



# Rebooting Ranking Factors

Google.com

Google





## About Searchmetrics

Changing search technology has forced SEO platform providers to up their game. These changes have created an entirely new search paradigm – search and content optimization. And since search engines have put a fence around a lot of their data, SEO platforms need to bring their own rich data to the party – and powerful tools to analyze it

There's only one search platform that owns its data: Searchmetrics, the world's #1 SEO and content performance platform. We don't rely on data from third parties. Our historical database spans nine years and contains over 250 billion pieces of information, such as keyword rankings, search terms, social links and backlinks. It includes global, mobile and local data covering organic and paid search, as well as social media. We have the largest global reach of any SEO platform, crawling the Web every day in more than 130 countries.

Searchmetrics monitors and reveals the full business available to you online. We provide our customers with a competitive advantage and help them identify new business opportunities by exposing the content consumers are engaging with on industry and competitors' sites. Our Visibility Score – trusted by reputable media sources such as The New York Times, Bloomberg and The Guardian reliably indicates your online presence.

We provide the insights our customers need to deliver results. Searchmetrics guides SEOs and content marketers with suggestions for creating content that improves relevance and boosts conversions. It shows the connection between social media links and overall engagement. And its analytics make clear which content performs the best and how an organization's content performs against its competitors.

With Marcus Tober, one of the top 10 SEO minds in the world, leading Searchmetrics' product development, we have over 100,000 users worldwide, many of whom are respected brands such as T-Mobile, eBay, Siemens and Symantec. They depend on Searchmetrics and our 12 years of product innovation to maximize their online performance.

**More information available at:**

**Searchmetrics Website**

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## **Content Factors**

Content Relevance

Word count

Keywords in Body

Keyword in Title, Description and H1



## **User Signals**

Click-Through Rate (CTR)

Bounce Rate

Time On Site



## **Technical Factors**

Presence of H1/H2

HTTPS

TLD Rankings

File size

Site speed

URL length

**Related Discussion: Mobile-Friendliness**



### **User Experience**

Number of internal links  
Number of external links  
Number of images  
Video integration  
Font size  
Interactive Elements  
Presence of unordered lists  
Bullets per List (max.)  
Flash  
Adlinks / AdSense



### **Social Signals**

Facebook total  
Google +1  
Tweets  
Pinterest



### **Backlinks**

Number of Backlinks  
Number of DoFollow Backlinks  
Number of NoFollow Backlinks  
Number of edu Backlinks  
Number of domains linked from the URL  
Number of external links from the URL

**Skip intro and jump to data**



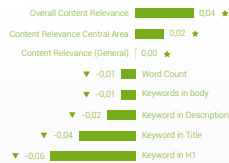
# Infographic

## General Ranking Factors Rank Correlations Top20 Google.com

TRENDS TO 2016  
▲ Up  
▶ Same  
▼ Down  
★ New Feature  
★ New Calculation



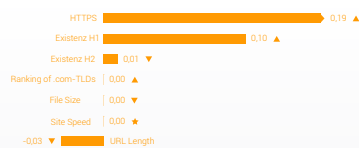
### CONTENT



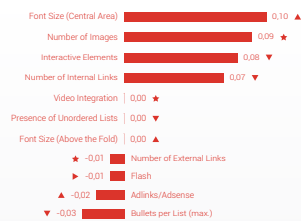
### USER SIGNALS



### TECHNICAL



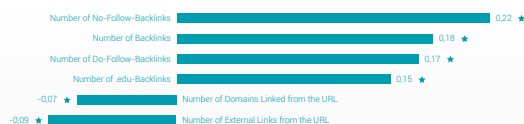
### USER EXPERIENCE



### SOCIAL SIGNALS



### BACKLINKS



Download the complete whitepaper at [searchmetrics.com/ranking-factors](http://searchmetrics.com/ranking-factors)



[Download Infographic](#)

# Executive Summary

## **A. Universally applicable ranking factors are a thing of the past**

Today, each industry, or even each individual search query, has its own ranking factors. And these are in constant flux. This is due to the development and application of Machine Learning algorithms, which now contribute to Google's evaluation of websites and search queries.

At the same time, it is vital for SEOs and online marketers to understand exactly how Google's evaluation of websites has changed, and what concrete impact this has on their day-to-day work. Searchmetrics' general ranking factors therefore provide comparative benchmarks, and provide insight into overall trends and developments.

## **B. Today's rankings are driven by the dynamic between individual content relevance and user intent**

The main task for SEOs and online marketers today is the creation of relevant content that is targeted towards the specific user intention, which can vary greatly depending on the search query. Generally speaking, content is relevant when it provides answers to as many questions as possible, and when it deals with the most important aspects of a topic. This is how we define holistic and comprehensive content.

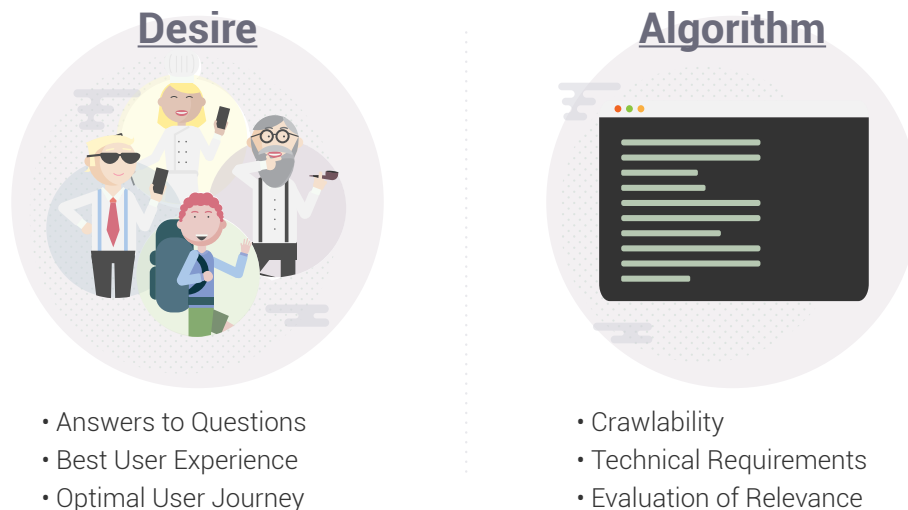
More specifically, the most relevant content ultimately depends on the user's intent and what people are looking for. This could be shorter content ("pesto ingredients"), a single piece of information ("Who won Superbowl 50?" or "What day is Christmas this year?"), images ("Halloween costume ideas") or videos ("how to tie a Windsor knot" or "smokey eyes").

At Searchmetrics, we have taken up precisely this challenge, and spent years of hard work developing solutions which help our customers to detect the user intention hidden behind a search query. This makes it possible to provide data-driven content recommendations and optimization measures.

## **C. Technical factors remain a prerequisite for good rankings**

Even when providing content which is as relevant as possible and which perfectly meets the user intention, it is extremely difficult to achieve a position at the top of Google's ranking if the page is not – for both humans and search engines – easily accessible, easy to consume and optimized from a technical point of view.

Factors such as loading time, file size, HTTPS encryption (for shops), internal links, page architecture and mobile-friendliness are elementary pieces of this puzzle. In general: Perfect technical implementation lays the foundation for breaking into the top 20, but long-term success in the upper echelons of the first results page is achieved by offering content that matches the relevant user intention.



#### **D. User signals give Google direct feedback on how satisfied people are with content**

Regarding internet users' behavior, Google has access to a gigantic quantity of data from:

- its search results,
- its Chrome browser,
- Google Analytics or
- Android.

This data provides Google with highly efficient measurements, enabling it to gauge how happy a user is with a result. Combined with information about the clustering of user intentions and Machine Learning methods, this creates an effective system for evaluating the relevance of online documents – all in real time.

#### **E. Backlinks are now just one of many contributing factors**

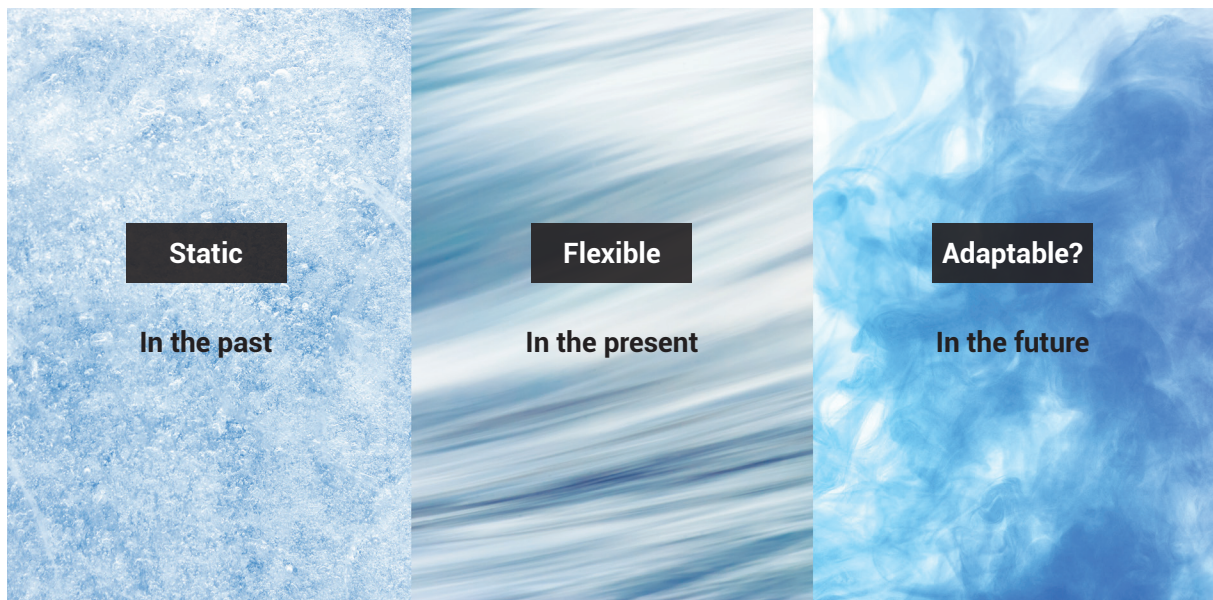
Search engine rankings are no longer determined primarily by backlinks. Depending on the topic, it is now sometimes possible for a website to achieve a high Google ranking without a large amount of high-quality backlinks. This is partly driven by the increase in mobile search queries, as URLs on mobile devices are often liked or shared, but rarely actively linked. The increasing prominence of apps and app rankings in organic search is also contributing to the decline of backlinks' importance. Backlinks do remain a part of the algorithm, but they are now just one of many contributing factors and no longer the driving force pushing webpages to the top of Google's rankings.



# Abstract & Data

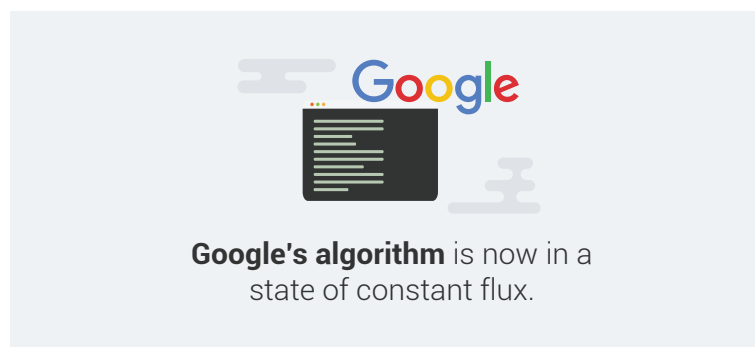
It is no secret that Google has spent the last years becoming increasingly good at evaluating the relevance of websites. The most recent major advancement, as the last of a series of improvements in 2015, was the integration of RankBrain into Google's search engine algorithm – a system based on Machine Learning that helps to determine the most relevant results for a search request.

## The Evolution of Ranking Factors



### **Be like Water**

What was once a slow, clunky algorithm that needed updating one step at a time, has now become a fluid, highly complex organism that changes continuously. Nothing is set in stone. Everything is in constant flux.



This also applies to the analysis in this whitepaper: The era of fixed ranking factors is over. Today's ranking factors are fluid and flexible – they are as malleable as water.

“

“Empty your mind, be formless. Shapeless, like water. If you put water into a cup, it becomes the cup. You put water into a bottle and it becomes the bottle. You put it in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Now, water can flow or it can crash. Be water, my friend.”

Bruce Lee



water changes its shape when you  
put it into a **cup, bottle or teapot**



We have now reached the stage where all significant Google updates have been incorporated into the central algorithm, meaning they can no longer be differentiated individually. The evaluation of a website's relevance is now based on the complex interplay of hundreds of factors, each of which is assigned its own flexible weighting. And this all happens in real time.



### **The end of ranking factors as we know them**

With this whitepaper, Searchmetrics is publishing its annual ranking factors study in its traditional form for the last time!

### **Why?**

Whilst general ranking factors and rank correlations provide a broad overview of which search elements tend to be the most important, and how the best-ranking landing pages vary regarding these elements, they can no longer be considered universally applicable for all webmasters. Ranking factors that apply equally to all industries have ceased to exist. This is primarily because the content requirements depend so heavily on different user intentions.

### Then what is the point of this whitepaper?

The aim of this whitepaper is therefore to provide general benchmark values, and to identify any overall patterns and trends. These benchmarks can be used as base values for comparison – such as for our industry-specific ranking factors and rank correlations coming for a range of industries in 2017. These Searchmetrics whitepapers will enable webmasters, SEOs and content marketers to analyze which elements are needed to secure a top ranking within their specific market.

### Approach

To provide maximum context to our results, this year's desktop data has been compared either with the mobile data from 2016, or with the equivalent desktop data from 2015. This depends in each case on which comparison is the most relevant to the ranking factor in question. We have also included last year's averages for the top 10 in each ranking factor, as this helps to show how trends are developing and in which direction should be optimized.

## Background information, dataset and definitions

### What is a Ranking Factor?



These are the last universally applicable **ranking factors**. Future whitepapers will focus on the analysis of **specific industries**.



## **Dataset**

As in previous years, the general ranking factors and rank correlations are based on a set of 10,000 relevant keywords. For some factors, a more in-depth analysis required the definition of specially-defined keyword sets.

All correlations are always based on the complete dataset. In the past, we excluded Wikipedia results from some mean value calculations. We have now done this across the board for all factors, because Google's ranking algorithm seems to apply non-standard criteria to the online encyclopedia.

Furthermore, median values are often provided, as these give a more accurate impression of the real trend, whereas mean values are sometimes disproportionately skewed by outlying values. Any exceptions are clearly indicated on the appropriate graphs. Wherever relevant and useful, we have also included a comparison with the previous year's results.

As Google's search parameters are now continuously changing, we also have to adapt flexibly in our work. The whole Searchmetrics team, not just for this whitepaper but throughout the company, is continually working to improve our data collection, processing and evaluation methods. The resulting changes in methodology mean that some data cannot be sensibly compared with data from previous years. This has been noted at the relevant points throughout the whitepaper.

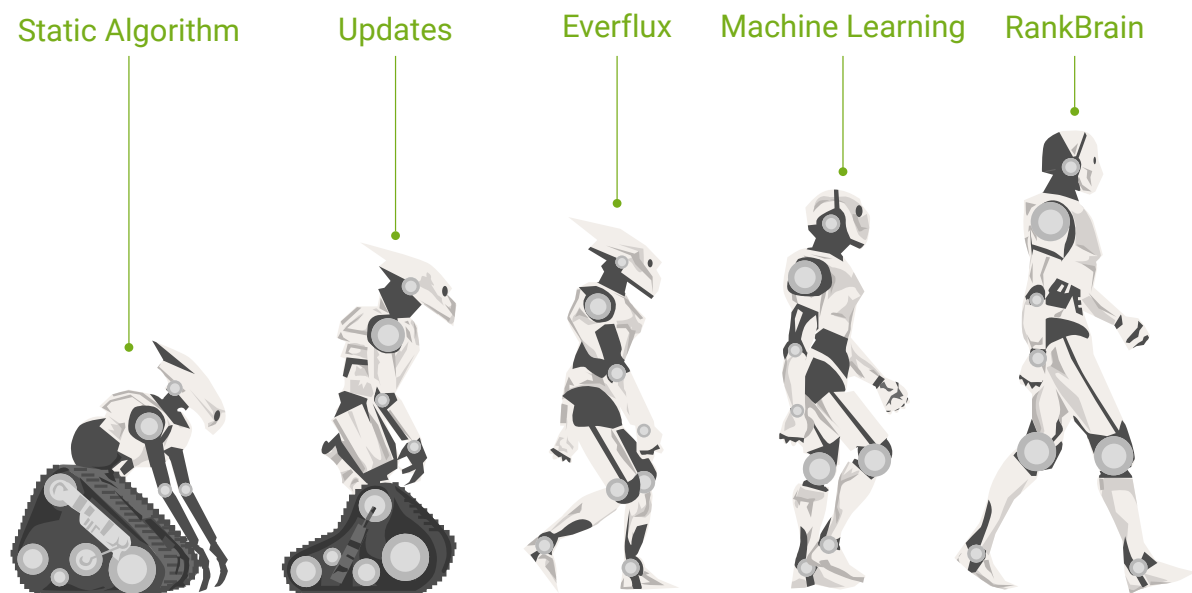
# Why content relevance and user focus are replacing checklist ranking factors

No joke. Our study opens with the assertion that classic, universally applicable ranking factors have become irrelevant. Checking the box on a laundry list of technical SEO items is no longer enough to ensure top rankings.

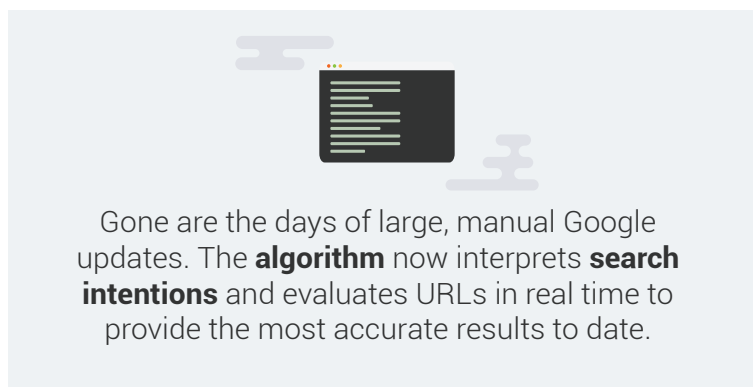
## Rebooting the recipe for success

A good marketing strategy has always been dependent on clearly defining the relevant market, and on identifying the target groups and personas that each output is supposed to appeal to.

In the online world, this concept was shaken up by the role of a machine as an intermediary between the producer and the consumer. Online outputs produced as described above often failed to be successful, because for far too long there was a discrepancy between the algorithmic and the human evaluation of relevance.

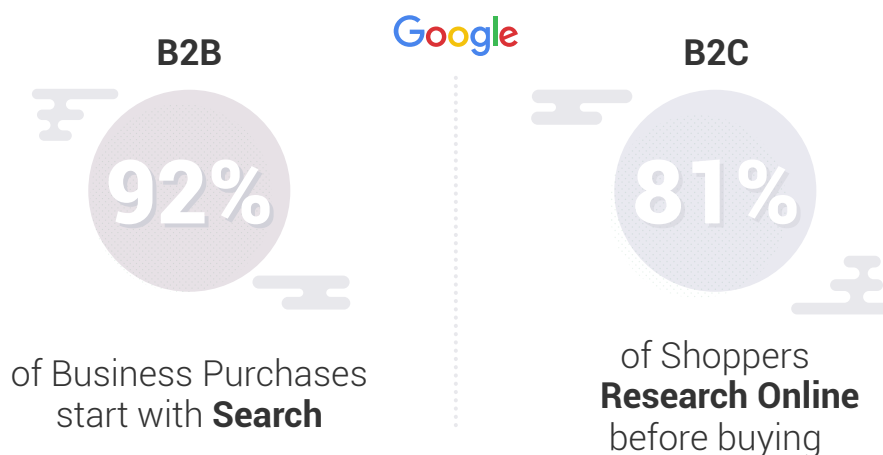


Let's be quite clear: Except for important technical standards, there are no longer any specific factors or benchmark values that are universally valid for all online marketers and SEOs. Instead, there are different ranking factors for every single industry, or even every single search query. And these now change continuously.



### Search remains an important part of the Customer Journey

Search continues to be one of the first contact points on the Customer Journey:



**Source:** <http://www.adweek.com/socialtimes/81-shoppers-conduct-online-research-making-purchase-infographic/208527>

At the same time, the web is overflowing with information. It is therefore no longer enough just to write 300 words about a chosen keyword. Instead of focusing on ineffective SEO tactics or the optimization of isolated factors, today's environment requires a holistic strategic approach. This is what can deliver a long-term increase in the number of users and the number of conversions for your online business.

### **Data-driven analysis of search intentions and topics**

This year's Ranking Factors have been adapted to our data-driven analyses and the prognosis models that we have been developing for some time and are already using.

The main focus is in the provision of data on content success factors, which assess content-related features of websites. When doing so, we have to look at content at two levels: Firstly, it has to be determined which types of content my intended target audience expects. Once this had been decided, I can then start to create holistic content that perfectly matches the user intention.

### **Data-driven solution**

To effectively analyze and evaluate this information, we have developed a data-driven solution: The Searchmetrics Content Experience Suite (CES). This solution supports online marketers, content strategists and SEOs in the following tasks:

1. **determining the interests of their target audience(s),**
2. **defining topic requirements,**
3. **creating corresponding content and**
4. **making success measurable.**

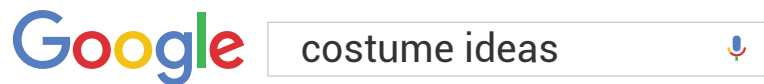


**Find out more about the Content Experience Suite:**

**Content Experience Suite**

### **Content types and target audience**

In this context, it is not only important to cover the appropriate topics and include the right keywords, but also to create the right types of content that will fulfill the respective search intention. In some cases, a user's demands may be best served not with a detailed FAQ text, but with an image gallery (e.g. when researching hairstyles) or short bullet points and videos (e.g. when researching recipes).



???



### Exploring topics and topic clusters – what does 'holistic' really mean?

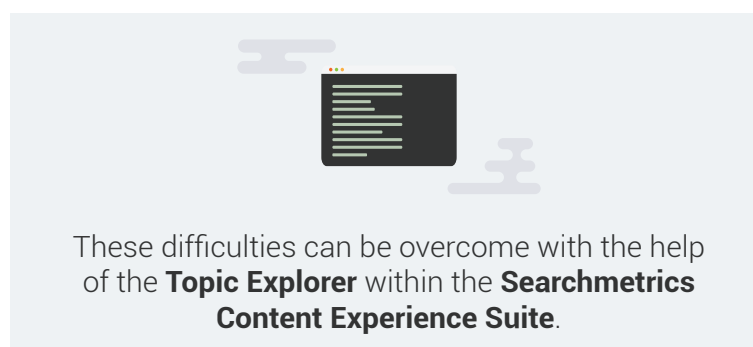
One important content success factor is holistic content. But what does 'holistic' mean?

In layman's terms, we are talking about bringing together and structuring individual search terms into complete topical areas, in which related terms relevant to the same or similar themes are summarized according to search intentions.

If you use these terms to address entire topics in a semantically appealing way, tailored to the search intention, that is you write a very good, readable text with lots of high-quality content, then it is not only highly likely that users will want to read and share the text, but also that it will also rank equally well with search engines for many different keywords at the same time.

There are several difficulties associated with the creation of holistic texts:

- What other keywords are relevant for my topic?
- Where does one topic end, where does the next one start?
- Which of these keywords overlap regarding search intention?
- Which of these terms should I use in a text? Which should be avoided?
- etc.



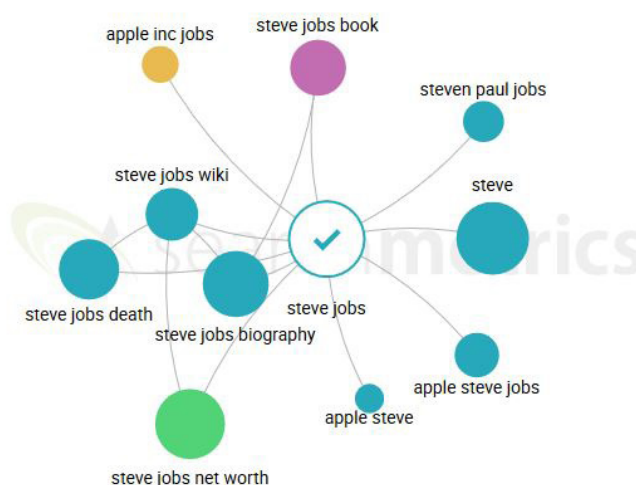
To demonstrate this concept, the following presents an analysis of the results of the search queries "steve jobs" vs "diet tips", as well as information about the top keywords for each topic.

#### a. Steve Jobs (Search intention: Information)

The Topic Explorer clearly shows how certain terms are related to the main keyword "steve jobs". This cluster graphic, which the Topic Explorer generates on demand for any keyword, also provides information about the target audience's interests related to this topic.

For the keyword "steve jobs", we see that the terms "steve jobs biography", "apple steve jobs" and "steve jobs death" are all very closely related, because they are all displayed in the same color. Other topics, which are still connected to the topic "steve jobs", but which correspond to a different search intention and are therefore displayed in a different color, are "steve jobs book" or "apple inc jobs".

The Topic Explorer supports the research stage of content creation by providing instant insight into my intended target audience's user intention.



The most important related keywords can be analyzed in more detail in a table. The Topic Explorer's top 50 keyword table shows those terms which the top-ranking websites use alongside the main keyword. This creates a list of usage frequency and recommendations for content creation.

Top 50 Keywords <span>🔍</span>					
steve jobs					
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Keyword	Target Keyword Frequency	Usage Recommendation	Recommendation	Usage by Competitors	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> steve	6	Must-have	🟢🟢🟢🟢	81	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> music	2	Must-have	🟢🟢🟢	57	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> experience	2	Additional	🟢🟢🟢	29	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> create	2	Additional	🟢🟢🟢	29	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> year	1	Additional	🟢🟢🟢	29	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> show	2	Additional	🟢🟢🟢	38	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> real	1	Additional	🟢🟢🟢	24	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> think	1	Additional	🟢🟢🟢	24	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> video	2	Additional	🟢🟢🟢	52	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> book	1	Additional	🟢🟢🟢	33	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> books	1	Additional	🟢🟢🟢	33	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> opportunities	1	Additional	🟢🟢🟢	24	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> play	2	Additional	🟢🟢🟢	29	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> design	1	Additional	🟢🟢🟢	24	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> person	1	Additional	🟢🟢🟢	29	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> full	1	Additional	🟢🟢🟢	33	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> media	2	Additional	🟢🟢🟢	38	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> photos	1	Additional	🟢🟢🟢	38	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> time	2	Additional	🟢🟢🟢	38	

## b. diet tips (Search intention: Inspiration)

The Searchmetrics Content Experience Suite is a one-stop shop for topic research, user intention analysis, content creation and publishing, and even performance tracking. Our second example shows an analysis of the search term “diet tips”.

In this case, the Topic Explorer again shows which keywords are related to our main term, i.e. what content users expect to find in the search results:





**Top 50 Keywords** ⓘ

diet tips

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Keyword	Target Keyword Frequency	Usage Recommendation	Recommendation	Usage by Competitors
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	eat	7	Must-have	★★★★	87
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	weight loss	4	Must-have	★★★★	74
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	foods	6	Must-have	★★★★	83
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	health	7	Must-have	★★★★	83
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	weight	8	Must-have	★★★★	87
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	diets	5	Must-have	★★★★	65
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	food	9	Must-have	★★★★	96
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	nutrition	5	Must-have	★★★★	57
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	healthy	6	Must-have	★★★★	74
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	diet	9	Must-have	★★★★	96
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	eating	5	Additional	★★★★	83
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	calories	3	Additional	★★★★	65
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	vegetables	3	Additional	★★★★	52
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	fat	5	Additional	★★★★	65
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	people	4	Additional	★★★★	74
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	lose	3	Additional	★★★★	74
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	content	1	Additional	★★★★	52
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	dietary	2	Additional	★★★★	48
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	healthy eating	1	Additional	★★★★	39

### Why is it helpful to adopt this approach to writing?

It's data driven, shows context and relevance, and provides insights to the writer regarding the user intention. This leads to holistic content that is intentionally imbued with more keywords covering the topic. Ultimately, content created with the help of the Content Experience Suite will be able to rank higher and for more different search queries.



# Content Factors

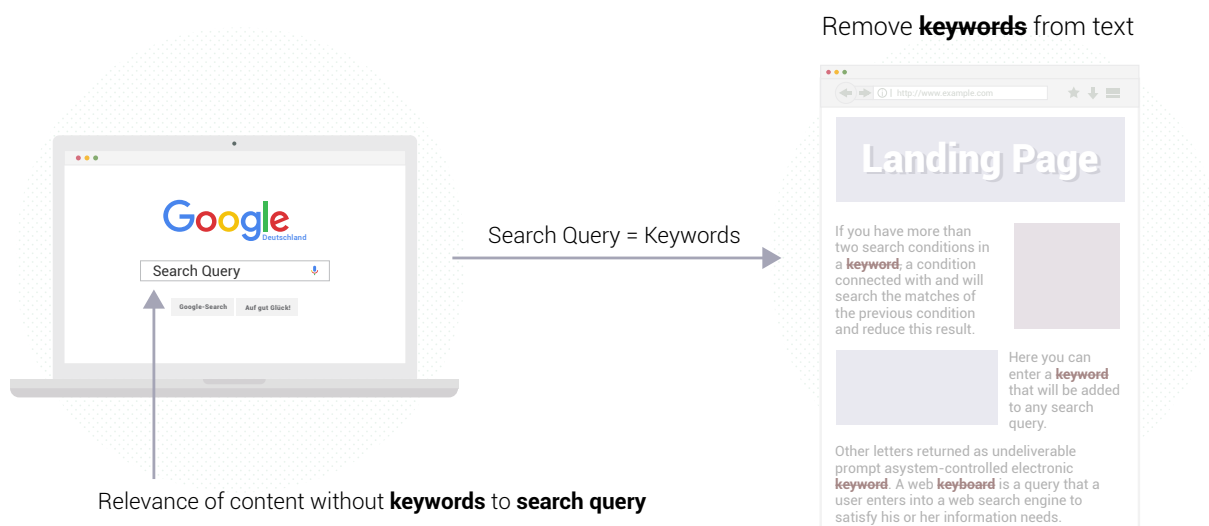
## Content Relevance

This year, Searchmetrics is introducing a new ranking factor: content relevance.



The data collection is based on measurement methods which use linguistic corpora and the conceptualization of semantic relationships between words as distances in the form of vectors. For the semantic evaluation of a text, this makes it possible to analyze the keyword and the content separately from one another.

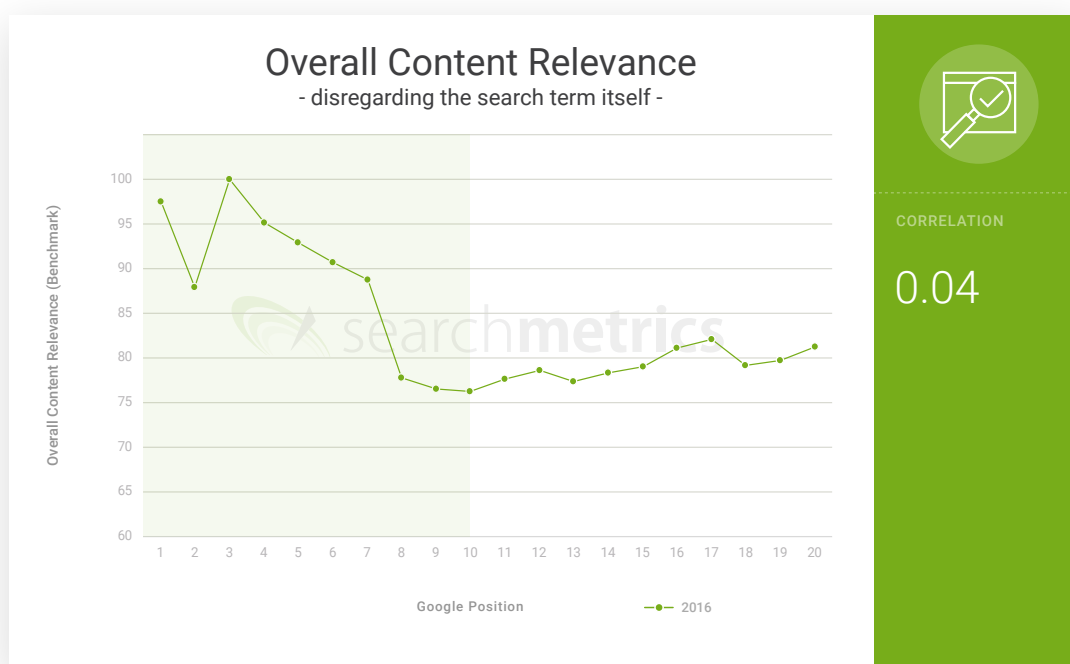
We can calculate a content relevance score for a complete text on a certain keyword or topic. The higher the relevance score, the more relevant the content of the analyzed landing page for the given search query.



The keyword itself is therefore no longer the decisive factor in determining the actual ranking for a search query. Our analysis shows how strongly the relevance of the content to the search intention influences the Google ranking.

Accordingly, landing pages in the top positions are significantly more relevant for the submitted search query than URLs which Google features less prominently. Exceptions to this rule – as is so often the case – are to be found at the first and (sometimes) second positions, which are mostly taken up by brands that Google rewards according to the “brand factor”. The likely rationale behind the “brand factor” is that Google values recognizability, user trust and brand image, and reflects this in the SERPs alongside other ranking factors.

The calculation of the content relevance ranking factors is based on a score that is expressed as a value between 0 and 100. This score describes the relevance criteria for all search result positions and aids comparability between the different content relevance factors.



## Content Relevance (Central Page Area)

- disregarding the search term itself -



CORRELATION

0.02

## Content Relevance (General)

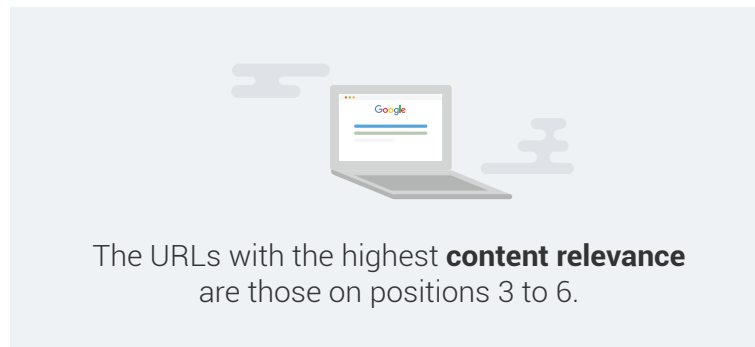
- including the search term -

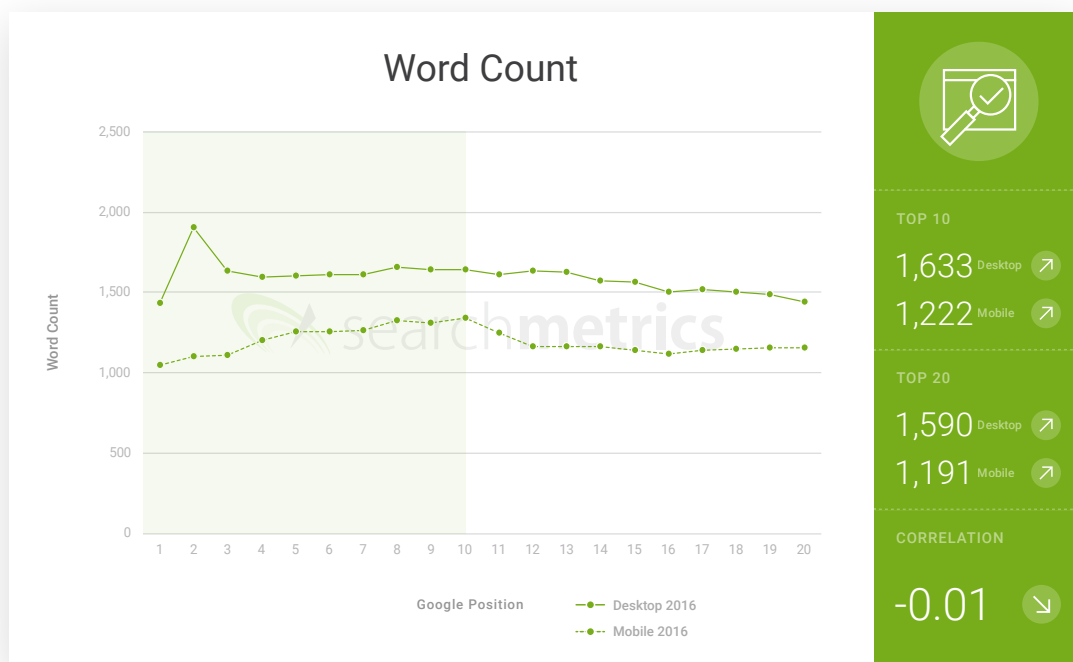


CORRELATION

0.00

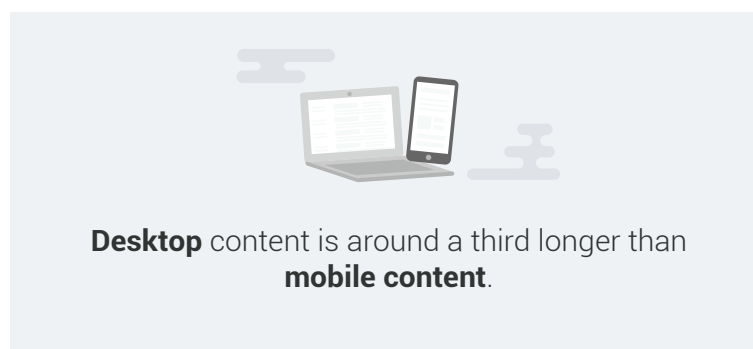
The analysis shows that the content relevance, both for the entire page and for the specific area 'main content', decreases as the position in the search results drops. The highest content relevance scores were found amongst the results for positions 3 to 6. Thereafter, the landing pages on subsequent positions show lower relevance scores.

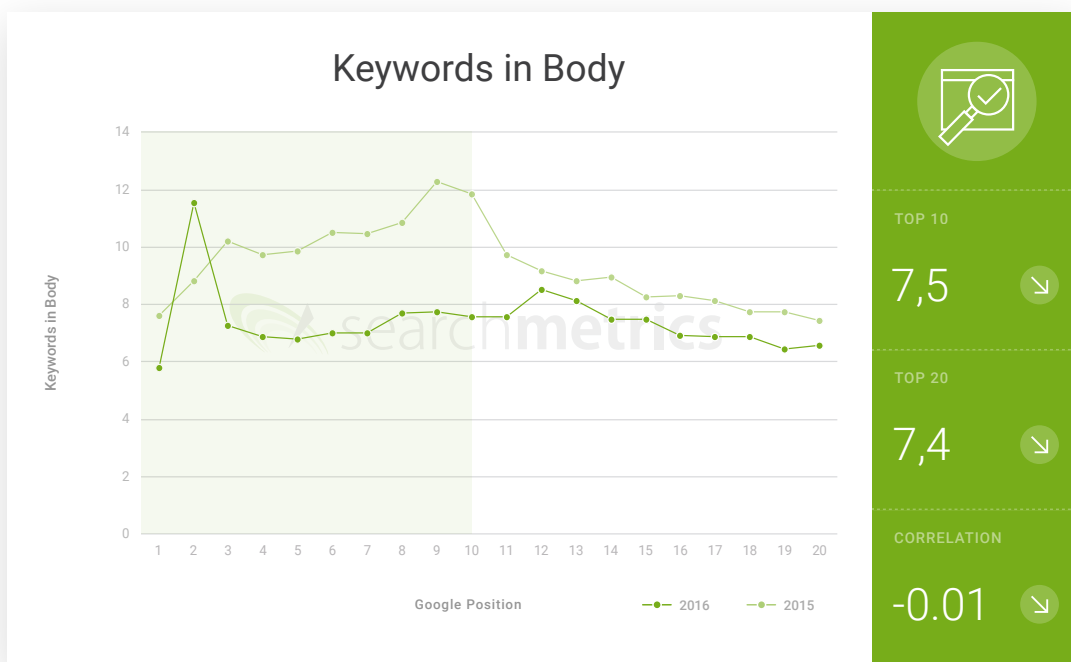




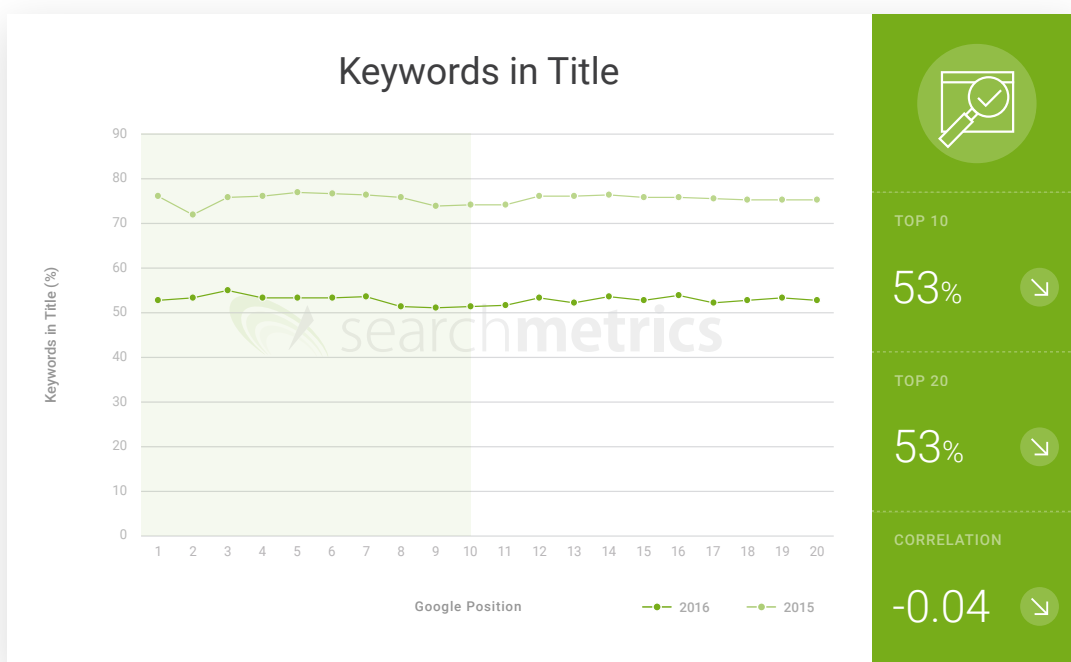
The word count of a landing page ranked amongst the top positions has been rising for years – this shows that the content on URLs near the top of the search results is becoming more detailed, more holistic and therefore better able to answer more user questions. Pages rank well under the condition that the content is not simply long, but also relevant, usually also meaning that they rank comparably well for several keywords related to the same topic.

This year, the calculation of the word count factor has changed slightly compared to previous years, making a direct comparison impossible. Nevertheless, we see a clear difference between desktop and mobile word counts: Desktop content is around a third longer on average.

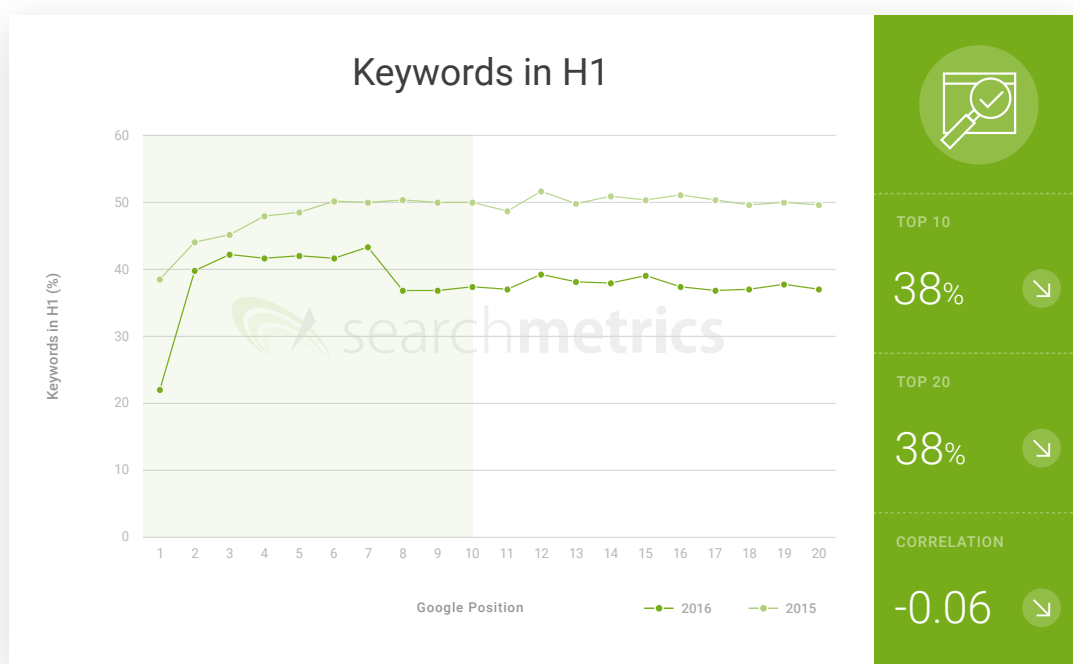
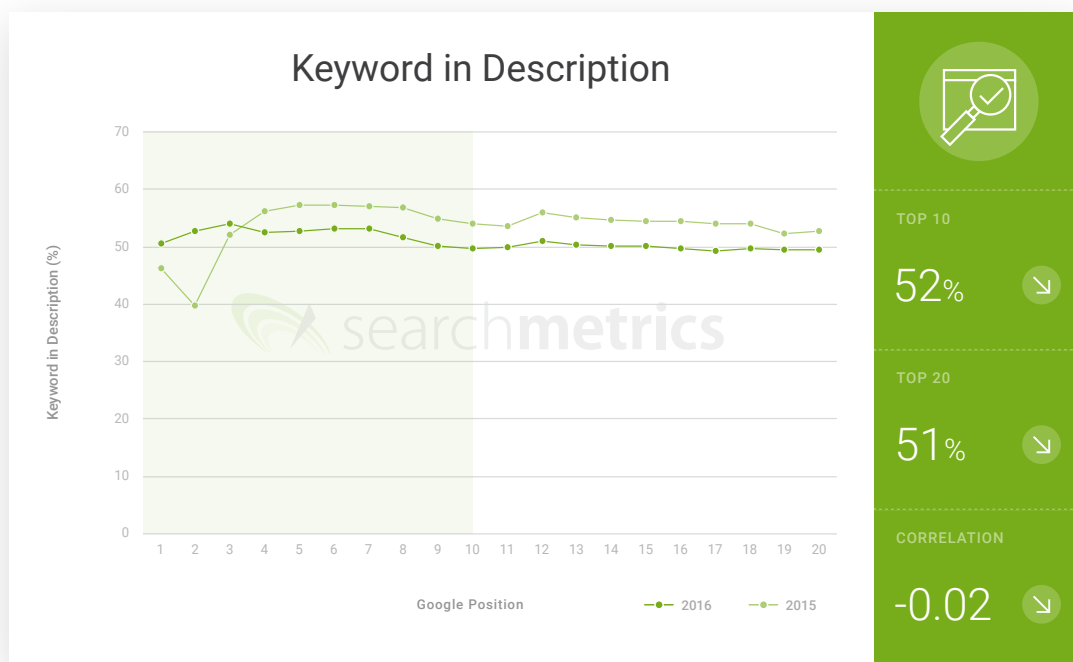




As texts grow longer, the use of keywords does not necessarily increase, as other synonyms and phrases are used. There is no observable Keyword Spamming (or "Keyword-Stuffing" (LINK) amongst the high-ranking pages, which now use around 20% fewer keywords in the body than last year.

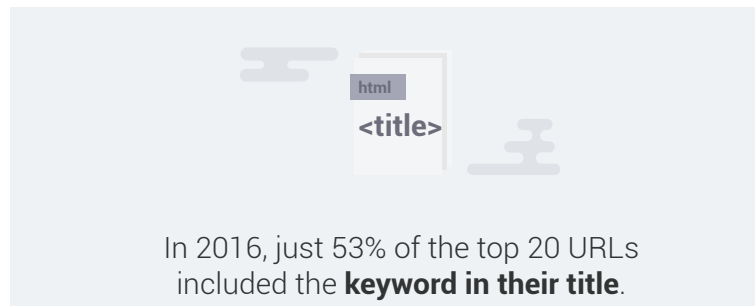






The importance of individual keywords continues to decline – also as a result of Google's Machine Learning algorithms. The relevance factors above showed that good rankings are based on the holistic optimization of texts at topic level, meaning that the keyword itself is now of secondary importance.

Accordingly, now only around half of the landing pages in the top 20 have the keyword in their title. The same is true for the description. Under 40% of landing pages have the keyword in their H1. This clearly demonstrates that Google evaluates content according to its relevance – and not by the inclusion of individual keywords.



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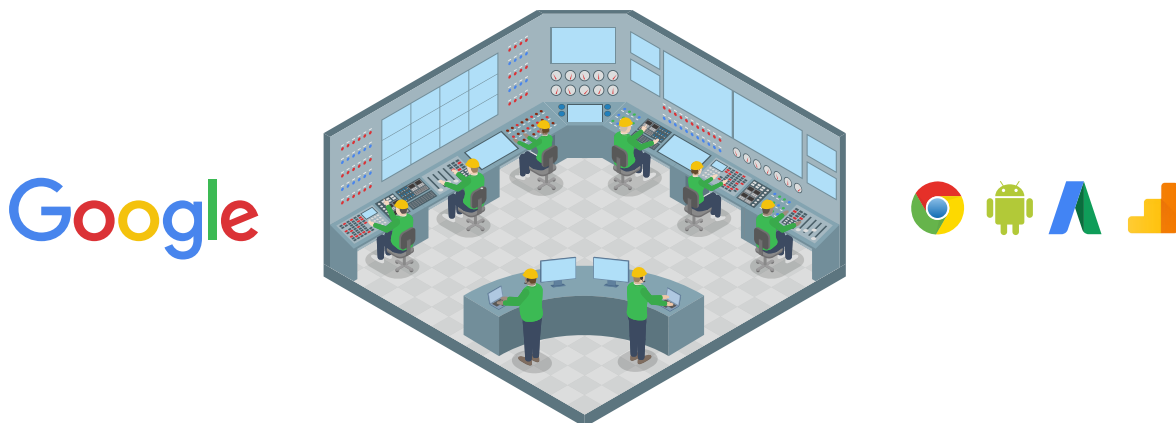
# User Signals

As mentioned earlier, together with the quality of content, the user signals generated by interactions – like Click-Through Rate (how frequently search results are clicked on, also CTR), the Time on Site (how long a user spends on a page) and the Bounce Rate (percentage of single-page sessions) – can now be considered amongst the most important ranking factors.

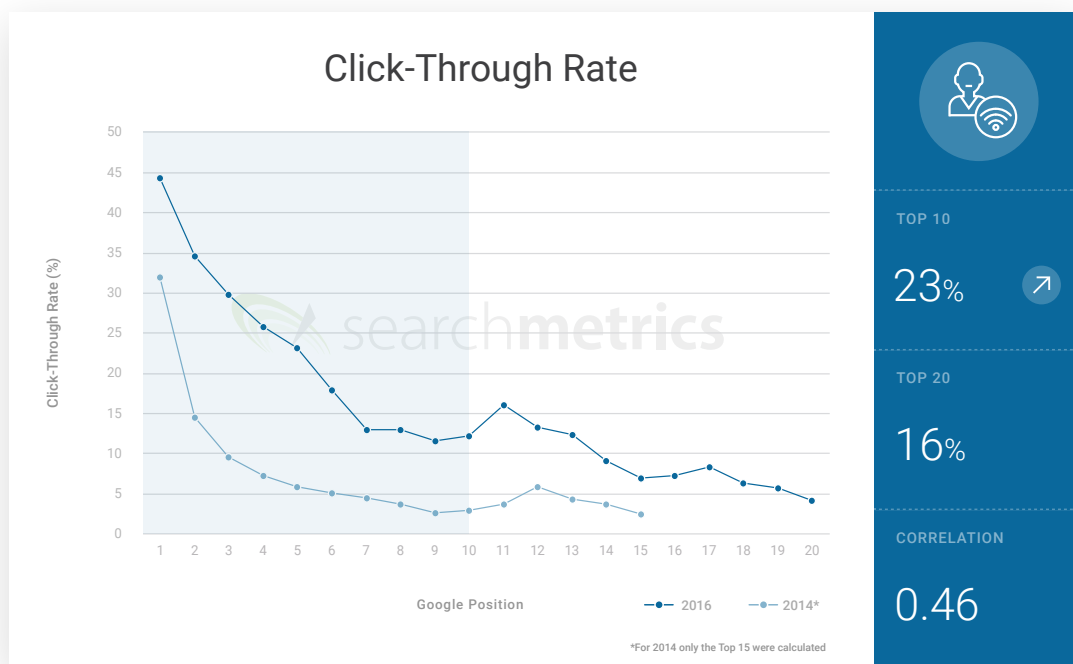
The reason for these signals' importance is that processing user feedback is one of the most direct ways of assessing the relevance of content. This makes it possible for search engines to draw precise conclusions regarding user satisfaction – and regarding whether or not the search result was able to fulfil the user intention. This tallies, because users will be more likely to click on the result to begin with, spend longer on the page once there and visit more pages per domain.

Google can use its extensive range of products for highly effective measurement and evaluation of these signals. For example:

1. user behavior on the search results page (Click rate, bounce rate, any further clicks etc.)
2. Google Chrome Browser
3. Google Analytics
4. Android
5. AdWords/ AdSense
6. Product Listing Ads
7. etc.



Having first collected information related to user signals in 2014, we have again gathered this data this year. The 2016 data is not only more up-to-date, but is based on significantly more keywords than in 2014, letting us draw more precise comparisons and make more accurate prognoses.

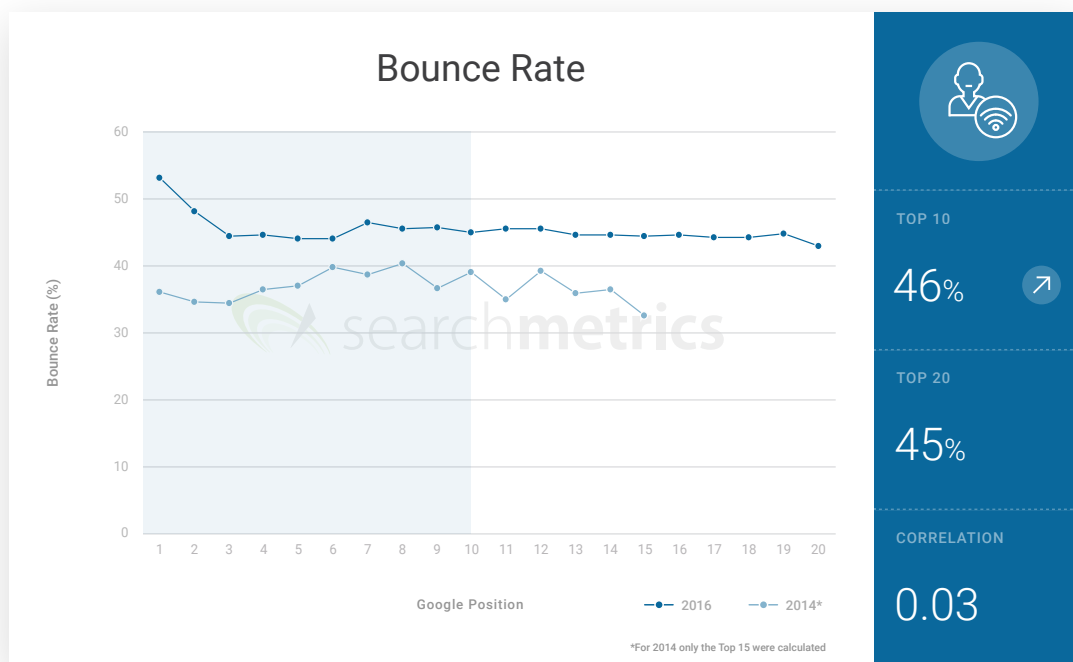


The Click-Through Rate measures the average percentage of users who click on the result at each position on the SERP. The CTR calculated for our dataset is much higher than that of our previous analysis – and in sum is far higher than 100%. This is because users often click through several URLs in the search results to find information or to research a product.

Our data shows that keywords in position 1 have an average CTR of 44%, the rate dropping to 30% for position 3. This year, we again see that the click rate for landing pages at the top of the second results page is higher than for results at the bottom of page 1.

As with our analysis in 2014, the correlation for CTR is higher than for any other ranking factor we have calculated. In 2016, this correlation is 0.46.



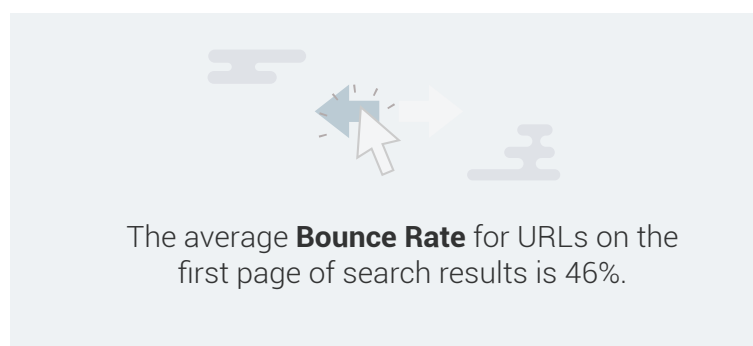


The Bounce Rate measures the percentage of users who only click on the URL from Google's search results, without visiting any other URLs on the domain, and then return back to the SERP. These are single-page sessions where the user leaves the site without interacting with the page.

On its own, this is insufficient for drawing conclusions about the quality of the content, because users can also "bounce" once their intention has been fulfilled. That said, combined with the other KPIs and/or information regarding the content category or the purpose and type of page (e.g. glossary entry or product page), the Bounce Rate can help to measuring a URL's relevance.

Compared with our first analysis in 2014, the proportion of bounces has risen for all positions across the search results. Overall, the average Bounce Rate for the first results page stands at 46%, up from 37% in 2014.

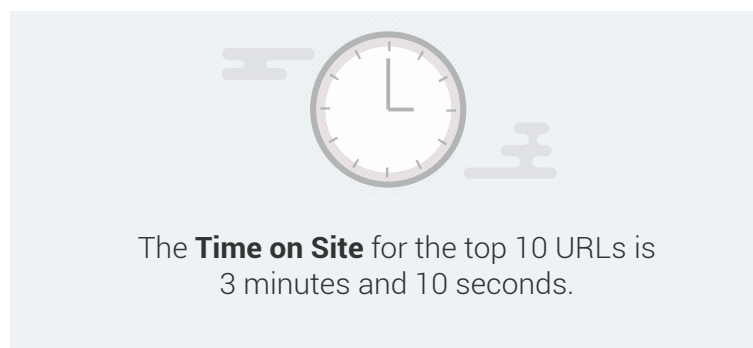
Our hypothesis is that this continuing rise is primarily due to an increase in Google directing users straight to the specific URL with the precise information sought, meaning they have no need to delve deeper into a domain. This is supported by the large increase in average Time on Site, described below.





The length of time users spend on a page also gives Google an indicator of how satisfied the user is with a result. Clearly, this is dependent on the precise search intention, as a user who quickly finds the answer to an exact question won't spend long on the page. On average, an increase in Time on Site suggests that the page is delivering worthwhile, interesting content.

Our data shows that the Time on Site has risen, compared with our first user signal analysis in 2014. On average, users spend more than three minutes (190 seconds) on the top-ranking URL, which is around the same as the average Time on Site for all URLs on the first page of results. At 3 minutes and 10 seconds, this is also significantly higher than the values measured in the past.

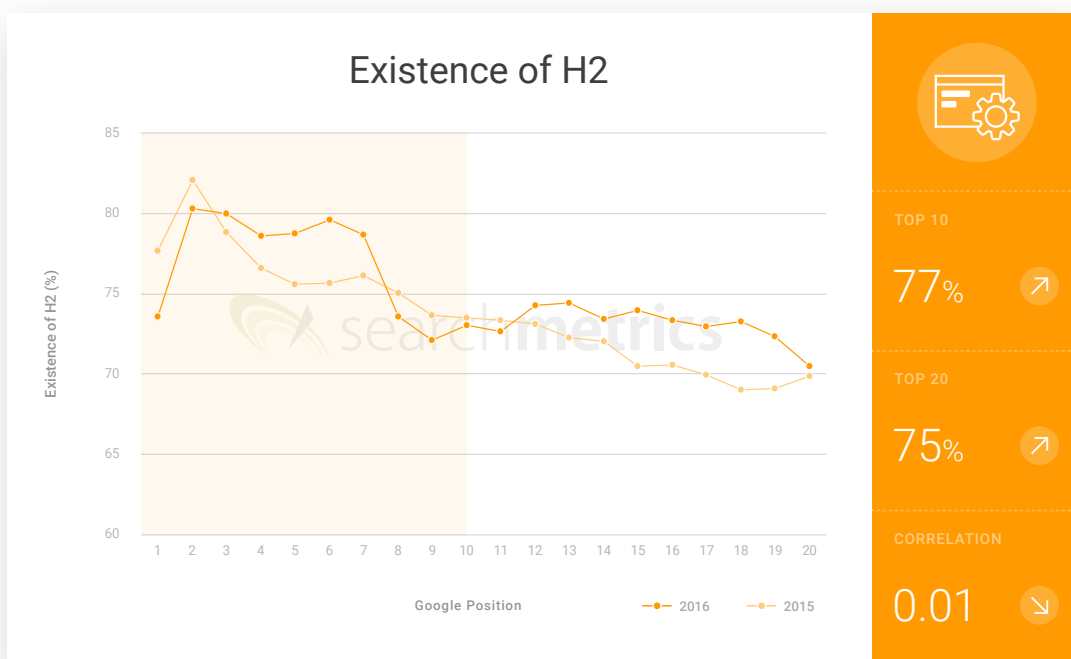
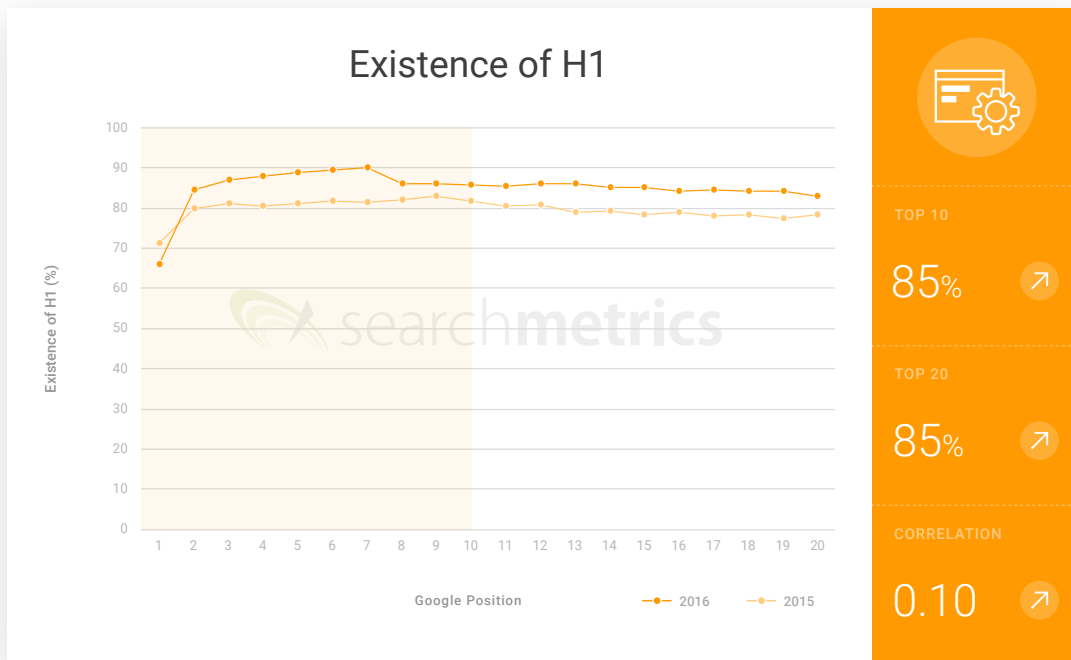


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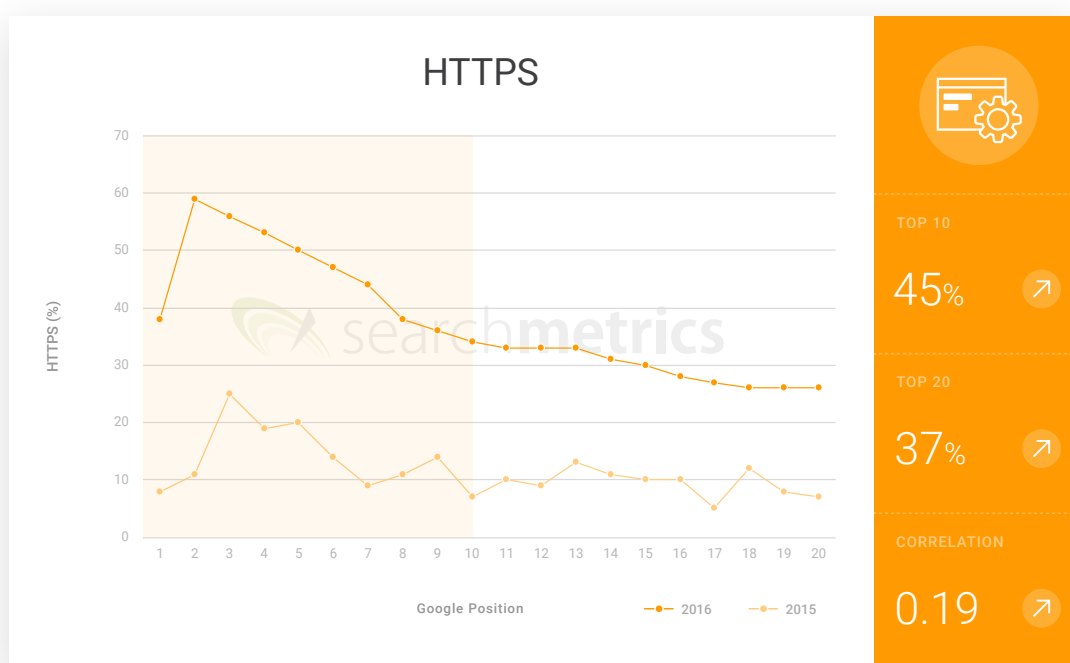
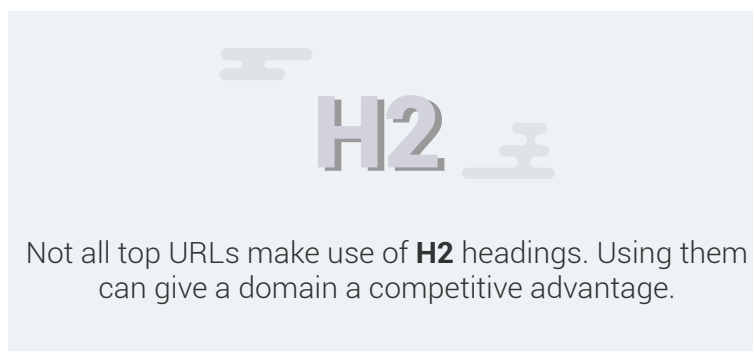
# Technical Factors

This chapter deals with on-page factors that are part of a website's technical structure but not directly related to its content.





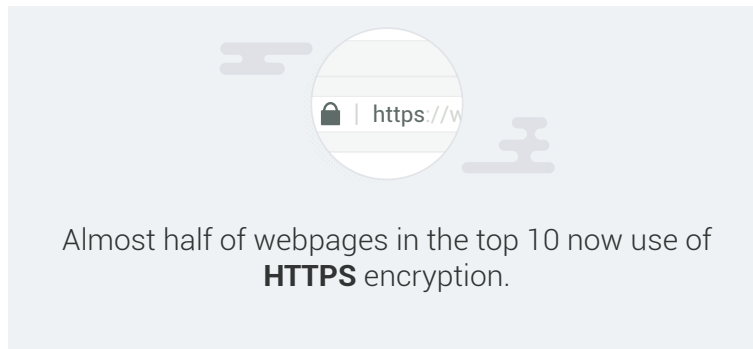
The proportion of landing pages with an H1 or H2 in the source code has risen for almost all search result positions compared with last year. The only position where the use of an H1 is less common is position 1. As a rule, these tend to be brand pages – an observation we call the “brand factor”. The use of (at least) one H2 has been found to be more frequent this year on average across all positions, with the general trend of more H2 for higher-ranking positions remaining true.



Page encryption using HTTPS is currently on the march. Last year, only 12% of pages relied on data transfer via HTTP. Today, this has more than tripled, with over a third of websites encrypting the data traffic on their pages.

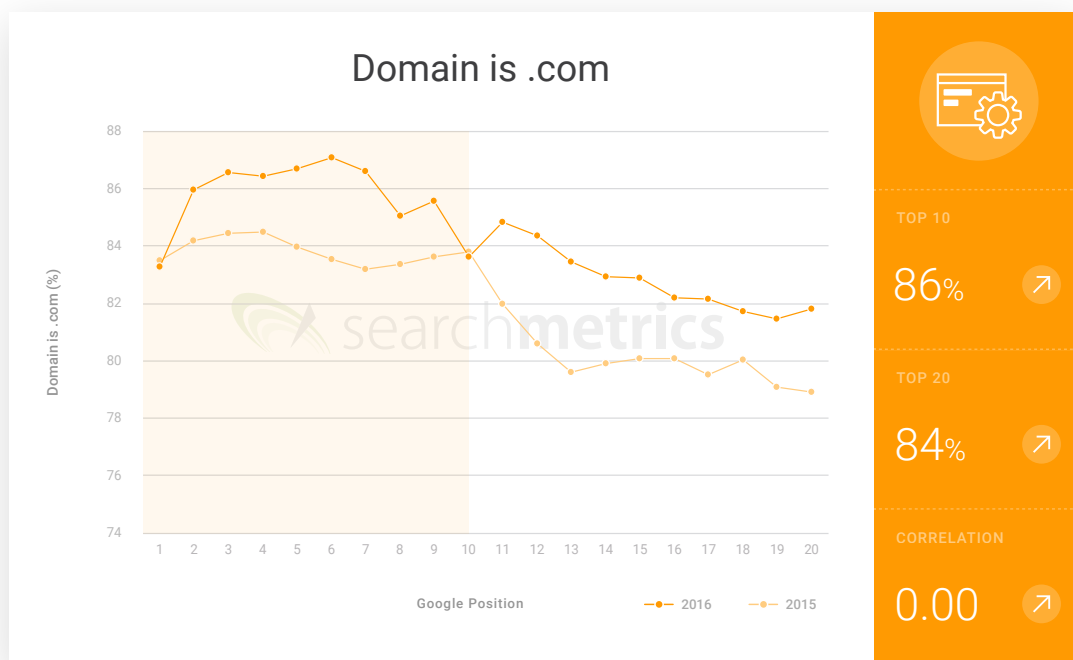
Furthermore, Google has announced that pages that have not switched to HTTPS by 2017 will be marked as “unsafe” in its Chrome browser. This will continue to elevate the status of HTTPS as a ranking factor.

**Source:** <https://security.googleblog.com/2016/09/moving-towards-more-secure-web.html>



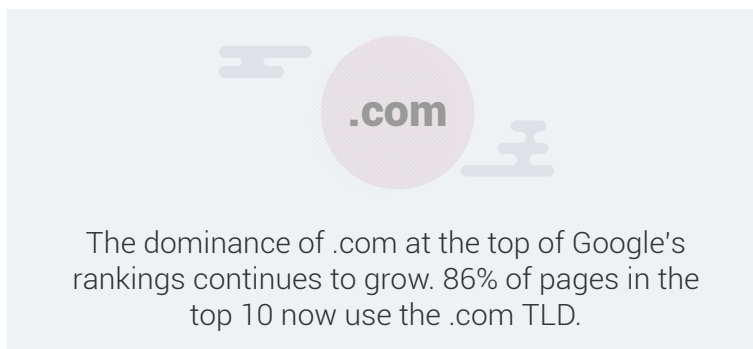
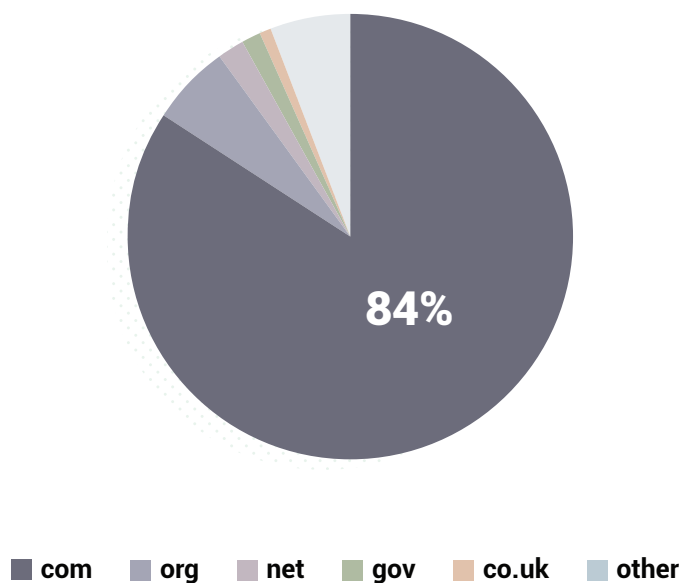
### TLD Rankings

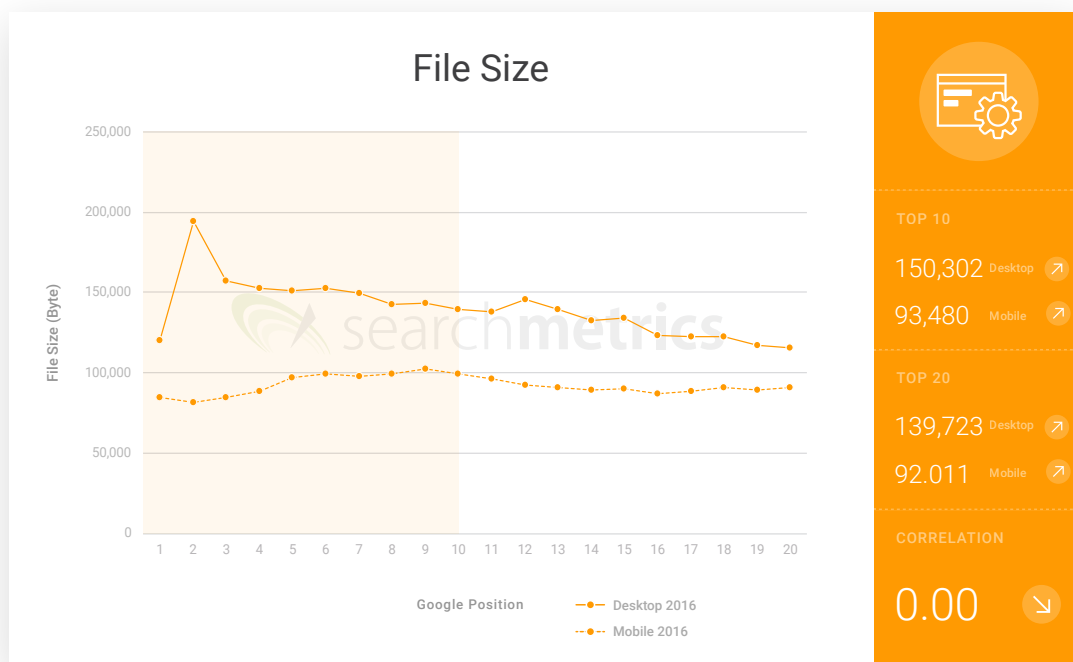
There has been a large increase in the presence of .com pages in the top 20 of Google's rankings. The benefit of having a TLD has to do with authority. Pages with a .com TLD tend to be evaluated more strongly, contributing to their continued dominance amongst high-ranking webpages.



The following chart shows the percentage distribution of the most common Top Level Domain endings in the US Google Index:

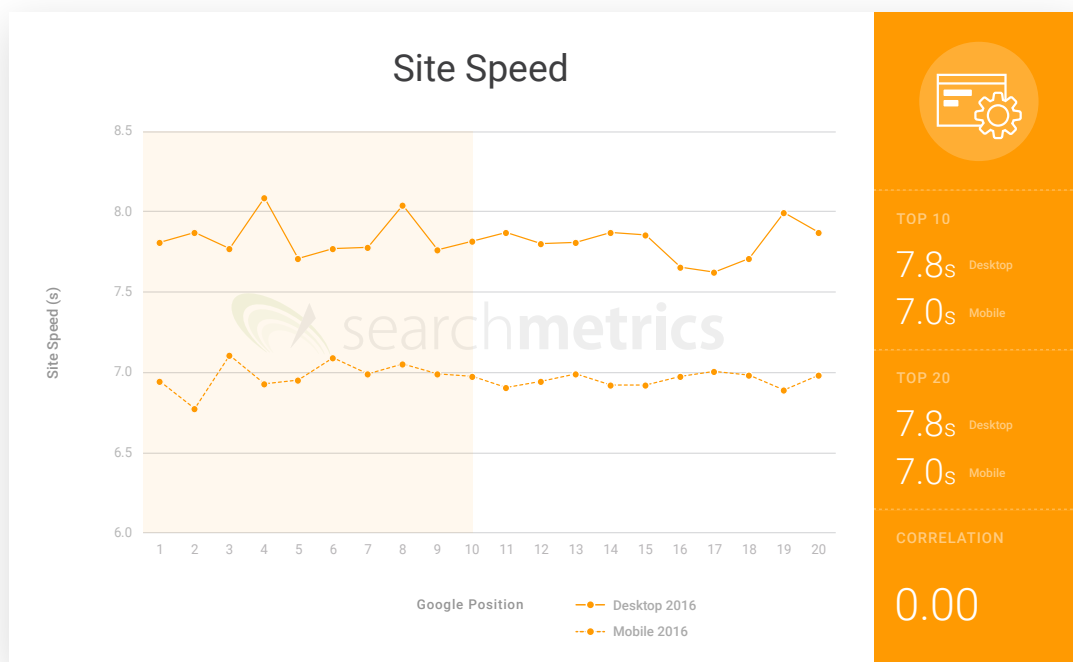
**TLDs Desktop US Index Top 20**





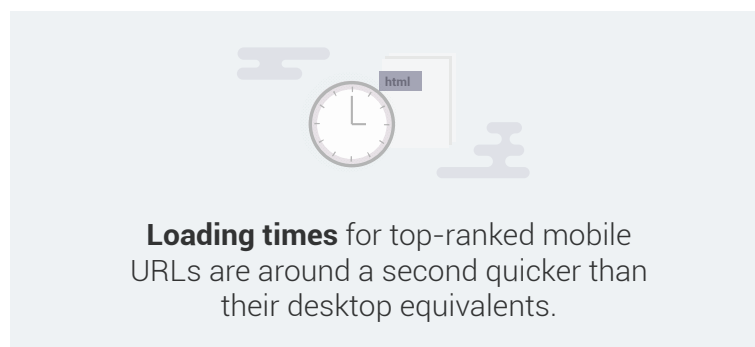
This year – for the first time – we have measured the unzipped file sizes of webpages. Previous results, using zipped files, have therefore been excluded, as they do not offer an equivalent for comparison. Instead, we can compare this year's mobile and desktop file sizes. These show that pages ranking for mobile are on average around a third smaller than the landing pages in the desktop results.

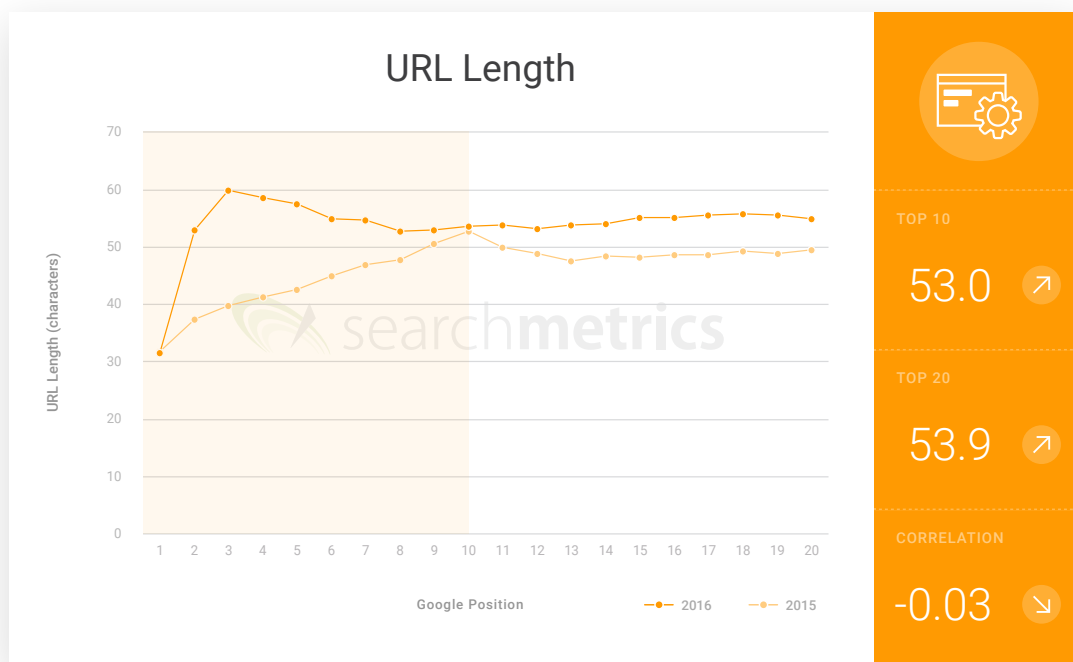
On the whole – with the exception of the results in position 1 – we can say: The higher up an online document ranks in the desktop search results, the larger the file size is likely to be. This is not true of mobile search results.



The methodology for measuring pages' loading times has also changed for this year's analysis, so we are avoiding meaningless comparisons with the previous years' results. For the first time, we have measured the complete timeframe, right up until a page's visible area had completely finished loading in the browser.

If we compare mobile and desktop, we see that mobile search results load almost a second more quickly than those in the desktop results. This could, among other factors, be connected to the use of responsive mobile pages. Last year, the difference in loading times between mobile and desktop URLs was much less pronounced.





The number of characters in URLs has risen by over 15 percent since last year. One cause could be that more holistic landing pages have supplanted homepages or "SEO-optimized" pages near the top of the rankings. Where in the past a domain's homepage may have ranked highly, Google now prefers to show the precise URL related to the search query.

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# Related Discussion: Mobile-Friendliness

## Mobile Traffic

The proportion of traffic generated from mobile devices has continued to rise over the past years. In May 2015, Google announced for the first time that, according to its own data, "more Google searches take place on mobile devices than on computers". This was true of ten countries, including the USA and Japan.

## Mobile-friendly – Impact of "Mobilegeddon"

The Google mobile update on 21st April 2015 caused less turbulence in the actual search results than the hashtag #Mobilegeddon did on social media. Nevertheless, we have seen an expected trend, as the number of websites in the mobile search results that are optimized for mobile devices has increased by several percentage points since the start of 2015

In August 2016, Google announced that the "mobile-friendly label" which had been used to separate the wheat from the chaff, was being eliminated. Reason:

“

„We've seen the ecosystem evolve and we recently found that 85% of all pages in the mobile search results now meet this criteria".

**Source:** <https://webmasters.googleblog.com/2016/08/helping-users-easily-access-content-on.html>

The label has since been removed.

There are, however, still many examples where Google still ranks the desktop version of a page in the mobile results, even though an equivalent mobile URL is available. This raises at least some doubt over the 85% figure given by Google for the proportion of mobile-friendly pages in the mobile search results.

## Mobile-first Index

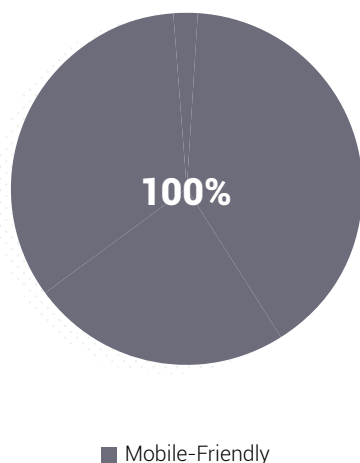
Another strong reason for making a website mobile-friendly is Google's announcement that it intends to switch to a mobile-first index. Where in the past the desktop versions of pages were used as the Google's main index for evaluating websites and determining rankings, the mobile version is set to take over. As a consequence, any pages which perform poorly in mobile search, possibly because they lack a mobile-friendly design, could also see a negative impact on their desktop rankings.

More than ever, webmasters need to be aware from 2017 of how to make their pages mobile-friendly. The most important ranking factors are those which show a large difference between mobile and desktop results. Site speed, file size and word count are factors where more streamlined URLs rank higher in the mobile index.

## Mobile-friendly websites

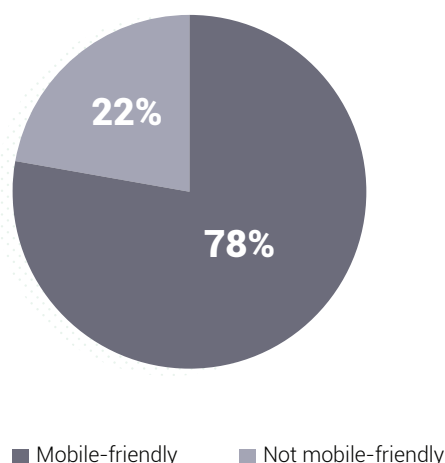
The following graphics show the frequency of websites with mobile-friendly solutions amongst the top 100 domains by SEO visibility.

Top 100 Domains Google US



That's right. All 100 of the top 100 have a mobile-friendly solution. These include the use of a mobile sub-domain, dynamic serving, responsive design and/or mobile apps.

Mobile-friendliness: Sample of smaller domains



Over a fifth of websites outside the top 100, based on a sample of smaller domains, offer no mobile-friendly solution to smartphone users. The upcoming shift to a mobile-first index will have a negative impact on such websites, should they fail to react and implement mobile-friendly solutions.



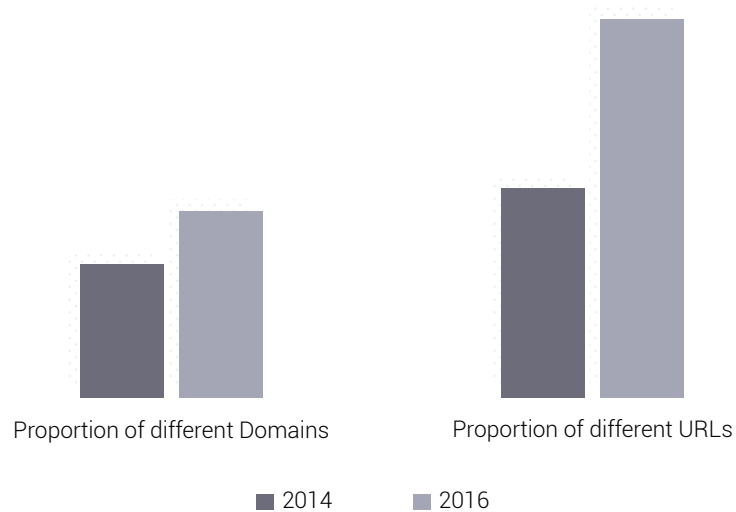
Further Links: Google Mobile-Friendly Test: [Link](#)

Detailed mobile-friendly and page-speed test with score: [Link](#)

### Variation between mobile and desktop

As we did two years ago, we have again analyzed how many pages in the search results are the same when comparing desktop and mobile – and how many are different. We have divided this analysis along domain and URL lines:

#### SERP Differences Desktop vs Mobile Comparison between 2014 und 2016



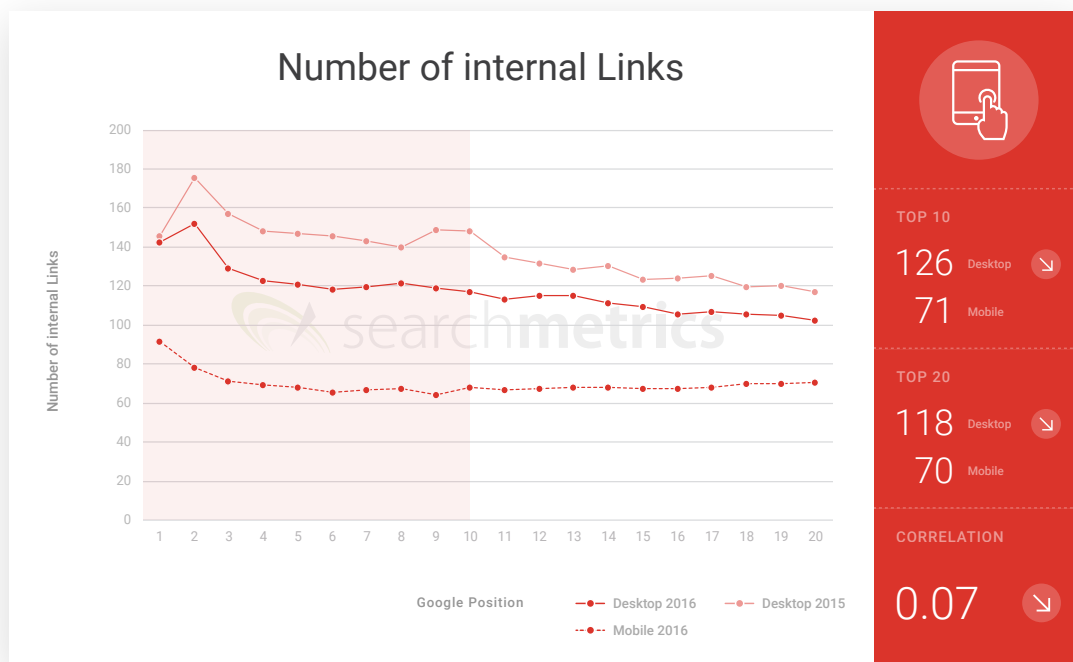
The trend shows that there is an increasing between the search results for mobile and desktop. At domain level, the proportion of different domains has increased by 10 percentage points; at the URL level, the jump is almost 30 percentage points. The latter figure is presumably strongly connected to the increasing usage of mobile-specific (sub)-domains like those of the form m.domain.com.

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# User Experience

The main aspects of user experience addressed in this chapter relate to design and usability. Improvements in user experience are part of on-page optimization.

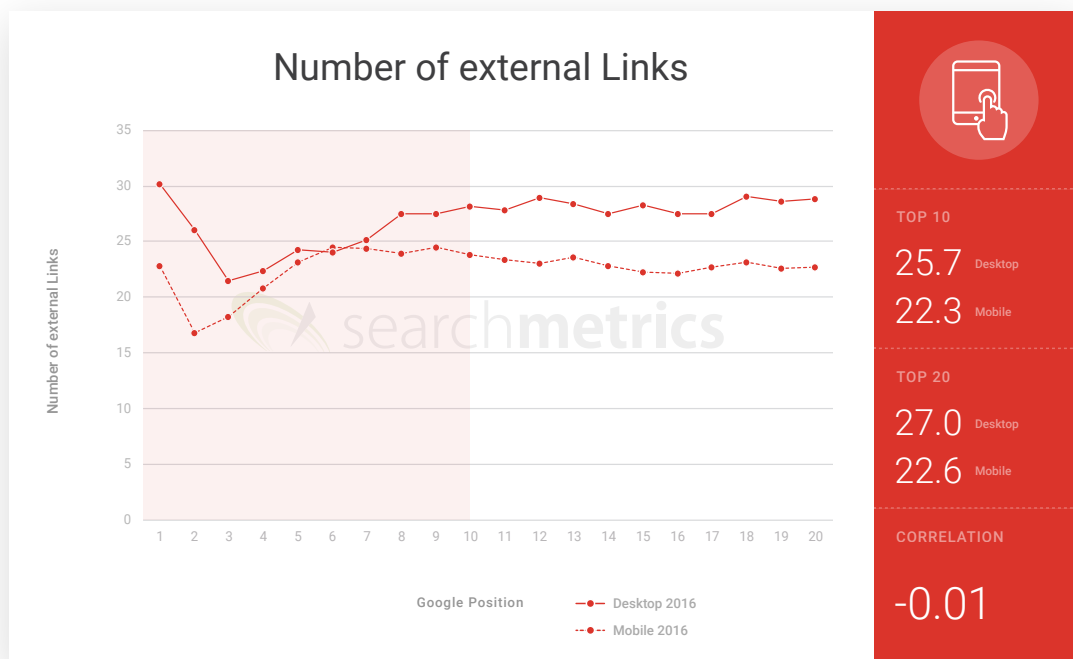


The number of internal links, which can be seen as one of the most important ranking factors, has fallen dramatically. It is therefore not the sheer volume of internal links that is important, but the implementation of a concise and relevant internal link structure. Optimizing how accessible sub-pages within a domain are is the only way of guaranteeing that search engine bots can effectively crawl them. At the same time, a logical link structure can contribute strongly to a user-friendly experience across the whole domain.

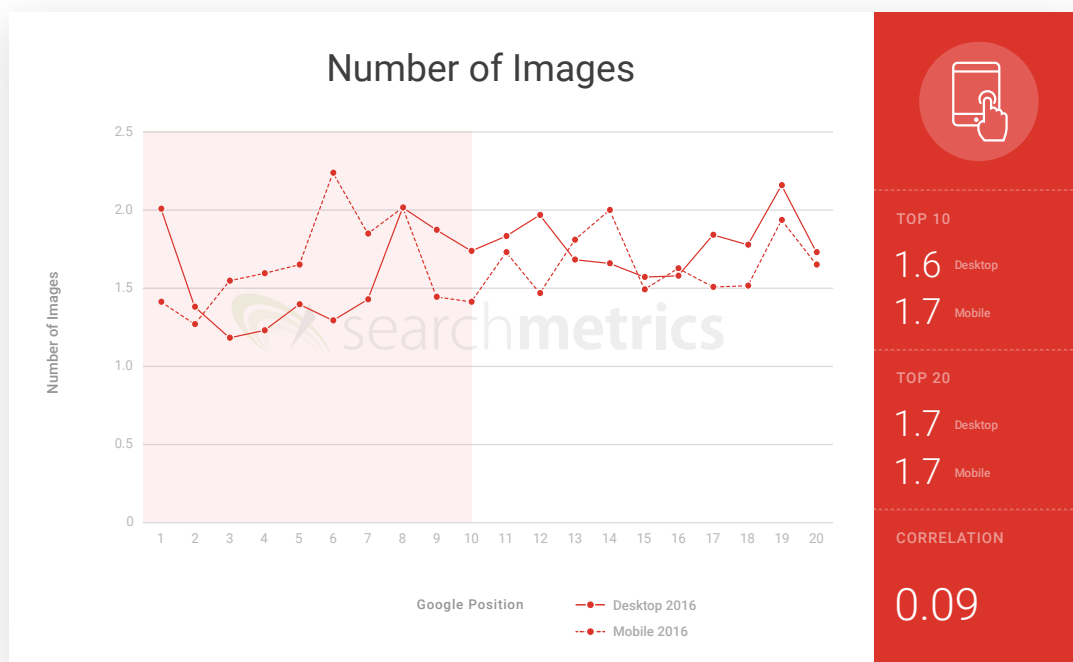
On average, mobile URLs have around 40% fewer internal links than desktop URLs, based on an identical keyword set.



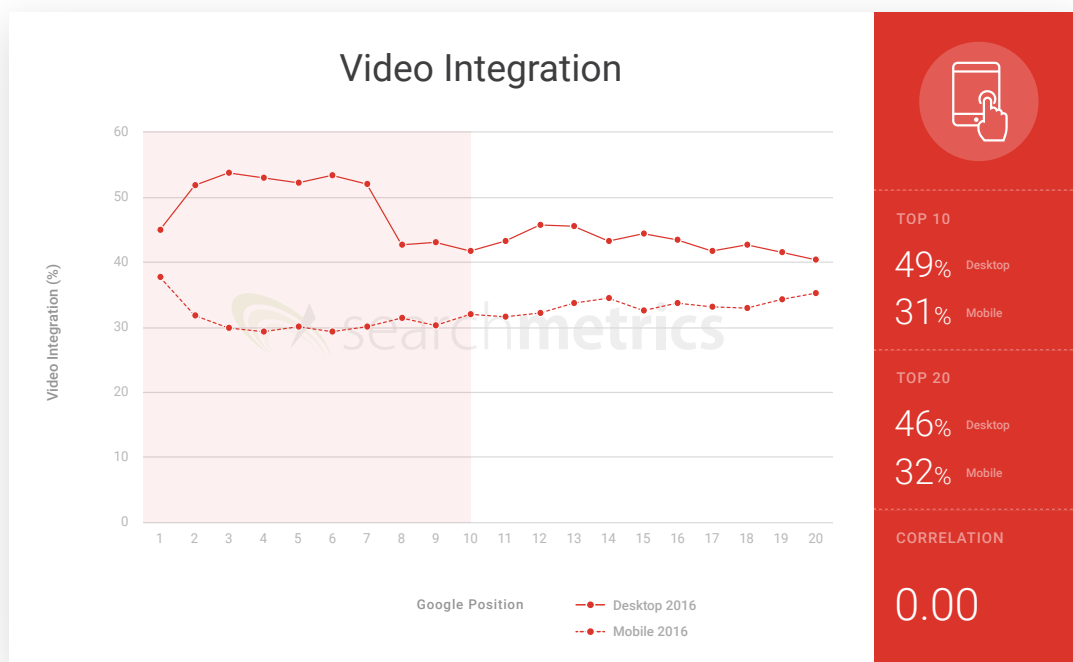
**Internal links** are one of the most important ranking factors, helping search engines and users alike to understand the page and to find relevant URLs.



External links to relevant pages can also have a strong positive effect for the linking page if they provide benefit to the user. Despite their reputation for abuse, links remain one of the core principles of the internet and internal linking in particular is a key component to showing crawlers site structure and related content.



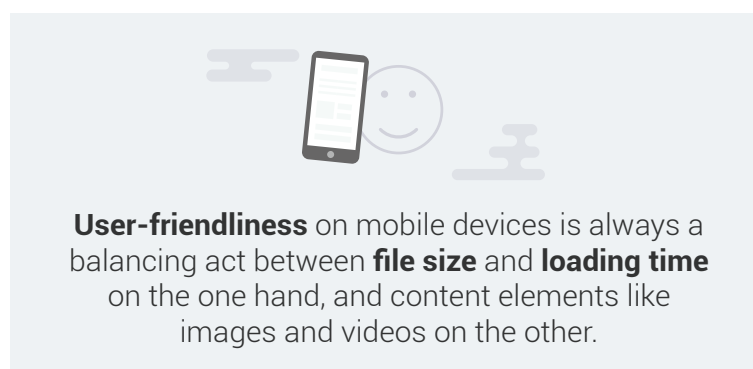
This year, we have refined the calculation method for measuring the number of images on a website. In the past, where all images were counted, we have now only included images of at least 200 pixels. This renders any comparison with last year meaningless. What is evident is that the use of images is similar across all positions within the search results. The websites analyzed which rank in the top 20 have an average of 1.67 images larger than 200 pixels per page.



As a refinement of the data used in the past, this year's analysis has looked separately at embedded videos and hosted videos. Although just one percent of the pages analyzed had self-hosted videos, embedded videos are found much more frequently. Almost half of the URLs in the top 10 use embedded video.

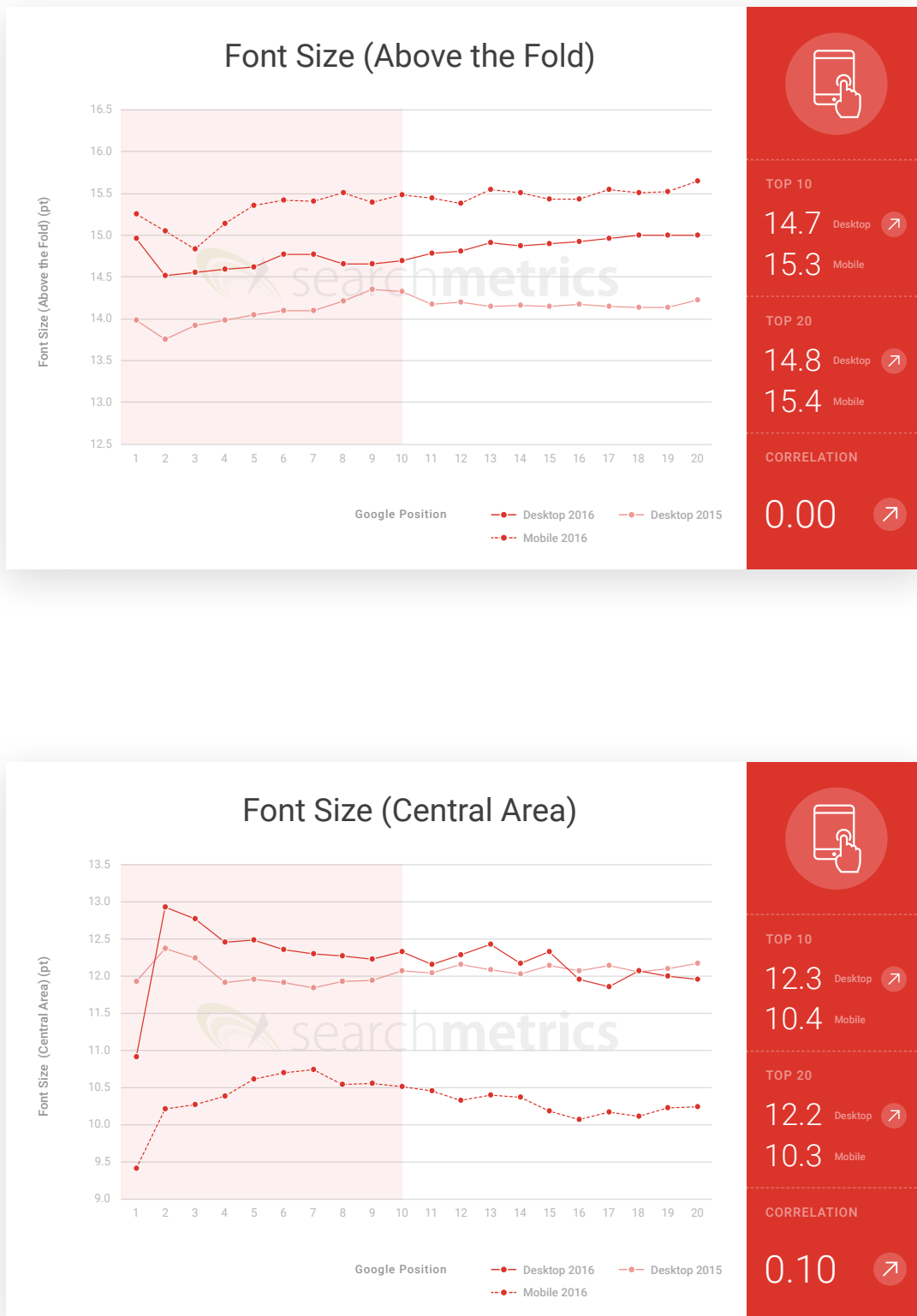
Furthermore, the comparison between desktop and mobile is of interest, with the average use of embedded video on mobile almost 20 percentage points lower for positions 1 thru 10.

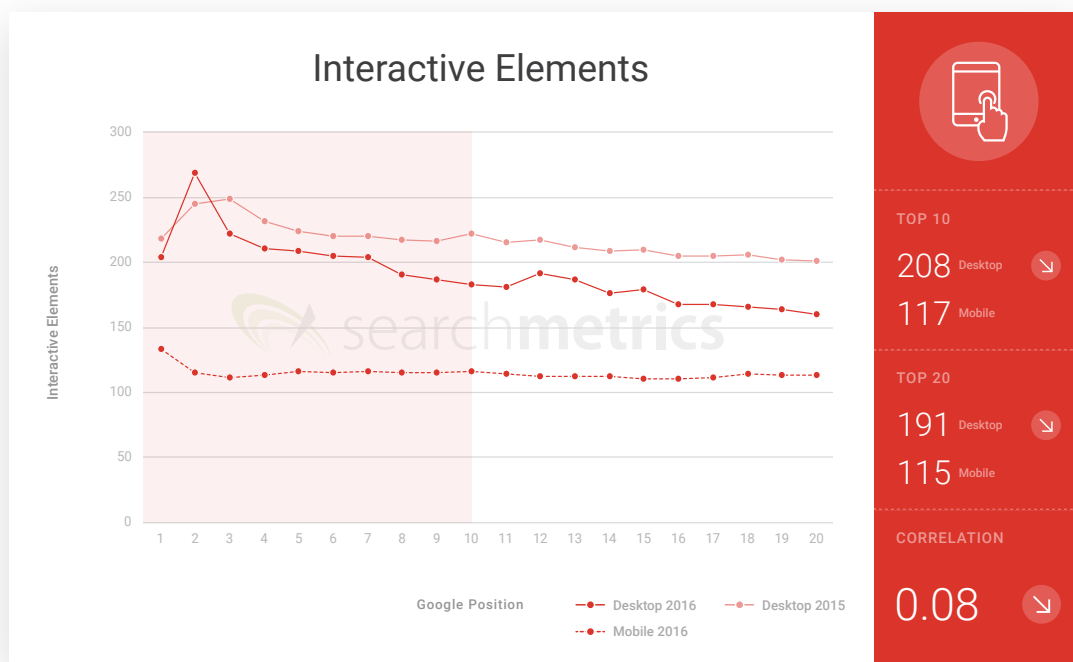
In general, it is now only video portals that Google includes with a video snippet in the SERP. This makes the overall proportion of videos in the search results comparatively low.



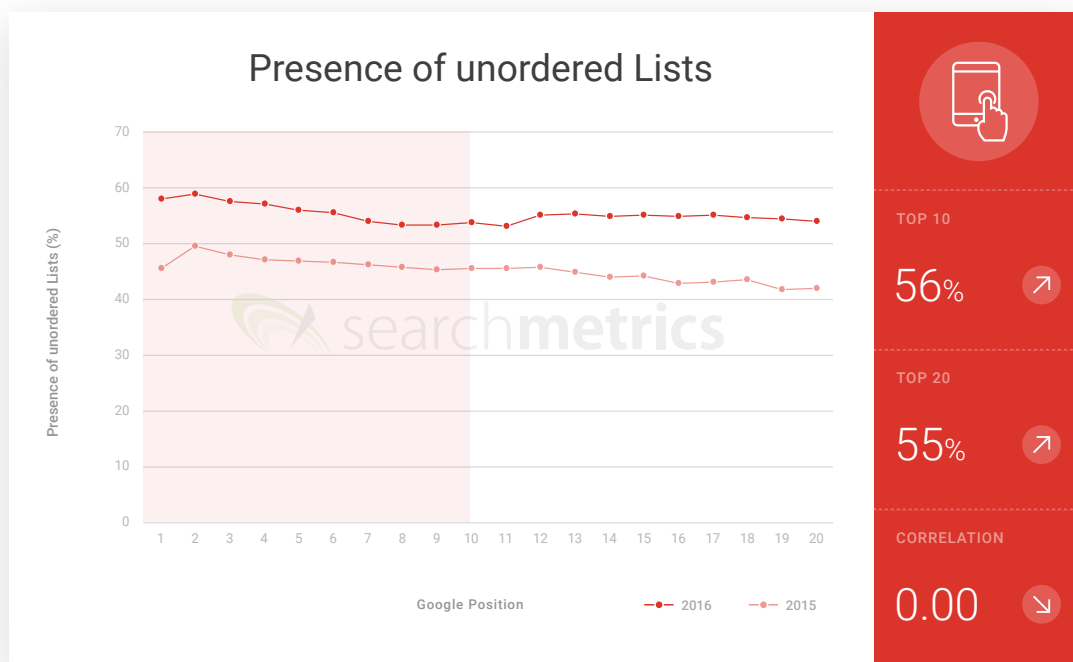
## Font size

Comparing font sizes for landing pages in mobile and desktop search results gives us clear differences in behavior. The different screen sizes mean that headings on mobile devices are larger than on desktop. The reverse is true for a page's main content – here, larger fonts are used on desktop.





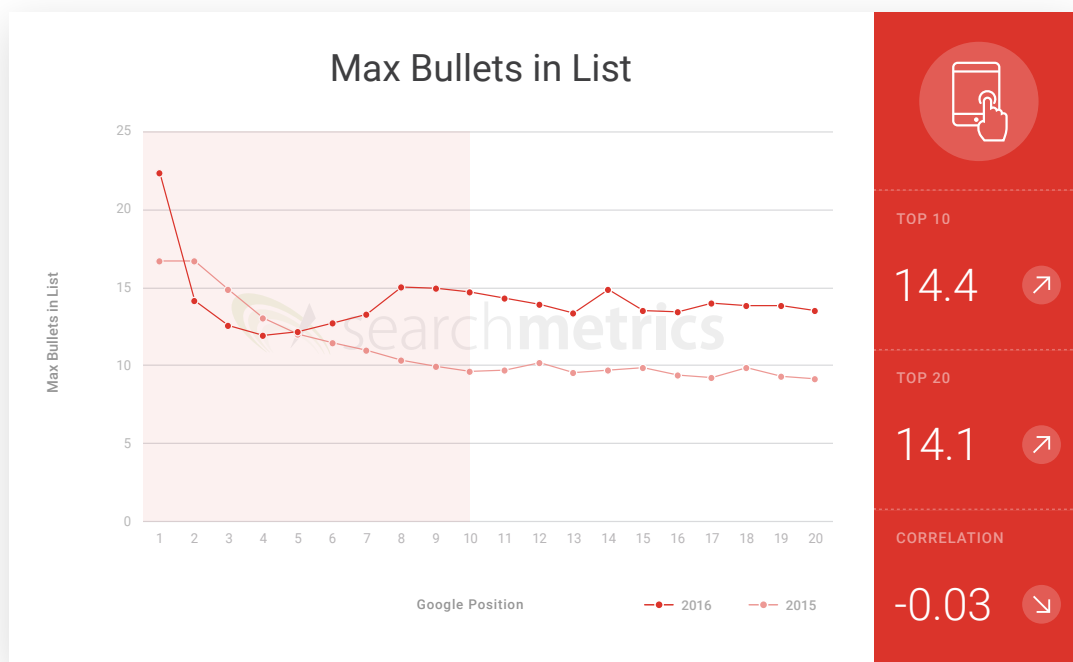
As with last year, we see that better ranking pages again contain more menus, buttons and other interactive elements. The comparison between the desktop and mobile values makes it clear that fewer elements are found on smartphones. This is likely due to the scarce mobile screen size, meaning that all visible elements of the screen must be factored in accordingly – from intuitive navigation to interactive elements. Overall, the number of mobile elements on both desktop and mobile has fallen slightly.



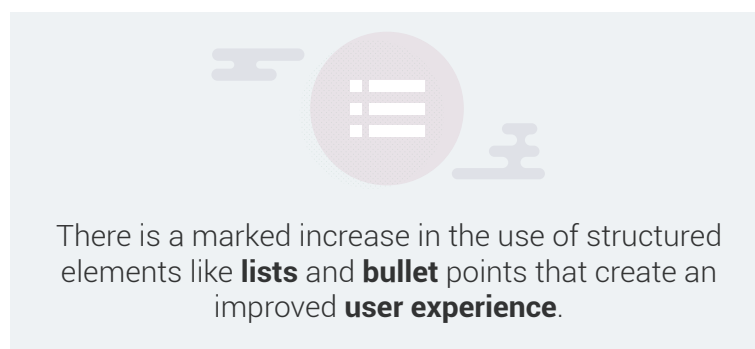
Across all search result positions, the use of unordered lists is high – between 53 percent and 59 percent. Unordered lists can include bullet points or similarly structured lists indicated by characters other than numbers (lists with numbers are ordered lists).

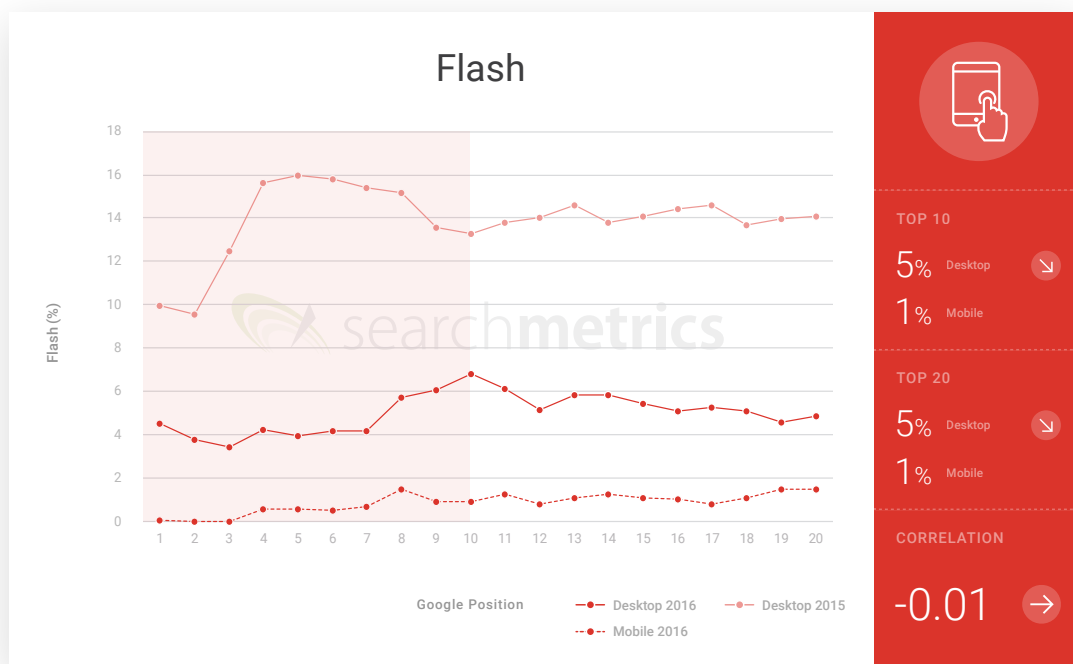
As with 2015, unordered lists remain common on high-ranking pages. In general: the higher a page ranks, the more likely it is that it contains a bullet point list.



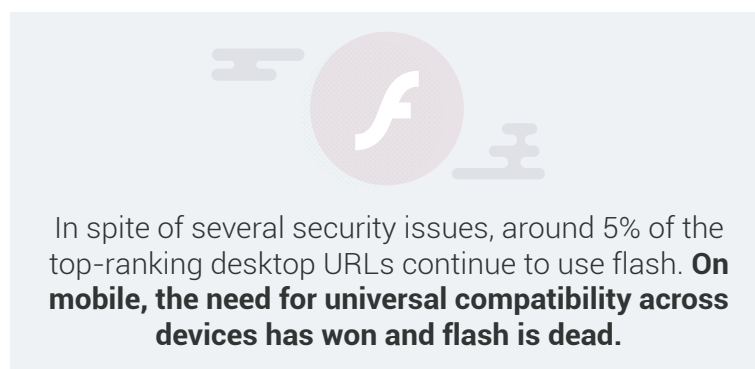


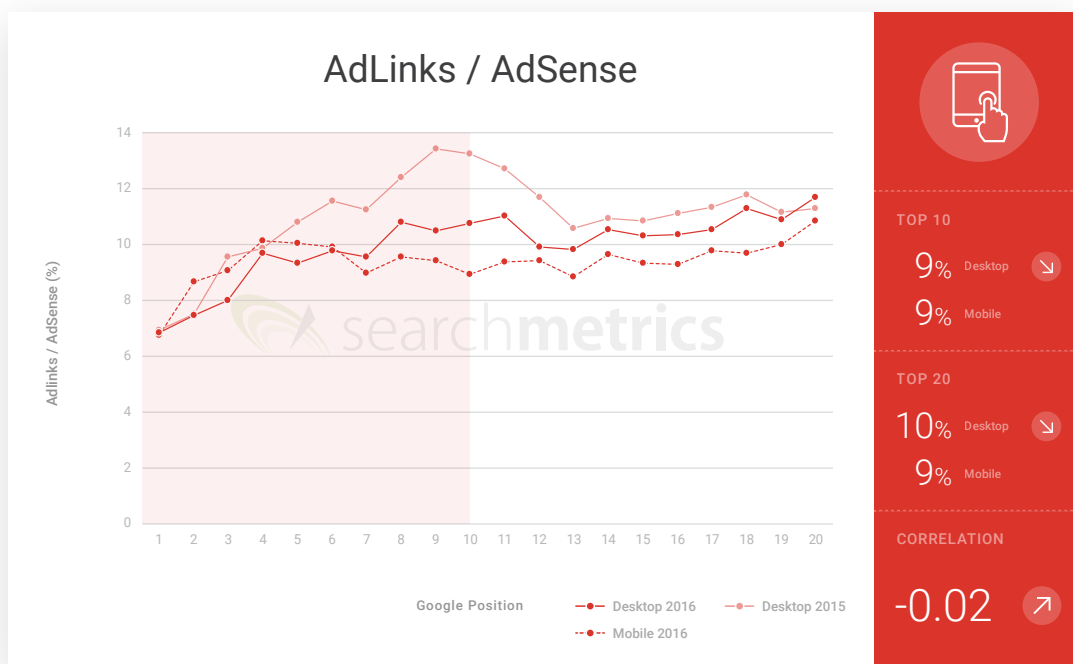
One area that has seen a sharp decline is the use of flash elements on top-ranked websites – a result of an array of security issues and the fact that many browsers block flash content.





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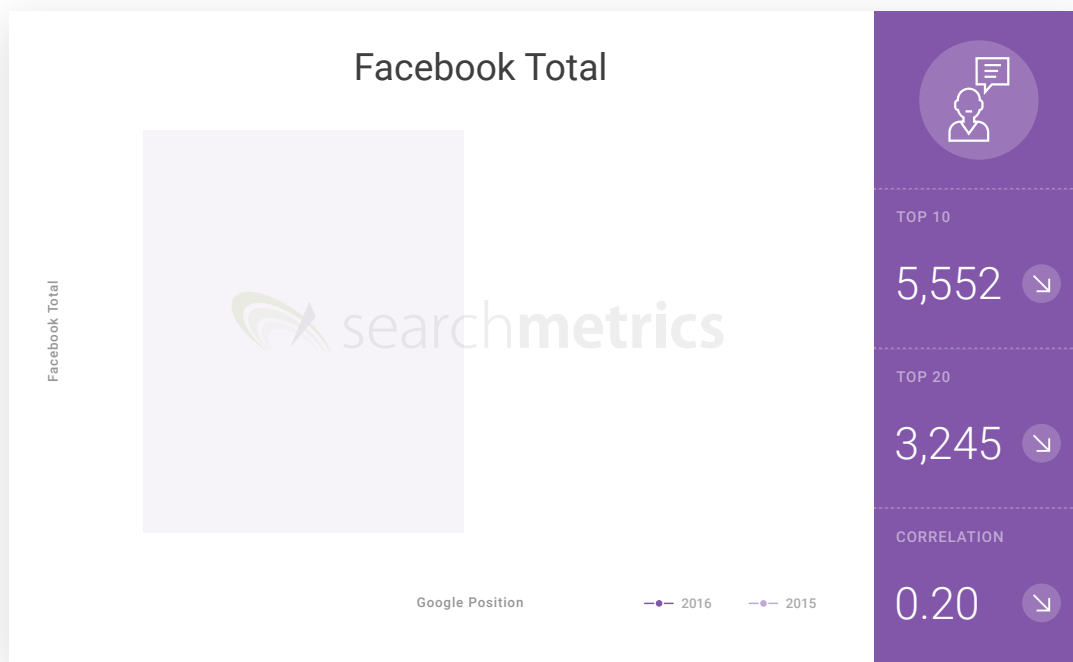
The variation in the use of AdLinks between desktop and mobile, which was observed in the previous year's results, has been eliminated. In 2016, the usage of Adlinks on desktop has decreased, so that now the rate is much the same across all devices.

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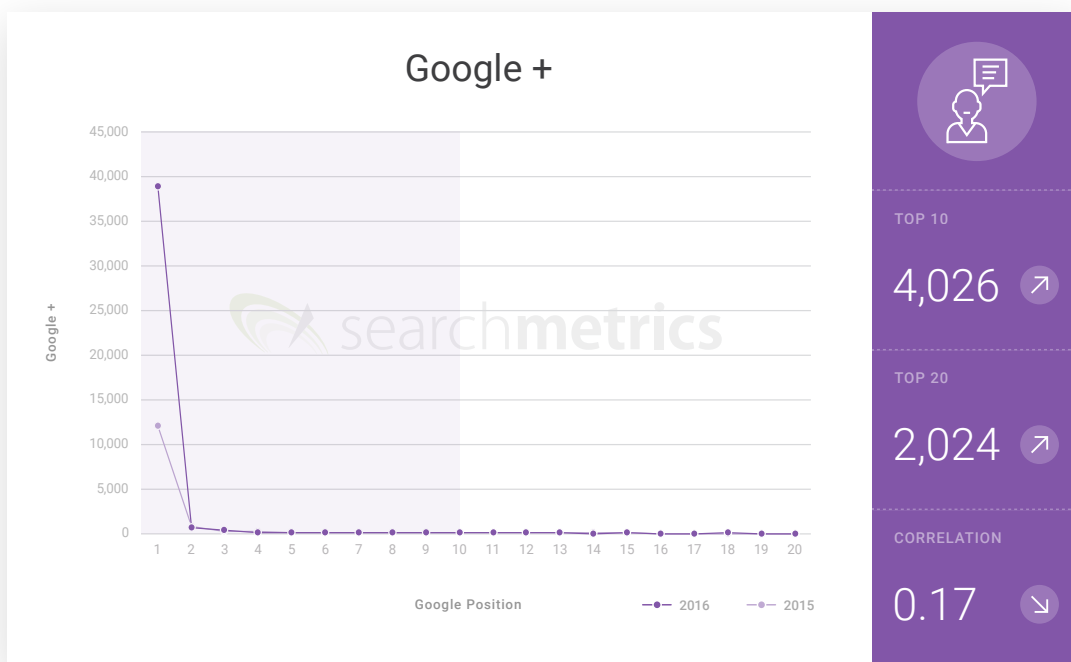


## Social Signals

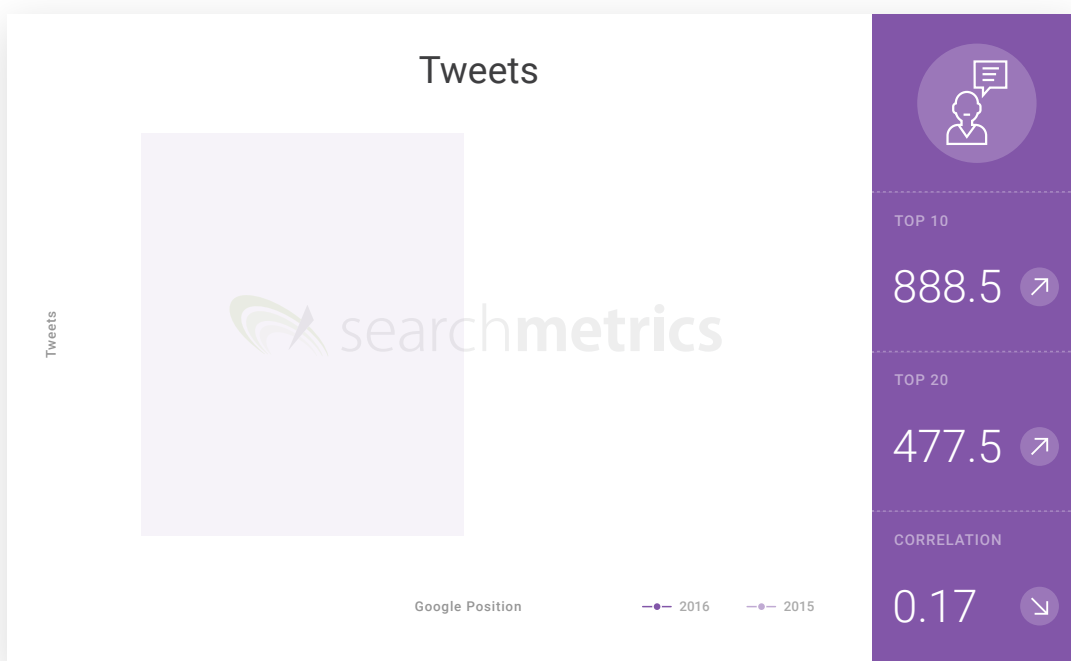
The correlation between social signals and ranking position is extremely high, and the number of social signals per landing page has remained constant when compared with the values from last year's whitepaper. This is true of all social networks analyzed.



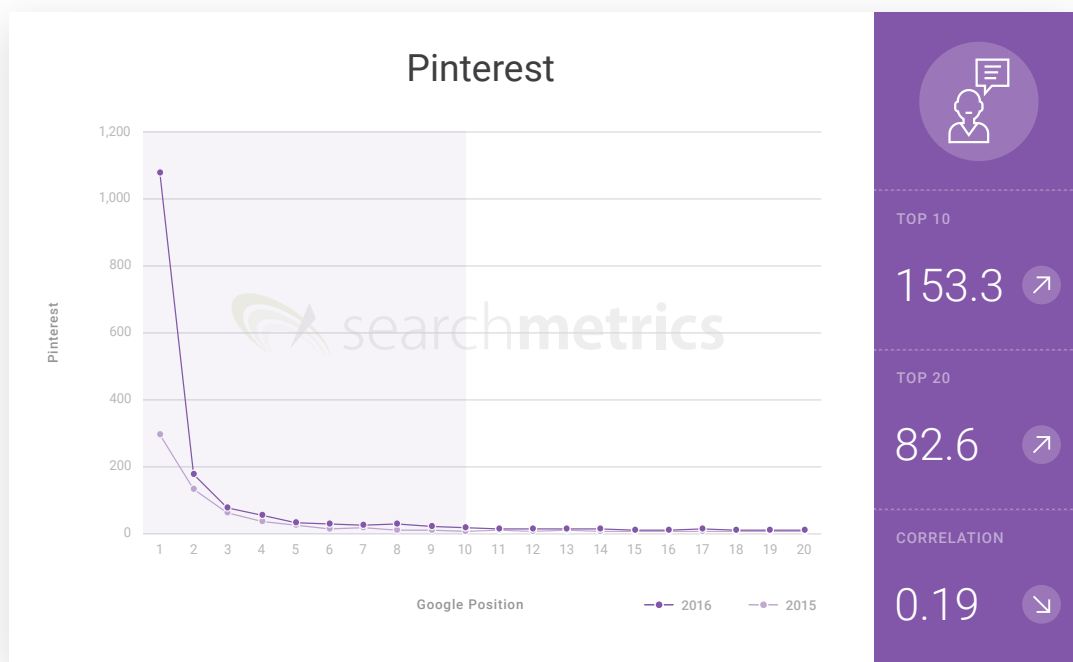
Facebook remains the social network with by far the highest level of user interactions. Furthermore, Facebook, compared with the other social networks, shows relatively high signals across the first search results page.



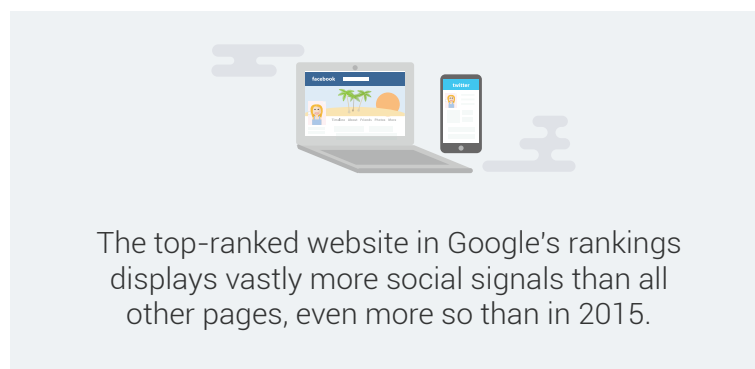
For Google+, we see a dramatic drop in the number of social signals after the first ranking position. In the majority of cases, this first position will be occupied by a brand.



The drop between first and second position for Twitter is almost as steep as for Google+. Again, brands correlating to the search query tend to occupy first position in Google's results.

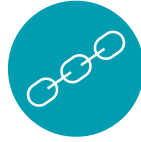


Pinterest also sees a large drop between first and second position, though the overall level of social signals is the lowest of the four social networks analyzed.



This is primarily due to overlap between brand websites performing strongly in social networks and being allocated top positions by Google.

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# Backlinks

For many years, backlinks were the main driving force of search engine rankings, the primary focus for SEOs and an important feature of our annual ranking factor whitepaper. For a long time, backlinks' considerable importance was also a reason for tactically motivated optimization measures.

These days are largely finished. For long-term success, in an age of self-learning algorithms evaluating semantic relationships between content and user intention, backlinks continue to decline in relevance and have now become just one of many contributing signals.

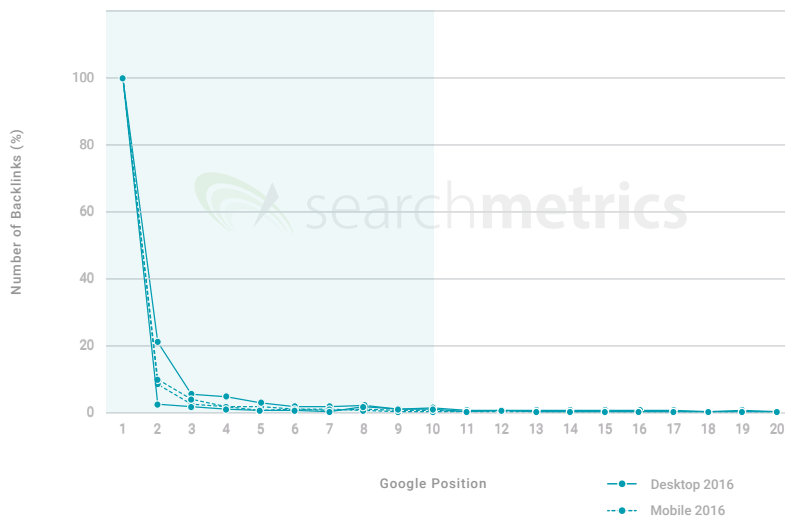
Until now, the correlations for backlink factors had kept high, even though they had partly been decreasing year-on-year. In 2016, the downward trends continue.

Looking ahead to our upcoming whitepapers, which will address ranking factors for specific industries, we have expressed backlinks as percentage values. This aids comparison across industries.



The **correlations** for **backlinks** remain high, but their importance for a page's ranking will continue to decline.

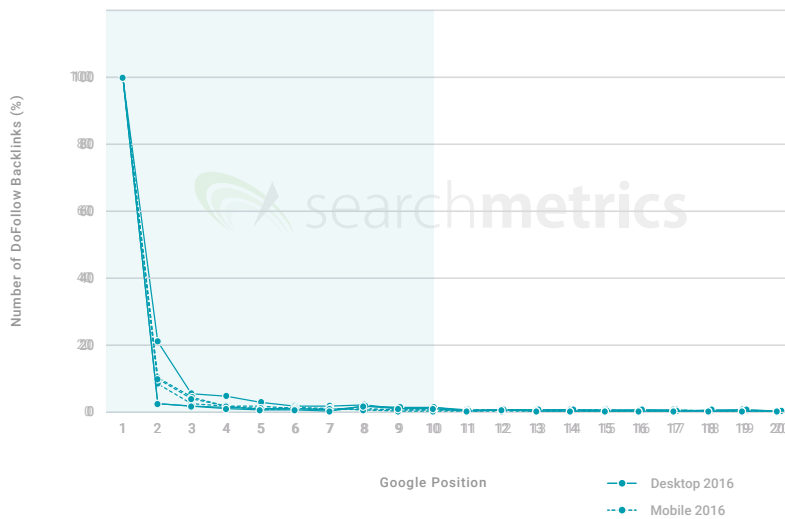
## Number of Backlinks



CORRELATION

0.18

## Number of DoFollow Backlinks

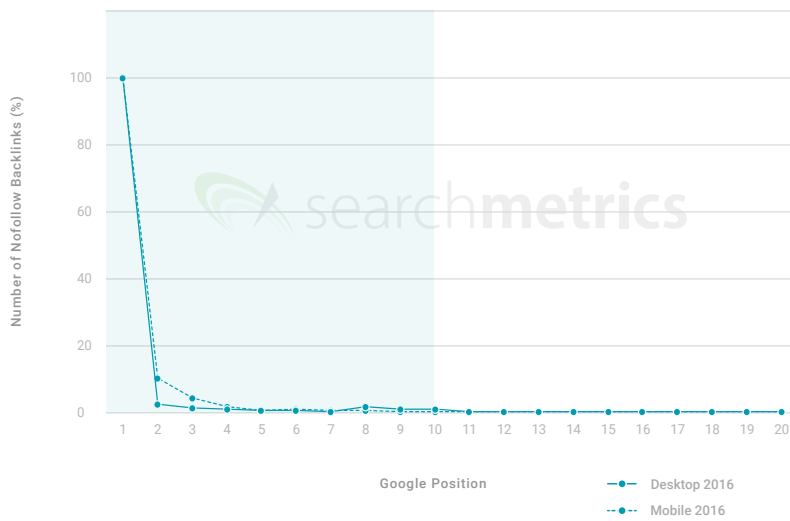


CORRELATION

0.17



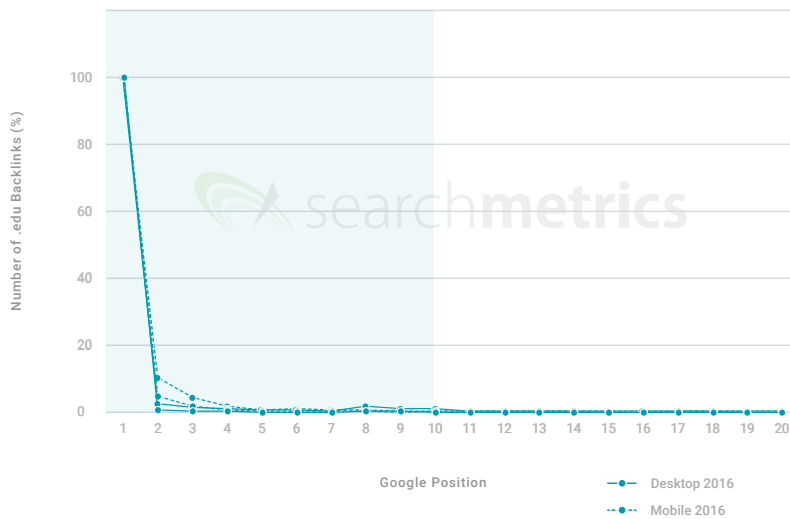
## Number of NoFollow Backlinks



CORRELATION

0.22

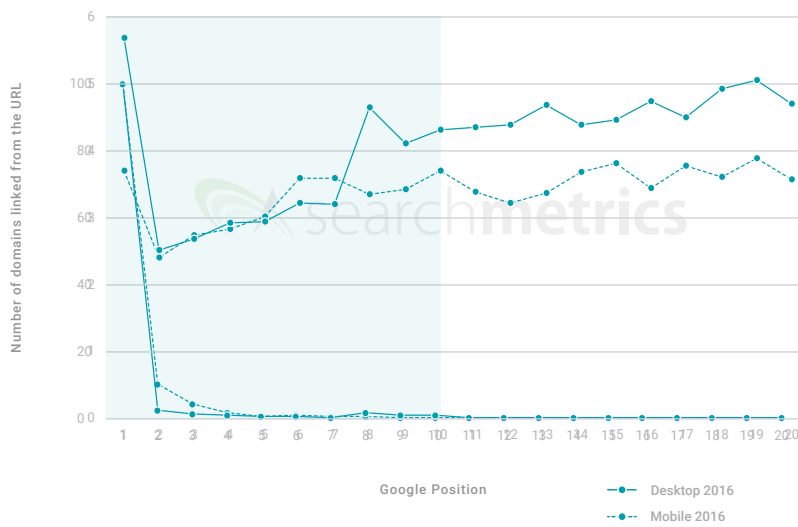
## Number of .edu Backlinks



CORRELATION

0.15

## Number of domains linked from the URL



### TOP 10

3.6 Desktop

3.2 Mobile

### TOP 20

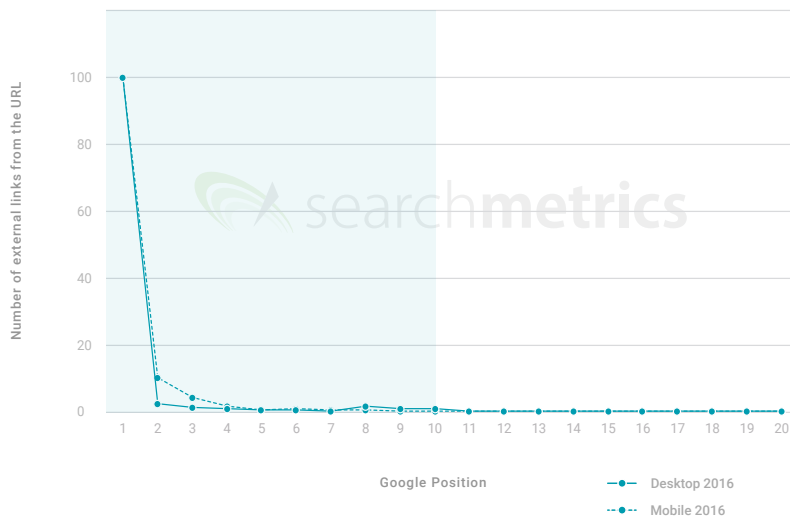
4.1 Desktop

3.4 Mobile

### CORRELATION

-0.07

## Number of external links from the URL



### TOP 10

1.2 Desktop

1.0 Mobile

### TOP 20

1.9 Desktop

1.5 Mobile

### CORRELATION

-0.09

Gone are the days of search engine rankings being primarily determined by backlinks. For certain niche topics, a high ranking is possible today without a large number of high-quality backlinks – particularly given the increase in mobile search queries. On mobile devices, pages are often liked or shared, but rarely actively linked.

The increasing role of apps and app rankings in organic search also impacts negatively on the importance of backlinks. They continue to be a part of the algorithm, but they are now just one other factor amongst several, and no longer the be all and end all of achieving high Google rankings.

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# Conclusion

This study of general ranking factors is being published for the last time. In this form, it can serve as a comparative benchmark for webmasters, online marketers and SEOs, but it is no longer as universally applicable as it once was.

We are now in an age dictated by Google's Machine Learning algorithm. Search engines now evaluate search intention and URLs that match a search query in real time. The practice of large manual Google updates is dead. Changes now occur fluidly.

The ranking algorithm now operates so flexibly that, from this point onwards, Searchmetrics is going to turn its focus to industry-specific whitepapers. These will contain detailed ranking factors.

The general ranking factors in this whitepaper show that the most important ranking factor is content that is perfectly aligned to the user intention, together with an optimized page architecture.

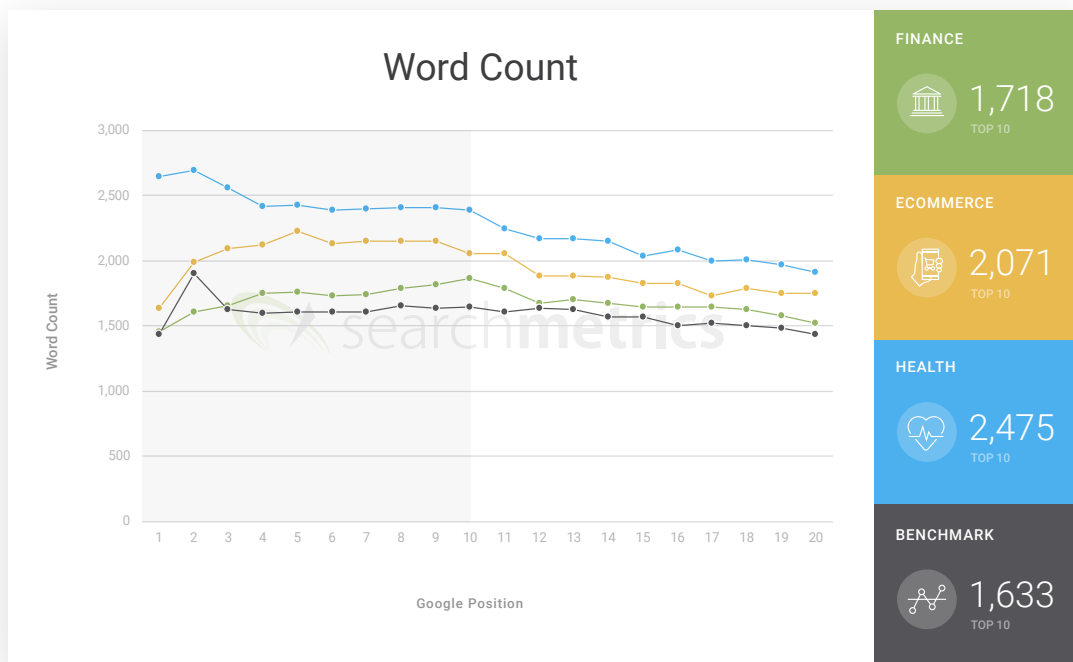
An overview of the most important findings:

- The URLs with the highest content relevance are those on positions 3 to 6.
- Desktop content is around a third longer than mobile content.
- In 2016, just 53% of the top 20 URLs included the keyword in their title.
- The Time on Site for the top 10 URLs is 3 minutes and 10 seconds.
- The average Bounce Rate for URLs on the first page of search results is 46%.
- The pages occupying positions 1-3 have an average Click-Through Rate of 36%.
- Almost half of webpages in the top 10 now use of HTTPS encryption.
- 86% of top 10 domains now use the .com TLD.
- Pages ranking for mobile are around a third smaller in terms of file size than their desktop equivalents.
- Mobile pages load around a second more quickly than desktop.
- The top 100 most visible domains all have mobile-friendly solutions for smartphone users. Outside the top 100, the rate is around 78%.
- 2016 saw a marked increase in the use of structured elements like lists and bullet points that create an improved user experience.
- The correlation between social signals and Google ranking has remained similar compared with previous years.
- Backlinks are now just one of many contributing factors. The correlation for backlinks remains high, but their importance is set to continue its decline.

# More to come: Industry Factors

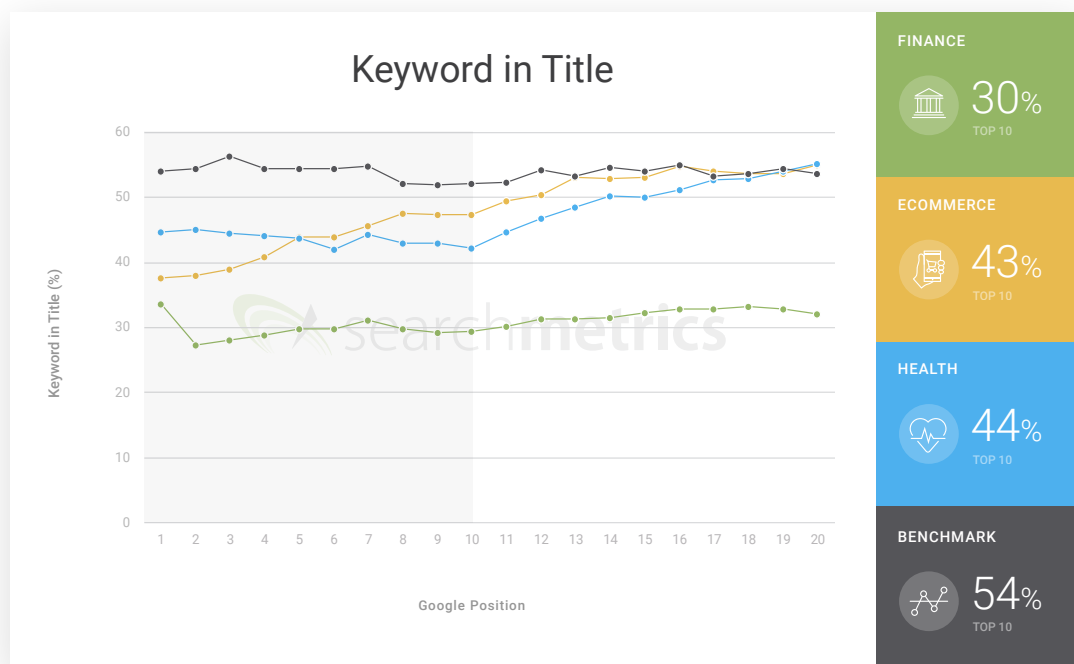
Looking ahead to the upcoming industry-specific studies and their differences, here are two examples: For each of the following factors, we have taken the averages from this study and compared them with the data for the industries of Finance, eCommerce and Health.

The industry-specific data is based on a special keyword set, defined individually for each industry.



We can observe some striking differences in word count. For Health, the value is around 50% higher than the general average.

For the factor “Keyword in Title”, the finance industry sticks out, where there is considerably less usage of the actual search term itself then in the other two industries. Interestingly, all three analyzed industries have higher rates of keyword in title than the overall average, particularly for the upper ranking positions.





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