SEO Landing Pages
How we achieved 548% more conversions without damaging organic traffic

ABSTRACT

Landing page optimization and search engine optimization are two completely different entities. While optimizing to convince a human to take an action – such as buy, or fill out a lead form – can clearly increase your conversions, it may have an adverse affect on your SERP ranking. In this Web clinic transcript, Dr. Flint McGlaughlin teaches how to address this problem in the most profitable way possible.

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SEO Landing Pages

How we achieved 548% more conversions without damaging organic traffic

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[Note: This Document is a transcript of our original Webclinic on SEO landing pages that aired June 15, 2011.]

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: Good afternoon! It's hard to believe, but we're at it again with research from another case study. The topic is SEO landing pages, how we achieved a 548% gain without damaging organic rankings. Time and time again, I'm approached by marketers who are struggling with the concept of optimizing the conversion rate of their key pages without damaging the organic search ranking. We're going to be talking about that in some depth. We're going to show you the case study that kind of represents how we grapple with it. And, if you want to comment back and forth to us, you can use this hashtag #webclinic.

And, I'm joined today by John Powell, who is a Research Manager. He's been on several of these calls before, and also by Aaron Rosenthal. Aaron worked for…within these labs, conducting research for many years, and now is the President of Thought Projects, and is an expert on the subject and can handle some of the deeper questions that you may want to drive that in from the audience.

If you are an expert in SEO, then this clinic is not going to shock you, the latest new tactic that we discovered in our research. That's not what this is about. If you have a lot of expertise in that area, the only value derived from this clinic is that we're going to show you how we had to dance through and around the perimeters of a good search ranking to try and achieve a gain without losing that ranking. And, we do not have all of the answers. We do not have all of the answers, number one because the game changes regularly. I have seen Aaron, who works in this field, frustrated day after day as the rules change at Google and within other engines. But, what we have been able to do over and over then is produce a significant conversion lift without damaging the SEO rankings. We have to do it with carts. We have to do it in e-commerce. We have to do it in subscription. And, I am going to share a case study with you now that will be the foundation of what we want to teach you. As you see this study unfold, bear in mind also that we're going to be ending this session with a whole group of pages submitted by our audience, doing live optimization and

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discussing the implications from an SEO standpoint.

Background and Test Design

Experiment ID: REGonline SEO landing page test
Location: MarketingExperiments Research Library
Test Protocol Number: TP3055

Research Notes:

Background: Well-known news publication offering home delivery services via online registration

Goal: To increase the amount of home delivery subscriptions

Primary research question: Which page/process will generate the most subscriptions?

Test Design: Which page/process will generate the most subscriptions

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: This is Test Protocol 3055. It is a technology and media company specializing in online registrations and event management. The goal was to increase the amount of leads generated online. I'm sure many of us have the same goal. And, if you're in B2C, and perhaps you're on the e-commerce side or some other version of B2C, stand by because these principles are transferrable and will still apply to you. But, for those of you in B2B, particularly B2C or B2B lead generation, you'll find this case study very germane.

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Control

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: What you're going to look at now is the original landing page. It's SEO-sensitive. It was designed to help them maintain high rankings, and you can see the brand, the organization. They were gracious enough to allow us to use this case study from our research in this clinic, and we're very thankful for that. And, pay close attention to the layout of the page. Look at the headers. For those of you with SEO background, think about what there might be on this page that helps it with its rakings. And, then let's go forward and look at the second part of this process.

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Control (Step 2)

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: Here is step two. So, we have two steps that have to be optimized. I'm going to back up, step one and step two. Now, I want to show you the treatment. A lot of times, I ask the audience to give me some of the changes they would make. And, what I want to do before we go any further is go back to this page and invite you to use Twitter or your Q&A function on the GoToMeeting console to tell us changes that you might make to improve the performance of this page and be sensitive to those changes from the standpoint of SEO. Let me get some of your feedback. So, Luke, go ahead and share that with me. Luke is managing all of this production and there's a lot more to producing one of these Web clinics than you might know. We're releasing a video very soon that goes behind the scenes and shows you the hundreds of hours and all of the people involved in prepping for something like this. Here we go. Too much friction on the form, says someone. The headline sucks, says Mark. Lesson, put boxes in the form, say Collin. Change the call to action, Jackson. Poor title, said someone else. Include keywords in the headers, says Garcia. Less form fields, Kathy. Change the H, Elizabeth. Why not show a form, says Rob. The CTA. The operative word in today's clinic, the new marketing vocabulary or lexicon appears to be sucks. Someone says the CTA sucks. Don't ask questions in the headline, says Norma. Too much text, says Dominic. No offer, says Eddie. And, there is a lot more of your thoughts coming in.

Treatment

Treatment SEO Landing Page

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: Alright, let's think about those and then let's look at the treatment that we used. And, I'll just kind of walk you forward to the revised page. Here is the revised page. This is step one.

Treatment (Step 2)

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: And I'm going to show you step two, and then point out for you that there is a step three.

Treatment (Step 3)

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: Now, that might surprise you, but we'll talk about why. Jon Powell, who oversaw this experiment, is standing by. Jon is going to be helping us with live optimization. And, Jon, I might have you just comment on the strategy of the treatment itself, from an optimization standpoint. So, Jon, I'll back up there and start with this version. Go ahead and give us a quick comment on what you were thinking as you worked through this, Jon.

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Jon Powell: Probably the most important element, or strategy element, in building this treatment has to be with the thought process and the direction. So, really at this point, they have too many options in the control and we wanted to limit those options, at least limit when they see those options and present them with one primary option, which is what you see on the right. Everything else is really just tweaks, but probably the biggest change is how we presented the thought sequence, which is here's the value, here's the one option that we want you to go to, and go there, and it looks less intimidating.

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: In fact, when you take the conversion sequence, C = 4m + 3v + 2(i - f) - 2a, most of you are familiar with it, we're working through the force of value proposition, trying to bring clarity, trying to answer the three principle questions. And, we reduce friction by reducing the options. And, sometimes when you have to accomplish several things, it's best to sequence them, which is what John did with his team. And, as you can see, step two and also step three, let's compare the two main pages side by side and get straight to the results.

Side-by-side

Results

548% Increase in Total Leads
The new page's conversion rate increased by 548.46%

Design	Conversion Rate (%)	Relative Difference	Statistical Level of Confidence
Original Page	0.7%	-	-
Treatment	4.8%	548%	99%

What you need to understand: By applying key optimization methodologies to the lead capture process, the treatment was able to improve step-level clickthrough rates by 1,312%, and completed leads captured by 548% all without damaging our organic ranking.

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: As I think you probably discerned from the headline of this piece, the new path produced a 548% gain. Now, here's the key. By applying these optimization methodologies, the treatment was able to improve step-level click-through rates by 1,312%, and completed leads captured by 548%. And, I think in bold, at the bottom of this slide, is the most important point. This was achieved without damaging the organic ranking. So, think about that for just a bit. We'll come back to it soon. And, instead, I want to start drilling down on what we can learn from this experience.

What we discovered

Key Principles

1. The primary objective of any SEO campaign is to maximize profit.

2. To maximize profit on an SEO landing page, we must optimize for conversion while minimizing the risk of damaging our organic ranking.

3. To minimize the risk of damaging our organic ranking on a particular page, we must follow four basic steps.

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Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: So, let's begin with some principles. The primary objective of any SEO campaign is to maximize profit. And, to maximize profit, we have to optimize for conversion while minimizing the risk of damaging the organic rankings. I don't think that's profound. We all know that. The key is in discovering a methodology that we can apply. Now, we've got four steps. We're going to work you through these four steps. We're going to try and focus what we say. As I have promised you at the beginning of time, we're not going to be teaching you a number of SEO tips. Aaron is an expert on the subject. He could give you lots of help and make lots of suggestions. But, what we're really going to be doing is talking about this method for improving your conversion without hurting your rankings.

Step 1: Prioritize Objectives

What is the objective of this path?

It is not simply to maximize brand equity

It is not simply to maximize traffic volume

It is not simply to maximize conversion rate

The objective is to maximize profit.

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: So, the first key is to prioritize your objectives. And, I want to ask you a simple question. On the right-hand side, take a look at this page. This is actually a research partner that we worked with. They've been a remarkable partner and I can't say much about this, except to say at one point, under the guidance of an expert, they launched a brand new cart which promptly hurt conversion rates by 40%. They had to climb back out and we instituted a methodology for them to both not only revert, they had to revert back to their original cart, but to improve that cart. And, I'm just going to ask you, from this simple diagram, what you believe the objective of this path is. So, someone, go ahead

and tell me, use your Q&A or use Twitter. Go back to that…just kind of…you're in the right place, Luke. But, look at that path and tell me what is the objective. I see some good questions coming in also. Log those and get those ready for Aaron. Alright, keep going. Add to cart. To add to cart. To make a sale, says Mark. To drive orders. To add to cart, says Irena. Tell me the objective of this path. Now, I'm looking for the overriding, top objective, not the step objective but the absolute top objective of this particular page. To make a sale. To sell the product. To select the size of the steel seal you want to buy. Good product, by the way. It works. To make a sale. To sell the most expensive product. To sell steel seal. To buy. To repair my head gasket. Somebody's thinking! Go ahead. Dan wants to make a comment. Yes?

Daniel Burstein: We just got a great one on Twitter, on hashtag #weblinic. Someone, I think they're most accurate, to shine the metal.

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: To shine the…

Daniel Burstein: So, I think to shine the metal might be it!

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: To shine the metal. Alright! To distract the users. Alright. To increase profits with increased sales. You're actually looking at a page that produced a revenue gain, but I think it's very important. Andy says, solve my problem. If you were to study aligning and value propositions through his lens, he'd talk about the customer experience. Let's go back to that page and talk about it for a second, and I'd like you just to see this page as a generalism, as an example of many paths like this we see all over the net. And, I'm going to ask you again what is the overriding top objective, and it won't be the same for all of us but it would be the same for most of us.

And, let's start by what it's not. It's not simply to maximize the brand equity of this product. There are a lot of sins committed in internet marketing in the name of institutional advertising or brand equity. There is such a thing as brand equity, but brand is simply the aggregate experience of your value proposition. And, everything you do in marketing, everything should influence a decision, a micro-decision that leads to an ultimate decision, that leads to your ultimate objective. The goal is not simply to maximize your brand equity. It's also not to maximize traffic volume. And, it is not, and this might surprise you, particularly coming from MarketingExperiments, it is not to simply maximize the conversion rate. In fact, the goal is to maximize profit. Now, you might say, "Well that's not profound. We're well aware of that." Yes, you are, but I'll tell you one of the greatest problems we have right now with helping organizations achieve the maximum profit is overcoming their fear of making changes to their pages because of this almost unreasonable kind of anxiety created around your SEO or your organic rankings. The goal is to maximize profit.

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Conversion Rate vs. Traffic Chart
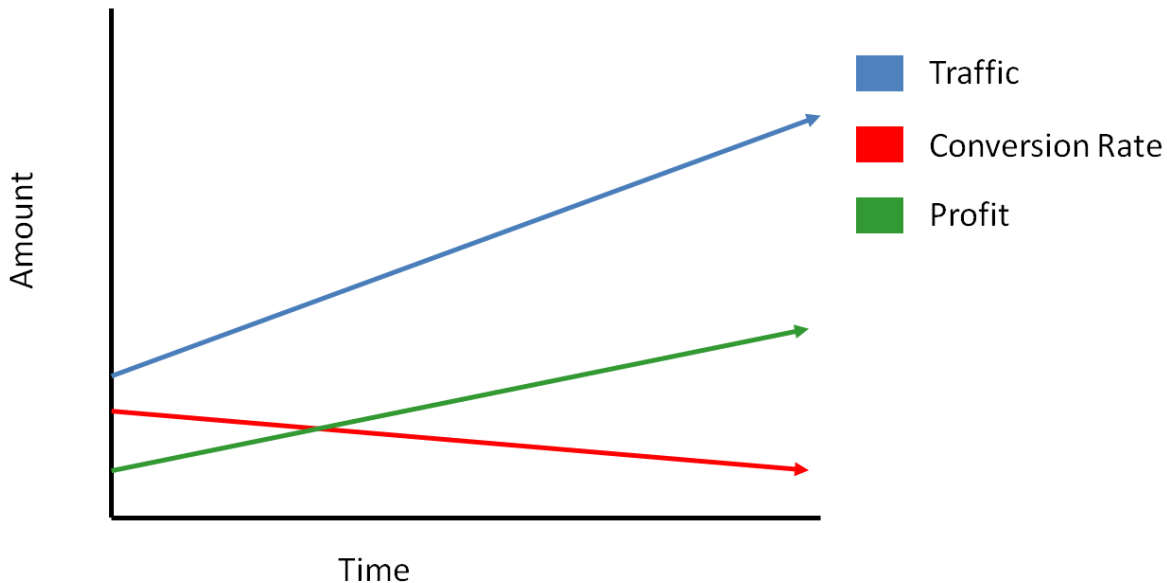
Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: And, in fact, and I've seen this over and over again, we found that if we maximize the conversion rate for a given page and then we add a major traffic surge, in most cases you're going to see, as you can note on this chart…see the red line? Conversion rate is going down as traffic is going up. But, while conversion rate is going down, profit is going up. Conversion rate is just a number. It's just a representation. It's just a ratio. We do not live and die around conversion rate. We're after a maximum profit and conversion rate is a useful ratio for helping us achieve that profit. But, the goal is not the highest conversion rate. The goal is the highest profit. And, that applies also to our understanding of traffic. And, there are a lot of situations that we've analyzed where we are so afraid of touching the page that we have poorly functioning, poorly served landing pages, with poor conversion rates and less profit than they should, but we can brag about our search ranking because it is particularly high. You've got to understand the balance.

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Median Conversion Rate on Organic Traffic is 4%

Chart: Organizations experience wide variability in conversion rates on organic traffic

Q. What is your organization's conversion rate for organic traffic?
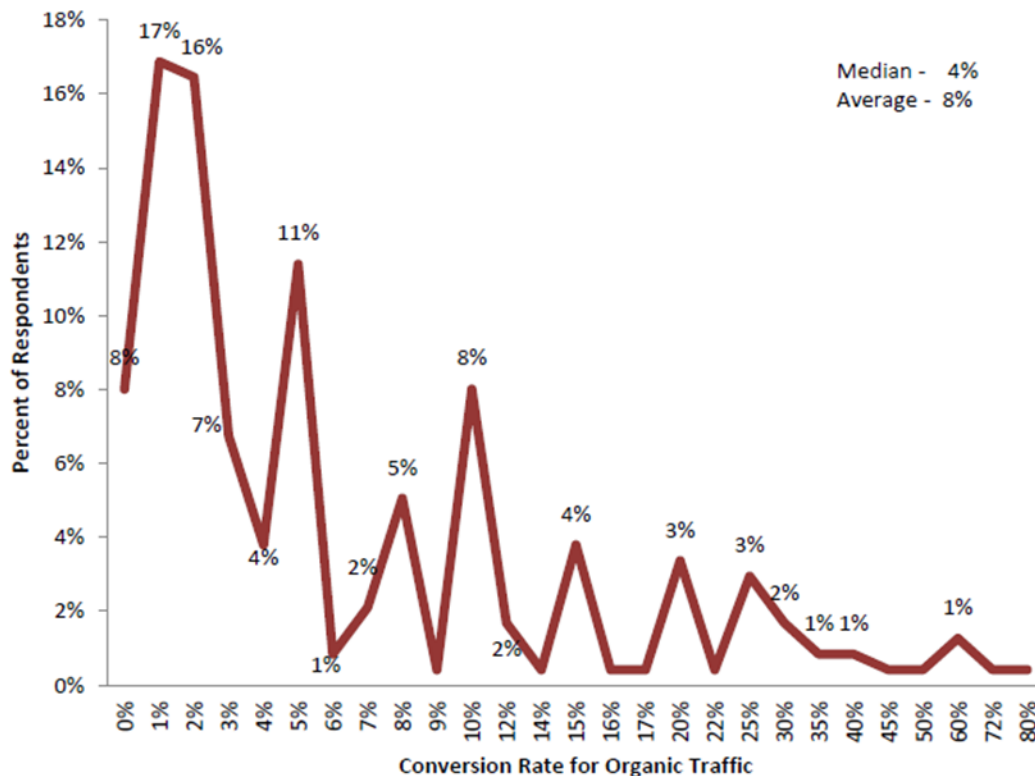
Source: ©2011 MarketingSherpa Search Marketing Benchmark Survey
Methodology: Fielded April 2011, N=1,530

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: In fact, we did a study in our sister company, MarketingSherpa, on the median conversion rate for organic traffic. This is in one of our recent charts, the MarketingSherpa Search Marketing Benchmark Survey. I don't know if you're familiar with the hundreds of studies we do each year across the industry to understand numbers like this, but this will help you benchmark what conversion rates typically are as it relates to organic traffic.

Now, think about that for just a moment and we will just point out that step one is to get clear about your priorities as you approach the page. You must understand that. I have seen sites. I was on the phone this week with a site that was designed many, many years ago and hasn't changed much, and they've maintained high rankings, but they have unacceptable conversion rates, and that impacts them at a profit level. That brings me to the second step. And, again, I'm going to touch this step very lightly. This is the one where there is a lot of available information here and in other sources that I can only touch, because we're going to move rapidly to more practical things for you. This is not about SEO tips.

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Step 2: Understand the Basics

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: But, you've got to understand the basics. And, first of all, you need to understand how Google ranks pages.

Understanding how Google ranks pages

Page Level Link Metrics	21.45
Domain Level Link Authority Features	21.13
Page Level Keyword Usage	14.93
Domain Level Keyword Usage	10.73
Page Level Social Metrics	7.22
Domain Level Brand Metrics	6.78
Page Level Keyword Agnostic Features	6.74
Page Level Traffic/Query Data	6.26
Domain Level Keyword Agnostic Features	4.92
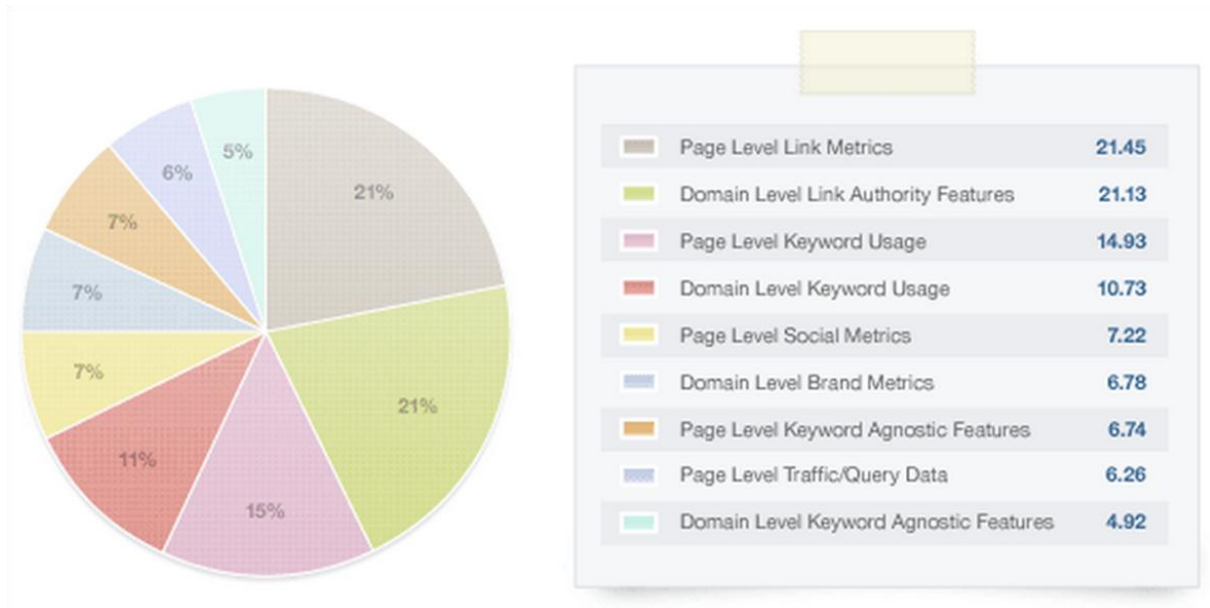
Source: SEOmoz Ranking Factors

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: And, you'll notice the chart that we see in the screen in front of you and it talks about those factors that impact your ranking. And, it's very critical to understand those because later you'll have to discern what's the primary driver of your SEO ranking, and that's not always easy.

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Content vs. Authority SEO Factors

Note:

While content will always contribute something to ranking,
in most cases, the authority of the page will trump any content changes.
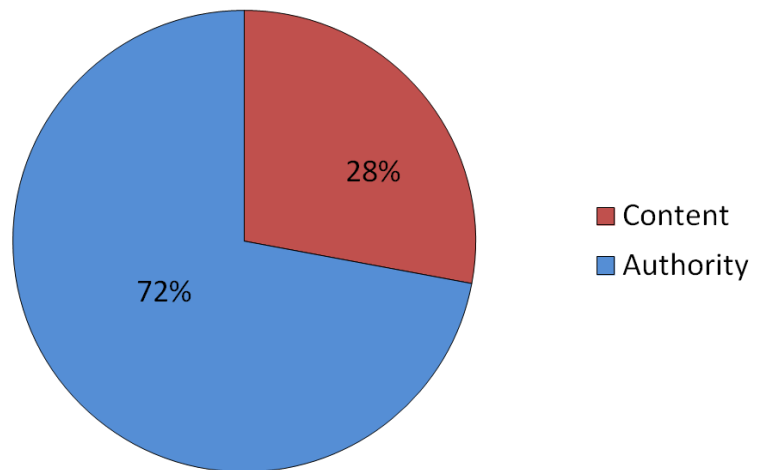
- Content
- Authority

Using Data From: SEOmoz Ranking Factors

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: And, then you need to understand that while content always contributes to ranking in some form or another, in many or most cases, the authority of the page will trump any content changes. Now, keeping that in mind, we had to look at the existing page and bring that same information together.

Basic steps taken to minimize damage to rankings:

Preserved Links: Moved navigation links/other links that tie the page to the overall site authority to the footer

Maintained Keyword Density: Ensured copy changes kept the same keywords in the same relative places.

Maintained Robot Accessibility: We made sure that we developed the test pages so that it wouldn't stop the spider (SSL vs. Non SSL).

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: These basic steps we're taking to minimize the damage to rankings. We had to preserve their links. We had to maintain keyword density. We had to maintain robot accessibility. Those factors all had to be considered. And, we had to put that together as we started this design. That enabled us to assess the risk. I'm going to go back to that again. It's important to be careful to preserve the links, to maintain your keyword density, and to maintain accessibility for the bots.

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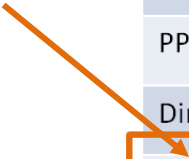
Step 3: Assess the Risk

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: With that in mind, we had to assess our risk, and there were three questions that needed to be asked.

3 Questions to identify the risk of content changes

QUESTION 1:

What is the actual impact of your organic traffic?

Traffic Source	Total Overall Visits	Total Overall Conversions	Average Conversion Rate (per campaign)	Total Profit
Email	9,560	598	7.38%	$105,023
PPC	13,687	435	4.56%	$90,567
Direct	2,378	202	1.67%	$4,057
Organic	20,324	523	3.45%	$100,873
Referral	15,143	103	0.54%	$876

Note: The numbers above have been adjusted and do not represent the real context for the situation in discussion.

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: The first one is this. What is the actual impact of our organic traffic? And, here we could see the overall visits, which led to the second question.

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QUESTION 2:

What is the potential gain from conversion optimization?

$$C = 4m + 3v + 2(i-f) - 2a$$

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: What is the potential gain from conversion optimization? When we applied the heuristic and looked at the page, we saw a number of areas that could be changed and could result in a dramatic lift. As you know from the experiment, they did result in a 548% lift.

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QUESTION 3:

What key elements drive the SEO rankings?

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: Then, we have to ask a third question. What key elements drive the SEO ranking? Now, this was a critical question, and it's not always easy to discern, and Aaron could probably comment on this for a long time.

Question 3: Example

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: But, the bottom line is in this case we began to drill down on the backlinks associated with this site. We noticed that while some of the rankings came as a result content, the primary cause was authority. And, if you drill down deeper, you can see that there were 137 links, backlinks to this particular page. So, we knew that we had to protect that link structure while making important but careful changes to the rest.

Free resources for analyzing your ranking

Yahoo Site Explorer – Most comprehensive backlink index on the web.

Bit.ly/siteexplorer

SEOMoz SERP Analysis Presentation – Highlights an effective methodology for analyzing why a page ranks (worksheet included).

Bit.ly/serpanalysis

SEOQuake browser extension – Effective tool for quickly gathering ranking data.

Bit.ly/browserextension

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: By the way, if you're trying to understand your ranking, here are some resources you can use, here are some tools that you can use that might be useful. And, if you don't have time right now to get these links down, you'll be able to get a copy of this online, when we present this along with the video and the slides.

Step 4: Minimize the Impact

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: So, let's just review for a moment. We've prioritized our objectives and then we've carefully walked through this process to identify the risks and to assess them. So, that brings us to the third step, and that is to minimize the impact. Now, there are some critical ways you could help to minimize the impact. You maybe then say, "Okay, let's suppose I could even figure out what the source is of my ranking, what I need to know is how to get changes to my website without jeopardizing that particular source. What if it isn't by backlinks? What if it's my content? How do I protect myself at this juncture?" Well, there are some keys that you can employ. None of these are silver bullets. You know, we're a research lab. There is nothing in this clinic I want to do to hype what I'm teaching you right now. This is just what it is. These are methods we've learned that will help you to optimize your pages in spite of the fact that you have an SEO-sensitive design.

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Minimizing Risk: Segmentation

Segmentation: The process of directing non-organic traffic channels to dedicated landing pages.
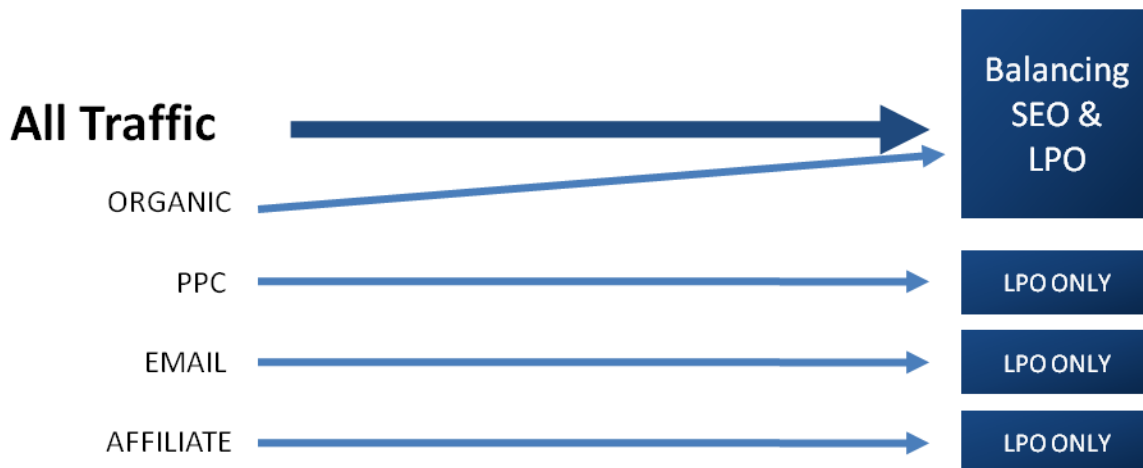
Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: So, the first risk is segmentation, or the first way to minimize this risk is through segmentation. I've got a lot of good questions coming in. We're going to get to those questions. Just stand by. The process of directing non-organic traffic channels to dedicated landing pages is essentially segmentation. Many, many times we're sending our page search to the same page that we've optimized for organic search. This is a mistake. There is no reason you need to send your emails to the same page that you've optimized for your organic search. In most cases, you can create a page customized to appeal to that particular segment and you'll, first of all, get a higher conversion rate because specificity converts. If you match the messaging of the landing page with the messaging of the channel, you'll find already that has an improvement for you, in terms of just general conversion theory. But, secondly, you take the shackles off that you might have on this other page that's been designed and optimized for organic search and you can do almost anything you want, almost. And, there are rules that we can talk about, duplicating content and so on. But, primarily, you can take those new pages and you can use them to optimize without such concern about the organic rankings for that particular page. That's called segmentation. And, I just stop and think many of the people that have contacted us and asked for help, many of the people that have approached me in classes or come up to me at conferences, or have come up to us in events have asked, "What can I do about this site," and it never occurred to them that they could take much of the traffic they're currently sending to those SEO-sensitive pages and send them to specialized landing pages.

Minimizing Risk: Extension

Extension: The process of using an SEO landing page as a continuation of the channel.

(Use this page as the extension of the channel)
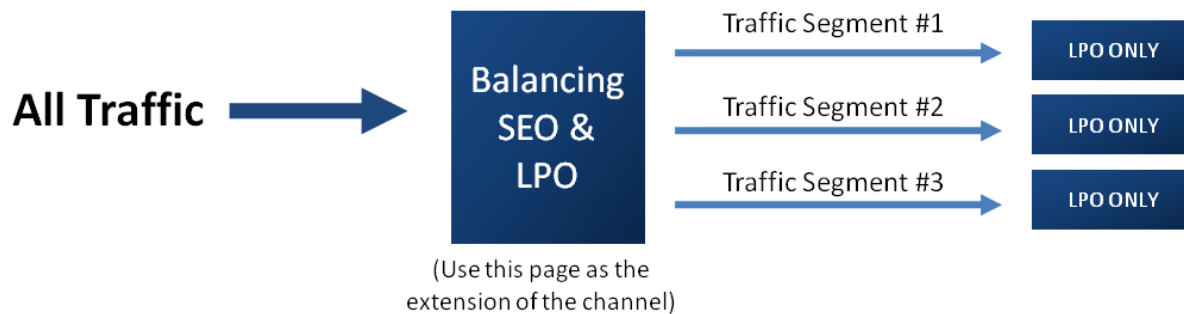
Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: A second key is to use something that we'll just call extension. An extension is the process of using an SEO landing page as a continuation of the channel. What am I talking about? Think of the landing page as not so much the landing page for your offer but as step 2 in the channel, a highly optimized, that is optimized for SEO, landing page, get a high search ranking, but use the links within that page to drive people to a page that is not so concerned about SEO and is designed to do one thing, convert. There are many examples we could give you of this and later, in other sessions, we may do so. But, think of driving your traffic to a powerful page with rich content that's useful, not content that's just designed to game the Google system, but content that's really helping your audience. And, then embed it, not with square boxes and ads on the side, but in the editorial of your content with key links that drive people into the main pages that have been optimized for your offer. Some of you could do better by taking the page you currently have, that you're trying to sell your product with, and optimizing it further for SEO and moving your product one step deeper in. We recognize that getting that extra click can cost you traffic, but the traffic that clicks through is going to receive or be able to interact with a page that's been optimized for conversion, and you still may see a significant gain.

Minimizing Risk: Emphasis

Emphasis: The process of emphasizing or de-emphasizing content on a page in an effort to minimize content changes and maximize conversion.
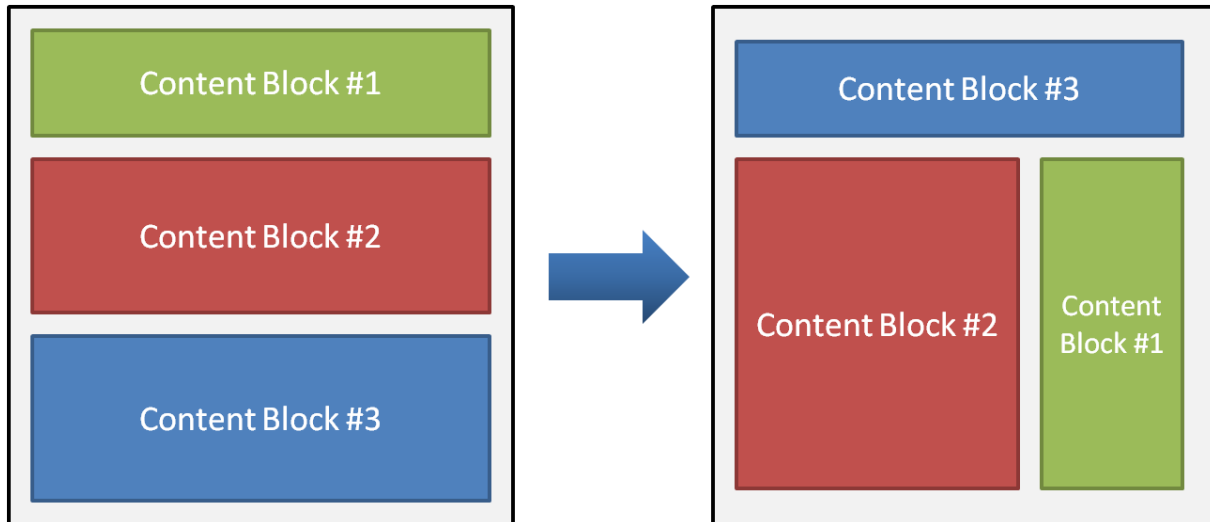
Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: Number three, you need to minimize your risk using emphasis. Emphasis is the process of controlling the eye path so that you minimize the changes or the SEO-related content and keep it from hurting you as you make the core messaging for optimization. On your left, you'll see content block one, content block two and content block three. On your right, you'll see how block one has been de-emphasized. Forget the colors. It's just the point that what you see in the block two is going to be far more dominant in the eye path than block one or block three, based on this design.

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Emphasis: Example

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: I'll show you can example I saw this week from a very smart company. And, since I'm using this page, you may want to buy your contact lenses from there next. They are probably the lowest price on the internet. And, if you are one of their competitors, I'm sorry. It's just a smart page when it comes to how they do SEO. Do you see down on the bottom? You'll see gray on gray, but you're looking at a page…and it's hard to see with the way this slide has been prepared. If you were to see the entire site, you would see that in that red-bordered box what you really see as the primary web content. It looks like the web page, the website. Underneath that box, however, is these, and these are significant drop-down menus, full of useful information, really useful information, but they're not in the eye path, interfering with the primary dialogue on the page. What you want to do is make certain that you SEO activities don't interfere with maintaining your control of the thought sequence, with mastering that dialogue that must take place between you and the potential customer. Now, can this page be

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optimized? Certainly! But, I'm just...I'm impressed with the way they did part of their SEO, and it shows in their rankings. And, so just think about that as we look to a fourth example.

Minimize Risk: Concealment

Audience Submission

EXAMPLE: Javascript

Note: This page might see a lift through using Javascript to dynamically hide and display content sections.
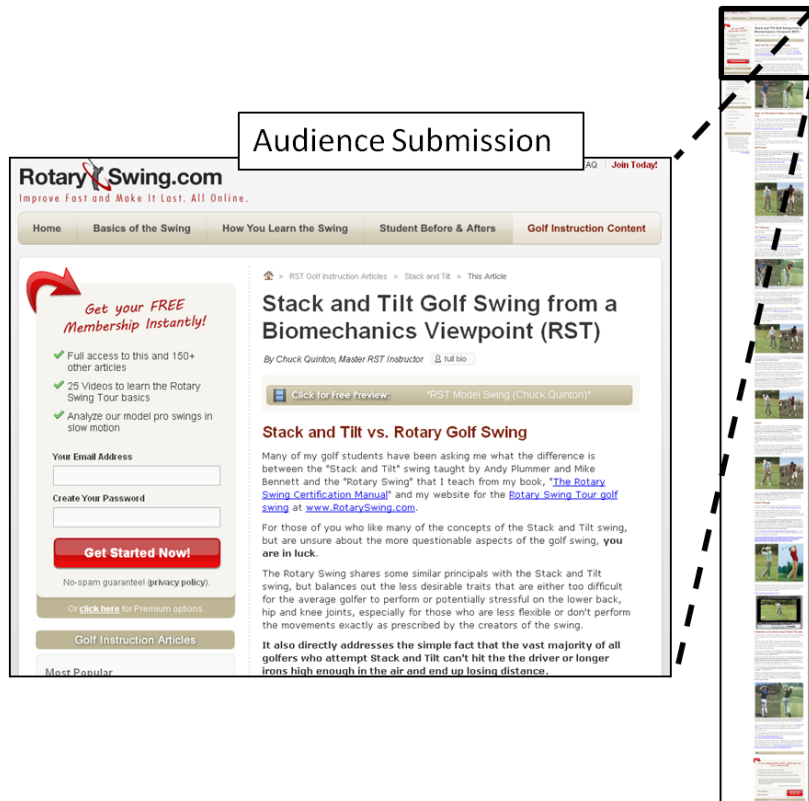
Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: We're getting ready soon to do live optimization, but this fourth example is using another term, concealment. So, we've talked about several keys, but concealment isn't a gray hat or a black hat tactic. In the old days, there were lots of things you could do that were borderline ridiculous. Google and other engines for years have been trying to crack down on all of these workarounds. But, the audience, you, have submitted pages and we're going to be optimizing those pages in a few minutes. And, one of you submitted this page. And, if you're not clear what you're looking at, on the right-hand side is a long page. You see that long, narrow box? That's actually the whole web page. And, if you look on the left, you'll see this little box that we pulled out, that says audience submission and it has a square underneath it. That's just the top of that very long page. That page might get good SEO rankings with all of that content, but it would be awful hard to get its highest possible conversion rate. I'm not saying that it doesn't convert well. I don't have the metrics. But, I will suggest this. You could use Javascript to dynamically hide and display various sections of this content and create a page that is more digestible and yet full of the rich content needed to attract good rankings. Let's just go back over that for a moment. We said concealment is one of the keys that you could use. We said emphasis is a key that

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you could use. Extension is another key. And, we said segmentation. These four ways help you to minimize the general impact or of the risk on your work.

Summary: Putting it all together

☞ *Key Principles*

1. The primary objective of any SEO campaign is to maximize profit.

2. To maximize profit on an SEO landing page, we must optimize for conversion while minimizing the risk of damaging our organic ranking.

3. To minimize the risk of damaging our organic ranking on a particular page, we must follow four basic steps.

   - **Step 1: Prioritize** your objectives

   - **Step 2: Understand** the basics.

   - **Step 3: Assess** the risk.

   - **Step 4: Minimize** the impact.

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: So, what are the four steps we used to get a 548% gain? A, we prioritized objectives. Second, we understood and applied the basics. Now, I'm just saying the basics. You don't have to be an SEO genius to do many of the things that we've talked about just now. Thirdly, we assessed the risk. Now, we could have been wrong. This is not easy. But, it appeared as though those 137 backlinks and the authority of that page was critical in establishing or maintaining its SEO ranking. And, then we suggested that you can also minimize the impact using the four techniques that we just outlined.

Now, I've got lots of questions coming in. Before I do that, pull up the Q&A so I can see it, Luke. We're going to start to answer questions. Aaron, if you would get close to a microphone and get ready to help us. I can't really brag about Aaron too much. He's my old friend. But, he started working in the lab in the earliest days, when there was just a handful of us. And, I've seen him do some remarkable things. I remember giving him a website that had a revenue of about $5,000 a month, and within a handful of months he had it up to $160,000 a month. I watched him build that business and in 12 months

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someone came and offered us $8 to $10 million for that little web property that Aaron optimized and worked with. And, Aaron at that point was in his early 20s. Now, he's like 84 or 85. He's still a young man in human years, but in internet years he's very old. And, he's got a wife and he's got children. I really watched his whole…you know, I watched all of that happen here and now we built a special business that studied…did lead generation and he's an expert in that field, and he runs his own company now. And, so Aaron is with us and he still works in our offices. And, I'm going to slide him up to the microphone to answer some of these questions. He really is an expert on SEO.

So, here's the question. "When using a testing platform, is the best practice to use a canonical tag on version B and to leave the control page alone?" Jon, Aaron, you can answer that. Go ahead.

Aaron Rosenthal: Yeah. For those of you that don't know, a canonical tag is just a way to help Google, help Bing with…help Google to help dealing with duplicate content. So, when using this tag, I would actually use it on the control page. That way you're protecting yourself from making too many changes. You're testing a version that you don't necessarily know is going to outperform the control, therefore I keep the canonical tag on the control.

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: Good. Good. Alright. Stay up close to that microphone. If you folks are having difficulties hearing, guys, we're in kind of the studio here together and Aaron and John are standing by. So, here's another question. By the way, before I take this next question, is this helping you today? Let me get some instant feedback, because we're optimizing live. We're getting ready to move to live optimization, but are you learning from this? Is this good for you? I'm seeing…I really need your feedback because it's a complex subject and I sometimes are concerned about giving you either too much or not enough of what you need. Good. Good. I'm seeing lots of great feedback and positive feedback. I appreciate the encouragement!

Alright, let's switch. Guys, we're going to go fast with these questions so we can do lots of live optimization to help this audience. So, here's the question. "Hasn't keyword density been shown to have very low correlation scores when it comes to improving ranking?" That's a question from Steven. Go ahead.

Aaron Rosenthal: Steven, yeah, I would say certainly it's a lot lower than it has been in the past. Google looks at a lot of factors nowadays and it has definitely depreciated the value of content on the page, focusing more on the incoming links and other behavioral factors that take place.

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: Excellent! Excellent. Now, we've had someone just try to get a little bit more clarity about where to put the tag we just discussed in the previous question. Could you just be clear again about that? We were talking about the canonical tags.

Aaron Rosenthal: Yeah. If you want information on canonical tags, I would actually go to Google. They have a Webmaster Help Forum section that'll describe it in depth. I know that Matt Cutts has also produced a short blog post, a video, on using the canonical tag, and I think those could be helpful.

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Live Optimization

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: Excellent! Alright. We're going to answer more questions, but we're going to move to live optimization for a few moments. These are pages that you've submitted. Let's apply some of this learning as we think about these pages. Okay?

Submission 1

Keyword: Credit Score

Position: 8th

Backlinks: 47,128
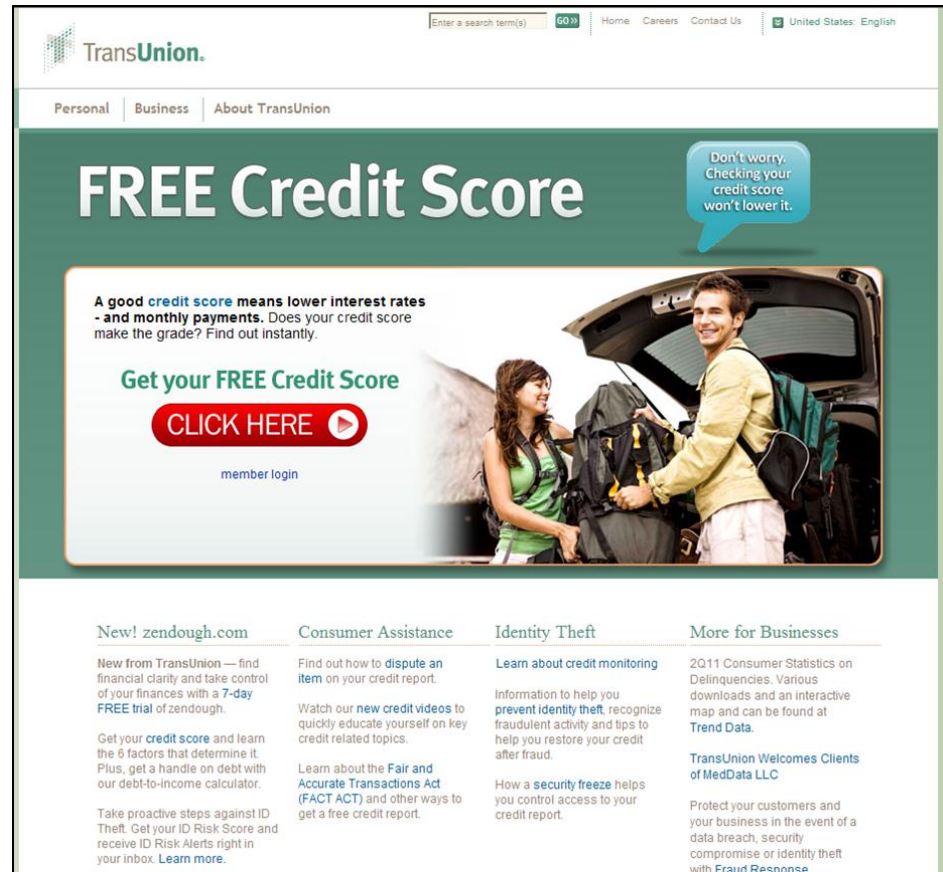
Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: So, I'm going to go straight over to a page. Free credit score, this is from TransUnion. And, the keyword is credit score and the position is eighth, and the backlinks, just a small 47,128 backlinks. For those of you that are jealous, congratulations Marki. Marki submitted this page.

Let's talk about a couple of things. John, have you prepared optimization from an SEO standpoint or overall? Kind of tell me what you're getting ready to go…kind of just give us some comments on how you protect this page better.

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John Powell: Honestly, I'm concerned about, again, the business and overall, because that's really what we're trying to do. We're not just trying to bring in traffic. Number one, here's the thing, credit score. I don't know if that's the only keyword. I'm betting it's not. But, if that's where the majority of traffic is coming from, then that's pretty broad, meaning they might not just be looking to act and find out what their credit score is. They might not even know what a credit score is and they want to know what it is, and they happen to see you and they saw that somebody used you in order to determine their credit score and denied them, and so they're going to your site. You've got one call to action, but you're probably not reaching the other group of people. So, you might want to consider an alternative call to action or presenting it better under your main one. Another thing too, I don't know if free credit score up there is an image or not, but if it is an image then the spider can't read it. So, you might want to do something about that, especially if you're going to, you know, optimize for that keyword.

Another thing, the image doesn't really add any value, so you're not really getting anything by using it. I don't see what value it adds to the whole credit score. The whole little blue bubble is just completely out of the way. Another thing that I really don't like about this page is that you lose the authority that TransUnion has in this industry. I think they're one of the magic three. Right? Experian and there is another one, Equifax. And, I completely missed the fact that it's TransUnion. I just see this big old like free credit score and I'm thinking freecreditscore.com, annoying people singing on the television. You know, it really…you need to utilize more of you authority, more of your design to, you know, convey that authority. Also, the bottom links, the links at the bottom, while I see what you're trying to do, they're not presented effectively, good for the SEO but not so great for the visitor. You might want to try bullets or you might want to try being more clear about where they go upfront and making it easier to read, so more optimization for the visitor, less so much for the SEO.

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: John made some very important points. I'm just going to add a few key pieces and, Aaron, jump in if you see anything that you think should be added as well. The bottom line is this. First of all, John is right about emphasizing the authority of TransUnion. Free credit score used to be powerful. It's less powerful now because we're hearing it on all sides, from everyone. We need a stronger reason, more force in your value proposition. And, so remember, we've taught this before, every site has three questions it has to answer immediately, where am I at, which is not clear here, what can I do here, reasonably clear, get your credit scores, why I should do it here, not clear. In fact, there is a lot of places offering a free credit score and most of the time there is a catch. What we haven't done is anything to deal with the anxiety someone has about is this really free, how long will this take, what are you really going to ask me for. None of that's being addressed. And, you say, well it's down there in the print. They're not even reading that. You're asking for them to make a decision before they read any of the information below. So, we need a much stronger headline, with a subheader.

The answer to the question, if I'm the ideal customer, why should I purchase from you rather than any other, or why should I get my credit score from you rather than anyone else is not clear. That's got to be in your subheader or a piece of key text. And, then it says click here. That's not the kind of text you want on a button. The button should promise something in exchange for the click. You say, well it says get your free credit score here. So, you've got the language wasted because you could use more important language. You could use a testimonial. You could do other things there if you were to put

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that same language and make that the language of your button, and then use paragraph above it to establish your value proposition.

I would also…Aaron's going to jump in. I know you're working for SEO, but in every test we've ever run in this lab we have never seen a four-column design ever be great for conversion rates. The eye path is wrong here. You're asking me to make a commitment before I know what the real commitment is, before I'm ready. I've used this analogy before. We'll go faster on some of the others, but the idea is not just to help this company, but to help all of you that are on the phone right now or all of you that are on this clinic to be able to go back and get a result. Do not fall prey to the keep it above the action or keep the call to action above the fold truism. It's not always the case. I've said it before. It's like walking up to a girl in the bar and grabbing her by the shoulder and kissing her on the lips. You're probably going to get thrown out of the bar. Your call to action is above the fold. Congratulations! But, you haven't led her through the proper thought sequence that allows you to get a kiss! We have the same issue here, unless they're being entirely sold on the channel. Aaron, you were going to mention another point? Go ahead!

Aaron Rosenthal: Well, the only thing I might add, from an optimization standpoint, is to start the lead process on this page. You've got a click here button, but you could easily replace that button with an email capture field or a name capture field, at least to get a little bit of information about the person in a way to re-communicate with them in case they drop off from that second step of the process.

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Submission 2

Keyword: trek canvas tent

Position: 1st

Backlinks: 23

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: Absolutely right! Absolutely right! Let's move on. This is submission two. This is Trek Canvas Tent. Its position is number one. They have 23 backlinks. We're at Practical Sports. This was submitted by Byron. Now, before I say a word with John here, use Twitter please, hashtag #webclinic, is that correct, or the Q&A to talk to me. Tell me how you would make this page better. Tell me how you make this page better. Thank you, Kathy, about the value proposition. That was a kind comment! It's always about the value proposition in the end. Isn't it? Let's keep going. Less text, somebody said. That's Joann. It's a yard sale, says Bill. Keep that in mind now, Byron. It's less text, more bullets, someone says. Visual hierarchy said another. It's a big headline, says Christian. Audio cutting out, says Tom. I hope that's on you end and not ours. If anybody else has trouble, let us know. A big…too many menus. Summarize the benefits. The headers are not being used. The picture should indicate the size of the tent. Let me see. Seven subheadlines, very busy looking, says Gary. So, Byron, you're getting a focus group here and the focus group happens to consist of some of the most astute marketers in the world. There are…I don't know how many are on the line, but typically we have 1,000 seats available and they're all thinking about your page. Let me see. Share this button is becoming an absolute necessity. It seems like he's going for the kiss before courting the girls, says Guarcia. Make is simpler for me, says Bill. Let's switch back over to the actual image and, John, talk to us now for a moment and tell us what you see about this particular page.

Jon Powell: Well, number one, I mean the main goal is to get them to add to the cart. So, there are a lot of different things that are potentially distracting them. I'm not sure I quite get the links on the left. If you really need them, they're not…you might want to consider testing that. Sometimes, you could use the header for that, depending on how specific and how (Inaudible) that is, to give you a little bit more space. Also, where are your reviews? Where are your testimonials? I can't see it.

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: Yeah, they're down there.

John Powell: Well, that's the problem. They're down there and they should be up there. You could probably do a two-column, where you have a main column and then you have a right column with your reviews and your testimonials next to it. If you have a star rating system, that should go in your primary, right below the, you know, the headlines, so something like that. Also, your images. It doesn't look like it's a very high quality image and then your other images, your thumbnails, are way down there. Those should be directly below those. And, somebody mentioned too much text. Maybe, if you've got a lot of irrelevant text, especially if you want to optimize for that keyword. You can get rid of some, otherwise present it better. That's where you can use your Java script or whatever to make kind of a tab-like approach, where you can allow them to see the kind of content that they can access. As soon as they hit the page as they're trying to evaluate whether they want this product or not, credibility indicators. Also, your options are kind of few. You know, the options aren't really straightforward. There's a lot of different things you could do. Aaron and Flint, do you want to add?

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: Yeah. Let me just point out something else that…you know, the text needs to be organized with visual eye path. There should be bold font in it. There should be subheaders. We've said that. You might use the Java script, but the text is perhaps helping you get a high search ranking, but it's interfering perhaps with your conversion rate. But, may I also suggest that if this is your number one position and if this is a key product you sell a lot of, and if you haven't done this already, Byron, you need separate landing pages for your other sources of traffic, because this is not a great page. This is a product page de carte, or at least that's how it appears to me. And, a product page de carte is…you know, it's alright but it's never as effective as a carefully designed landing page that's not dynamically generated but is specially designed to provide the information and the thought flow that leads to a purchase. I'm not suggesting that you don't send your organic search here, but I'd think very carefully about sending any outside traffic, page search, email or otherwise, to a page that was customized to sell this particular unit. And, I think you'd find that'll help you get optimization done right. And, here's the other key. And, all of you that are on the line, if you'd listen to this point, it's something I didn't teach earlier, it'll help you. If you create an alternate landing page that you're sending your paid search to, you may point out that your demographic sample is slightly different. But, it could be close enough that you can test on the search page, get the ideal headline, get the ideal subheader, get the ideal content, and then take those learnings and gradually migrate those learnings onto your SEO organic landing page carefully. Be careful about your headers. Be careful about changing key, certain other words. But, the bottom line is you could pretest to get the ideal page from a different channel and then shift the most important learnings over to this page, as long as you're careful not to touch your keyword densities or whatever you think is the primary driver of your SEO ranking.

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We're going to move on to another page. I hope that's helped you, Byron. But, let me suggest this to Byron and also to the last page. Send us over your new design and we'll comment on it, since you've been with us here. Let us finish helping you get a gain or a lift here. Aaron, did you have anything about that? I saw a look on your face. Did you see anything that you wanted to clarify, that I just said?

Aaron Rosenthal: No. I think these are all good suggestions for testing. The one thing that I would mention is that when you're going about testing this, look at using a program like a Google Website Optimizer that uses Java script to change these elements post search engine crawl. So...

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: This is...hold on, everybody. Aaron is saying something really smart, so I'm just going to put an apostrophe on that...or, I'm sorry, an exclamation point. Explain what you're saying, Aaron. Go ahead!

Aaron Rosenthal: Yeah. So, if you remember the slide earlier that talked about using Javascript to shorten the length of a page, essentially what you're doing is when Google bot or other spiders come to your page, they have a difficult time reading Javascript. So, if you're changing these elements by using Javascript, you're in effect changing them for the purpose of visitors coming to your page, but not necessarily for the search engine spiders who come to your page. So, they will review...you know, if you're using this, and the way Google Website Optimizer works, a spider will come to your page, viewing the control copy or the original copy of your landing page. A visitor will come, Google Website Optimizer will change the elements and the visitor will see the new or the test version of the page. This will help you establish a conversion lift first or determine if there's going to be a conversion lift before you go messing around with the elements on your landing page.

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Submission 3

Keyword: travel franchise

Position: 8th

Backlinks: 3,605
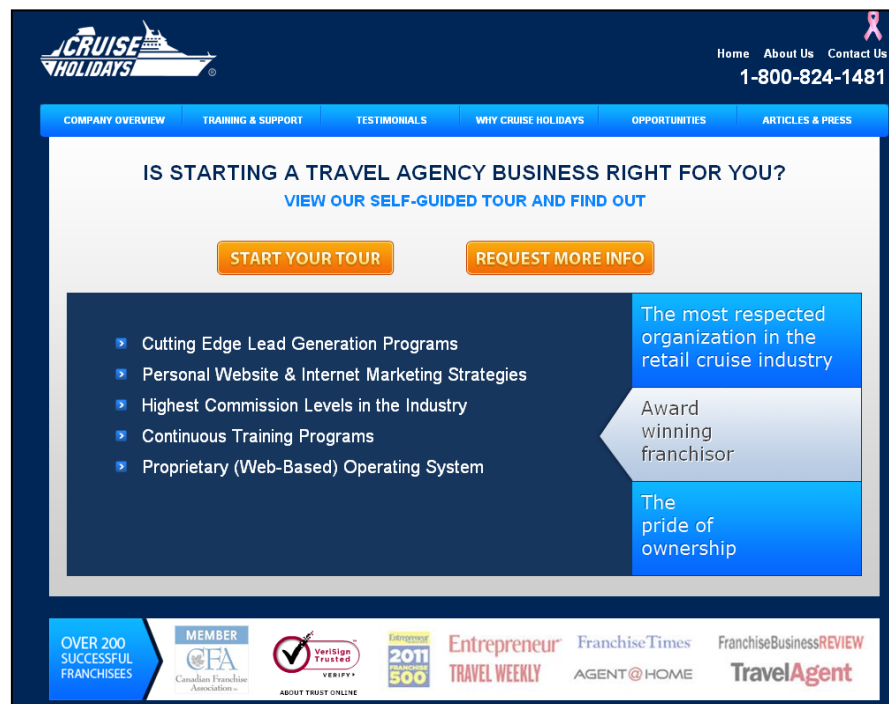
Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: Excellent! Excellent! If you have more comments about that, ask us. We might put something on that in the blog, if we think it'll help bring something. It's a very important point. Let's move on to submission three. I want to cover as many of these as I can. If you're new to live optimization, we're not just trying to help the people that submitted the page. We're trying to help you get transferrable lessons, things you can apply from what we taught earlier in the broadcast. This page was submitted by John. And, you're looking at a page that has position eight under the keyword travel franchise, and there are 3,605 backlinks to this page, which is interesting! Now, audience, let me ask you a question. Do you think Google's page rank for this particular page…or, let's say, now do you think that a search engine ranking is a function of the content more or a function of the backlinks? Now, we don't know for sure, but looking at this page what would be your instant answer? Use your Twitter hashtag and so we can count your responses. By the way, every time you give us a response, I see a lot of people saying backlinks, backlinks, it very well may be, which is really powerful because that tells us some things we can do with this page to improve it. And, as you're giving us these answers, bear this in mind. We read every one of these transcripts and go through it and learn, and think about how our audience is relating to what we're teaching and saying. So, we really value your answers! John, talk to us about this page and some things we could do to make it better.

Jon Powell: Wow! This page! If you take…yeah, I agree with the audience. There's really not much content here, in terms of bringing up the rankings. I mean, looking at the keyword itself, it's still very broad in general. I'm not sure that you are going to get entirely people looking to start their own travel agency business from that keyword, or what not. But, definitely, you've got a lot of opportunity here.

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One thing, show them what they're going to get. I cannot…right now, you're leaving me to guess what you're going to get. Start your tour and this…the other button that you've got up there, request more information. What am I going to get when I click those? What's the value? When I look below there, it looks like credibility indicators for the company itself, award winning franchise or the pride of ownership. That doesn't really connect very well to the action that you want me to take. So, that needs to be minimized and you need to add content in this case, maybe imagery, a little bit of extra text, something that tells me…that justifies the value proposition. And, kind of like what Aaron said on the other page, you could actually test adding some initial form fields, capture a lead on this page that could very well be effective in reducing some steps.

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: John also is pointing…let's look at the heading, to begin with. Remember, they came in out of the search engine. They've landed on your page. I don't know precisely what the thought was…I'd have to look. You know, it says travel franchise. I'm assuming this is someone that's looking for a travel franchise. If that's the case and the keyword if franchise, franchise should be up there in the headline. It is not. And, the headline should drive in deeper. The goal of the headline is not to sell your product. The goal of the headline is not to get a lead. The goal of the headline is not to relate your value proposition. It might. It might do those things. It certainly might relate to value proposition, but that's not its first goal. The goal of the headline is to get them to read the header and the first paragraph. It's to get into the dialogue. When they landed on this page, their front foot is one this page and their back foot is in the search engine. And, you've got to do something at the top of this page to get their back foot out of the search engine and land it squarely on this page, where they're going to give you enough of their attention to fully engage their thinking. And, when they land on this page and the front foot is here and the back foot is in the engine, asking them is starting a travel agent's or business right for you, is that question forceful enough to drive them into this site? Not really. And, then, even if they're interested, it has two buttons equally weighted, and equally weighted buttons hurt your conversion rate. People don't need to be torn between two decisions. You need to guide their thinking for them. Recommend the primary thing, de-emphasize the other and drive them vertically through.

Moreover, and vital to everybody that's on this call…and what I'm going to say next will help your search rankings, and not hurt them. Too many of our pages look like an advertisement, look like an ad from a magazine. You need to engage in the dialogue so that you can control the thought sequence, which means somebody needs to meet them here and say something. And, I see Cruise Holidays, but what are you saying? If you're number eight, why are you number eight? If there's 3,605 backlinks to you, then people are talking about you. If you've been featured in those places that you have down below, there's a better story about you. You need to say welcome and you need to explain to me who you are and give me the answer to the value proposition again. Why should I stop here? Why should I take my back leg out of the search engine now and invest some time on this site? What is it potentially you can do for me better than everyone else? That's got to be up there, before you start asking them to kiss you, which is what's going on with these buttons. Give me enough content. And, then when you do promote something like the tour, tell me that it's a 14-step tour with 16 illustrations, an overview of the exact purchase process or the qualification process, the average cost. Let me know what it is I'm going to get

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in exchange for this click. None of that's being done here. And, pages like this are all over the internet. And, John, this page is not even performing at 50% of its default 0. And, I don't mean this in a bad way. You may still be getting lots of business from this page, but adequacy is the enemy of excellence. And, the real question is how much business are you not getting that you could get if you optimized, and that's what you should do, being sensitive to those backlinks and walking through the process that we talked about today. I hope that helps others as well as John. John, I hope I'm not making you mad at me and feel free to flame me on Twitter. Or, if we're helping you, let us know. And, as you make changes, send them to us and we'll comment on them and try to help you.

Submission 4

Keyword: Network Monitoring Software

Position: 1st

Backlinks: 15,005

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: Alright, I've got a page submitted by Jason and this is a page with a domain that's hard to read, Spiceworks. Alright. Good! Network monitoring software. Position is first, backlinks, 15,000 backlinks! Congratulations guys! So, Jason, is that you in the middle, with the glasses? I assume it isn't, now that I look closely. It looks like there's names there and I'm just being facetious. I'm looking at the page. Connect with IT pros like you. Alright, that's what it says. And, audience, take a look at this. Tell me quickly. We don't have much time. How would you improve this page? Real fast, let me get your suggestions. Alright, Jason said it's definitely not him. This why value, what's the value proposition or why connect, says Christine. Bullet points, Irena. What the hell would I click, says Yves. That was subtle, Yves! What keywords? Why? That girl is very distracting! Less image. Where am I?

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Join them why? Emphasize benefits. What are they selling? That's an important question. Get answers from IT pros like you, is a suggestion from someone. Alright, let's look. We have just a few more minutes and we're going to pack every minute. We're going to stop in four minutes, but we're not going to stop adding value until 5 o'clock, and I don't think I have anything…do I have anything I'm going to point to afterwards? There's nothing to sell. Right? I don't have anything to…oh! I've been told to tell you about the SEO Benchmark Report, so you've just been told about it. You need to buy that. Alright? Let's use our time to get this, as much learning as we can. Alright? So, go ahead, Jon! Talk to us about this page.

Jon Powell: It's funny that the keyword is network monitoring software, because it's the only place I see it on the page, actually on this whole slide. So, maybe there's some content I'm missing in kind of the stuff that's going on in the top that's being…you know, going back and forth with the other slides, but that's the biggest problem. And, a lot of what you guys are saying in the audience actually is what I'm seeing as well. I have no idea who I'm going to join. What do you mean by I'm an IT pro? I mean, there are so many specialties in IT. There are so many apartments in IT. It's ridiculous! So, what is it that you want me to do? What am I joining for? Try, number one, with a better headline. Connect with IT pros just like you to do what? Okay. Yeah.

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: You know, what is the value of this connection?

Jon Powell: Yeah, what is the value?

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: Don't confuse means within in your headlines...

Jon Powell: Right.

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: …and in your promises. Who cares about connecting with IT pros?

Jon Powell: Yeah.

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: I care about something that connecting with IT pros enables me to do.

Jon Powell: Yeah.

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: What is that?

Jon Powell: Yeah, we need a point first headline, which is get this when you do this, when you connect with us. And, call to action, try something like ask questions for free. Get free IT advice. Do, you know, something that ties again to the value that you want to point out in the headline. Get this when you do this, and this is the first step. Again, you actually may be able to capture some information too on this field. But, the biggest problem on this page is I have no idea what it is that you sell or do, or what is it I'm going to get. And, the only clue that I have is in this little keyword that you've told us about, and even then I'm confused, so there's a lot of issues to delineate that.

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Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: And, you need to test the images. Never, never be satisfied with a face or a person that you haven't tested. I mean, I did this with Jim Kramer and when we put his face on the…and no offense Jim. But, when we actually used his image, conversion rates went down.

Jon Powell: The same thing with RegOnline. We did a test a couple of months ago and it was the China office versus the American office, and the China office sent conversion rates up significantly within a week.

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: What they mean…they don't know what you mean. We actually took employees…

Jon Powell: Right, employees.

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: …from the various offices, used their images and tested them, and the employees from China's image actually improved the conversion rate. Now, I don't know what that says to you, but the bottom line is it says to everybody else more revenue, and that's what we're after here. So, those images need to be tested as well. Beware of this page being divided into three boxes. We're almost out of time. Avoid this box upon box upon box format. It hurts you every time. And, we have two issues going on here, two conversations at the bottom, and we don't understand what the differences are. There's a box at the top, a box at the bottom, and another box. This whole business of having something at the top that looks like it's a hero shot with a call to action right at the top of the page is being done all over the internet. This is not a best practice! In the internet, best practices are pooled ignorance. Just because they do it doesn't mean it's right. You need to actually give people a better story before we drive them to the call to action, unless again, Jason, unless that's happening in the channel, but we can talk more about that on a subsequent clinic.

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Learn more about the Benchmark Report

Dr. Flint McGlaughlin: We are out of time. We have more pages that we'd like to get to in the future. And, oh, there it is, the infamous benchmark report. If you enjoyed this…look, this report is full of what we learned about, SEO benchmarks, by polling industries all over 1,530 companies. I don't have a lot to say about it because we're out of time, but you can find out more about it following what the information is on the slide.

Thank you! Thank you for today! If this was helpful, share it with a friend and tell them about the MarketingExperiments and MECLABS, and we'll keep trying to discover what works. And, we'll be back in a couple of weeks with more of our discoveries.

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