EBOOK

Hotel SEO Guide

Introduction to Hotel SEO

As hospitality marketers, we strive each day to be discovered by travelers, to create the strategy that will meet someone at the perfect moment and grab their attention. All the while, thousands of hoteliers are doing the same, creating a fierce competition and a crowded field for eyeballs. For marketers, it's a time of unprecedented change, challenges, and opportunities.

How does a hotel stand out in a crowded arena? What goes into claiming that coveted real estate atop search engines like Google? That answer is increasingly becoming a collection of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) strategies. As hospitality marketing strategies are shifting to meet new consumer behaviors and social media is giving hotels new opportunities to engage with their guests, SEO is presenting an ever-changing landscape to reach travelers.

Just as consumers are changing the way they navigate the travel journey — from increased reliance on mobile devices to quick booking via metasearch — search engines are also constantly evolving. Frequent algorithm changes make it difficult for marketers to stay on top of SEO best practices and search engine guidelines. In the face of these changes, hospitality marketers have a lot to keep track of. From on-site SEO to technical SEO to local SEO, marketers must understand the ways that search engines are changing, how to stay compliant with the algorithm, and what's next.

Now more than ever, hotels have unlimited opportunities to be discovered, but that also means that there are thousands of opportunities for competitors to steal the spotlight. As marketers, we're constantly on the lookout for best practices and innovative strategies to meet travelers where they are. Let's dive deeper in where SEO stands today and where it's headed tomorrow.

5.6 billion

SEARCHES CONDUCTED EACH DAY ON GOOGLE.

28.5%

OF USERSCLICK THE FIRST ORGANIC SEARCH RESULT ON THE RESULTS PAGE

The Evolution of Google's Algorithm Updates

The craziest part about Search Engine Optimization is that there is no exact science to mastering it. Sure, there are tips and tricks and best practices based on decades of experience, but SEO is largely based on experience and a lot of educated guesswork.

In simple terms, Google's algorithm is the set of rules and processes that determines how the search giant catalogues and ranks websites. There have been many different versions of the Google algorithm since founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin created PageRank in 1996. For years, PageRank was the core algorithm used by Google to determine where websites were placed within their search engine results pages, otherwise known as SERPs. Websites with a higher PageRank received more clicks from users who were searching for similar subjects, while website links that came from other authority sites were given more weight.

The algorithm has continued to evolve since, but at its core remains an immensely complex series of processes that Google engineers tweak and refine on a daily basis. Over more than two decades, Google has made thousands of algorithm changes. While Google doesn't share many details about algorithm changes, in addition to almost-daily tweaks there are now "core" updates that can shift rankings and draw undivided attention from marketers upon release.

Without knowing what Google's algorithm is or how it works, you could be working hard on a new website or a redesign, only to find organic search engine traffic going down rather than up. Search engines are a critical component of a hospitality marketing strategy and yet marketers don't fully know how the algorithms work. That may be a frustrating answer for those who want clear-cut answers, but it's the real truth. And yet, marketers across all industries must still navigate all aspects of SEO as best they can — or risk falling behind (and off Page 1).

Worth Noting: High-Impact Algorithm Updates

Google has rolled out hundreds of algorithm updates over the years. But some have impacted search results more than others. In recent years, Google has seemingly shifted toward a model that includes a large annual 'core' update. These updates usually include major algorithmic changes, as well as smaller initiatives to refine the quality of results.

2019

BERT

The BERT update that debuted in October 2019 was one of Google's most prominent updates to the algorithm in its history. Simplified to BERT from Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers, the major update focused on natural language processing. In essence, Google wanted its algorithm to better understand search intent. With BERT, Google was able to better understand context, nuance, and conversational queries to improve search results.

> SEO Impact: What marketers learned following the 2019 update was that Google was optimizing rankings for content quality over length. That meant hoteliers needed to focus more on creating highly specific, quality content instead of stuffing keywords onto pages. This update also heightened the importance of long-tail keywords, which are specific keyword phrases typically of 3-5 words. As Google has better understood long queries and context, those long keyword searches have become more and more important for reaching qualified visitors.

2020

CORE UPDATE: E-A-T

While the May 2020 algorithm update didn't get a fancy name, it played a crucial role in advancing Google's focus on content quality. Specifically, the 2020 core update emphasized E-A-T signals, or, Expertise, Authority and Trustworthiness. The goal of the update was to surface reliable content to search users, especially when it came down to life decisions or spending money. Another way to think about E-A-T is page quality. This includes factors such as content quality, website reputation, useful or beneficial information, and more.

> SEO Impact: Google didn't specifically outline how websites should adapt to its 2020 core update, but marketers were able to glean a few best practices. Like with BERT, creating unique and informative content, whether on a website page or blog, became critical to quality factors. Many marketers adapted content to be more user-focused. Meanwhile, keeping content fresh took on increased significance. And to tie in with E-A-T, incoming links and interlinking across a website was thought to play a role in showcasing a brand's authority.

2021

PAGE EXPERIENCE

After emphasizing content to ensure search users were getting quality information, Google unleashed an update centered on page experience in mid-2021. This update aimed to provide users with the best online search experience possible by evaluating how easy it is for users to find their desired information. In its effort to emphasize website experience, Google pointed to its Core Web Vitals, a set of six measurable website data points that evaluate experience. In essence, these metrics measure load times and page speed as well as mobile experience.

> SEO Impact: Nobody knows exactly how page experience factors into the algorithm, but Google is transparent about its Core Web Vitals, and any hotelier can see their hotel website's scores using Google's PageSpeed Insights tool. What marketers have found is that slow-loading or cumbersome websites have been negatively impacted in search rankings. By understanding their hotel website's data points, hoteliers have been able to make critical decisions and changes to improve user experience with the goal of positively impacting future SEO.

On-Site SEO

On-site SEO plays a key role in how search engines rank your hotel's website. The No. 1 goal of search engines like Google, Bing and Yahoo! is to surface the right content to search users at the right time. Search engine algorithms strive to do this through critical on-site elements. If your hotel isn't optimizing each of the many different SEO elements of your website, it can still be difficult for anyone to find your hotel on search engines — even if your hotel is extremely popular. That's why it's important to make sure your on-site SEO is optimized and aligns with keywords and phrases that travelers search for when looking for hotels and experiences.

On-Site SEO Overview

UNDERSTANDING THE ELEMENTS OF ON-SITE SEO

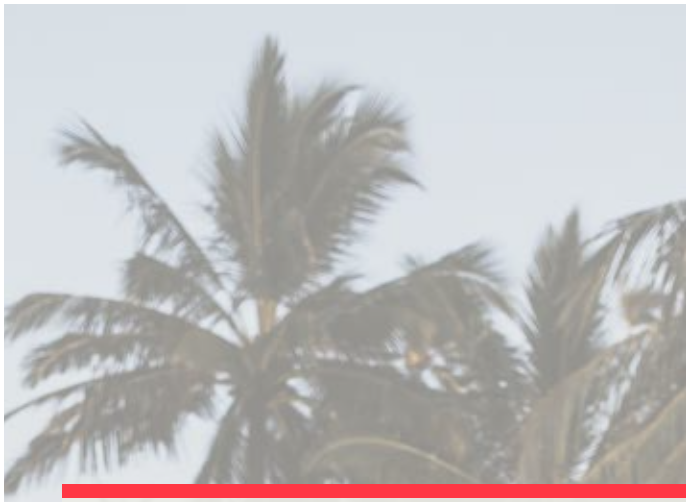
On-site SEO is the process of optimizing your website for search engines. This means that all of the components in a properly optimized site have been tailored to your hotel's marketing strategy and to align with the best practices from search engines. Individual on-site SEO elements such as page titles, meta descriptions, page content, keywords, and more are measured by search engine algorithms to determine how and where your hotel appears in response to keyword searches. Optimizing these elements can be time-consuming, but it's vital for ensuring that prospective guests find your hotel when they use specific terms.

OPTIMIZING FOR THE TARGET TRAVELER

Hoteliers can build a thought-out SEO strategy, but any strategy is only as powerful as the keywords that drive it. Before you can write the perfect page title or meta description or craft a blog article that will draw prospective travelers to your hotel website organically, you need to understand what those travelers are looking for in the first place and how they're searching.

To create an SEO strategy that will help your hotel achieve its goals, it's necessary to clearly define your target keywords. It's important to conduct research about your hotel and market. What are people searching for to find your hotel? What are your competitors doing? Hoteliers can utilize tools like Google Analytics and Google Search Console to identify what search queries are bringing travelers to their hotel website. Then, a range of keyword tools can help identify keywords (including long-tail keywords) that have notable monthly search volumes.

When your hotel's on-site optimization aligns with keywords and phrases that people actually search for when trying to find information about hotels in your location, it increases the chances of your hotel's website appearing higher on the results page. Your hotel may be a perfect match, but if your strategy doesn't match the keywords someone is searching for, you'll be missing out on direct bookings. That's why it's important to keep an eye on what search engines are looking for, adjust as the algorithms do, and remain relevant without over-optimizing.



1. Follow the data

Tools like Google Analytics and Google Search Console can help you identify what keywords and long-tail phrases are bringing travelers to your hotel website. With this data in hand, you can better optimize your hotel website's page titles, meta descriptions, and content.

2. Identify competitors

Keyword and competitor research is essential to craft an SEO strategy. What keywords are similar hotels targeting? Where do your competitors show up in search rankings? Understanding the landscape plays an important role in determining target keywords.

3. Get specific

Targeting keywords specific to your hotel's location, nearby destinations and experience, and amenities is a good starting point. But it's important to get specific and identify long-tail keyword opportunities. These 3-5 word phrases bring high-intent traffic and can drive bookings.

How to Improve Your Hotel Website's On-Site SEO

PAGE TITLES

SEO-expert Moz says title tags are the most important on-site SEO element after only the actual content of a web page. While there is some debate among SEO experts about the role these page titles play, there is no denying their importance on click-through rates and ultimately the ability to drive direct bookings through organic search. While Google doesn't directly use the page title in its algorithm, it does use the phrase and target keywords in the title tag to understand the context and relevance of a web page to the user's search query. Meanwhile, relevant and customer-focused page titles help lead to more clicks. It's important to keep a web page's title tags under 600 pixels (usually 50-70 characters). After that length, a search user won't see your full page title and will instead be shown ellipses.

META DESCRIPTIONS

Here's the truth about meta descriptions: They remain an important on-site SEO element but might not carry the same weight with the algorithms as they once did. Google has acknowledged that meta descriptions (and the included keywords) don't factor into its ranking algorithm. Still, the search giant often uses a web page's meta description as the description on the search engine results page. Essentially, this is organic advertising space for marketers. And since click-through rate is a ranking factor in the algorithm, writing a meta description that is relevant and leads to clicks could indirectly help a hotel website's SEO. Marketers should keep meta descriptions under 920 pixels (usually 150 characters) to ensure they are shown in full.

SEO CONTENT CREATION

Google's algorithm updates in recent years have been an effort to provide more content from trusted sources at the top of search results pages. As Google's algorithm shifts to emphasize high-quality content and the ability to determine context of search queries, SEO-optimized content helps hotel websites rank for more keywords and increase their opportunity to show up in Google's search results. This includes more specific web pages, which could mean creating a specific page on your hotel website for a wedding venue or food options. It also means blog content, which could help answer search queries related to things to do near your hotel.

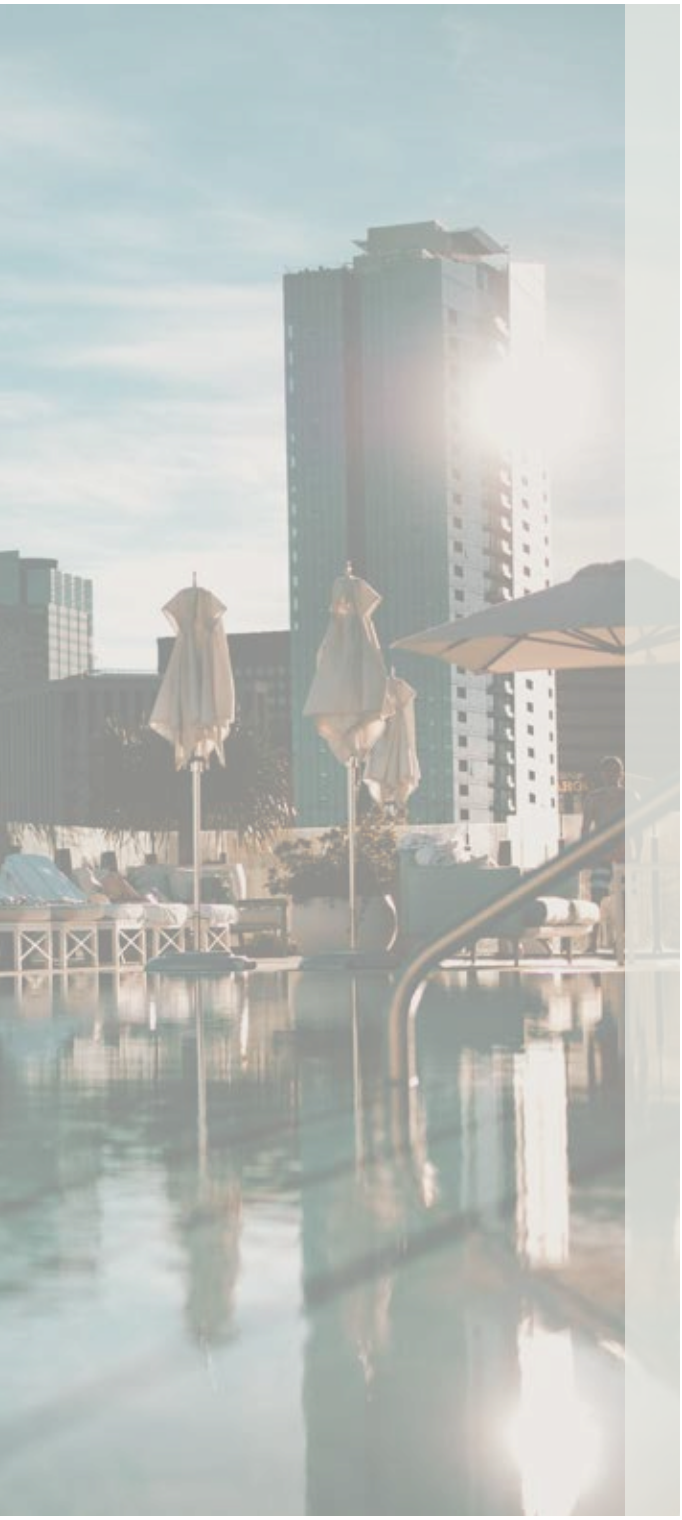
INBOUND LINKS

Not only does an SEO content strategy help a hotel website increase its keyword portfolio and work with the search engine algorithms to increase page rankings, it also provides content that can be used in a social media and marketing strategy. Plus, that quality content and links provide opportunities to draw inbound links from other websites. When Google first launched its PageRank algorithm in the '90s, inbound links were a major factor. So much so that marketers began stuffing links into content. Today, inbound links don't hold the same weight, but they are still a critical component and play into the E-A-T factor as they show Google that a website is an authority on a topic. In that sense, hotels with blog content can be an authority in their area.

Technical SEO

Having a hotel website that is keyword optimized can pay big dividends in search rankings, but your hotel can only rank well if it has a sound technical foundation. That's where technical SEO comes in. Technical SEO ensures your hotel website meets the stringent demands of today's search engines so it can be crawled, indexed, and discovered. While on-site SEO centers around a hotel website's content and keyword strategy, technical SEO focuses on the structure of those various SEO elements to improve organic search rankings. Search engines give preference to websites that are structured well, secure, and load fast, and technical SEO can ensure your hotel website meets those requirements.

Technical SEO Overview



UNDERSTANDING THE ELEMENTS OF TECHNICAL SEO

So, your hotel website is well-optimized for SEO and has a content plan. That's great! But if your hotel website has issues behind-the-scenes, it could all be for waste. Through the years, search engine algorithms have evolved to consider more than just keywords and content. In fact, the recent algorithm updates specifically emphasize experience.

Technical SEO looks at two primary factors: How easy it is for your hotel website to be crawled and indexed by search engines and what experience visitors have upon arrival. Issues like duplicate page titles, missing title tags, broken link, unsecure pages, and 404 errors can all act as a warning signal to Google and other search engines in addition to making your hotel website difficult to crawl and thus include in search rankings. Marketers often use crawling tools to uncover technical SEO errors that can be fixed to improve discoverability.

Meanwhile, Google's Core Web Vitals act as indicators to both the algorithm and marketers about a website's performance. In recent years, Google shifted to mobile-first indexing as a sign of the importance placed on speed and mobile experience. Hotel website designs that aren't optimized for mobile devices and speed risk falling behind — no matter how great their SEO is.

COMMON TECHNICAL SEO FIXES

Hoteliers can uncover technical SEO errors with a number of online tools that crawl all website pages and evaluate the code. By checking for these issues, such as slow load speeds or broken links, hotels can get a better understanding of their website's health. It's also possible a scan may be able to identify problems that are impacting their website's visibility in search results.

- Multiple H1 headings on a page (you just want one!)
- Duplicate meta descriptions
- Missing H1 tag or meta description
- Broken internal or external links
- Missing alt text on images
- Pages using HTTP (instead of the secure HTTPS)
- 4XX errors (such as a 404 error page)
- Broken images

What are the Core Web Vitals?

CUMULATIVE LAYOUT SHIFT

Cumulative Layout Shift represents the percentage of users who are likely to experience layout shifts while scrolling through your website. This metric shows how many users are able to see everything on the web page without having to scroll at all. A Cumulative Layout Shift score of less than 20% is a good value — anything higher is likely going to affect how users experience your website.

FIRST CONTENTFUL PAINT

First Contentful Paint measures the time it takes for your page to begin painting content that's visible to the user, or what users can see without having to scroll. The expected value for this metric is under 1.8 seconds — any higher than that could be problematic in terms of how quickly your page loads on devices.

FIRST INPUT DELAY

First Input Delay is the time it takes for your website to react to user interaction. This metric can include things like scrolling events, clicks, and other forms of input that are available on a given page. A First Input Delay score of fewer than 300 milliseconds means users should have an appropriate response time when interacting with your website.

LARGEST CONTENTFUL PAINT

This metric shows how quickly a browser can "paint" content to the screen without waiting for external stylesheets and images to load. In other words, Largest Contentful Paint measures how long it takes for users to see what's actually on your webpage — as opposed to waiting for your webpage to load other external components. This metric has the desired value of fewer than 2.5 seconds.

TIME TO INTERACTIVE

Time to Interactive shows how quickly your website's interactive content appears when the user arrives. In most cases, interactive content includes things like videos, ads, or third-party integrations such as virtual tours — elements users might interact with or click on in order to start using them. The optimal range is defined as under 3.8 seconds.

PAGE SPEED INDEX

The Page Speed Index measures how quickly your website appears to be loading for the user. This metric shows how quickly the main content on your website is delivered to the user's browser. The optimal value for this metric is less than 3.4 seconds, which means your page should be loading at a rate that users won't experience any issues with.

Local SEO

Local SEO plays different roles for different companies but is especially crucial for hotels. As a destination-based industry, local SEO plays an integral role in ensuring your hotel shows up when and where travelers conduct location-based queries. Unlike on-site SEO and technical SEO, which are solely focused on the hotel website, local SEO is a combination of on-site factors and off-sure tools like Google Business Profile. When combined together, local SEO can be used to help increase a hotel's visibility across a variety of platforms, which may help improve the ability of travelers to find your hotel when searching for locations.

Why Local SEO matters in the first place

Hotels aim to reach potential guests across state borders and even international waters, which is why on-site SEO and technical SEO are so important to the broad appeal of search engines. But there is also local intent that surrounds travel research and bookings. In fact, according to Google, 46% of all searches have local intent, meaning the search user is looking for a specific business nearby or with a specific location. Suffice to say, local SEO can't be forgotten.

It has become critical for hotels and their website's to be optimized for local SEO in order to increase the likelihood that they will show up near the top of search engine results for hotel-related inquiries, specifically ones related to their city or destination. In essence, local SEO has two primary components. An optimal strategy includes both sending signals to Google by optimizing specific pages and content around local searches and taking advantage of off-site local SEO tools that ensure your hotel shows up for a traveler when and where it matters most.

Understanding the three components of Local SEO

1. LOCAL SEO SCHEMA MARKUP

Businesses across industries use schema markup (also known as structured data) in the HTML of their website to highlight important information to search engine crawlers. This code provides search engines like Google explicit clues about the meaning of a page and business. Hotels can use schema markup to create local business listings that display information including address, phone number and hours of operation. This allows both prospective travelers and guests to find nearby attractions without having to search through other resources. Businesses can also utilize review schema, event schema, FAQ schema, and hotel-specific schema such as room information to help Google surface more information right on the results page.

2. LOCAL SEO CITATIONS

As a local business, it's important for hotels to be listed across the hundreds of available directories across the interest (and make sure their information is up-to-date). Local SEO citations allow hotels to do just that. The main purpose of local SEO citations is to help businesses rank higher in localized search results. By building a strong online presence and improving the visibility of your hotel's website, you can attract more traffic. Through tools like BrightLocal, Localeze, and Yext, hotels can scan the web to see what citations they have, remove duplicates, quickly update UNAP (URL, Name, Address, Phone) information, and get listed on a range of directories like Yelp, Foursquare, Yahoo! Local, Yellowbook, and more. It's important to monitor all of your hotel's listings on a regular basis, because it can take some time before directories begin to display your listings in the search results.

3. GOOGLE BUSINESS PROFILE AND HOTEL PACK

While schema is a simple way to improve local SEO, it's results are more modest. In general, schema plays a larger role in helping search engines know everything about your hotel and serving it up right on the results pages to help travelers. On the other hand, Google Business Profile can have huge dividends. Google Business Profile takes up prime real estate at the top of the SERP and includes photos, hotel information such as hours and amenities, reviews, and more. Hotels have complete control of this area, which also connects to metasearch, where travelers can book right on Google. In recent years, GBP has evolved to Google's Hotel Pack, which is utilized on Google Hotels and in Google Maps. Hotels that don't optimize their GBP listing are missing out on an opportunity to tell their hotel's story.

How to Improve Your Hotel's Google Business Profile

When optimized, a Google Business Profile listing has callouts for travelers to visit the hotel's website, call, or look at directions and nearby destinations on a map. According to Google, 60% of search users have contacted a business directly using search results. GBP allows hotels to tell their story right above the ever-important metasearch advertising. But only if done right.

1. VERIFY YOUR HOTEL'S GBP LISTING

For most branded hotels, this is handled at the corporate marketing level. But for independent hotels, it's up to you to take ownership of your hotel's GBP and verify it. If your hotel is new, you'll need to create and set up a GBP listing. If your hotel has recently been purchased or you just aren't certain whether a GBP listing exists, you should start by searching to see if a GBP listing comes up. If one does, you'll need to request ownership access. If your GBP isn't verified, Google will require address verification via phone or by sending a postcard.

2. SHOWCASE YOUR HOTEL'S INFORMATION

Travelers are bound to have questions while searching for the perfect hotel, and Google created Hotel Attributes within GBP to help address frequently asked questions. This section allows hoteliers to go more in-depth on specific hotel features, including:

Health and safety
Covid-19-responder policy
Internet
Food and drink
Policies & payments
Activities
Services
Children
Pools
Parking & transport
Wellness
Accessibility
Business & events
Pets

3. HIGHLIGHT SPECIFIC HOTEL AMENITIES

Capturing the attention of travelers is hard, but many are simply trying to find out if a hotel has all of the amenities they need. The amenities feature within GBP allows hotels to quickly highlight amenities such as Free Wi-Fi, Paid Breakfast, Parking, Accessibility, Air Conditioning, Laundry Service, and more to help people quickly identify amenities they're looking for.

4. UPDATE YOUR GBP WITH VIVID PHOTOS

It's no secret that travelers want to see a hotel and imagine the experience. Photos highlight the top of a GBP listing, so it's important to display vivid photos of your hotel. Google offers hotels to have both a cover photo for their GBP listing as well as a collection of additional photos users can scroll through, allowing you to showcase your lobby, dining areas, pool, rooms, and more.

5. STAY ON TOP OF GUEST REVIEWS

Guest reviews are an important factor for many travelers. GBP showcases a hotel's star rating and allows guests to leave reviews. It's important for hotels to have a review management strategy to monitor these reviews and respond to them, both good and bad. People like seeing that hotels take reviews seriously, and a bad review can help your hotel stay on top of issues.

What's Next in Search Engine Optimization?

The overarching future of SEO may not be all that different from one of the major trends in marketing — personalization. Google has begun to use machine learning and artificial intelligence to develop algorithms that can identify the content that users want to see based on their previous searches, the context of their search query, and more. Going forward, users will likely see more personalized results in the future, even when searching for something general like hotels near them.

Just like nobody can truly predict how an algorithm change will impact SEO, there is no definite answer to the future of SEO. But there are some signals.

1. AN INCREASED EMPHASIS ON USER EXPERIENCE

More than 40% of all searches (and growing) are done on mobile devices. That has been a crucial factor in Google's page experience push, and it won't slow down in years to come. Google's goal has long been to offer up search users the most relevant and high-quality information as efficiently as possible. In many ways, that has led to features that keep users on the search engines, whether that be Google Hotels, featured snippets, or dynamic content. When Google does offer up websites on Page 1, it'll increasingly focus on sending users to well-designed and optimized websites that load quickly and offer a positive, responsive experience. If not, cumbersome hotel websites will likely fall behind.

2. THE EVOLUTION OF VOICE SEARCH

Voice search is not yet pervasive, but it's getting there. Estimates are that more than one-third of Americans have a smart speaker in their home, and that number is growing rapidly. According to data, 41% of adults use voice search at least once per day and 20% of mobile searches on Google are conducted by voice. The number of devices with access to voice search will only continue to rise, including in cars, homes and wearables, and the future of SEO as it relates to voice will be about creating content that is easy to call up via simple questions or commands—the kind of things a chatbot can handle today. This means that structured data markup will become even more meaningful than it already is. Voice assistants can use information from schema markup to quickly answer questions, making it an increasingly important SEO component outside of just local SEO.

3. THE ROLE OF AI IS BETTER SEARCH EXPERIENCE

Google made significant progress in its utilization of machine learning through recent algorithm updates. While its RankBrain update aimed to understand the context of user searches, the goal of the BERT update was to understand intent. Future years will undoubtedly include advancements in the search engine's Artificial Intelligence (AI). Advancements in deep learning and natural language processing will help Google understand what a user wants and data like location, search history, and more will combine for incredibly personalized and targeted results.

Strategic Hospitality Marketing

With more than 20 years of hospitality marketing experience, O'Rourke uses a comprehensive and strategic approach to help both independent and branded hotels take their digital marketing to the next level. We create an online presence for your brand that captures guests from their initial online engagement with you and seamlessly transitions them to your real-world experience.

O'ROURKE

To discuss your business challenges and see how we can help, please contact Brian Fitzgerald, VP Digital Strategy, at **(978) 465-5955, ext. 221,** or **bfitzgerald@orourkehospitality.com.**