

# Introduction: Why Keyword Research is Important

Keyword research is one of the most crucial aspects of a successful search engine optimization and marketing campaign. Proper keyword research and selection helps establish an effective foundation for most of your online marketing efforts. The keywords you choose will power your search engine optimization, sponsored ad campaigns, link building campaigns, press releases and more. Before you begin any of these marketing efforts you must have already determined what core terms your site will be built upon and what keywords will fuel your online marketing efforts.

Keyword research should be the first step in any process that involves optimizing and marketing your website through the search engines. I would say keyword research is the most important part of the process, yet often one that is glossed over as either largely unimportant, or not important enough to spend enough time doing effectively.

Many site owners get caught up in the belief that if they just achieve any #1 ranking then visitors will begin flocking to their site. This may be true if your #1 ranked search term is actively searched and is relevant to your site or page which it leads to. If not—if you don't research your keywords properly—all the top rankings in the world won't drive or keep the best visitors to your site. In regards to getting and maintaining top listings, keep this in mind: all search terms are not created equal.

You'll want to note that there is a big difference between a marketing campaign that delivers *a lot of* traffic to your site and one that delivers *relevant* traffic to your site. More often than not, sites that generate smaller amounts of targeted traffic see a better return on investment than sites that generate larger amounts of untargeted traffic.




Identifying and selecting the correct keyword phrases to optimize and promote your site with is important, time consuming and sometimes it's even difficult. Many people often get hung up on the wrong keywords based on incomplete data or not thinking through each keyword carefully. If keyword research is not performed with the correct focus in the correct areas you may find you have a whole mess of phrases to target but no clear picture on the value of those phrases or their ability to drive targeted traffic.

## *What to Expect from this Document*

There are many articles on keyword research freely available on the web. Many of these articles focus on uncovering keyword competition in order to determine if certain keywords are worth the time and investment. While these measures are useful and have their place, this document will provide a different perspective on keyword research and selection.

While some keywords are simply too far out of reach for top rankings in a relatively short period of time, I don't believe *any* keyword is out of bounds or unattainable provided the right amount of effort to achieve a top ranking for that keyword is feasible.

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ICON KEY	
	Important Concepts
	Useful Tips & Hints
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While you should always consider investment (how much it'll cost in time and money to overtake the competition) versus reward (how much targeted traffic and new sales it will bring in) a well structured campaign, built upon solid keyword research and organization, will return immediate results with the attainable keyword phrases while also building the foundation for success with what others might consider to be unattainable

keywords. By balancing the two an investment in time is not necessarily going to cost an unreturned monetary investment, even in the short-term. The results achieved on the "lesser" keywords pave the way for the "greater" keywords.

I don't want to leave you with the implication that other keyword research methods and statistics are not relevant or useful. They are. Many of the articles written on the topic of keyword research is excellent information and should be taken into consideration right along with the information provided here as well. What I want to provide is a more complete picture of the processes involved in finding and selecting good keywords while looking at what matters most for a successful campaign. The more information you have the better decisions you'll make. Keyword selection is one of those decisions that will affect your optimization campaign forever.

This document will be broken down into three sections:

***Gathering Keywords:*** I plan to avoid a lot of the technical details in the gathering process but will mention several tools available. This paper assumes that you already have a strong knowledge of where to go to research your keywords and are ready to go in-depth into the strategy behind the gathering process.

***Sorting & Selecting Keywords:*** Pouring through and selecting keywords may seem like a no-brainer for anybody who has in-depth knowledge of their industry, but this process requires much more than simply taking an inventory of what you know. It is important to put yourself in the mind of the searcher in order to truly discover which keywords are relevant *and* most important.

***Organizing Keywords:*** How you organize your keywords can make or break or optimization campaign before it really begins. We'll analyze this process and study how best to achieve great search engine rankings

One final note, this document is largely new material but does contain information and articles pulled directly from other articles I have written on this subject. Parts of this "old" information has been edited and updated, while other parts remain intact as being pretty much timeless. If some of this sounds familiar, this would be why.

# Part I: Gathering Keywords

## *Finding Core Terms*

When most people perform keyword research they often start by looking for keywords people would use when searching on one of the search engines. It makes sense, right? There is not necessarily anything wrong with this approach, however I prefer to take a more organized path through the keyword research process.

When I start the gathering process, instead of looking for keywords or keyword phrases, I look for keyword *themes* or *core terms*. What you call them doesn't matter as much as what they are. Core terms are unique one-, two- or three-word phrases from which many other keywords will stem from.

Here are some examples of core terms for a site that sells duffel bags:

- Duffel bag
- Sports bag
- Wholesale bag
- Wheeled bag
- Travel bag

In actuality, the word 'bag' would be the true core term, but it's so broad that there is no legitimate reason to optimize for it. Not only would it be near impossible, but if rankings were achieved the percentage of the targeted traffic it produced (i.e. searchers actually interested in their products) would be incredibly low. A top ranking for this keyword still might produce a lot of sales, but at the same time produce enough drain on the resources to bring in a very low, and possibly negative, return on investment (ROI).

Of the terms above, any and all of these can actually refer to the same product, and many of these core terms could be combined to produce valid keyword phrases. For example, someone might be looking for a 'wheeled sports bag,' or a 'wholesale travel bag,' or even a 'wheeled sports travel bag at wholesale prices!' But none of this matters at this stage because we simply want to work with the basic core terms and not full keyword/search phrases.

### Example: Discovering Core Themes

- 1) Write down the purpose(s) of the website as well as a detailed description of the scope of the website in relation to its industry/subject/service, etc.

2) Determine an umbrella phrase that covers the entire scope of the site; the technique is to strive for the greatest specificity without excluding any topics that are covered by the site. This umbrella phrase is the website Theme.

*Consider a website that offers detailed information on 1965-1975 Ford Mustangs, 1965-1975 Chevy Camaros and 1968-1975 Dodge Chargers. This website has a couple of reasonable options. At the broader end of the spectrum "American Cars" or "Classic Cars" could be used. Better still would be "Classic American Cars". Even better than that would be "Classic American Muscle Cars".*

*However if in addition to the cars above the website also specialized in information on Dodge Neons, then the theme of the website is diluted in such a way that now only "American Cars" applies as a theme.*

### *Researching Core Terms*

The first step in finding all your core terms is to go to the site itself. Even if you're dealing with your own site you need to review it intently. It's common use unique terminology in the copy that won't pop into your mind if you're just simply brainstorming. Rummaging through your title, keyword tags, description tags, text, navigation links and products helps you find and identify all of the site's main themes. Go page by page scanning each of these areas. Looking through your pages thoroughly should produce a gold mine of core terms.

Anytime you find a core term, jot it down. We use a spreadsheet to document all of these which is provided [here as an additional download](#) to this document. Remember that core terms should be unique two- or three-word phrases. Don't jot down 'wholesale sports bag' as a core term because all three of those words are covered with the two core terms 'wholesale bag' and 'sports bag'. Also, don't worry about word order or plurals, singulars or other stemmed variations either, as those will all be dug up once we get past the core terms research phase.

After you have exhausted your site, do the same thing with your competitor's site(s). Many core terms will be specific to certain sites, depending on what they offer, so only keep record of those that relate to you and your products or services. Some of the terms you find may be ambiguous as to what the searcher is looking for. When in doubt add it to your list, you can

always go back and eliminate it later. On the other hand, any keyword that obviously doesn't relate specifically for your site should be discarded.

*Note: You might want to try and capture traffic from searchers looking for a specific product of a competitor which you don't offer. For legal reasons this needs to be done with great care. If you wish to capture these keywords record them separately from the core terms relevant to your site.*

Before concluding your core term research be sure to exhaust the following resources:

- Words you feel people would type in to find the website, its product/service, etc.
- What questions your visitors will be asking
- What visitors are trying to accomplish
- Audience needs: phrases that describe problems which are addressed by website
- Industry glossaries and reference materials
- Thesauri, taxonomies and ontologies
- Websites listed in related categories of the Yahoo! Directory
- Geography dependent search phrases



### Research Tip

When researching your competition for a given keyword make sure you take a look at your top competitor's back-link profile. This can give you an idea of the time investment and link building effort that may be required to be successful.

The next step is to start digging through your preferred keyword research software. Both [Wordtracker](#) and [Keyword Discovery](#) have features that allow you to search for these core terms.

In WordTracker it is Step 1 when you start a new project. The left side of the screen lets you search for "related keywords". Type in a keyword here and the results below give words that appear to be closely related to what you were looking for.

If you use Keyword Discovery, go to advanced search and select Related or Fuzzy. Both of these should give you additional lists of core terms.

When using either of these programs, plug in some of the core terms you already found and scan through those results for additional terms that you hadn't thought of or added to your list. Many of the core terms will end up producing the same, or similar, results, but you'll often find one or two (or perhaps more) new core terms with each search. Don't neglect these nuggets of gold. You'll discover many times that

the results will provide phrases which contain a new core term. For example, you might find 'waterproof wheeled bag'. 'Wheeled bag' is already on our list, but 'waterproof bag' or even 'water proof bag' isn't. This gives us a new core term (or two, depending if you want to keep 'water proof' and 'waterproof' separate) to add to our list.

Server logs also provide a wealth of keyword information. Here you will find keywords already being used to drive people to your site. Server logs often show keywords that you won't find from other sources, but largely low volume/high converting phrases. It is the temptation of many to consider keywords found in server logs to be more valuable than

others. This isn't necessarily true. Keywords used by searchers and captured in these logs only show how people are currently finding your site but don't show you many dozens or hundreds of other keywords that people are not finding you with because of poor positioning on the search engines. In this stage we are simply gathering keywords and not rating them in anyway.



### Research Tip

Have an outside agency conduct similar initial research, and then combine their research with your own.

You can also use the keyword research tools provided by both [Google](#) and [Yahoo](#) to find good core terms.

Hint: Try Google Suggest, Google Sets and Google Web Search using the tilde operator.

Another great research tool is [www.l3xicon.com](http://www.l3xicon.com). Running a core term search through L3xicon provides results showing related words, definitions and even related web pages. It's the related words we are most concerned about, and these results come in two sections, both can provide useful information.

Punch in core terms already on your list just like you did with WordTracker or Keyword Discovery to see what comes up. Look for any new unique core terms that can be added to your list.

### Sorting Core Terms

With any of the research methods mentioned above you will often get a lot of junk. Other times you'll find some excellent core terms you can use. But most of the time you'll find something in between. For instance searching L3xicon for 'travel bag' gives us 'weekender travel bag' and 'leather travel bag', among other things. From this we could consider 'weekender bag' and 'leather bag' as new core terms. Later we'll probably find out that there are not many searches for 'weekender bag', if any at all, but we don't need to worry about that now.

Pulling core terms like this works with whatever research method or tool you are using. You quickly learn to see through the search phrases and find the unique two- or three- word core terms that you add to your growing list. Just keep punching in core terms that you found from your website, your competitor's websites and then do the same with the core terms you've found with your keyword research tool. This will help you find *all* possibly relevant core terms.

Actually, you will probably find yourself finding new core terms throughout the research process and even well into the optimization of your site. That's good. Keep your mind working and with every new core term discovered, just keep adding it to your core term spreadsheet. But don't move forward to the next phase too soon! The last thing you want is to move forward with optimization having neglected some absolutely essential core terms.

In our research for 'duffel bag' keywords we found over 36 core terms.

- duffelbag
- dufflebag
- duffel bag
- fannypack
- sports bag
- travel bags

- duffle bag
- back pack
- brief case
- briefcase
- volume bag
- emergency bag
- conference bag
- luggage bag
- cargo bag
- gear bag
- fanny pack
- waterproof bag
- water proof bag
- wheeled bag
- promotional bag
- first aid bag
- custom bag
- imprinted bag
- gym bag
- athletic bag
- wholesale bags
- messenger bag
- roll bag
- garment bag
- logo bag
- printed bag
- embroidered bag
- athlete bag
- backpack
- leather bag

You might find more or even less than this depending on your industry and how many different ways there are to search for the same thing. Don't worry about the size of your core term list, for some clients we find well over 100 core terms! You can never find too many keywords. Of the terms above not all of them will actually end up giving us good search phrases and others may end up being combined. These determinations will be made later in the process.

Once you are comfortable with your list you want to look through and select a handful of core terms which you feel are the most important to your business success. A few things you want to consider before determining what your most important core terms are:

*Search Volume:* Use Wordtracker or Keyword discovery to find the search volume of your core terms. (Search volume is how often the phrase is searched daily, monthly or yearly). Those with the highest search volume should probably be given more importance over those with low search volume, provided they are also relevant.

*Target Audience:* Sometimes a core term may get fewer searches but, if ranked well, would produce a higher number of targeted visitors, resulting in more sales. Any core term that you feel targets your audience better than others should be considered important.

*Profit:* Some core terms may be able to bring you a higher profit margin than others. For example, if you get more from the sale of a first aid bag than a garment bag, then you might want to consider 'first aid bag' to be a more important core term.

*Meet Demand:* Your ability to meet demand should also play into your decision in choosing which core terms are most important. If you currently can't sufficiently fulfill a large number of orders for a particular product or service then it's probably best to choose other terms until you are better equipped.

Don't make your decision based on the fact that you don't sell a lot of something *right now*. There very well might be a high demand (and high profits) on particular searches but you simply are not selling any because you're not positioned on the search engines for those terms.

## Finding Search Phrases

Searching for your keyword phrases is probably one of the easiest, but possibly most time consuming part of the keyword research process. But getting too hasty here may ultimately lead to more problems later on. During this phase you may end up combining, splitting or even removing core terms. You'll want to pay attention as you go along to avoid additional and unnecessary work later.

Search phrases differ from core terms in that every search phrase is a variation on the core term itself. For example, if your core term is 'sports bag' your research will produce a number of search phrases such as 'personalized sports bag,' 'sports duffel bag,' 'sports golf bag' and 'sports bag supplies,' etc.

Finding your search phrases is what WordTracker and Keyword Discovery help you do best. Simply search for any core term and they give you all the various search phrases that contain the words in that term. Make sure you're searching for both plurals and singulars here ('sports bag' and 'sports bags') in order to get the most comprehensive list.



### Concepts:

A raw set of terms or phrases that *accurately describe* the subject of the website is compiled.

This set must contain *broad terms* which communicate general ideas as well as *narrow terms* which describe very granular details of specific topics within the website.

Don't spend too much time analyzing each phrase here because we'll do that in later phases and we don't want to get bogged down in that aspect here. Highly popular core terms with lots of related search phrases can take a good deal of time to go through. If you try and stop and consider each term individually it's only going to add more time to an already lengthy process. You're better off adding any term that, at a quick glance, appears relevant and then remove it later in the sorting process. You'll learn to quickly scan the list of search terms to be able to remove obvious junk such as 'sports bed in a bag', or 'buffalo bills sports bag' if you don't offer that type of bag specifically.

Depending on your keywords, a search for a core term may produce results rating from 0 to 1000 keyword phrases. Obviously if it produces zero then that core term can be ditched, or maybe set aside for a day if/when that becomes a popular search phrase. If you've broken down your core terms correctly you will usually get a list between 10-300 keyword phrases returned, but again, this varies by industry and term. Here are some guidelines on when to split and

when to combine your core terms.

*When to Combine:* If you get less than 10 good keyword phrases from a core term search then you might want to look at combining this with another. If you do, you should try to combine it only with another closely related core term that also gets few results. On our duffel bag research we had both 'duffelbag' and 'dufflebag' as core terms (notice the swapping of the *e* and *l*.) Neither of these produced many results so we felt it best to combine them together.



Even still, the number of results was less than 25 but we didn't want to combine these into the 'duffel bag' core terms for a couple of reasons:

1. I don't like to mix spellings on a page. We'd make an exception for the spellings of 'duffelbag' and 'dufflebag' because of the low search volume each one produces, but 'duffel bag' produces enough results that we felt it best not to try and mix them in.
2. It is usually difficult to write good, user-friendly copy if you keep changing your spellings. This inconsistency can look unprofessional to your users. Again, an exception was made for the two low-volume keyword phrases, but ultimately these two produce such few searches that they are pretty far down the list of important terms to optimize for. We'll be better off spending our time going after more important and higher traffic phrases.

*When to Split:* If you get more than 150 phrases from a core term search then you should consider splitting this into two (or more) core terms and re-do your search. As we searched for 'travel bags' over 50 of the 250+ results contained the word 'golf', quite a few with a good deal of search volume. This gives us a reason to split out 'golf travel bag' as a new core term. We can then re-perform our 'travel bag' core term search, but this time exclude any with the word 'golf' in order to narrow the results, and then perform the search for 'golf travel bag' later.

If you get several hundred results you may be able to split out more than just one new core term. Again, paying attention to this early in the process can save you a lot of work sorting through results later. There really is no limit to how far you can split core terms out so long as you continue to find five or more phrases that all contain the same words that will make up the new core term being created. In fact, the more core terms you have, the more tightly focused you'll be able to keep each page, which will result in a higher performing optimization campaign.

## Selecting High ROI Search Phrases

### **Avoid Single-Word Keywords**

Single-word queries generally produce the highest volume of searches, but also the lowest amount of targeted traffic. Many people start their searches with single word-keywords only to find that the results are not targeted for their specific need. They then go back to refine their search, often multiple times.

Let's say you're looking for a doll for your daughter so you go to Google and type in "doll." Are you looking for a large doll, small doll, a cartoon doll, an action figure doll, a Raggedy Ann doll, a Barbie doll, a celebrity doll? The possibilities at this point are limitless and you realize that the search results for "doll" are not giving you enough options so you go back

and refine the search.

Many will use single phrases as a means of learning how best to refine their search. While this may prove valuable to the searcher it is essentially of no value to the sites listed in the search results. The better place to be is in the refined search results where the user is more likely to click through and buy.

### **Target Multi-Word Phrases**

When looking at search volumes for particular keyword queries, the raw numbers will show that single word terms often get more queries than multiple word phrases. Studies have shown, however, that more people search using two- and three-word search queries in greater numbers than single words. Most searches for single-words end up being re-performed as multiple word queries as searchers find ways to target their searches more effectively.

These highly-targeted, multiple-word queries tend to produce more qualified traffic than the single-word queries. Because of this, it is in your best interest to target variations of these multiple word queries. Proper selection and targeting of these phrases will result not only in greater traffic volume to your site, but a higher conversion rate as well.

### **Target Phrases with Measurable Search Volume**

While making sure your phrases are as targeted as possible for your audience, it is important to go after phrases that register at least a measurable amount of search volume each month. Keyword phrases that have no search volume, no matter how targeted, generally won't do anything to increase business or sales.

Using search volume and additional competitive matrix information, you can then determine which keywords will be your primary phrases (those that produce largest amount of targeted traffic) and which keywords will act as supporting phrases (less competitive, yet extremely targeted.) Both kinds of phrases play an important role in creating strong, well-rounded websites that is able to achieve complete market dominance for related phrases.

For newer sites the primary phrases are often out of reach—at least early in the optimization campaign, if not for months. Selecting a combination of primary and supporting phrases for each page can help you achieve

results that begin delivering traffic earlier, while building the foundation upon which you'll be able to begin displacing your competitors on the primary phrases down the road.

### **Target Multiple Phrase Variations**

Every keyword phrase will have multiple variations that should accompany it in the page. Such variations are plurals, singulars and stemmed variations such as "ing," "ed," etc. In many cases you can also swap word order. "pontiac used cars" can become "used pontiac cars."

Don't get locked into using the keyword phrase precisely as it's most often searched, even if the stemmed variations show little search volume. When writing, use all variations as they would naturally be used within the context of what you have to say.

### **Localize Phrases When Necessary**

If you are targeting an audience specific to your geographic location, be sure to localize your phrases accordingly. To do this you can place city, county, state or other local references such as city districts or zip codes before or after each phrase.

Localizing your phrases will ensure that you get targeted traffic to your site and eliminate the need to deal with emails and phone calls from searchers who are not in your geographical location, and therefore not your target audience.