



Lucidworks

Site Search 101

The most effective content
marketing tool (you're
probably forgetting)

Leave me alone.

More than ever: Customers just want you to get out of their faces.

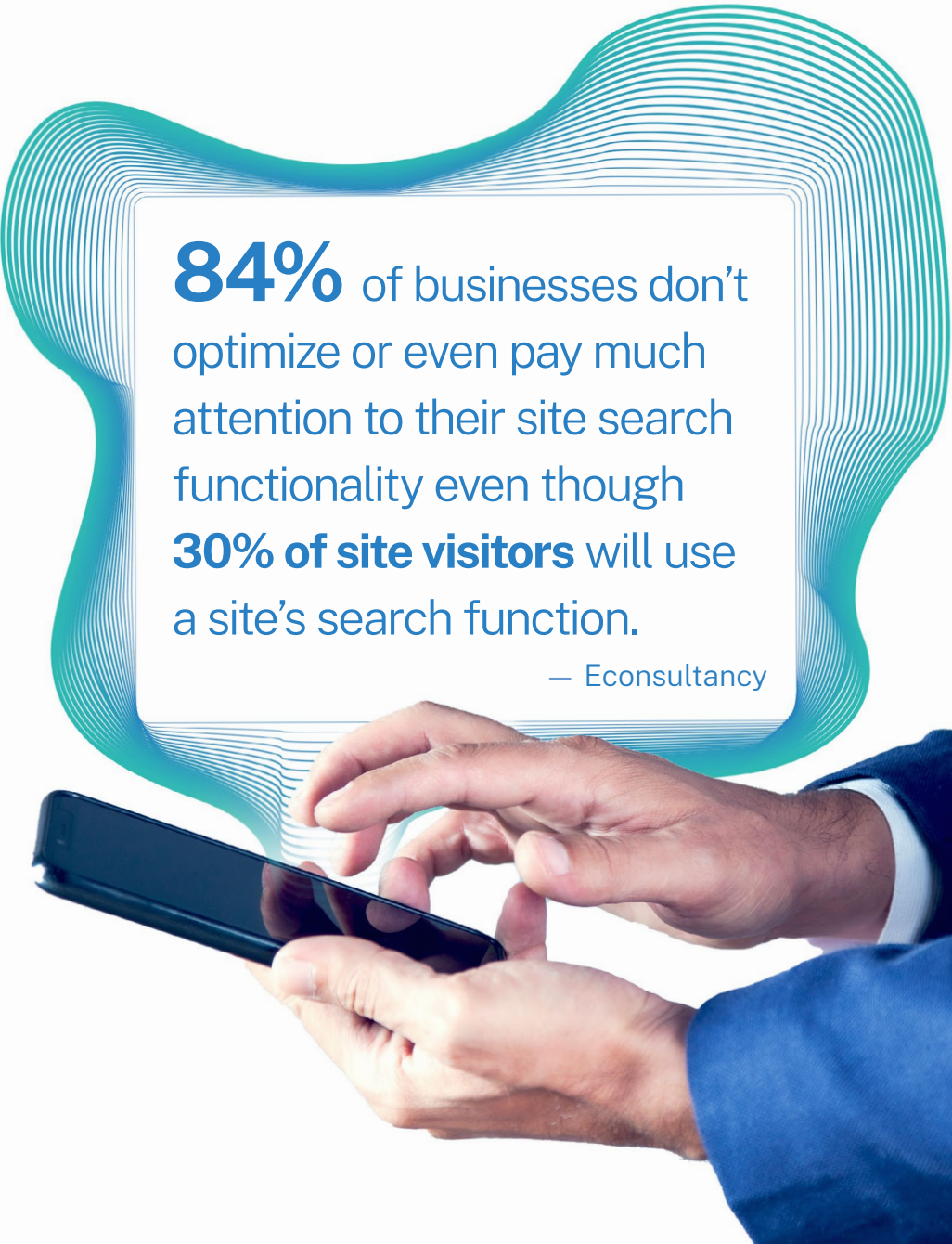
They don't want a barrage of calls and emails and texts to their phones. They don't want a phalanx of ads stalking them around the internet. You and your team have done the legwork and campaigns to make them aware of who you are and what you do. But they'd rather learn about your offerings on their own time.

And the main channel for that is your website. Every day, prospective customers come to your website looking for answers about your products and services. Combing through blog posts, product information, FAQs, and research trying to find what they need. You see the trail of pageviews in your analytics and reports. You know they're out there.

And what do we do when we're on a website looking for information?
We search.

Yes, of course a site's navigation can take us to the main sections of the site in the top nav and probably a few other places from the footer. But when site visitors want to really dive in, they use search.

Most ebooks like this are going to talk about getting *more* people to your site. Let's put that to the side. Let's focus on getting the people that are on your site to click, engage, and come back again. Get them to the information they want faster. Let's make sure they can find exactly what they need to research a future purchasing decision.

A hand in a blue suit sleeve is shown holding a black smartphone. A large, decorative callout box with a teal, wavy border surrounds the text. The text inside the box is in blue and black, providing statistics about site search functionality.

84% of businesses don't optimize or even pay much attention to their site search functionality even though **30% of site visitors** will use a site's search function.

— Econsultancy

55%
of users will
abandon your
site if they can't
find what they're
looking for.

— *Search Engine Journal*

What is site search?

But before we dive in: What are we talking about when we say “site search”?

We aren't talking about how to craft content to achieve better ranking in search engines - that's **search engine optimization**. Nor do we mean searching through the product catalog of a company selling something - that's ecommerce search. And we don't mean the internal search a company's employees might use to find data or documents - that's usually part of knowledge management or just called intranet search or **enterprise search**.

Site search— sometimes called *on-site search* or *external site search* — refers to applications that allow someone to search the content within a public website or collection of websites to find answers and information. And by public we mean that the site's content is not behind a login or gated form. Some search applications provide access across a brand or company's many web properties, providing search across all those sites in one unified experience.

Your website's search experience is a key part of your site's overall customer experience and branding. Marketing teams often overlook site search because they don't use it themselves and they're more focused on content production and campaign execution than ensuring that content is as findable as possible. But focusing on smarter site search can ensure that your website and your brand make a great first impression.

Your site's visitors want an instant, precise, Google-grade search experience. It gets out of the way and connects people directly to the content they are looking for.

A frustrating search experience can leave a sour brand impression and send website visitors looking elsewhere. But if you get it right, you're shortening the customer journey, getting the right content in front of each person, and moving them further down the funnel.

Want to learn more about inverted indexes?

Check out this blog post:

[The Awesome Power of the Inverted Index](#)

How site search works

What actually happens when you type what you're looking for into a site's search box and hit go?

Here's how site search -and search engines -in general work: Before anyone ever searches for anything, a search application is pointed to a website or collection of sites and starts to go through each web page, following each link, combing through the text, images, and attachments of the website. The search app creates a search index that keeps track of which words appear on which web pages.

Think of it like the index in the back of a book. But for every word that appears across the whole website.

Each word is ingested into the index and the search app makes a note of where it appears on each of the site's pages. If we were going to satisfy the PhD's in the room, this is called an inverted index.

The search app eventually crawls through all the site's content and has created the index -a map of where every word on the site appears and how frequently. Most search apps will periodically go and look for any new pages or content so the index is always fresh and up-to-date.

And all that has to happen before you can even search for anything.

How site search works

Once the search app is up and running:

So you type your search query into the search box and hit go. You're searching for *austin tx office* to find information about a company's office in Austin, TX. The search app receives your query, goes to the index and finds all the web pages with the words *austin*, *tx*, and *office* in them. It even knows that *tx* probably refers to the state of Texas. It then ranks the pages based on how suited they are for that particular query and returns the set of search results back to the user as a set of links to pages and documents about the company's office in Austin, Texas.

If there hadn't been a search index, you would have had to patiently wait while the search app went through every single piece of content on the site to find what you were looking for. It's like using a library's card catalog instead of reading every book in the entire building. (If you remember what a card catalog is.)

Many of the sites and apps you use on your laptop or smartphone every day are search apps whether you're searching for what to buy, where to go, who to date, or if you should worry about that persistent cough.



What about my CMS's search?

Most CMS platforms come with a basic search function that gets you part of the way there. But they can return results from within the CMS and nowhere else. And the ranking algorithms aren't optimized for discovery and engagement. They're made by CMS experts, not search experts. Site search is a critical part of your marketing stack. Go with a site search app that is built for performance and precision. Don't make it an afterthought.

Relevance and ranking does the heavy lifting

But how does the search application know what is relevant for a particular query?

How can it tell that *that* document over here is the best one for *this* particular query and then *that other one* is the second best? How does it rank the set of results in order? This is done through text analysis of the individual documents on the site as well as the entire collection of documents from the sites (this is called a *corpus*).

Here are just two of those techniques:

Term frequency, looks at the frequency of a word or phrase in a particular document or page. A web page that mentions the words in the query several times is probably more relevant than one that mentions it only once.

Document frequency looks at how often the word or phrase appears across all the sites that the search app has indexed — across the entire corpus. The more rare a term is across the entire site, the more likely it is to be a better match for that query.

And when all else fails, sometimes a human touch is needed. Site owners and admins can use functionality like boost, block, and bury to promote, remove, or demote particular documents for particular queries. You'll want to try and keep the amount of manual fine-tuning you and your team have to do for your search engine to a minimum.

That's where AI comes in.

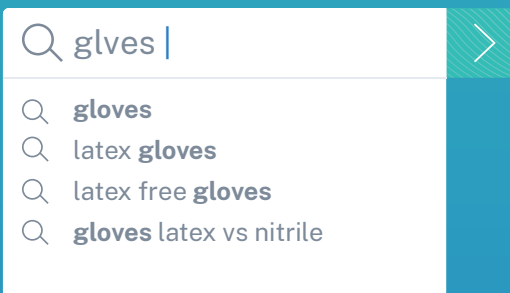
Show me what I want, not what I typed!

A site search application's focus is on getting the user to what they want – even if they aren't using the right words for it.

Visitors use the words and phrases they already know and will stumble through trying to find the right ones. The system needs to understand user intent beyond the literal meaning of what they typed into the search box. Show them what they want, not what they typed.

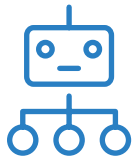
You and your team could spend all day making long lists of synonyms and substitutions. This results in an ever-burgeoning list of rules and exceptions. That's where artificial intelligence comes in.

Machine learning can be put to work to better understand the meaning and relationships between your site content and the people searching it. These systems also monitor where users go, what they ask for, and what they click on (or don't). All of these bits of user behavior are signals that can help the search app provide the best possible search results and continuously improve so they get better and better the more people that use the site search app.



The Key Benefits of Great Site Search

Focusing some time and resources on getting stellar site search has several benefits:



Expand access to your site: Site search expands the breadth of information your site's visitors can access and makes it instantly accessible. Think of it as an expansion of your navigation. But some site visitors come to your site and know exactly what they are looking for. Site search makes it easy for them to get to the answers and data they need as quickly as possible.



Amplify content marketing: Site search also extends your content marketing efforts way beyond their initial publishing date. Ebooks, blog posts, thought leadership articles, webinars, videos, transcripts... all of it becomes infinitely more findable through site search. This pushes your content efforts further down the long-tail so these assets continue to deliver results long past their publication date.



On-demand education: Site search guides visitors to the answers they want but just as importantly, lets them do it on their own time. They'll read about the things you sell, and also read about your expertise and thought leadership all at their own pace with their own unique intent. They want to know they are buying from the experts in that particular industry, vertical, or landscape.



Increased brand engagement: In addition, visitors using site search are using your search app, getting to the right information and being satisfied with what they see, they'll continue to rely on your site as a source of information and data. Increased engagement means more conversions to contact forms and other calls-to-action.



Guide content development: From your point of view — the site owner — the activity of your site search application can tell you a lot about who comes to your site and what they are looking for. Reports and analytics will tell you the most popular queries. These topics you should create content for top-to-bottom, back-and-forth. The reports of queries that produce no results (or require users to add terms to refine their search) can tell you what you're missing so you can have your team create tailor-made content for your site and its visitors.

Ready to learn more about site search?

Now that you have an overview of the basics of site search, how it works, and why it is critical to every organization's marketing stack, check out some more info on how to best apply site search for your organization:

Dive right into our [Site Search Buyer's Guide](#) that walks you through the critical capabilities and features you'll need to deliver stellar site search.

Get Started >

Lucidworks Connected Search gives your website the best search relevancy — from the very first search — in a fast, easy-to-use platform that anyone can manage.

Contact us today at lucidworks.com or call 415-329-6253