Realize Greater Revenue By Prioritizing SEO

Creating A Strong SEO Foundation Is Key To Unlocking Revenue Potential

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Executive Summary

Organic search continues to drive a substantial share of website traffic. For that reason, search engine optimization (SEO) — which by no means is a new marketing tactic — continues to be a critical pillar of digital marketing. In today's hypercompetitive online landscape, any business that makes a sizeable portion of their revenue from their website ignores SEO at its own peril. But it's not enough to just do SEO; businesses must continually optimize their SEO capabilities to truly turn it into an engine for business growth, or else they'll lose out.

In September 2019, Botify commissioned Forrester Consulting to evaluate the current state of SEO capabilities at large organizations. Forrester conducted an online survey with 250 respondents and five interviews with decision makers who are knowledgeable about and responsible for SEO at their organization. We found that those who prioritized SEO across the entire enterprise and aligned it to hard metrics such as revenue are seeing high returns, whereas others struggle with hurdles such as measuring SEO's impact, a lack of skills and knowledge, and silos. It is crucial to overcome these challenges, however, as the profitability and benefits realized through SEO makes a clear case for improving capabilities.

KEY FINDINGS

› **Organizations that lead in SEO maturity are differentiated by their capabilities and strategic approach to SEO.** When assessing the reality of SEO capabilities, we found that despite the reported confidence overall, only 14% of organizations can be described as mature, or as Optimizers. These organizations are differentiated by their enterprisewide focus on SEO, their tendency to link SEO tactics to business outcomes, their higher levels of budget and resources dedicated to SEO, and their dual focus on both technical and content SEO.

› **Mature SEO organizations drive profitable sales and improve user experience on their websites.** Organizations that are most mature in their SEO practices are likely to find SEO very profitable (91%), compared to organizations that are less mature in SEO. The top benefit reported by organizations was increased sales (65%), resulting from greater conversions (62%). They also saw an increase in profitability on the website and greater improvements in user experience than expected.

› **Those organizations that are not mature in SEO, struggle with a poor understanding of SEO's impact, skills gaps, and silos.** These organizations fall into the less mature Maintainer and Learner segments. They struggle to mature their SEO practices, because they: 1) find it difficult to measure the impact of SEO on business goals; 2) lack the necessary talent and knowledge; and 3) are challenged by siloed teams and processes.

Improving SEO Is A Top Priority For Both Capabilities And Outcomes

SEO is one of the oldest digital marketing tactics, but it continues to be one of the most important for customer acquisition.[1] Most organizations are heavily reliant on increasing site visibility to attract new customers. Our study found that improving SEO is understandably top of mind for most companies because it drives free (unpaid) traffic to their website; the vast majority highlighted improving SEO capabilities (94%) and organic search visibility (92%) as top priorities.

Most organizations claim to be taking action on these priorities. They state that they: have a companywide SEO strategy (90%); have a good awareness of internal and external stakeholders needed for SEO processes (83%); and understand the SEO issues on their site and how to prioritize fixing them (82%). However, when we explored their SEO capabilities in-depth, we found that these statements reveal a notable overconfidence, which does not necessarily par with the reality of SEO execution.

Forrester's research indicates that some marketers are still struggling to adopt best practices for SEO and are challenged by the complexity of search engine algorithms and changing consumer search behavior.[2] To further investigate SEO maturity, we asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with a series of statements describing the strategy, technology, people, and processes for effective SEO practices. We uncovered three levels of maturity: Optimizers (14%), Maintainers (53%), and Learners (33%) (see Figure 1).

> "[SEO] is both relied on and very important. It is essential because it drives free traffic, and because that traffic is commercially valuable."
>
> *Head of digital marketing, health food retailer UK*

Figure 1

We used the scoring framework below to define the maturity assessment of organization's SEO capabilities:
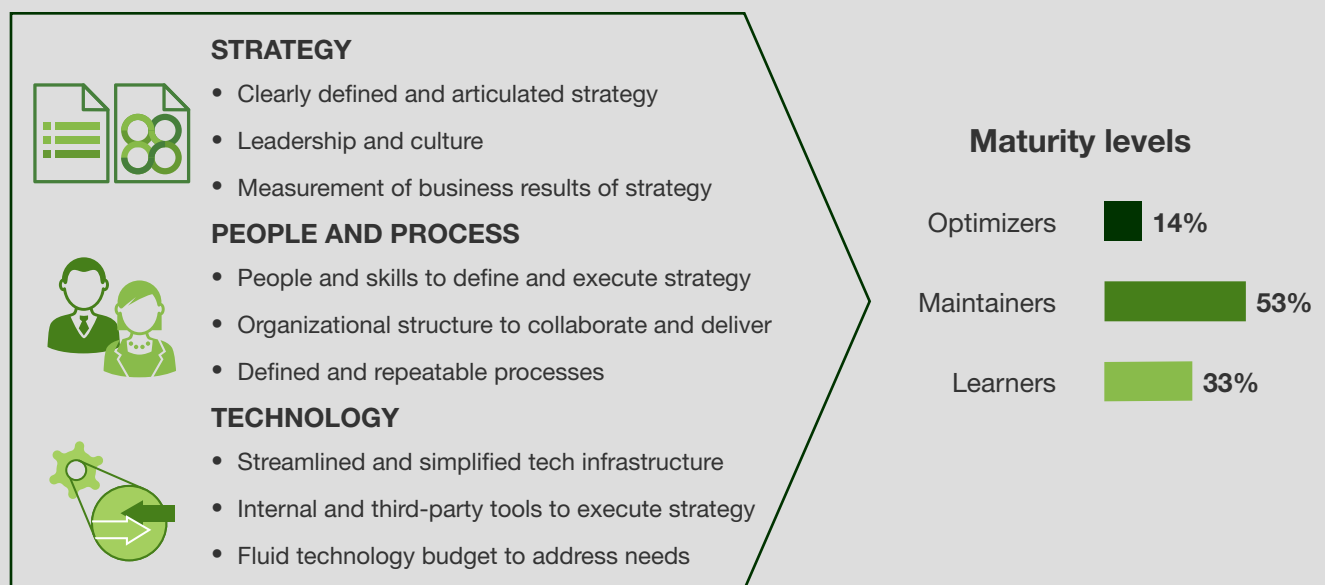
STRATEGY
- Clearly defined and articulated strategy
- Leadership and culture
- Measurement of business results of strategy

PEOPLE AND PROCESS
- People and skills to define and execute strategy
- Organizational structure to collaborate and deliver
- Defined and repeatable processes

TECHNOLOGY
- Streamlined and simplified tech infrastructure
- Internal and third-party tools to execute strategy
- Fluid technology budget to address needs

Maturity levels

Optimizers	14%
Maintainers	53%
Learners	33%

Base: 250 senior decision makers in the digital marketing space, specifically SEO
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Botify, September 2019

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Optimizers are differentiated from Maintainers and Learners by not only their capabilities but also their approach to SEO. They are more likely to:

› Have an enterprisewide focus on SEO. Optimizers do a great job in evangelizing SEO across their companies. They are much more likely to have an overarching, companywide SEO strategy compared to Maintainers and Learners (see Figure 2). They are also more likely to have a cross-functional execution team with both marketing and product/web development professionals. One VP of eCommerce in the US demonstrated this approach in practice: "SEO touches so many different teams. Between the content team, our UX team, as well as our IT development team. But the way we think about it, is that every initiative that we do, whether it's a piece of code, whether it's a piece of content, whether it's our taxonomy from a categorization, navigational standpoint, it all goes through the lens of SEO first."

› Link SEO tactics to measurable business outcomes. Sixty percent of Optimizers measure the impact of SEO on revenue, compared to just 23% of Maintainers, and 14% of Learners. When asked why they were prioritizing improving SEO's ROI/effectiveness, Optimizers were much more likely to say it was because SEO was the most effective revenue generation strategy (75%), compared to 59% of Maintainers and 56% of Learners. The VP of eCommerce highlighted the use of analytics platforms to measure SEO's impact: "The analytics platform we use helps us identify the organic traffic coming in and the metrics associated with it. Additionally, we're also looking at the outcome metrics for revenue per visit and all of the essentials needed for sales. Hence, we're able to analyze the traffic x conversion x average order value."

› Dedicate more budget and resources to SEO. Optimizers outspend Maintainers and Learners, both in terms of proportion of marketing budget dedicated to SEO and budget spend on SEO tools. They also have more people dedicated to SEO; 63% of Optimizers have 10 or more people in their SEO team, compared to 27% of Maintainers and 30% of Learners. A head of digital marketing in the UK explained the use of continual ranking reports to help build the business case for dedicated resources: "The business suddenly sees how much money it is losing by not having specialist resources on it, and hence understands it needs a dedicated resource for SEO."

› Focus on the technical as well as content aspects of SEO. Optimizers are much more likely to also focus on the technical element of SEO (see Figure 2). Forty-six percent said their SEO strategy focuses on getting key pages crawled and indexed, compared to just 33% of Maintainers. Learners lag behind on both content and technical elements. Technical SEO is just as critical as content — if you do not get your site crawled or indexed, it will never get ranked.[3]

Optimizers prioritize improving SEO ROI/effectiveness because they see it as an effective revenue generation strategy.

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Figure 2

"Assessing your organization's SEO strategy, how much do you agree with the following statements?"
(Showing *strongly agree* responses)

Legend: ■ Optimizers ■ Maintainers ■ Learners

Our development team always considers SEO when developing new features on our website(s)
- Optimizers: 66%
- Maintainers: 53%
- Learners: 41%

We measure the impact of SEO on revenue
- Optimizers: 60%
- Maintainers: 23%
- Learners: 14%

Our SEO strategy largely revolves around achieving higher rankings in search engines such as Google
- Optimizers: 54%
- Maintainers: 49%
- Learners: 33%

We have an overarching, companywide SEO strategy in place
- Optimizers: 51%
- Maintainers: 36%
- Learners: 20%

We know which of our pages are ranking in search results, and for what keywords
- Optimizers: 51%
- Maintainers: 26%
- Learners: 20%

We understand what SEO issues exist on the site and how to prioritize fixing them
- Optimizers: 49%
- Maintainers: 35%
- Learners: 20%

Our SEO strategy involves focusing on getting key pages crawled and indexed
- Optimizers: 46%
- Maintainers: 33%
- Learners: 29%

Base: 250 senior decision makers in the digital marketing space, specifically SEO
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Botify, September 2019
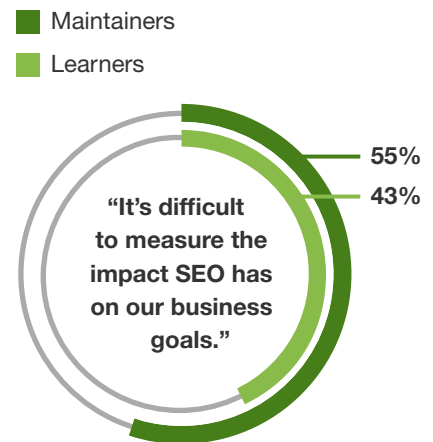
Maintainers And Learners Struggle With Poor Understanding, A Lack Of Talent, And Siloed Practices

Unsurprisingly, Forrester's assessment qualifies few as Optimizers — the most mature segment — despite organizations reporting high confidence overall in SEO capabilities. Most organizations (86%) fall into the Maintainer and Learner categories. Most organizations struggle to achieve a mature SEO strategy because they:

› Cannot decipher the impact of SEO. Well over half of Maintainers and 43% of Learners flagged that it was difficult to measure the impact SEO has on their business goals (see Figure 3). Nearly a third overall said that tying SEO performance to revenue and ROI was a top challenge to improving SEO. Part of this could be down to a misalignment of KPIs across business areas. An eCommerce director of international development at a French retailer noted the disparity between different business units when trying to attribute outcomes to SEO: "We follow a basic last click logic where the other is attributed to the last touchpoint the customer goes. However, we have a tough time tying SEO to revenue."

› Lack the necessary talent and skills. Organizations struggle to find and hire talent who are knowledgeable about and can manage both content SEO and technical SEO (see Figure 4). One in three are also hindered by a lack of knowledge and support outside of the SEO team. This might partly be due to an unattainable loop where building the business case for internal SEO skills depends on proof of value from early efforts, as stated by the VP of eCommerce for a US organization, "Once we saw the monetary value of SEO, it gave us the business case to increase headcount with talented personnel." This might prove difficult for Maintainers and Learners since they already struggle with proving SEO's impact on business outcomes.

› Are unable to coordinate siloed data, processes, and teams. The study supported Forrester's existing research that most organizations are unable to coordinate due to siloed marketing teams internally; they also struggle to coordinate with different marketing service providers.[4] As a result of siloed working, creating a single view of the customer is a top challenge for over half of organizations. Having a multinational online presence further complicates the picture, as the eCommerce Director in France explained: "We have four languages: Dutch, English, French, and German. The French team is not in charge of optimizing or developing SEO strategies related with the content we should have, or we could have on the German version of our site."

Figure 3

(Showing *strongly agree* and *agree* combined)

■ Maintainers

■ Learners

"It's difficult to measure the impact SEO has on our business goals."

55%
43%

Base: 215 senior decision makers in the digital marketing space, specifically SEO
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Botify, September 2019

"When you get a sale, knowing to which channel you attribute that [is difficult] because maybe they discovered the product in your store with SEO, but it was two weeks after you clicked on the banner and three weeks after you clicked on the Facebook ad. How do you attribute the revenue to each channel? To the last channel? That's a big concern, and it's not that easy."
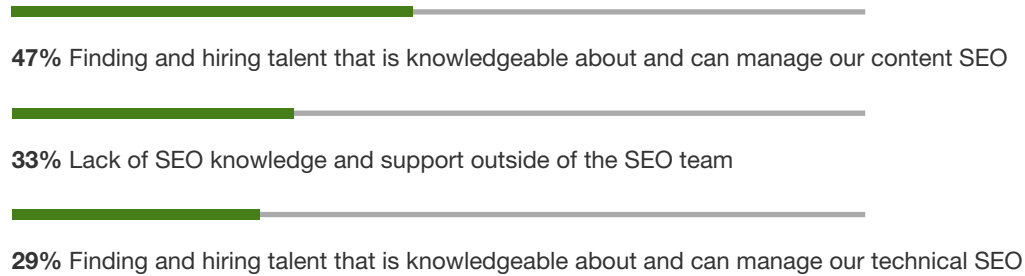
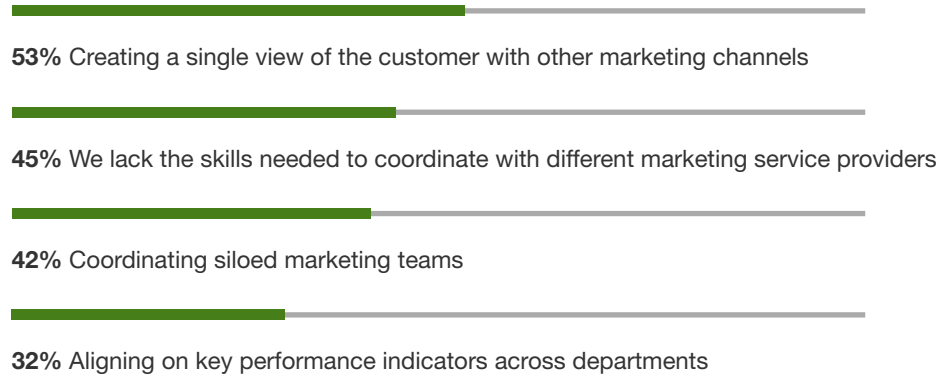*Director of transformation, France*

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Figure 4

"What are your organization's biggest challenges to grow your SEO programs?"
(Showing top results for Maintainers and Learners)

TALENT AND SKILLS

47% Finding and hiring talent that is knowledgeable about and can manage our content SEO

33% Lack of SEO knowledge and support outside of the SEO team

29% Finding and hiring talent that is knowledgeable about and can manage our technical SEO

COORDINATION OF DATA, PROCESSES, AND TEAMS

53% Creating a single view of the customer with other marketing channels

45% We lack the skills needed to coordinate with different marketing service providers

42% Coordinating siloed marketing teams

32% Aligning on key performance indicators across departments

Base: 215 senior decision makers in the digital marketing space, specifically SEO
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Botify, September 2019

MAINTAINERS AND LEARNERS FACE MORE CHALLENGES WITH COORDINATING SILOED DEPARTMENTS AND CHANNELS

While the struggle to find necessary talent and skills to understand and execute SEO is a universal challenge for organizations, Maintainers and Learners experience difficulties at a higher rate than Optimizers, especially with coordinating across silos:

› Nearly half of Learners (47%) lack the skills to coordinate with different marketing service providers, compared with 37% of Optimizers.

› Aligning metrics and KPIs across departments is also more of a challenge for Learners (35%) and Maintainers (30%) than Optimizers (20%).

› A lack of enterprisewide buy-in for SEO might be the root cause of these issues for Learners, as 29% highlighted this in their top challenges, compared to just 9% of Optimizers.

> "The biggest challenge I do have is how to optimize a site that potentially has more than twenty languages from today to use over the next 10 years."
>
> *eCommerce director of international development, France*

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A Strong SEO Foundation Fuels Greater Sales And Profit For Companies

The increased pressure to create a unified, efficient content marketing practice coupled with ongoing budgetary challenges means that companies must extract maximum value from content. Therefore, 68% of organizations consider it a top priority of the next year to dedicate their marketing budget to SEO and therefore increase SEO spend in order to generate greater ROI from existing content.

Most companies in the study (84%) have already implemented SEO; most plan to increase SEO spend over the next 12 months, with more than a third stating that they plan to increase spend by 10% or more. This increase in spend must be coupled with maturing SEO practices for Learners and Maintainers to catch up and truly capitalize on the benefits enabled by well executed SEO. The threat of online competition is raising the urgency around SEO investment for some, as stated by the director of transformation for an organization in France: "We get new online competitors that are specialized in digital marketing and very good in SEO. For the past year, I think we didn't invest enough because we had a good position and not so many competitors threatening us. Now we feel the urge to get it more serious and invest more."

Despite difficulties measuring its exact impact, most organizations who have implemented SEO found it profitable: 61% said it was very profitable and a further 33% said it was somewhat profitable. A significant portion also viewed it as more profitable or about the same profitability as other channels. Unsurprisingly, Optimizers were more likely to find SEO very profitable (91%), compared with Maintainers (58%) and Learners (63%) (see Figure 5). This is not only because they do a better job of measuring SEO's impact on business outcomes, but also because they: 1) prioritize technical SEO as well as content SEO; 2) evangelize the SEO's value across the business; and 3) continue building internal skills.

SEO PRODUCES MORE PROFITABLE WEBSITE SALES THROUGH GREATER BRAND AWARENESS AND BETTER USER EXPERIENCE

Organizations who have implemented SEO report a range of benefits they achieved as a result, especially around increasing the commercial value of their website. The top benefit reported by organizations was increased sales (65%), resulting from greater conversions (62%) (see Figure 6). Not only was there an increase in volume of sales, but most organizations (58%) also noted an increase in profitability from website sales. This is significant given that only around half expected an increase in website sales when implementing SEO. This commercial success is down to:

› Improved brand visibility online. Organizations achieved increased brand awareness (60%), resulting from improvements in share of voice on search engine results pages (50%). The eCommerce director of international development emphasized SEO's centrality to building brand awareness in new markets: "SEO has an important role because it gives us the chance to rebalance the commercial investment ratio on sales we can have within markets where the brand awareness is still not established. Especially within the first years of building the brand within a new market, SEO has the main role to balance the paid and unpaid channels, and gives us enough oxygen to then activate marketing activities on the paid channels."
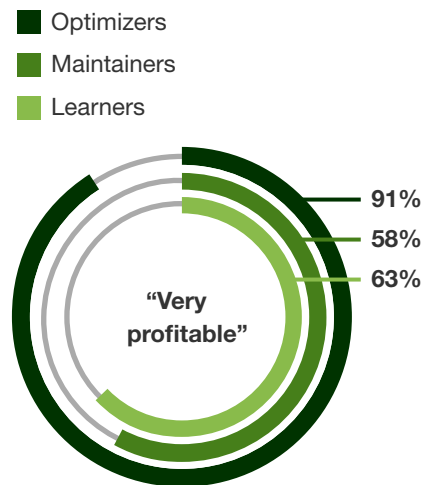
91%
58%
63%

"Very profitable"

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> › Improved quality and user experience of website. Since pursuing SEO, organizations noted that the content on their website improved (58%) due to the enhanced measurement and review of content enabled by SEO tactics. As a result of improved quality, they also noted improved user experience on their website (50%).

Greater visibility of the website and brand, coupled with improved quality and user experience, allows for increased traffic and revenue from organic search. The resulting impact on the bottom line is perceived by organizations as the top benefit of improved SEO practices.

Figure 6

Benefits received from SEO

65% Increase in sales on our website

62% Increase in conversions on our website

60% Improved awareness of our brand

58% Improved content on our website

58% Improved profitability from sales on our website

50% Improved share of voice in search engine results pages

50% Improved user experience of our website
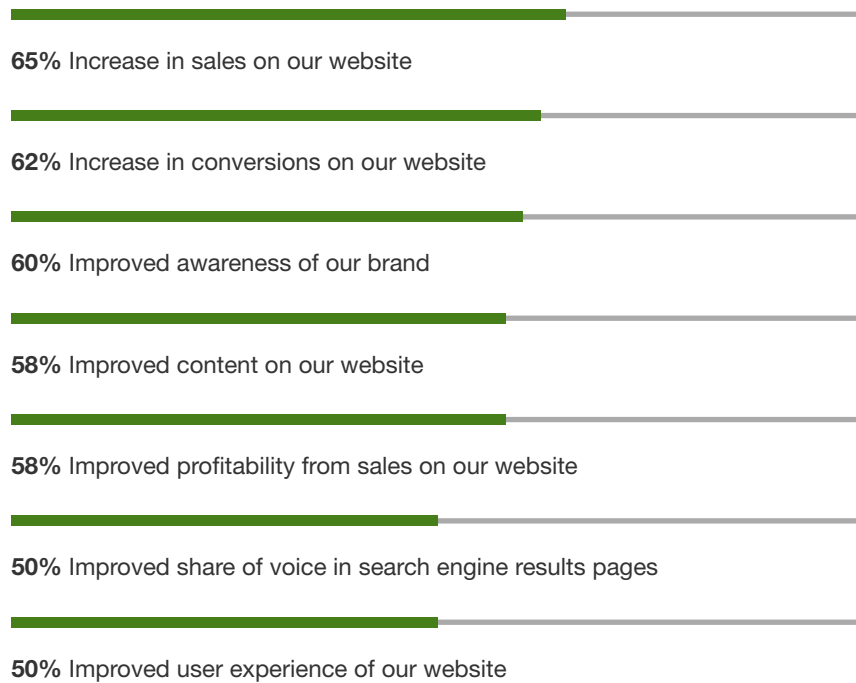
EXPECTED BENEFITS:

- Increase in sales on our website: 53%
- Improved content on our website: 50%
- Improved user experience of our website: 39%

Base: 210 senior decision makers in the digital marketing space, specifically SEO
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Botify, September 2019

Key Recommendations

The business case for SEO is clear. A strategic approach with effective execution enables SEO to turn your website into an engine for growth, by increasing sales and profitability, as well as improving user experience. Optimizers are charging ahead and taking advantage of the business benefits enabled by SEO, but Maintainers and Learners can catch up and capture lost ground by maturing their capabilities.

Forrester's in-depth survey of SEO decision makers about the state of SEO maturity at large global organizations yielded several important recommendations:

Learners can become Maintainers by establishing an SEO process and identifying stakeholders. Given the increasing complexity of search engine algorithms, Learners must go back to basics: refreshing themselves on the mechanics of how search works; starting with how search engines crawl a website, and then how those crawled pages are indexed; and finally how those indexed pages rank and attract traffic. They must establish SEO processes that the entire organization can align on and commit to, and identify key stakeholders internally and externally.
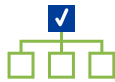
Maintainers can move to Optimizers by evangelizing SEO best practices across the organization. SEO is a cross-functional process involving stakeholders from across the organization, and an SEO strategy cannot deliver results without an enterprisewide commitment to best practices. Maintainers should ensure they establish both technical SEO and content SEO best practices as identified by Forrester's research, and ingrain these across relevant teams and departments.[5]

Optimizers can keep excelling by tying SEO to outcomes and integrate SEO into their marketing mix. Although many organizations are taking their SEO efforts in-house, this study confirms our existing research that most companies do not have all the skills or resources internally to manage SEO.[6] Optimizers can continue to excel by working closely with SEO platforms to automate SEO processes, scale SEO, and further integrate it into the marketing mix.

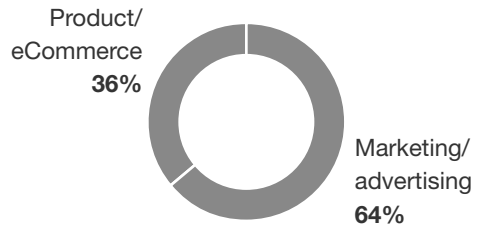FORRESTER®

Appendix A: Methodology

In this study, Forrester conducted an online survey with 250 respondents and five interviews with decision makers who are knowledgeable about and responsible for SEO at large organizations in the UK, the US, and France to evaluate the maturity of SEO practices, the challenges faced, and the benefits received. Survey participants included decision makers in marketing/advertising and product/eCommerce. Questions provided to the participants asked about their current strategy, technology, and skills for SEO, their top challenges with implementing SEO, and the business impact of these tactics. The study began in August 2019 and was completed in September 2019.
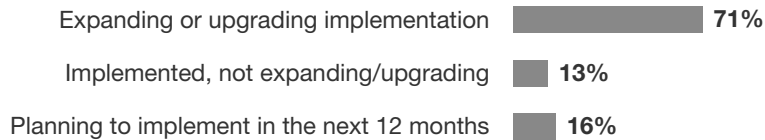
Appendix B: Demographics/Data
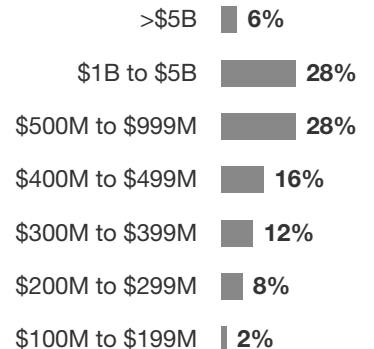
"In which country are you located?"

44% UK

42% US

14% FR
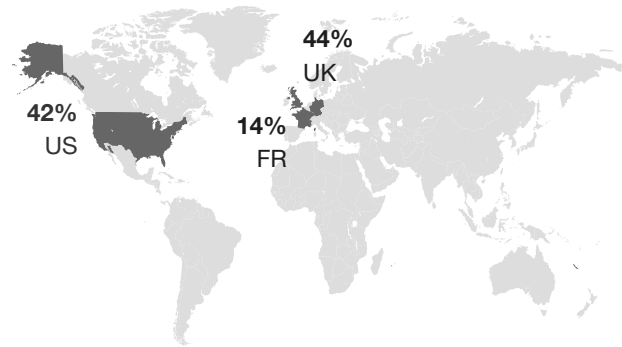
"Which title best describes your position at your organization?"

Product/ eCommerce 36%

Marketing/ advertising 64%

"What are your company's plans when it comes to SEO strategy?"

Expanding or upgrading implementation	71%
Implemented, not expanding/upgrading	13%
Planning to implement in the next 12 months	16%

COMPANY REVENUE

>$5B	6%
$1B to $5B	28%
$500M to $999M	28%
$400M to $499M	16%
$300M to $399M	12%
$200M to $299M	8%
$100M to $199M	2%

"Which of the following best describes the industry to which your company belongs?"

Digital publishers (e.g. editorial-focused websites such as those dedicated to publishing news, articles, and other forms)	19%
Retail online (e.g. my company sells products online)	17%
Consumer product goods with an online presence	16%
Travel and hospitality (e.g. my company is a travel booking website, online travel agency or otherwise dedicated to help)	13%
Classifieds (e.g. websites that serve as a directory of multiple listings, such as job listings, car listings, real-estate)	12%
Consumer financials (e.g. loans, credit card, mortgages)	12%
Media publishers	11%

Base: 250 senior decision makers in the digital marketing space, specifically SEO
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Botify, September 2019

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Appendix C: Supplemental Material

RELATED FORRESTER RESEARCH

"Ten SEO Best Practices That Your Site Can't Live Without," Forrester Research, Inc., October 1, 2018.

Appendix D: Endnotes

[1] Source: "Ten SEO Best Practices That Your Site Can't Live Without," Forrester Research, Inc., October 1, 2018.

[2] Source: Ibid.

[3] Source: Ibid.

[4] Source: "Top-Notch SEO Requires Seamless Coordination, Not Another Siloed Team," Forrester Research, Inc., October 1, 2018.

[5] Source: "Ten SEO Best Practices That Your Site Can't Live Without," Forrester Research, Inc., October 1, 2018.

[6] "The Forrester WaveTM: Search Engine Optimization (SEO) Platforms, Q3 2018," Forrester Research, Inc., August 8, 2018.

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