“How much do the executives at your company associate SEO with improving the perception of the brand?”



69%
Considerably/A great deal

Base: 266 global executives with influence over SEO strategy

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Terakeet, November 2019

- › **SEO supports long-term goals.** SEO provides longer-term wins than paid search. Eighty-one percent of SEO leaders agree that SEO will become increasingly important in the next year. However, 27% of SEO decision makers still say they are focused on quick wins, not long-term business results. Again, marketers must rethink how their organizations are leveraging SEO. Seventy-four percent of decision makers say SEO results are more challenging to quantify than paid search. Organic search may be more difficult and take longer to quantify than paid, but it leads to long-term results like improved brand perception, better online visibility, improved rankings, and better traffic and sales, which firms listed as top business priorities.
- › **SEO offers a way to improve customers' perception of key executives.** Nearly three-quarters (74%) of respondents believe their customers moderately to considerably tie their perception of a brand to their perception of its executives (see Figure 2). Companies cannot afford to underestimate the impact the reputation of their executive leadership has on their brands.

The CMO of a US-based wealth asset management firm explained the results after bringing in a partner to manage brand reputation: "We use a partner to do reputational management, and it didn't make a difference immediately, but after six months we saw measurable results. We had to stop using them due to budget constraints, and we felt their loss significantly and brought them back on board as soon as I had the funds again."

- › **SEO brings high-value customers to your website.** Several SEO decision makers report that the customers who come to their brand websites through SEO are more loyal and stay onsite longer than customers who come from paid search. The senior vice president of marketing and eCommerce at a US-based retail company said: "We have found that new customers that come to our business through organic search, different from paid search, tend to be 'stickier.' They have a longer lifetime value if they come to you through organic search." The CMO of a US-based wealth asset management firm agreed: "We measure how long customers are on our site, and customers that come from organic search have more sticking power." When you have a more loyal customer base, you can spend more time focusing on your brand management initiatives and less on driving traffic.

"I had to convince my CEO about the longer-term benefits of SEO. We were experiencing low traffic (and thus lower sales) and poor customer sentiment. But once I put our SEO strategy in place, we saw those results change. All of a sudden, I was everyone's best friend at the company."

Senior vice president of marketing and eCommerce at a US-based retail company



"We have realized that when people search, they tend to look for organic search results. We want to maximize the amount of opportunities through organic search. It's not like paid search where you pay for an ad and people click on it, but when your budget runs out, that ad comes down and no one can see it."

The director of digital media at a US-based telecommunication company



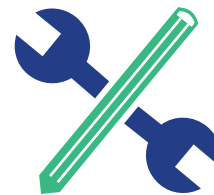
Figure 2



74% of decision makers believe their customers moderately to considerably tie the perception of a brand to their perception of its executives.

Base: 266 global executives with influence over SEO strategy
 Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Terakeet, November 2019

Marketers Struggle To Make SEO A Holistic Solution For Both Brand And Performance Marketing



A successful SEO strategy, especially when used in tandem with paid search, can provide many significant benefits to businesses — in the form of increased leads or site traffic and improved brand recognition. But many challenges in SEO today prevent it from solving for both performance and brand objectives. Our study revealed these barriers:

- > **SEO leaders do not have the tools they need to measure organic search performance.** SEO leaders use a range of tools like web analytics platforms, content optimization tools, and keyword tools to manage and measure their SEO. This leaves organizations with a fractured view of the SEO performance. Fewer than a third (31%) of respondents say their companies use comprehensive SEO tools (see Figure 3). Often marketers must use many tools for their overall SEO process as a result. These are tools that help marketers create quality, useful, and engaging content for their websites that will rank well within search results and serve prospects and customers. SEO leaders in the market for solutions should choose the tools that will best fit their organizations’ needs. Key considerations are SEO technologies that produce high-ranking sites, improve crawl efficiency, spotlight physical locations, audit website connections (monitor inbound links pointing to your site and outbound links that your site connects), and/or bring stakeholders together.¹

“A lack of skilled staff is always an issue, especially on the technology side. I’m lobbying for a separate SEO team in our IT department. A dedicated team could better handle our continuous audits, and we could start to optimize our SEO efforts.”

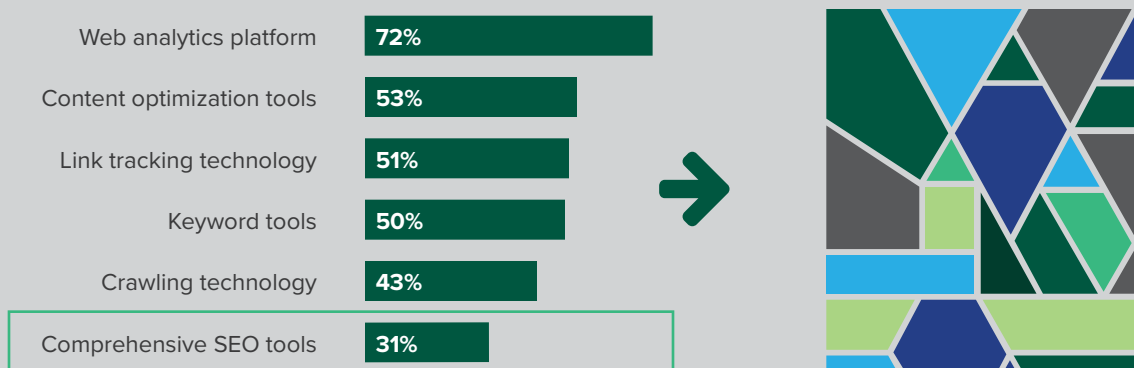
Senior vice president of marketing and eCommerce at a US-based retail company



As a result, most companies only focus on performance-driven metrics to understand SEO success. We found that most firms measure the number of qualified leads that SEO produces. While this is a critical KPI to business success, it doesn’t provide a comprehensive view of SEO performance. For example, marketers should also monitor how SEO affects brand health through brand awareness and perception studies. Marketers must also remember that, unlike other performance-based channels, the trajectory for projecting traffic/lead improvements does not follow a linear path in SEO.

Figure 3

Use Of SEO Tools That Only Look At A Piece Of The Picture Leaves Firms With A Fractured View Of Their Success



Base: 266 global executives with influence over SEO strategy
 Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Terakeet, November 2019

- › **SEO decision makers overlook the suppression of negative search results while not promoting their preferred brand stories.** As the saying goes, “one rotten apple ruins the bunch.” That is particularly true online today. A one-star review can have significant impact on a business. We found in our study that only 29% of marketers are actively trying to suppress negative search results about their brands or executives. This is a ripe area to improve the effectiveness SEO has on customers’ perceptions of a brand.

Executives can build and promote their brands’ narratives through SEO. By sharing and promoting positive stories and content about your brand, you can drown out and overcome negative sentiment or search results while building customer trust.

- › **Companies struggle to keep up with the changing SEO landscape.** Constantly changing search algorithms make it challenging for companies to know how organic search will influence the decisions that prospects or customers make. This limits marketers’ ability to take a more progressive and holistic approach to SEO as a solution for brand and performance marketing. Large search engines and social media platforms provide limited transparency into their algorithms. “Understanding why we rank where we do and then understanding why that rank changes can be really challenging. We don’t have transparency into why we are successful or fall dramatically in the rankings,” said the CMO of a US-based wealth asset management firm.

- › **SEO leaders are thinking too small about SEO.** Firms need SEO leadership that embraces a new way of thinking about SEO to overcome top barriers (see Figure 4). Executives who want to truly dominate the landscape need to directly link new SEO investments to clear and measurable brand improvements that drive business growth and improve their reputation. SEO leadership must convince their business colleagues that they are serious about contributing to their brands’ reputation. This will require changing the culture around SEO and aligning others to think of SEO as a strategy to meet long-term goals, not just drive site traffic.

“We don’t have any SEO tools; we are entirely reliant on our partner.”

CMO of a US-based wealth asset management firm



“Education is another key challenge. I have a young team that needs to be brought up to speed quickly both on the content side and the technology side.”

Director of marketing and digital eCommerce at a US-based apparel retail company



Figure 4

“What are the top barriers to improving your SEO processes?”



Lack of skilled staff

41%



Inability to measure

39%



Lack of budget

38%



Internal focus on paid search

36%

Base: 266 global executives with influence over SEO strategy

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Terakeet, November 2019

Many companies are trying to compensate for the skills drought with training and education. “There are a lot of assumptions about SEO that we have to combat with awareness and education. People think throwing out a keyword here or there is SEO. We have had to explain that SEO is everyone’s job. Anyone creating content should be thinking about SEO — and not as an afterthought,” said the senior director of corporate marketing at a US-based technology company. But simply training staff isn’t enough. The entire organization has to embrace SEO as a brand management strategy, and that has to start at the top with C-suite leadership.

Present SEO As A Brand Marketing Solution

Our study shows that companies that take a tactical approach to SEO see the most success. Firms that utilize SEO for brand management are a step ahead of those that are just optimizing for keywords and rankings. The director of digital media at a US-based telecommunication company told us about his approach to SEO: “We think about SEO as three pillars: infrastructure (web server configurations for site crawlers), on-page (site content), and off-page (building inbound links to our site). We utilize an SEO partner to make recommendations and help with best practices for the infrastructure and on-page portion. For the off-page pillar, they help us acquire links pointing to our site. This allows us to be more efficient with our resources so we can focus on our initiatives to improve brand performance.”

Changing the way you and your colleagues think about SEO is not easy, but you can start by:

- › **Focusing equally on negative and positive search results.** More often than not, marketers are worried about competitors ranking higher than their websites for a coveted keyword. They should be equally concerned with how their brands are represented within the results for unfavorable search queries. Start by doing an audit of negative search terms related to your brand, and then identify solutions to reduce those negative mentions. Brands that focus equally on positive and negative keywords experience more benefits. Our study results show that brands that reduce negative content improve user experience, brand perception, and brand awareness. In addition, brands that reduce negative search results about executives can improve brand perception scores, grow revenue, and regain customer trust (see Figure 5).

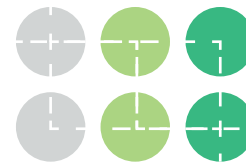
The CMO of a US-based wealth asset management firm told us how reducing his negative search results impacted his business: “We built content around our philanthropic activity and got involved in noncontroversial industry content. This helped our organic search results and drove customers to positive content that made them feel good about doing business with us.”



Data breaches, product recalls/ failures, and negative reviews are the top three incidents of reputational damage experienced in the past year.

› **Looking at SEO as a long-term strategy.** One senior vice president explained, “We made a big bet on SEO, and we have seen an increase in customer loyalty and customer lifetime value.” However, 56% of leaders say paid search is a higher priority than SEO for key decision makers. They cite faster results, the ability to quantify results, and faster conversion rates for their investments in paid. While those results are important, the conversation must now shift to aligning the long-term results of organic search.

It is time for SEO and marketing leadership to lead the charge in changing their teams’ thinking about SEO. SEO brings in more loyal customers with a longer lifetime value, but it takes longer to reach those customers. Additionally, SEO can improve your brand’s and executives’ reputations. When used in tandem with the immediate results of paid, firms can see significant benefits like improved brand awareness, better market share, and improved user experience.



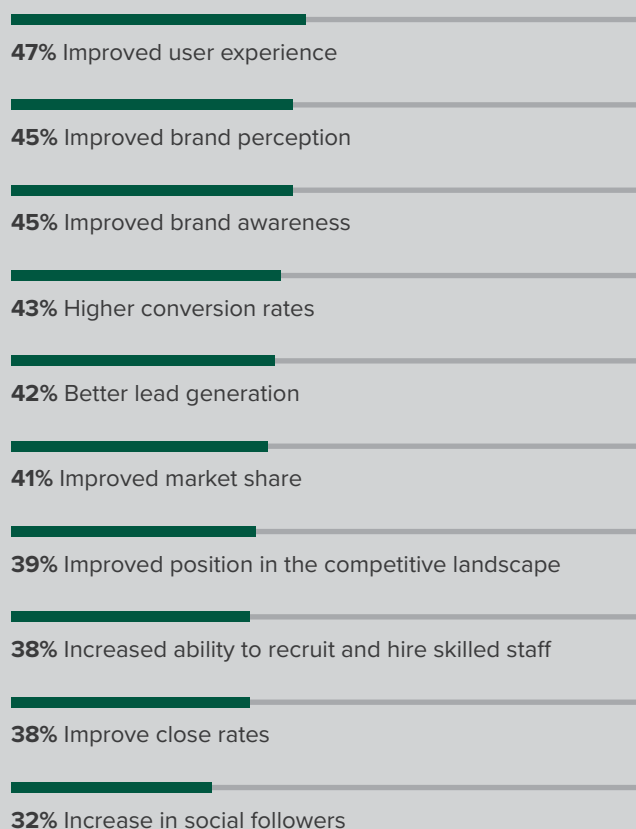
“We use SEO like a canary in a coal mine; it’s a good temperature check for how mature our digital marketing organization is. We know we’re doing our job when our KPIs are being met.”

Vice president of global digital marketing at a US-based financial services company

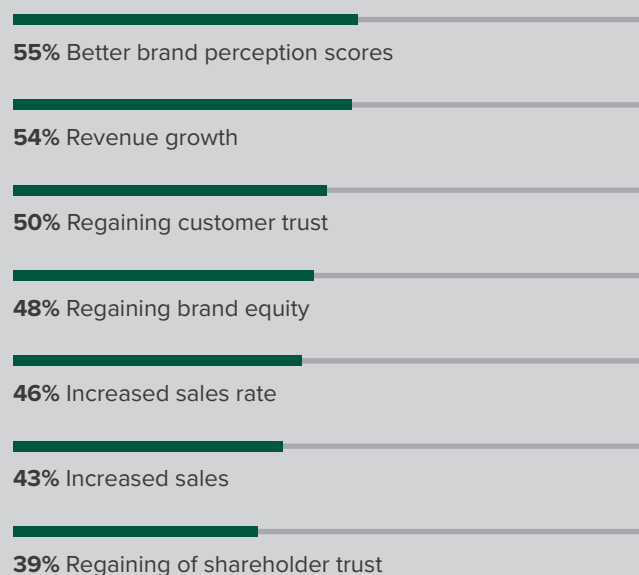


Figure 5

“What perceived benefits would you expect from a reduction in negative search results about your brand?”



“What perceived benefits would you expect from a reduction in negative search results related to your executive staff?”



Base: 266 global executives with influence over SEO strategy

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Terakeet, November 2019

Key Recommendations

Forrester's in-depth survey of 266 global SEO decision makers and six interviews about the value of SEO to improve brand and reputational management yielded four recommended steps to improve SEO practices:



Start by understanding how your customers rely on organic search results. To improve SEO as a channel, you need to understand the various use cases for which your customers rely on SEO. Do they use organic search results to answer questions? Find products? Get faster customer service? Once you understand your customers' needs, you can better tailor your SEO strategy to meet those needs and build trust with those customers. This includes how they see and think about your brand's reputation.



Promote brand protection and growth in key SEO objectives. The most common objective is to get customers to your site, but now it is time to level up this strategy. Do you want to find more qualified leads, improve your brand awareness and perceptions, maybe dominate the market with the largest share of voice? Utilize SEO to promote your brand's narrative and story. Leverage SEO to promote your philanthropic efforts. Maximizing your positive messaging can drown out negative search results without only having to actively suppress negative search results.



Plan for deeper integration of SEO partners to support expanding areas of SEO value across user experience and brand. Utilizing your learnings from the first two steps, you can decide what steps you need to take to understand your customers' needs and meet your objectives. Discern the exact role SEO will play in each step. This includes aligning the right internal partners to ensure success. We saw in our study that marketing, IT, web development, product, growth and acquisition, and sales teams all have a finger in the SEO pie. Leverage the skills and best practices across each of these teams to better understand your customers' needs and how they can help you meet your SEO objectives without getting in the way or taking over.



Lastly, attain the tools and resources you need to support your SEO roadmap. Half the executives in our study use a combination of in-house and agency support to manage their SEO strategies. Make sure that your agency partners are aligned to your SEO objectives and aren't stuck in the old mindset of only seeing SEO as a traffic driver. If they cannot see the bigger picture of SEO as a brand management tool, look for partners/agencies that align to your vision by bringing together the full landscape through unified data points and tools. When deciding what tools to use, thoroughly analyze what technology functionality you most need to address and choose a partner that best meets those needs, whether it is improving rankings, spotlighting physical locations, or connecting stakeholders. Leverage these tools and partners to reduce fragmentation and maintain a modern view into advanced SEO.

Appendix A: Methodology

In this study, Forrester interviewed six SEO strategy professionals and conducted an online survey of 266 global SEO strategy professionals at the director level and above to evaluate the role of SEO as part of an overall business strategy and reputational management. Questions provided to the participants asked about their SEO usage, challenges with SEO, how they manage reputational damage, and benefits to improving SEO. The study began in October 2019 and was completed in November 2019.

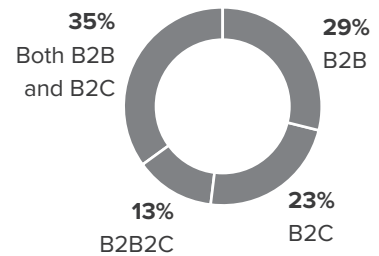
Appendix B: Demographics/Data



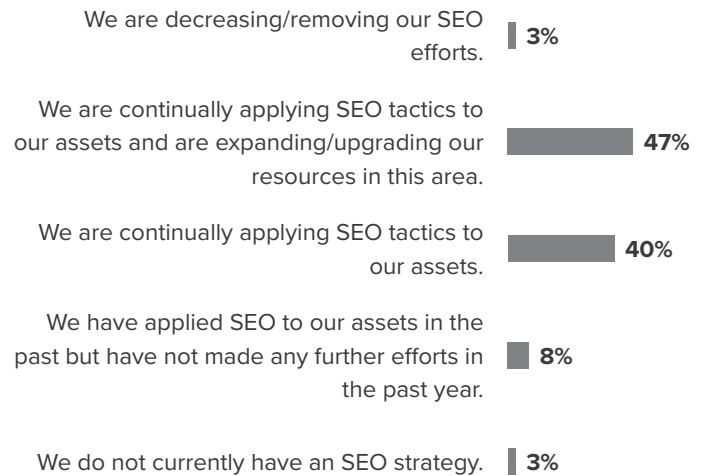
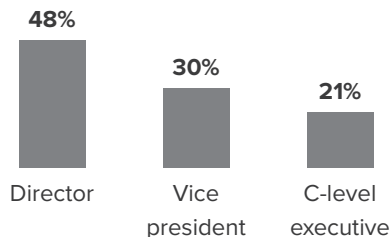
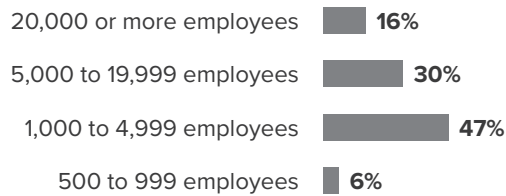
NA:
59% US
20% CA



EMEA:
21% UK



NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES



Base: 266 global executives with influence over SEO strategy

Note: Percentages may not total 100 because of rounding.

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Terakeet, November 2019

Appendix C: Endnotes

ENDNOTES

¹ Source: "Now Tech: Search Engine Optimization (SEO) Technologies, Q1 2020," Forrester Research, Inc., March 16, 2020.