Search intent optimization - A complete guide

Search intent optimization may be an unfamiliar word. But its relationship with search results and SERPs is complicated, yet effective. If you read and understand this, I promise you will understand the intricacies and relationship between all the parameters on a SEO checklist.

What is search intent?

Search intent is the intent behind a visitor's search for specific terms and what he/she expects to find using them. Google looks at these terms and tries to understand where the searcher stands in the marketing conversion funnel before displaying results in line with the analyzed search intent. Google's data and interpretation are confounding. User level or IP level data collection empowers its algorithms to interpret user behaviour and keyword intent.

Believe me, search intent or user intent is the only driver that drives Google's search algorithm completely. All search parameters and SEO checklists evolve from here. For some, it may sound valuable but intangible, but Google has made it a science and built the entire search empire around 'search intent.'

Growth of search intent and challenges

Search intent or audience intent is dynamic, and this is an enormous challenge. Search intent is not a new concept. Google has always built its algorithms around this. Google's mission is very simple. It has come a long way and grown complex over time owing to the following reasons.

- **Search engine algorithm updates in relation to better results and better intent understand, that are frequent** - Search has undergone a sea of changes in the last 15 years. Even the interface has changed. The UX and GUI changes also impact user behaviour and thus we always recommend minimalist branding. For example, as little as 5 years ago, you had to access a browser to book flight tickets, today, Google facilitates it within the search results. Google has introduced HummingBird and RankBrain algorithms to understand search intent. No one knows how they work, but, these algorithms analyse search intent by considering what the user has searched for before (in that domain), how the search query is phrased and the device that the user is using (probably many other factors). This facilitates better and specific results that match the search intent. The user is also collating and understanding the way to search, learning unconsciously. So, user behaviour is also changing.
- **Ever changing web technologies** - Web technologies have evolved to become more interactive, with new platforms being introduced almost every day. Backend technology has changed drastically. Users want instant gratification and are ever-connected. Search behaviour has changed and users expect to see something new all the time. Because of these, search intent has also changed with users learning 24X7.
- **Changes in devices** - new smart phones, voice devices, etc. - Introduction of Google's mobile-first indexing on July 1, 2019 is a sign that your webpage should be mobile-friendly to enhance smartphone search experience. This includes quick loading of webpages, fast core value delivery, and user-friendliness. Users have different expectations from a mobile

search. Irrespective of devices used, UX comes first. For this, Google introduced mobile-first [Core Web Vitals](#) on May 28, 2021.

What is search intent optimization and why is it critical?

Search engines use rich snippet results to understand a user query. These could be answer boxes or knowledge panels, enhanced by algorithmic updates like Google RankBrain and Google Hummingbird. These algorithms empower search engines to understand the intent behind a search and to display relevant results. Search intent optimization, thus takes the front seat in boosting your SERPs. Search intent also interpreted as user intent, keyword intent, audience intent or query intent by different marketers.

Optimising your web page content and other parameters in line with keyword intent is search intent optimization and is a critical key to attract and/or convert visitors.

A few FAQs

The practice of search engine optimization may put you on top of Google for certain keywords or phrases purely for information and not for the marketing funnel. Search intent optimisation will put you on top of SERPs for an intent depending on how your webpage address a user query or intent. The difference is 'relevance' of your webpage. This means the visitor is a part of the marketing funnel and thus relevant and convertible. The longer the search intent (aka long tail), the better is the relevance.

- *If you focus on search intent optimization, would Google rank you better on search results?* - Yes, it will rank it higher on relevant searches. This translates to more visitors.
- *If you understand the search intent of your visitors, would it help you create effective content that can turn visitors into leads?* - Yes, getting visitors is not the end all, converting them to leads and moving them further into the market funnel is.
- *Will it help you fine-tune your marketing efforts to catch visitors at the right stage of conversion?* - Yes, it will because the objective is to push the visitor further into the funnel and the search intent is relevant.
- *If yes, will you acquire more customers and a greater customer life-time value?* - Yes, it will. Relevant visitors will convert at a higher rate and will come back for support, more information or to buy more, depending on your domain.
- *Will it help your SEO, if you refine your keywords to enhance conversion rates by tapping into its [Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines](#)?* - Yes, the guidelines are for us to understand how the search engines interpret and analyse user intent.
- *And will it help you rank higher on SERPs?* - Yes, you rank higher for relevant searches and that means you will get relevant traffic, enhancing chances of conversion.

Meeting the audience's expectation or intent at every stage of the marketing funnel is important, and catering to them is critical. And, here comes search intent optimization to the rescue.

How search intent optimization effects search engine optimization?

If you cater to Google search's intent, you will inarguably be on top, because "Google's mission is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful."

Remember, the competition in the 'intent' space is limited, and ranking is easier.

Google will take care of making the information "universally accessible and useful" only when you use search intent optimization to make the information on the accessed page most "useful".

The more useful it is, the more accessible will be your webpage. This is Google's old principle - 'Create content for the visitor (a.k.a query intent) and we will take care of the rest.' The algorithm is built that way historically, so put in your 2 cents.

Are you catering to Google by interpreting the search intent and fine-tuning your page content to cater to it?

This is very important to Google, as it strives to provide the most useful and relevant answers. Google's success and the dinner on its plate depends on search intent. Because, if they do not answer satisfactorily a query, searchers will prefer using a different search engine. Google wouldn't want that and it has primed itself to give out the best, no wonder it has over [85% of search market share](#).

Inference: If you cater to Google's long-term objectives, and they are the right ones, you will rank well. Align your website to search intent along with your [search engine optimization](#) efforts, and you will be blessed with rankings.

At this point, I would say "Search intent is king, Content is the kingdom.'

- Anil Kumar P. (efficaci)
Sorry [Mr. Bill Gates](#), times they a changin'.'

How to measure search intent?
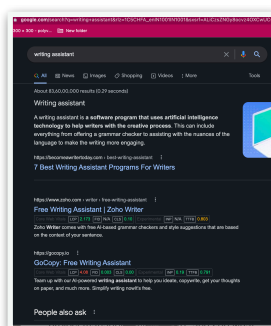
Measuring search intent for a single keyword is easy, however, it is a challenge when you need to measure for many keywords. Let us look at how we need to prune user intent from a SERP. Let us look for 'writing assistant' on Google search.

This is a short form search and you will get information on what the word means in the featured snippets and the products follow later.

Now, let us change the search term to 'writing assistant software.' You will see a fresh set of results. The featured snippets show a list of software and a click will lead to a fairly populated comparison page.
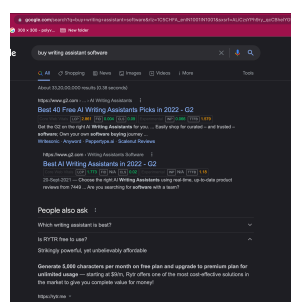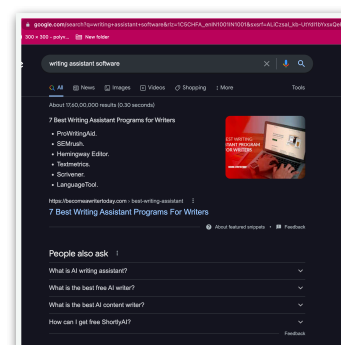
When I change the search term to 'buy writing assistant software,' you see that the search results are entirely different. Along with deep comparison results, The SERP will show results that will help you make a buying decision.

In all the above examples, we have been searching for a 'writing assistant' however, the intent of search was different.

Now, go back to the search box and click at the end of the search term. You will see Google predictions on the left and 'people also ask' to the right. So, you have some options here wherein you can change your search term and clicking on any will change the intent again. You can also choose an option from 'people also ask' - this is Google at its best, trying to ask the searcher to understand the search intent better.
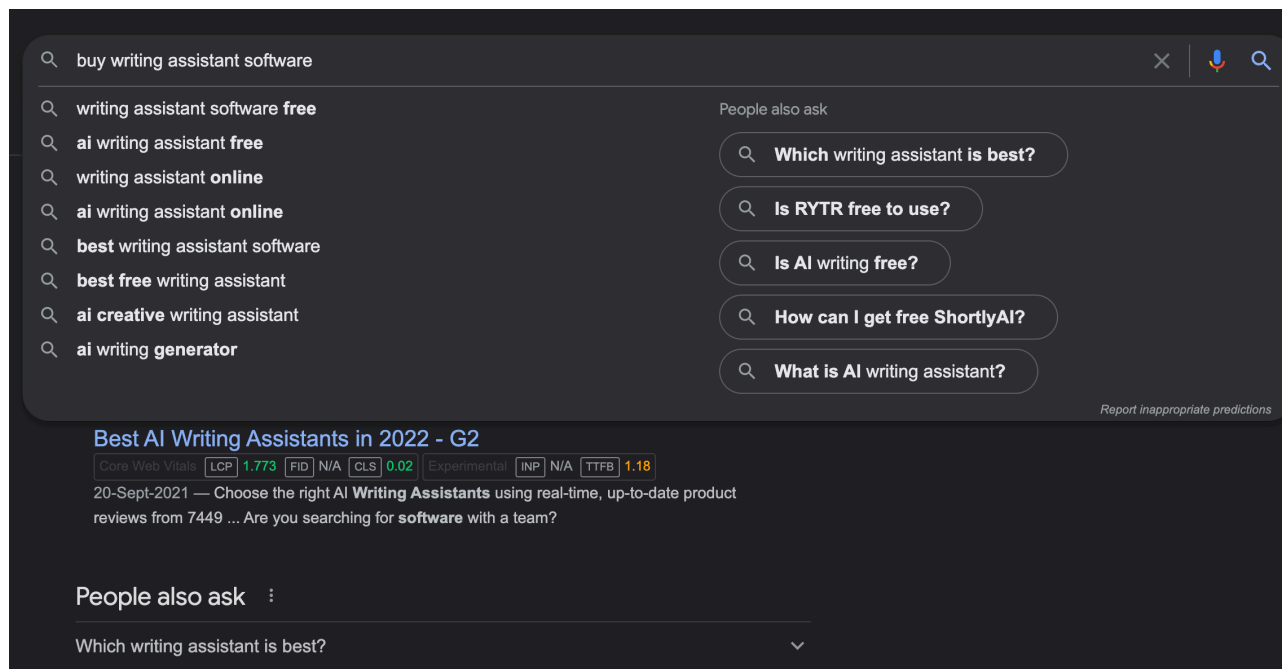
You can see that all predictions are of the same length or longer. This is because long-tail search words provide more search intent than the short-tail ones, because they give out more information. This is a key factor to analyse before you begin with search intent optimization.

The monthly search volume for long-tail keywords is less and increases as the keywords or phrases get shorter. This again showcases user intent. Though the search volume is short, the search intent is relevant and chances of conversion increase. So, the search volume numbers may be indicative, but choosing intent over it important.

We have tried to measure user intent for a single keyword, however taking this process forward and measuring for 1000s of keywords is a challenge.

How to measure search intent for multiple keywords?

Measuring user intent for 1000s of keywords is a monumental challenge. However, there are some tools I found across the marketplace while looking for a solution.

The simplest way to do this is to use a [REGEXMATCH formula](#) within your keyword sheet. If you use this, you need to edit your domain parameters in the sheet, which explained beautifully on the link.

If you already use tools like [SearchMetrics](#), [SemRush](#) or [Ahrefs](#), there are ways to analyse your keywords and download the sheets for further filtering. Only, they do not do it for you and it is still quite hard work. I wish they used a little automation there and made it a little user friendly. I, for one, would go for the REGEXMATCH formula as above.

How to map search intent to buyer journey?

A buyer journey is individualistic and complicated to assess from a seller's point of view. No amount of AI or EQ can do justice to this component of digital marketing. It is a set of steps that a buyer takes from the need conception to buying. These could 10 steps or 100's of them and most of them can be mapped to organic search.

At most, on a generic level, you can map the search queries to their user intent and you could probably come up with a search engine optimization strategy w.r.t content.

Since it is difficult to assess or calculate with a scientific basis, we can generalise the steps:

- Need or problem recognition
- Research on problem and solutions
- Comparison of products/services
- Decision making
- Post-Sales

We can map these steps to the type of search intents that Google provides and group the search queries into each of the above steps. This method is proved to be quite successful.

However, you need to keep the following in mind:

- Serendipity: SEO, by itself, cannot create demand for a product or a service. However, by ranking for multiple keywords, SEO can help a buyer realise a problem, which means the searcher comes across your webpage while searching for something else.
- A user might not resort to google while searching all the time. Did you know that the biggest competition to google in the search industry is Amazon? So, depending on the query intent, a searcher could choose his own site owing to his beliefs and trust. In these cases, mapping search intent becomes hypothetical.
- Interpreting buyer journeys: It has been proved that the top 3 or 4 buyer journeys cater to 90% of a business. Identifying and analysing these can set the tone for search intent optimization. Get the data together and do a GAP analysis to understand where your webpage may lack in addressing the search intent.

Google's user intent categories

Going by the marketing funnel, irrespective of overlaps, almost all searches fall into 4 search intent categories:

Informational intent

Know Simple Query	Know Query	Explanation
[barack obama height] [how tall is obama]	[barack obama]	The **Know** query is a broad information query and different users may be looking for different things (e.g., biography, books, social media posts, etc.).
[new york city population 2013]	[new york city]	The **Know** query is a broad information query and different users may be looking for different things (e.g., tourist and trip planning information, facts, photographs, history).
[who is graves disease named after]	[graves disease]	The **Know** query is a broad query for medical information and different users may have different needs. There is no single "answer" for this query.
[macy's store hours]	[macy's gift wrap options]	The **Know** query is a broad query for a particular service offered by a department store, and does not have a short answer.
[what is the symbol for the element nickel]	[what nickel is used for]	The **Know** query is a broad query and there is no short, complete answer.
[who won the 2014 bcs national championship game]	[who is going to win the bcs national championship game]	The **Know** query asks for an opinion and there is no definitive answer.
[what is starbucks stock price]	[should i invest in starbucks stock]	Even though the **Know** query is theoretically a yes/no question, there is not a single answer that everyone would agree on.

Basic level information search - Now that the searcher wants to buy a EV, someone trying to figure out "What is the best EV to buy?" - This is categorised as '*Know*' or "*Know Simple*" on Google's quality rater guidelines.

Relevance of informational search intent to your business

Most searches on Google have informational intent and they are important. One, to create visibility for your business all around to grow on search. Two, providing answers to visitor queries will build expertise and trust for your business. When the user intent changes, chances are that he/she will convert into a customer.

Optimising for informational intent

We should provide information in a good format and in a correct manner. For this, you need to put the search queries under a microscope and use them and variants within the information you provide.

How-TOs, FAQs and blogs are the tools to provide informational content to consumers. These target the high-funnel customers [TOF]. Your content on these query results should be spot on.

Well formatted content using search intent optimization will get into Google's rich snippets (easier said than done). Take examples from your competition and build authority and trust.

Navigational intent

Searcher wants to buy a car and is looking for information - "Should I buy a EV vehicle or a diesel powered one." - This is categorised as '*Website Queries*' on Google's quality rater guidelines.

12.7 Understanding User Intent

It can be helpful to think of queries as having one or more of the following intents.

- **Know** query, some of which are **Know Simple** queries
- **Do** query, some of which are **Device Action** queries
- **Website** query, when the user is looking for a specific website or webpage
- **Visit-in-person** query, some of which are looking for a specific business or organization, some of which are looking for a category of businesses

Relevance of navigational search intent to your business

Navigational keywords should guide a searcher to a product or a service from the home or the landing page. More often than not, you will get branded queries in this category. However, more open searches will lead the unbranded ones too.

Optimizing for navigational intent?

First up, your website should be well-structured and labeled clearly with headers, descriptions, titles, and tags. It is wise to have a product page for each of the products you sell that has every bit of information the searcher may look for. A prime example is Amazon. No wonder they are at the top.

Each of those pages has to be search intent optimised for the product name and the brand with descriptive URLs. It would be clever to have a section on what problems the product or service solves.

Commercial intent

The EV list is now ready, and the searcher is looking for more information to make a purchase decision - "GMC Hummer EV — 47 MPGe Vs. Porsche Taycan Cross Turismo — 76 MPGe?" - This is categorised as '*Do Queries*' on Google's quality rater guidelines.

Query	Likely User Intent
[get candy crush game]	Install the Candy Crush game.
[online personality test]	Take an online personality test.
[what is my bmi?]	Calculate BMI (body mass index).
[buy citizen kane dvd]	Purchase this DVD.
[bubble spinner]	Play Bubble Spinner online or download/open the app.

Relevance of commercial search intent to your business

Showing off your offers and discounts is a great way to tell your audience why they should buy from you. This information helps them make converting decision. The audience needs to find this information quickly because they are at the end of the funnel [EOF]. It is not only about using commercial keywords but also about keeping connected with the customer. Again, as an example, check an Amazon product page.
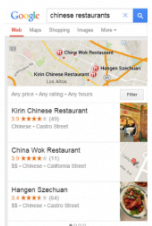
Optimizing for commercial intent?

What is the searcher with commercial intent looking for on your website? Your commercial keywords should answer this question. If the searcher is coming from other parts of your website (blog post, service pages etc.) to a product page, the keywords should address the intent of the searcher. They might want to compare products or services. No wonder then, Google also provides aggregator pages in its search results pertaining to commercial intent.

Now, search intent optimize the pages with good descriptive headers, titles, meta descriptions and URLs. Do not forget to help them with comparisons, more information and purchase pages.

Transactional intent

The searcher has made a buying decision and looking for last details, could be "buy GMC Hummer EV — 47 MPGe" or "buy Porsche Taycan Cross Turismo — 76 MPGe?" Or "vehicle financing options". - This is categorised as '*Visit in Person*' on Google's quality rater guidelines.

Relevance of transactional search intent to your business

Transactional keywords are the rainmakers for your business. All this while you have been promoting and marketing, time to make a sale. These are the keywords that searchers will use to find you when they are ready to buy. So, it is time to figure out those keywords and optimise your product landing pages with an easy purchase process.

Optimizing for transactional intent?

First, search intent optimize your pages with transactional keywords. They should have good meta descriptions, headers, titles and URLs. Do not forget to help them with comparisons, more information and purchase pages. Ensure they have good and clear CTAs, clear design and conversion optimized text. Use structured data to ensure Google understands the contents of the page clearly.

In conclusion, a small story?

What if you had a dynamic keyword strategy to address these queries (search intent) as a dealer of GMC or Porsche? You want to be there, don't you, making that sale in your backyard? That, dear marketer, is the power of search intent.

What if Google sends you this information?

It does, as deep analytics, but by the time you have seen it, the searcher has already brought the car. Sadly, for you as a seller, it is important. But, as a buyer, it will swarm me, thanks to Google, I am not!

Because, as the searcher, I still live because of "[not provided](#)."This means Google will not share the data with you. Oops, how sad! Don't worry about marketing gurus, you can't fix this!

If Google provided that information, it will be the end of the search for me… Google has to live and me too!

Sadly, no business I know, hires a real-time SEO guy to cater to real time search intent! Do you? And, do you have a real time analytics tool to find this? The search for convertible leads never ends!