SEO Wrapped by Surfer

12 Lessons learned in 2023
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Introduction

Welcome to a 2023 recap of everything impactful that happened in SEO this year.

It has been quite a year, beginning with the rapid ascension of AI generated content followed by AI led search engine feature announcements on a regular schedule.

Just as things were calming down, OpenAI announced a flurry of new upgrades in November 23 that have got us excited (and curious) for 2024. Oh and the drama.

I'll walk you through the main highlights of each month and break down their impact and takeaways. Like most of you, I've spent my year deep in the trenches dealing with most of this stuff.

We’ve also got good news when it comes to AI content websites. And a bunch of case studies to go along with.

If SEO naysayers have been sliding into your DMs in 2023, relax.

SEO isn’t dead or dying. It's evolving. And we're all evolving with it.

Infinite scrolling kinda killed that “best place to hide a body” SEO riddle. So here’s a new one.

*Why did the chicken cross the road?*

Answer enclosed on the page with a great offer for Black Friday that you will want to check out.

If you'd like to discuss any of the material here, reach out via any of our online channels and I'll be happy to talk.

Even better if you have an original SEO joke.

Sincerely,

Satya Dalai
SEO Manager @Surfer
January 2023

There’s a new E in town

The new E stands for experience and technically, it surfaced in mid-December 2022 but was discussed widely after the holidays.

Experience, expertise, authoritativeness, and trustworthiness now comprise E-EAT in the search quality rater guidelines.

How can you demonstrate experience?
Well, if you have been following the general EAT guidelines, you should be fine since showing experience will overlap with expertise.

However, the deliberate inclusion of first hand images and personal insights can help relay evidence of experience.

There has been some anecdotal evidence of people using first-person language, but this is unconfirmed.

Bankrate’s use of AI content gets scrutinized

Bankrate.com’s disclaimer on using AI content stirred up quite a buzz leading to a response from Google’s search liaison, Danny Sullivan, on their stance on AI content.

This generated quite some noise in the SEO community because Bankrate is a large finance site in the YMYL niche.
What’s happened since?

It looks like the attention spooked Bankrate and they no longer have an explicit disclaimer for using AI content.

This doesn’t mean they’ve stopped using AI to write content. They could just be avoiding the extra scrutiny by not including a disclaimer.

Google Search’s analyst, Gary Illyes mentioned that labeling AI content is not necessary for Google Search but suggested providing a label if users would appreciate it.

“I don’t think we care. As long as I will learn from it, learn correct information, why would it matter?” — Illyes said

Sullivan emphasized that content primarily created for search engine rankings is against Google’s guidelines.

However, content that is helpful and created for people first aligns with Google’s principles, especially with the new E-EAT guidelines.

As said before when asked about AI, content created primarily for search engine rankings, however it is done, is against our guidance. If content is helpful & created for people first, that’s not an issue.

Our AI site got penalized

Encouraged by the rapid ascension of AI writing tools, we launched an internal experiment to test several theories about a year ago.

A content website built on AI content using a third party AI writing tool.

An SEO specialist and editor were assigned to the website and were responsible for creating a content plan and editing AI generated articles before publishing them.
After growing for 5 joyous months, we reached our lowest in January this year. **But more on this in the spring of 2023.**

### Honorable mentions

- Microsoft announced the inclusion of ChatGPT features in Bing searches
- Instead of SEO tactics, we spent more time translating Russian due to the Yandex source code repository leak which included about 2000 ranking factors used by the search algorithm.
February 2023

Google’s February Product Review Update seeks original content

Google introduced the February 2023 Product Reviews update, implemented globally across eleven languages.

The fact that the update focused on seeking evidence of Experience in content wasn’t a surprise, given the inclusion of the new E in Google’s EAT guidelines.

It was completed on March 7th and reported more volatility than previous iterations, marking a significant shift in how Google evaluates and ranks review pages.

The objective of the update was to promote review content that goes beyond the templatized articles we are so used to seeing when it comes to best X listicles.
In Google’s words, they’re looking to reward high-quality reviews written by experts or enthusiasts who are knowledgeable about the subject and offer insightful analysis and original research.

What was the impact?

Websites that had invested in extensive product reviews likely benefited from the focus on original content.

Others who were regurgitating reviews from other websites may have seen sharp declines in traffic like our friend here.

If you saw a drop in rankings or are producing review content, Google’s documentation on writing reviews offers a few points to consider.

- Explain why an item is your top recommendation with first-hand evidence. Delve into what it does better than the other tools.
- Include original pictures, videos, or links to other resources as evidence to support the authenticity of your review.
- Focus on the most important decision-making factors based on your experience or expertise. So, sensor size over ergonomics if you’re reviewing cameras.
- Cite quantitative measurements in your review where possible and make references to improvements from previous models or releases.
- Include alternative links where the reader can make a purchase.
Yandex leak

Most folks I spoke to from the SEO community spent the month of February trying to decipher the Yandex leak.

While lessons from the leak weren’t supposed to be instructional for Google, they could still reveal insights into how search engines think from the inside.

Yandex employs Google's open source technologies like TensorFlow and BERT. And a quick search on LinkedIn reveals tons of engineers who Yandex employed after working for Google.

A significant portion of the translated code were things we already know and apply as SEO best practices.

For example, Yandex analyzes URLs in a manner similar to Google's guidelines on URL structure:
- Numbers in the URL are bad
- Several trailing slashes are bad
- Excessive capital letters are bad

What were the takeaways?

The leak validated current SEO strategies and prompted the exploration of new ones. The two search engines agree on several aspects.

- Links are important, moreso from authoritative sites
- Legal, finance and health sites are paid more attention just like Googl does for YMYL
- Pages closer to the homepage are deemed to have higher importance
- A high ratio of ads to content is bad
So what should you do if you’re trying to rank on Yandex?

Well, you’d probably do just fine to follow existing SEO guidelines for Google. The leak isn’t going to help you game the algorithm but it can help you think like one.

We also learned some additional insights that aren’t common to Google SEO. For example, Yandex considers the age of links as a ranking factor.

While this isn’t too difficult to understand since domain age is important, the next time you are prioritizing guest posts, it may help to look at domain age along with the usual suspects — authority and relevance.

Brand awareness is important, with the number of search queries for your website being a ranking factor.

If you’ve done SEO for a company in its growth stage, you’ll know that, all things equal, ranking pages on Google becomes easier as your brand grows its online presence.

Yandex also exhibits an apparent soft spot for Wikipedia, weighing the website and its links higher. While we know that backlinks from high authority sites like Wikipedia can boost rankings, this uncovers the possibilities of individual domains.

Lastly, the list includes 5 ranking factors with TikTok in their names and descriptions.

So we know the search engine has been looking at improving their search results by potentially incorporating results from social media, but unfortunately, we don’t know how exactly.

Google’s version of this may be the Perspectives feature.
Honorable mentions

- Microsoft announced the inclusion of ChatGPT features in Bing searches and saw more action than it had in a long time.
- Google updated the language in its documentation about AI-generated content, the key phrase being “rewarding high-quality content, however it is produced.” thus, paving the way for AI content to go mainstream in the SERPs.
March 2023

2023’s first core update

March saw the rollout of the year’s first core algorithm update and brought with it the usual speculation.

According to Similarweb, e-commerce and shopping organizations saw the most absolute changes in search rankings.

We relaunched our AI-only website

Not pleased with Google’s strike, we decided to test our hypothesis on AI content.

Remember the website we created with AI content that we discussed dying in January 2023? I’ll reveal the domain in a bit but here’s what happened in a nutshell.

We made the decision to test artificial intelligence in SEO because of the rapid rise of AI in content.

Was it really going to be that easy to rank with AI content?

Although we used a popular AI writing tool to create the content, we didn’t just hack together a website and start posting a bunch of unconnected articles that don’t make sense.

Instead, our SEO specialist created a topical map using Surfer Keyword Research, and my content editor colleague, Zuza edited the articles for accuracy and readability.

Did we rank?

Yes. For 5 months before we were penalized.

To be fair, it wasn’t clear that AI content was the primary issue so we continued to wait. Unfortunately, things got worse.

The site went from a peak of over 1000 visits daily to less than 100 at our worst.
We republished old articles

Instead of giving in, we recreated articles on the same topics using a prototype of what is now our AI writing tool, Surfer AI.

Our hypothesis was that it wasn’t AI content that Google was penalizing; it was low-quality content.

We kept the same URLs, internal links and meta titles to ensure a similar testing environment. Only the content was changed.

The makeover led to some interesting insights that we’ll get to.

Google updates its stance on AI (again)

Not for the last time this year did we see the search engine update its policy on using AI generative text.

GENERATIVE AI PROHIBITED USE POLICY

Last Modified: March 14, 2023

Generative AI models can help you explore new topics, inspire your creativity, and learn new things. However, we expect you to use and engage with them in a responsible, legal manner. To this end, you must not use the Google services that reference this policy to:
Other honorable mentions

- The search engine requested including the link to your Better Business Bureau (BBB) listing page while verifying Google Business Profile accounts
- Google announced the Google News Initiative in a bid to highlight accurate journalism while fighting misinformation, particularly relevant in the face of AI generated fake news.
- Featured snippets began highlighting text making them easier to read
- LinkedIn introduces collaborative articles
April 2023

Google’s Product Review Update widens scope

Google released the April 2023 Reviews Update which evaluated all content based on reviews and recommendations, not just products.

The change in naming convention from “product reviews” to just “reviews” may have been a giveaway. As well as the language in the tweet, post, or XOST, whatever we’re calling them now.

Here’s what Google’s documentation on high quality reviews was updated to

Publishing high quality reviews can help people learn more about things they are considering, such as products, services, destinations, games, movies or other topics. For example, you could write a review as

Versus in the past:
Publishing high quality product review pages on your ecommerce or product review site can help shoppers learn more about a product before purchase. For example, you could create a product review page as

You can see that the April update went from Google evaluating traditional review pages to analyzing a much wider scope of articles under review content.

Marie Haynes did a wonderful job of capturing all the differences in the wording on X.com if you’re interested.

**What did we learn?**

Even though April’s update announced the addition of new topics, the fundamentals of creating review content remain the same.

Review items like you would for a friend or family member. Ones you don’t owe money to.

Focus on demonstrating E-EAT, including personal images and linking to relevant content, and you should be fine.

Google launched an *About this result* search feature at the end of March that may give us some clues into E-EAT.

The *About this result* summary draws from your About Us page so ensure that you have a short but detailed writeup about your company there.

It helps to answer the questions,
- When was your company founded and where?
- What does your company do? Mention specific industry, services and products

Also, if you’re large enough to have a Wikipedia page, ensure it’s updated and consistent with the language on your website.

I found that for search results where Google didn’t summarize the company, it instead preferred to show the age of the domain but didn’t display pages that were under 5 years old for the investment niche.
Similarly, the About this author result crawls your author bios so it’s a good idea to beef up your author profiles with social links and references.

**Results from AI content are encouraging**

Initial results from republishing AI generated content on our experimental marketing website were positive.

We saw almost an immediate uptick in organic traffic and rankings.

Still wary of Google’s policy on AI content, we decided to wait and see if a penalty was coming.

As you can see, the trend is promising.
Let’s check back in June.
Declare your dates

The kind with numbers.
Google’s Danny Sullivan laid the *date versus no date debate in your article* to rest.

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Google SearchLiaison 🥁
@searchliaison

So for you (or anyone) publishing content, dates can be helpful. Helps readers know the currency of the information. Helps us understand if the content's been recently updated, especially perhaps is something is in the news.

12:59 AM · Apr 4, 2023 · 315 Views

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It's especially important if you're a publisher or news site, but it can't hurt if the content you're creating is time sensitive.

Honorable mentions

- The Page Experience report inside Google Search Console is undergoing changes. Some publications mistook the vague language to mean that Core Web Vitals will not be important anymore. This isn't true; they'll continue to contribute as signals to the ranking system and remain as important or unimportant, as before.

  However, you don't need to make CWV a priority. As Gary Illyes, Google's search team analyst said later this year,

  "If you don’t have anything better to do on your site, go do Core Web Vitals. Most sites won’t see benefit playing around with it"

- Google News introduced Reader Revenue Manager, a new tool to engage and monetize subscribers for publishers.
May 2023

Google I/O announcements

Google unveiled Search Generative Experience, or SGE, a new AI assisted approach to search results.

This raised the eternal question of whether SEO was now dead. Of course, if you look at what SGE really does, you’ll find even more opportunities to show your pages in the search rankings.

They also invited the public to join ‘Search Labs’ to test the latest search related products and ideas.

Google Workspace apps like Docs, Slides, Sheets, and Gmail now have AI features to assist in email composition, proofreading, writing reports, image suggestions and enhanced data analytics in Sheets.

In light of the influx of questionable AI content, Google highlighted the importance of personal human led experiences and insights with its new Perspective feature.

The new tool is meant to serve images, long and short form videos and writing from real people on forums and social media platforms. It will also include creator details and information about their content’s distribution.

Especially when you search for something that might benefit from the experiences of others. I’m thinking of travel and non YMYL recommendations.

Google topic authority in the news

Google touched upon its “topic authority” system used to evaluate relevant content for news related queries based on whether a publication is particularly relevant to specific topics or locations, has original reporting and historical performance.

The search engine advised providing comprehensive coverage on known areas and topics to optimize for topic authority.
Surfer AI went public

Surfer finally pulled back the curtains on our AI writing tool that we had been internally testing for months. In an internal survey with Surfer AI testers, the tool was determined to be 7 times cheaper than the average human writer for comparable content.

Comparable content being key here.

But that wasn’t what got our users excited.

**Powered by GPT 4 32K, Surfer AI specifically creates finished articles that are optimized for search engine rankings unlike other AI content generators.**

So yes, articles include related keywords and secondary phrases.

Surfer also lets you create articles that can pass AI detectors.

But don’t let me sweet talk you.

Here’s a snapshot from Google Search Console.

More in the fall.

**Honorable mentions**

- Google began introducing the related topics search filter feature for desktop search results, a new way to find related articles you can write about.
June 2023

AI site recovery

The website we republished AI content on seemed to recover from the earlier drop in rankings and clicks.

In fact, the site went on to exceed previous results in May-June of 2023.

Keep in mind that this is an AI only website following a content plan.

The only difference between the older content and the new articles was that we'd used our own AI content generator, Surfer AI, to create the updated pages.

Why did this work?

So why did we see great results from AI content the second time when we had already failed once?

Our hypothesis after the penalty was that the older content created with a third party AI tool was typical of AI content generators.

The articles were well written but too generic to provide real value to readers. They were difficult to distinguish from other AI content on similar topics.

We know that AI generates well written content with correct grammar but that isn't enough to rank in search engines. Otherwise, you could just rank using ChatGPT.

But we know that doesn’t hold up over an initial spike.

**AI content writing algorithms need information context and custom insights layered**
with facts and research to mimic how human writers write.

Otherwise, they’ll create generic content that may not be similar in words but will largely overlap in context and interpretation of information.

We also felt the content could be better suited to satisfy search intent and lacked semantically relevant entities, keywords, and secondary terms.

These issues were addressed when we republished content generated with Surfer AI because the tool drew from already ranking pages for target keywords.

It also incorporated relevant keywords and entities within optimal frequencies for SEO, essentially acting as a human writer would, by researching information and creating a new version of a topic.

You can check out the website at peepstrategy.com.

Was it too early to declare Surfer AI content a winner?

**No, because the site continued to grow.**
What can you do with Surfer AI

Surfer AI isn’t just a content writing tool. Think of Surfer AI as your AI assisted writer, editor, and content specialist rolled into one.

All you need to create an article is to enter your primary topic.

And then make a few selections to customize your article.

For example, should your content be written as a standard blog post, product roundup or a product review?

Choose from 13 tones of voice, including conversational, formal, humorous and even sarcastic. Or leave it up to the tool to decide based on SERP results.

Even though Google has issued multiple disclaimers embracing AI content as long as it’s written to help readers, our AI pass feature can help your articles pass AI content detectors.
The **Custom Knowledge** feature is designed to give you control over your articles, allowing you to add your own sources. You can add it in plain text or let Surfer AI extract it from a URL.

It seems like one of the primary focus areas of Google's updates this year has been the demonstration of personal experience and insights gained from first-hand knowledge.

Besides the addition of the new Experience to E-EAT, we also saw LinkedIn's collaborative articles offering unique insights promoted in the SERPs. Similarly, Reddit and Quora have also seen traffic boosts.

Perhaps it's something that is not on the internet or relates to your personal expertise, or you'd like to instruct Surfer on which angle to adopt.

The **Custom Knowledge** option can help improve your E-EAT.

Enter custom instructions and content that you'd like to reflect in your final article.

And as a final step, tell Surfer which other pages you consider your competitors for the same target keyword.

**Choose at least 5 for a well rounded article.**
Hit the **Create Outline** button to review your article’s outline.

You can then review and edit your article’s outline that Surfer will generate.

Tapping on the toggle buttons beside the headers can enable you to add custom information for a particular header.
When you’re happy with the outline, hit Let’s write.

And in about twenty minutes, you’ll have a complete article ready that has been optimized to perform in the search engine results for your target keyword.

Complete with relevant keywords, secondary headers and an FAQ section.
There's more before the end of 2023. We're bringing Christmas in early with the inclusion of a couple of newbies:

- AI generated images for each article
- Citations and links to sources
- Google Docs style comment features
- Multiple user collaboration in real time
- Even more refinements to SEO content writing
July 2023

Google promotes Reddit

Partly due to thousands of subreddits going private as Reddit began to roll out changes to its API use, Google eventually caught up with the realization that people want genuine answers from other folks like them.

Users have been appending search terms with “reddit” or “site:reddit.com” to bypass Google’s search results.

In response, Google started promoting Reddit’s pages higher up its search rankings resulting in a huge traffic spike that started becoming apparent sometime in July 2023.

This has continued for the rest of the year, sparking debates on what the future of ranking useful content really looks like.

And if Google is equipped to solve these challenges effectively.
Other UGC sites like Quora also saw an increase in traffic around the same time.

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**Gael Breton** @GaelBreton · Nov 7

People don’t add “Reddit” to the end of their query because they love Reddit.

They do it because Google sucks at surfacing useful content. 😞

The solution is not to rank Reddit.

The solution is to reward content searchers enjoy.

Ranking Reddit is basically giving up.

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**The Ultimate Employee Onboarding Guide: Set Your New Hires Up for Success**

- **Understanding Employee Onboarding**

- **Key Phases in the Employee Onboarding Process**
  - Pre-boarding
  - First day orientation
  - First week integration
  - First 90 days development
  - End of the first-year evaluation
August 2023

Google launches new core update

The year’s second core update launched on August 22nd and was completed on September 7th, 2023. Internally, we saw the most positive movement for new articles or those that had been updated recently.

CNET’s SEO strategy receives scrutiny

In an effort to improve its content’s performance in Google search, CNET was reported to have deleted thousands of old articles over the past few months.

An internal memo revealed that this was aimed at making the site appear more up-to-date with fresh and relevant content.

The move raised questions about the effectiveness of such an approach among SEOs who were quick to point out flaws in CNET’s reasoning.

What can we learn from CNET’s strategy?

Content pruning, deprecation or culling is a fairly common and recommended SEO practice.

However, this really is a case where “it depends” on your site. Here are a couple of reasons why this made sense in CNET’s case and some takeaways.

1. To appear fresh
   For a mass publisher like CNET that thrives on recency and new announcements in technology, it’s easy to see that most of their content isn’t evergreen like more traditional SEO content.

   If you’re creating content that is newsy or in an industry that sees major updates like gaming or sports, outdated content may not be relevant anymore.

   A significant portion of your readers aren’t reading articles on the launch of the iPod Shuffle.
2. Replace low quality content
The bar for quality content has been rising steadily for the past few years. For an old domain like CNET, that means that what passed for good content several years ago may not make the cut today.

Since Google evaluates content quality on a wide level, the quality of individual articles can affect how your entire site ranks.

3. To utilize website crawl budget effectively
To have pages that actually bring in traffic and are relevant, or to have hundreds or thousands of legacy pages, a significant portion of which aren’t relevant anymore?

Pruning outdated content can free up your crawl budget for new pages.

Before you go ahead and delete entire categories from your site, note that the deletion of CNET’s articles was conducted in small batches initially, with the pace of deletion increasing after July 2023.

And that a few thousand pages on CNET’s website isn’t a significant fraction of their content volume.

A quick search only on their tech blog’s path reveals over 260,000 indexed pages.

Don’t prune your content for the sake of deleting old content.

Look to redirect or repurpose your content first to ensure they’re still relevant. Keeping old content isn’t going to hurt you.
I am John - ⭐⭐ LIVE ⭐⭐
@JohnMu

If you don't want to keep it, then delete it :).

FWIW sometimes good, old stuff becomes interesting again over time, so you might want to avoid just blindly deleting everything over a certain age.

2:53 PM · May 13, 2019

How has CNET fared since?

They've done okay, I suppose.
ChatGPT website recovery

In August, we worked with Damian, our friend at Premium Digital to recover rankings for a domain that he had purchased at an auction.

So although it wasn’t a new website, he had used ChatGPT to publish AI articles and had been hit quite severely after an initial few months of ranking well.

We republished Damian’s URLs with Surfer AI articles in July and started seeing results in August.

We also generated a content map using Surfer Keyword Research.

Honorable mentions

- Google Algorithm can now read .csv files
- Amidst concerns over data crawling, a number of popular websites blocked OpenAI’s web crawler, GPTBot.
September 2023

**Topic Clusters + AI content = SERP Gold**

Google’s own may not have been able to put it quite as eloquently. Here’s a working proof of the formula above, with empirical evidence.

A month ago, we began working with a SaaS company that builds enterprise level HR tools. Even with 100 blog posts, their traffic had plateaued for the last year and looked like this.

![Graph showing traffic plateau](image)

HR SaaS can be a pretty competitive niche.

We found that most ranking pages belonged to popular websites with strong backlink profiles and domain ratings exceeding 70.

However, the website we were working with had a few limitations.

1. They had a very low budget for content.
2. They didn’t really have an SEO team or content writers. In fact, they only had 1 writer.
3. They also had hesitations about SEO. Who could blame them with results like this for over a year.

Both parties wanted a quick and hands-off approach that wouldn’t require a lot of close inspection.
Our solution was to leverage AI to communicate niche relevance and gain topic authority in the eyes of search engines.

Using AI would help keep costs down but would also help us reach the scale we needed to deliver results. And could do this quickly since we’re impatient folks when it comes to results.

Here are the three things we did.

1. Identify relevant topics for content

We used Surfer Keyword Research to generate a list of potential topics for the blog.

And ended up with 89 ideas for just our primary keyword.

Mapping these keywords to their topical clusters can be a time taking exercise that requires SEO expertise, so it’s a good thing that Surfer generated entire content hubs and identified their associated pillars, and supporting pages, at the click of a button.
Here's an example of a topical cluster with the primary keyword for the pillar page on top followed by supporting pages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article idea</th>
<th>Traffic potential</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PILLAR PAGE</strong></td>
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<td>employee onboarding, employee onboarding guide</td>
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<td>company onboarding, employee onboarding guide</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SUPPORTING PAGES</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>onboarding new employees, best ways to onboard new employees, how to onboard an employee</td>
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<td>onboarding checklist for new employees template</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>employee onboarding checklist sample</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

### 2. Publish topic clusters with AI content

We used Surfer AI to write search engine optimized articles for these keywords and published them beginning in August.

Since Surfer AI treats information like a human writer — browsing and analyzing it, it helped us create new articles on the topics we assigned.

We used the **Custom Knowledge** feature to feed it with specific information for some topics so the articles would have the necessary details.

---

Custom knowledge

Customize the structure and content of your article here or add it in detail in the next step. [Learn more](https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/special-reports-and-expert-views/documents/onboarding-new-employees.pdf)
3. Internally link the articles

We also linked the articles within each cluster to communicate virtual silos since the website’s URL didn’t denote physical hubs of related content.

This was pretty straightforward since we already knew which articles fell within a cluster based on the topical maps created by Surfer’s Keyword Research.

What was the impact?

You’d think Google would show some restraint and get to know us first.

But no, we doubled traffic in mid September and then tripled it at the end of the month, just three weeks after publishing new content and updating old articles according to our keyword plan.

At the time of writing this in mid October, we’re at almost 1200 organic visits per day and growing.

How can you do the same?

The formula we discussed above takes two well established strategies to ranking content in search engines —

Topical authority and Helpful content.

— and blends both their benefits.

There’s ample evidence of Google rewarding websites that demonstrate expertise across related topics via high quality content for their readers.
We took these two and supercharged the strategy using AI.

Of course, you can do this manually but I'm certain it would have taken us many months to see these kinds of results if we'd adopted a manual approach versus 3 weeks using AI!

It would have cost our friends a pretty penny too.

Anyway, here it is again. Topic Clusters + AI content = SERP Gold.

Google launches Helpful Content update

The third of the Helpful Content updates seemed to have targeted content that was specifically created to rank well in search engines — SEO-first content, as users were calling it.

Think of low-quality programmatic content with useless pages and websites that covered all the possible variations of a subject without adding anything useful.

Other commonalities among websites that reported drops in rankings were poor user experience and intrusive ads.

Effectively loading ads without impacting page speed

Interestingly, around the time of the update, Google's developer blog published an article on running ads without negatively impacting the user experience.

The article is worth reading, even if you're not a developer. Here are a few noteworthy points, specifically on advertising:

- Google understands that advertising is a source of revenue but stresses the need to balance monetization and a clean, user-friendly layout.
- Implement lazy loading for ads so they don't hamper user interactions, which can negatively impact Core Web Vital metrics like INP and FID.
- Ensure that your ads have reserved space to prevent layout shifts, and optimize ad sizes to avoid sudden content shifts.
- Don't overload above the fold spaces with too many ads. And integrate below the fold ads into surrounding content to appear less disruptive to users.
October 2023

LinkedIn’s AI Collaborative articles peak

Launched in April 2023, LinkedIn Collaborative Articles leverage the ease and scale of AI to prompt user generated content on the platform.

AI generated articles tapped into experts for their unique insights and commentary, landing a huge SEO win for LinkedIn.

They took comments and used them as body content, resulting in a peak of between 1.8 and 3 million visitors per month, depending on which tool you believe.

What’s the takeaway?

The combination of user generated content and expertise at such scale definitely played a role in enhancing the E-EAT profile for these pages.

Sharing personal experiences and insights also played into the signals that Google’s “hidden gems” update is seeking.

We’re still early — some would say late in the AI revolution but companies are already experimenting with different ways to leverage the ease with which AI can scale.
We know that AI can write well but how can you tap into its seemingly infinite potential for high volumes of content?

**Links don’t make the podium**

Gary Illyes, an analyst on Google’s search team revealed that he wouldn’t consider links among the top 3 ranking signals and this has been the case for some time now, echoing previous revelations about links becoming less important.

**However, not everybody in the community was convinced.**

Google: Links are not a top 3 ranking factor.

We redirected 100+ links (from old posts we removed) to this page without updating ANYTHING.

Result: #11 > #1

Now, we need to update the page... We shouldn’t recommend Jasper. 😞

**What does this mean?**

Well, it’s kind of hard to take Google at face value. It wouldn’t be the first time SEOs have been let down by their “revelations.”

But context is important here. Gary isn’t saying that links aren’t important at all.

Perhaps he meant that content is number one, keywords in your URL are second, and the meta title is third.

In any case, we know that it’s possible to rank without links and it has been for some time.
My suggestion would be to continue building links if you are, but not to fret if you aren’t. You can focus on establishing topical expertise with good content first.

**Google announced two updates in quick succession**

Just a week after the September Helpful Update finished rolling out, Google announced the October 2023 Spam Update which aims to decrease the number of spammy sites in its search results.

Only a day later, they rolled out the October 2023 Core Algorithm Update.

**AI content works in YMYL recovery**

A Surfer user reported a dip in their traffic and rankings in May this year. Since we'd seen our formula work before, we adopted the same approach for this site.

We identified relevant content clusters and created articles on them using Surfer AI, then linked them internally.

Updating their old content and publishing new articles led to a spike we’re now familiar with.

However, as the tail end of the graph suggests, it seemed like we may only have benefitted from an initial spike.

After some optimization, this is a magnified view of what the graph looks like in
Honorable mentions

- Google SGE now has an “About this result” feature to show users the sources of AI generated answers.
- Google completed its transition to mobile first indexing of websites.
- Users reported seeing Google test ads between organic searches.
November 2023

Black Friday 2023

Surfer’s Black Friday sales will run from November 24 to December 8, 2023.

We’re effectively offering up to 30% off on plans that include AI powered keyword research, topical clustering and creating AI content, just like we showed you above.

We’re also hosting a challenge to win back your credits.

You can check out our Black Friday deals here [https://surferseo.com/black-friday/](https://surferseo.com/black-friday/)

Why did the chicken cross the road?  
To get to the traffic duh.

Ex engineer confirms click data for rankings

Google’s ongoing antitrust trial at the US Department of Justice revealed that Google studies user interactions as part of its ranking system, as also confirmed by Illyes in September.

But not before a bizarre slide stating that Google relied on user reactions more than it did on content inside pages.

Keep in mind that this is from 2016 and we’ve seen significant upgrades to NLP so this doesn’t likely hold as much water now.
While this may be true, the wording is umm, eye catching.

Verge calls SEOs out

The infamous article follows another one in a similar vein published earlier in May but this made the most noise. The comments make for interesting reading though. Not because they’re mostly from SEOs like us, but because they shed light on the spectrum of what SEO means to different folks in our community.

Here’s some advice from Frank that caught our eye.
The Verge’s parent company, Vox Media does have an SEO manager though. It could make for a frosty Christmas party at work.

Sure, we ruined the internet.
And we now rank above you for your article.

Google releases November Updates

The search engine announced that it was rolling out November Core and Reviews updates.

These updates signal a change in how Google will publicly announce improvements to its algorithm in the future.

They will no longer send out notifications about review system improvements because they will now happen on a regular basis rather than through periodic updates.
Go figure.

OpenAI's dev day

Sam Altman, freshly ex-CEO, announced a bunch of new developments and upgrades at OpenAI but the one that has been receiving the most attention is the ease of building your own GPT.

It's early days but some use cases I can think of are training a GPT on your own content and building subject matter expert GPTs that are trained on advanced concepts for your industry.

Think technical writing.

I'm playing around but am excited to learn what others in our community are doing apart from the obvious use cases.
Honorable mentions

- We went from being in the audience in previous years to now being speakers and platinum sponsors at the Chiang Mai 2023 SEO Conference. Our workshops and opening party were filled to the brim and our freshly printed merchandise disappeared in a blink of an eye among some very excited community members.

- Yahoo Search is coming in 2024, announced at SMX.
- Musk and Google launched new AI tools, xAI's Grok and Duet AI respectively.
December 2023 predictions

Google updates to resume

Google may continue to release updates during the holidays. Here's what Gary Illyes said about this,

“*The problem is around that time, everyone tries to manipulate search results. With these updates we’re trying to course correct. I don’t think we should stop releasing updates in that period of time. Honestly I would hope that the updates will actually help you rank better if you were not trying do manipulate search results.*”

More AI

Devs and marketers are going to get to work in December following OpenAI's announcements, and I'm certain that we'll see more AI assisted tools in the new year.

We're working on a few ourselves, and I can't say too much, but the one I'm most excited about is the programmatic SEO feature, since this has traditionally been ignored by the more popular SEO tools.

Traditionally, programmatic SEO tools have been relegated to duplicating multiple pages with slight tag variations without a scientific approach.

We're taking a more nuanced data-backed approach that includes on-page keyword optimization and topical clustering, specifically for programmatic SEO.

Instead of just cloning your pages with slight variations, Surfer's Programmatic SEO will help you automate building pages that communicate category depth and breadth to search engines.

We're also working with SEO Signals Lab to develop an AI chatbot based on their training data, specifically for SEO. The chatbot will have access to their SEO experiments, case studies and testing data from over 50,000 members.
The road ahead

Well, that's all I have this (almost) year. I hope this helped you refresh a few things, and if not, at least you looked important reading a PDF.

I'm sure I missed a few things, but I tried to keep this relevant and interesting. We've got enough to speculate on anyway.

But please fill me in. You can find me on LinkedIn or on Surfer's blog.

Things are heating up in the AI SEO space and I'm curious to learn about how you folks are adapting.

How has AI impacted your SEO strategy if you're a small to mid size publisher?

Are AI writing tools replacing your writers? Or do you prefer staying with human writers?

I think the best approach is to blend an AI generated draft with a human writer's edits and fact checking.

The degree to which, will depend on your industry.

Meanwhile, has anybody figured out a good use of ChatGPT voice queries?

Voice SEO has been silent for some time, but I am not sure talking to ChatGPT is the answer.

Any thoughts on Danny Sullivan's presentation this November 2023? More importantly, was anything new?

It's cool if you don't want to talk shop. Ever experience a paralyzing guilt from not spending loyalty points before they expire?

What can I help with?

Sincerely,

Satya Dalai
SEO Manager @Surfer
About Surfer

Surfer builds SEO tools that help marketers and business owners plan, create, and optimize long form search engine content to drive organic traffic to their websites.

Unlike other SEO tools that rely on users having up-to-date SEO knowledge, our tools are the experts. So whether you're a novice or an SEO guru, Surfer leverages AI to help you conduct SEO tasks with the click of a few buttons.

What started in 2017 in a small city in Poland as an in-house tool, turned into a global community of over 20,000 marketing agencies, publishers, affiliate marketers, and enterprises who now use our tools across 140 countries on a daily basis.

About the author

Satya Dalai is the resident SEO at Surfer where he's responsible for SEO strategy and implementation. You can reach him via our blog or LinkedIn to discuss the use and impact of AI in SEO, your unique SEO challenge, or anything in business and marketing.

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