Search Engine Journal®

THE STATE OF
SEO 2021

Insights, Opportunities & Threats

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Contents

Welcome to the first Search Engine Journal State of SEO Report.

In this report, you'll find valuable insights gleaned from our recent survey of 2,830 SEO professionals who freely gave their time and industry wisdom.

Spoiler alert: the state of SEO is strong.

Over the last year, SEO professionals were better positioned than most to deal with the fast pivot to digital infrastructure and remote work.

Almost half of the SEO pros we surveyed experienced greater success these past 12 months than in the year prior. Respondents tell us that clients now see SEO as an essential part of marketing, too. That's a huge plus for our entire industry.

We're also pleased to report that SEO professionals who put in the effort to develop their experience and knowledge are finding there are ample rewards and room to grow in their career.

Hopefully you find this data useful. If you would like to discuss any of the results, please reach out to us via social media.

Shelley Walsh
Special Projects Editor, Search Engine Journal

12 Top Insights on the State of SEO

1 The most common salary bracket in the SEO industry is $50,000 to $74,000.

2 Of those SEO professionals who earn over $200,000, 17% have over 20 years of experience.

3 When it comes to measures of SEO success, conversions are half as likely (19.9%) as keyword ranking (43.9%) to be used.

4 Of all SEO activities, content marketing is most likely to take the major share of the digital marketing budget.

5 Digital PR is the SEO activity least likely to receive budget.

6 Over two-thirds of SEO professionals (64.6%) rate their results as more successful compared to the previous period, with 18% of those saying they were "a lot more successful."

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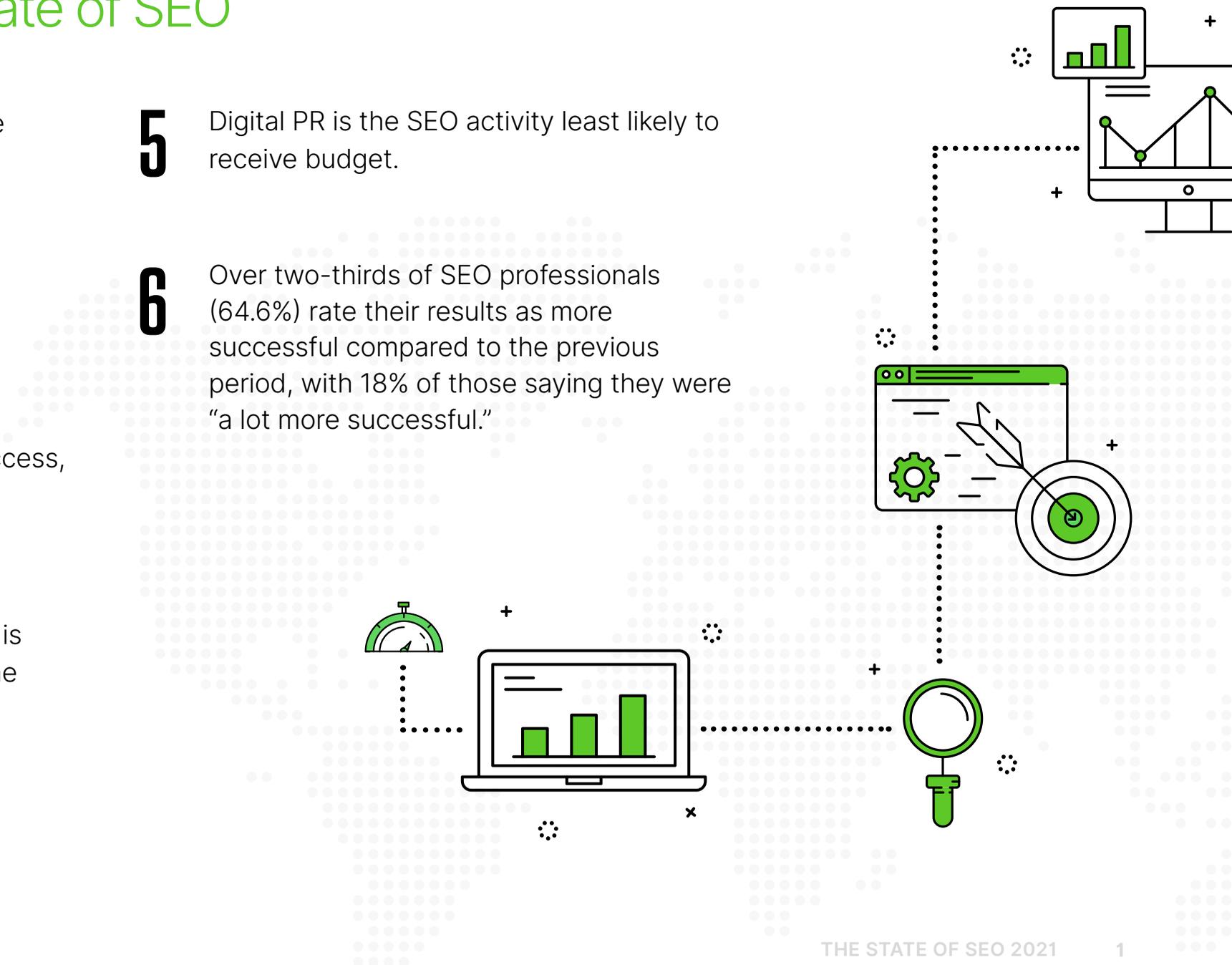
12 Top Insights on the State of SEO

7 Nearly a third (32.8%) of SEO pros think meta titles/descriptions, H1 tags and other on-page elements are the most important ranking factor.

8 Zero-click SERPs are perceived as the greatest threat facing the SEO industry, as indicated by 38.7% of respondents.

9 When it comes to emerging ranking factors, 36.7% of SEO pros think Core Web Vitals will be the most important for the next few years.

10 Over a third of SEO professionals (34.7%) plan to focus on user experience over the next year.

11 The average SEO client budget is between $1,000 to $5,000 per month and of this bracket, there are twice as many agencies (33%) as freelancers (14%).

12 Thirty-eight percent of respondents reported that their clients think SEO is an essential part of marketing.

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SEO CAREER INSIGHTS
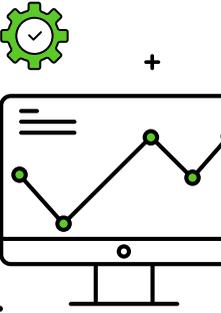
SEO Career Insights: Key Findings

As an overview to the SEO industry, we looked at salaries, job titles and levels of experience to consider how they might impact each other.

What we found was that higher level job titles correlate with years of experience. It's an indication that the SEO industry rewards experience and has plenty of opportunity for constant progression. You must prove yourself before you can achieve senior roles.

In contrast to senior job titles, 14% of SEO professionals with less than two years of experience start out as freelancers. A lack of required qualification and a low barrier to entry in the industry does attract inexperience.

The other stand-out result was that company founders had the best chance to earn more than $200,000 annually.

Another interesting trend we picked up was that more in-house SEO professionals have less than two years experience and hold junior roles than in agencies. This indicates that more people start doing SEO in-house and move on to agencies later in their careers.

Agencies have more people working together, while in-house teams are considerably smaller.

We also found the same for B2B, who have smaller teams compared to B2C.

As a sector, B2C appears to attract more entrepreneurial talent, as B2C SEO pros are more inclined to have their own business. And in B2B, they are more likely to work for an employer.

This would suggest that the B2C sector has more opportunities for SEO professionals to establish their own websites as a side project or business.

Average SEO Salary Brackets

The most common salary bracket in the SEO industry is $50,000 to $74,000.

It's achievable to reach an above-average salary of up to $149,000, but only a small percentage of SEO professionals command $200,000 and over.

Seventeen percent of those who did earn over $200,000 had over 20 years of experience.
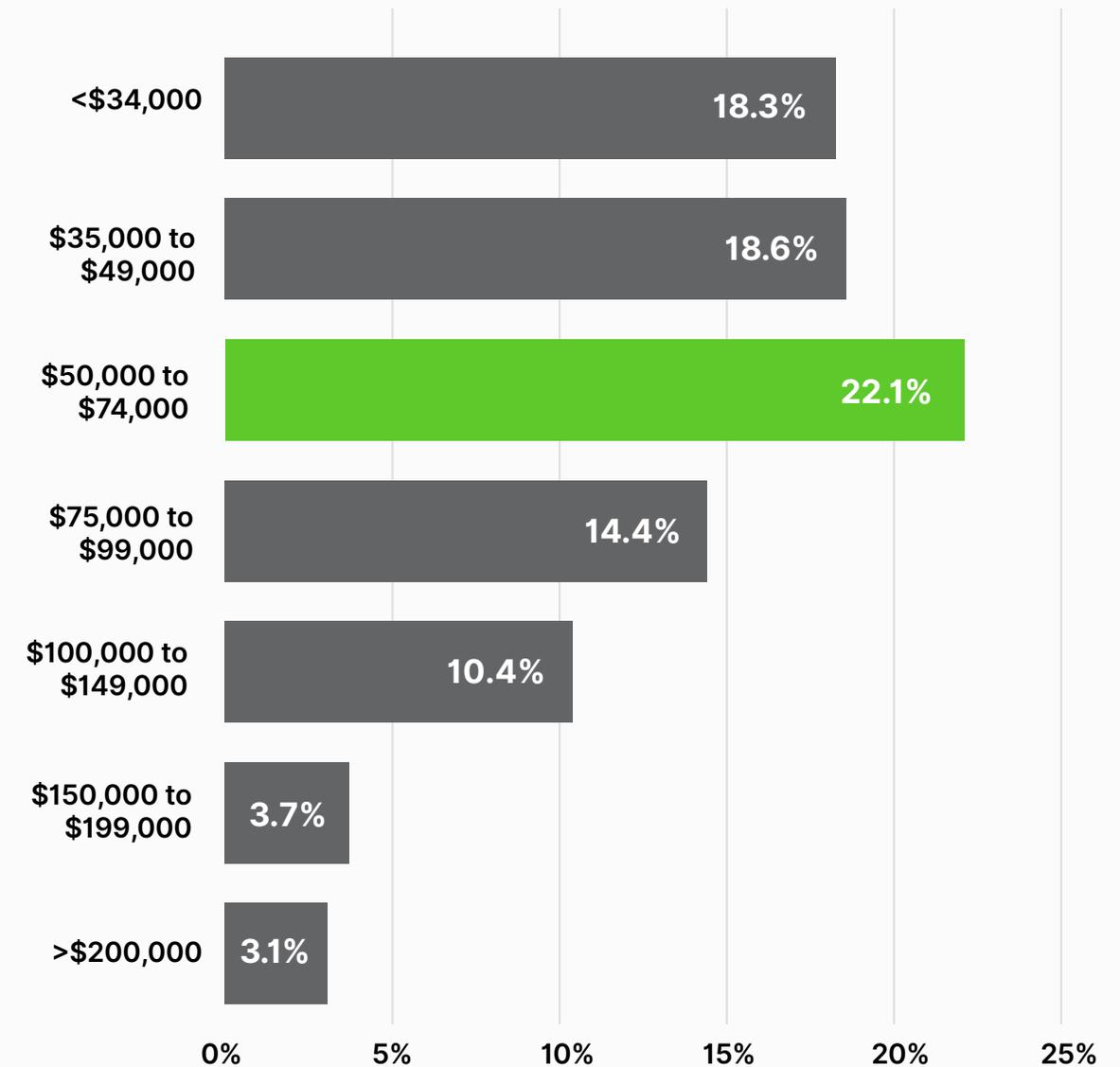
Q. What is your current annual salary bracket (in USD)?

Open to all respondents, 2,643 answered. 9.46% selected 'prefer not to say'.

How SEO Salary Compares to Job Title

In comparing SEO salary and role, we see a clear pattern of salary increase in relation to job title. Junior SEO roles begin at $35,000, while those at the Director level most often make $100,000 to $149,000.

The majority of C-level and Directors can expect a salary over $100,000. Forty-four percent of freelancers earn less than $34,000 (possibly influenced by freelancers working in different locations and currencies).

JOB TITLE	SALARY						
	<$34,000	$35,000 to $49,000	$50,000 to $74,000	$75,000 to $99,000	$100,000 to $149,000	$150,000 to $199,000	>$200,000
Junior/Mid-level	28.1%	30.2%	21.4%	10.6%	6.9%	1.2%	1.7%
Manager/Head of Dept.	11%	18.9%	32.3%	19.4%	11.6%	3.8%	3%
C-level/VP/Director	5.7%	9.9%	21.6%	23.7%	25.8%	8.8%	4.6%
Founder	24.3%	14%	17.8%	16.8%	10.3%	7.5%	9.4%
Freelance/Contractor	44.3%	15.9%	13%	8.9%	9.4%	5.3%	3.3%

Q: What is your current annual salary bracket (in USD)?
Q: How would you describe your role?

Open to all respondents, 2,643 answered. 9.46% selected 'prefer not to say'.

How SEO Salary Compares to Years of Experience

Showing the same pattern we see in salary compared to job title data, there's a clear trend for salary increase in relation to years of experience. For example, 27.2% of respondents earn between $35,000 to $49,000 with 2-4 years of experience; with 5-10 years of experience, 31.8% are in the $50,000 to $74,000 bracket. The largest segment of SEO professionals with 20 or more years of experience reportedly earned $75,000 to $100,000 (20.7%). However, 48.3% are in the three $100,000+ salary brackets combined.

	SALARY						
	<$34,000	$35,000 to $49,000	$50,000 to $74,000	$75,000 to $99,000	$100,000 to $149,000	$150,000 to $199,000	>$200,000
<2 years	38.9%	24.6%	14.6%	8.5%	9.5%	2.3%	1.7%
2 to 4 years	17.7%	27.2%	27.3%	14.1%	8.6%	2.7%	2.4%
5 to 10 years	13.2%	13.2%	31.8%	19.9%	15%	3.8%	3.4%
11 to 20 years	12.2%	14.3%	18.9%	25.2%	13.5%	10.5%	5.5%
20+ years	9.2%	10.3%	11.5%	20.7%	17.2%	13.8%	17.2%

EXPERIENCE

Q: **What is your current annual salary bracket (in USD)?**
Q: **How long have you worked in the search industry?**

Open to all respondents, 2,643 answered. 9.46% selected 'prefer not to say'.

How SEO Job Title Compares to Industry Experience

SEO professionals are likely to move up in job title or found their own company as they gain experience, as well. Fifty-nine percent of SEO pros with two years of experience or less are in junior to mid-level positions.

SEO pros are most likely to serve in management positions at the point in their career where they have between 5 and 10 years of experience. Just under a quarter (23.7%) of those who have 20 years experience in SEO are business founders and 17.8% are freelance.

EXPERIENCE	JOB TITLE				
	Junior/Mid	Manager	C-level/Director	Founder	Freelance
<2 years	59.9%	13.8%	4.3%	8%	14.1%
2 to 4 years	14.1%	41.4%	8.4%	6%	10.2%
5 to 10 years	13.6%	52.2%	16.4%	7.7%	10.2%
11 to 20 years	6.1%	39.6%	19.6%	20%	14.6%
20+ years	10.2%	32.2%	16.1%	23.7%	17.8%

Q: How would you describe your role?
Q: How long have you worked in the search industry?

Open to all respondents, 2,643 answered. 9.46% selected 'prefer not to say'.

How and Where Different SEO Professionals Work

Agencies vs. In-house

- 27% of agencies are 11-25 people and 22% are 26-50 people.

- 25.3% of in-house teams are 5-10 people and 24.9% are less than 5 people.

- 25% of in-house SEO professionals work in a junior role compared to 8% in agencies.

- 14% of agency SEO professionals are directors compared to 7% in-house.

B2B vs. B2C

- 38% of B2B SEO professionals work in-house for a brand, compared to 28% for an agency.

- 22% of SEO professionals have their own business in the B2C sector, compared to 14% in B2B.

- 24% of B2C SEO pros work in a team of 11-25 people, compared to 18% of B2B.

- 23% of B2B SEO pros work in a team of less than 5 people, compared to 18% of B2C.

THE VALUE
OF SEO

The Value of SEO: Key Findings

In the disruption of the last year, online became critical to businesses, and by extension, digital marketing became imperative for business survival. The value of SEO is clear.

However, we found that SEO was not the area where most digital marketing spend went. Content marketing is the dominant area when it comes to how digital marketing budgets are allocated.

Another surprising find was the lack of budget for digital PR. Even though many agencies have been vocal about their success by leveraging PR online, it's not where decision-makers are allocating their budgets.

When it comes to time spent on SEO tasks, off-page factors such as digital PR and link building also landed at the bottom of the results. SEO professionals spend the least amount of time on these tasks.

To measure value, SEO pros are still focused on traffic volume and ranking as a goal. Conversions are half as likely as rankings to be used as a success metric.

This might be considered myopic as traffic is no guarantee of success for conversion. But it does align with the top client expectation for an increase in traffic.

We found that marketing qualified leads (MQL) were also a strong metric for measuring SEO results. This points to SEO becoming more integrated with marketing departments and adopting more traditional marketing metrics.

Results also showed that performance metrics align with the specific customer journeys for each sector. B2B is more likely to consider MQLs a top metric, while B2C is more likely to look to customer acquisition costs (CAC) as a measure of success.

How Different Types of SEO Professionals Allocate Budget

Agencies vs In-house

- Agencies are more likely to spend most of their digital marketing budget on SEO (29%), compared to in-house SEO professionals (20%).

- Agencies are more likely to allocate most of their time on local SEO (27%), compared to in-house SEO pros (18%).

- In-house SEO pros are more likely to allocate no time on local SEO (20%), compared to agencies (4%).

B2B vs B2C

- B2B SEO professionals are more likely to spend no budget on digital PR (19%), compared to B2C (14%).

- B2C SEO professionals are more likely to spend most of their budget on digital PR (17%), compared to B2B (12%).

- B2C SEO professionals are more likely to allocate most of their budget to social media (23%), compared to B2B (18%).

How Digital Marketing Budgets are Allocated

SEO professionals responded that Paid Media most likely gets "Most" of the digital marketing budget, while Content Marketing is more likely than other activities to get "All."

SEO is most likely to receive a "Moderate" portion of the budget (35.1%) or a "Little" of the budget (25.7%). And of all activities, Digital PR is most likely to receive "Little" or "None" of the apportioned budget.

DIGITAL MARKETING AREA	BUDGET ALLOCATION					
	None	Little	Moderate	Most	All	Weighted
Content Marketing	8.9%	21.9%	38%	25.1%	6.2%	3.0
SEO	9.1%	25.7%	35.1%	25%	5.2%	2.9
Paid Media	12.5%	23.9%	33.6%	25.8%	4.3%	2.9
Social Media	9.1%	29%	36.6%	20%	5.3%	2.8
Email Marketing	14.2%	29%	32.2%	19.5%	5.1%	2.7
Digital PR	17.9%	30.4%	34.2%	13.9%	3.6%	2.5

Q: How do you allocate your digital marketing budget?

Matrix selection, one per row. Open to all respondents, 2,369 answered.

How Time is Spent on SEO Activities

Keyword research (36.3%) and on-page factors (33.4%) were the activities SEO professionals spent most of their time on.

That a small percentage of SEO pros indicated they spend either none or all of their time on Local SEO, Mobile, Off-page and other activities indicates that these are areas of specialization for some.

SEO AREA	TIME ALLOCATION					
	None	**Little**	**Moderate**	**Most**	**All**	**Weighted**
Keyword Research	3.4%	15.4%	38.2%	36.3%	6.8%	3.3
On-page	4.1%	19.2%	35.5%	33.4%	7.9%	3.2
Analytics	4.5%	18.3%	38.1%	30.9%	8.2%	3.2
Technical SEO	4.4%	25.8%	38.3%	25.7%	5.8%	3.0
Mobile SEO	8.9%	24.7%	36.7%	22.8%	7%	2.9
Audience Research	6.4%	25.2%	42.7%	21.1%	4.6%	2.9
Local SEO	11.4%	24.7%	34.4%	22.3%	7.1%	2.9
Off-page (link building)	8.2%	29.7%	35.9%	21.1%	5.1%	2.9

Q: When working on SEO, how much time do you spend for each of the following activities?

Matrix selection, one per row. Open to all respondents, 2,369 answered.

Top SEO Performance Metrics

Keyword ranking was the top-reported metric used for measuring SEO performance (43.9%), followed by page views/ sessions at 32.8%.

These responses correlate with the top client expectations for an increase in traffic, and keyword research subsequently being where SEO pros said they spent the most time.

Conversions are half as likely as keyword rankings to be used as a measure for success.

Q. In the last 12 months, what were your top metrics to measure SEO performance?

Up to 3 options could be selected. Open to all respondents, 2,369 answered. 0.84% selected 'other'.

1	**Keyword rankings**	43.9%	1,041
2	**Page views/sessions**	32.8%	776
3	**Marketing Qualified Leads (MQL, SQL)**	20.7%	491
4	**Branded vs. non-branded traffic**	20.1%	477
5	**Conversion and goal events**	19.9%	471
6	**Bounce rate**	19.4%	460
7	**Social media (shares, likes)**	17.8%	421
8	**Backlinks**	15.7%	371
9	**Customer Acquisition Cost (CAC)**	14.6%	346
10	**Average time on page**	13.0%	308
11	**Page speed**	12.8%	304
12	**PR mentions**	12.5%	295
13	**Revenue increase**	10.2%	242
14	**Customer Lifetime Value (CLV)**	8.7%	206
15	**Email subscribers**	7.1%	168

How Different SEO Professionals Measure Performance

Agencies vs. In-house

- An in-house SEO team is more likely to consider page views a top metric (39%), compared to an agency (27%).

- An in-house SEO pro is more likely to consider MQLs a top metric (60%), compared to an agency (20%).

- An agency is more likely to consider PR mentions (16%) a top metric, compared to in-house brands (10%).

B2B vs. B2C

- B2B SEO pros are more likely to consider MQLs a top metric (28%), compared to B2C (14%).

- B2C SEO pros are more likely to consider social media 'likes' as a metric (21%), compared to B2B (15%).

- B2C SEO pros are more likely to use CAC as a top metric (18%), compared to B2B (13%).

Are Results from SEO Getting Better or Worse?

The pandemic dramatically increased the demand for expert services across our industry, as it quickly became apparent that the world had moved online.

Over two-thirds of SEO professionals (64.6%) rate their results as more successful compared to the previous period, with 18% of those saying they were "a lot more successful."

Q. In the last 12 months, compared to the year before, how do you rate the results from SEO?

Open to all respondents, Answered: 2,369. 2.11% selected 'not sure'.

Category	Percentage
A lot more successful	18%
More successful	46.6%
About the same	22.3%
Less successful	7.3%
A lot less successful	3.6%
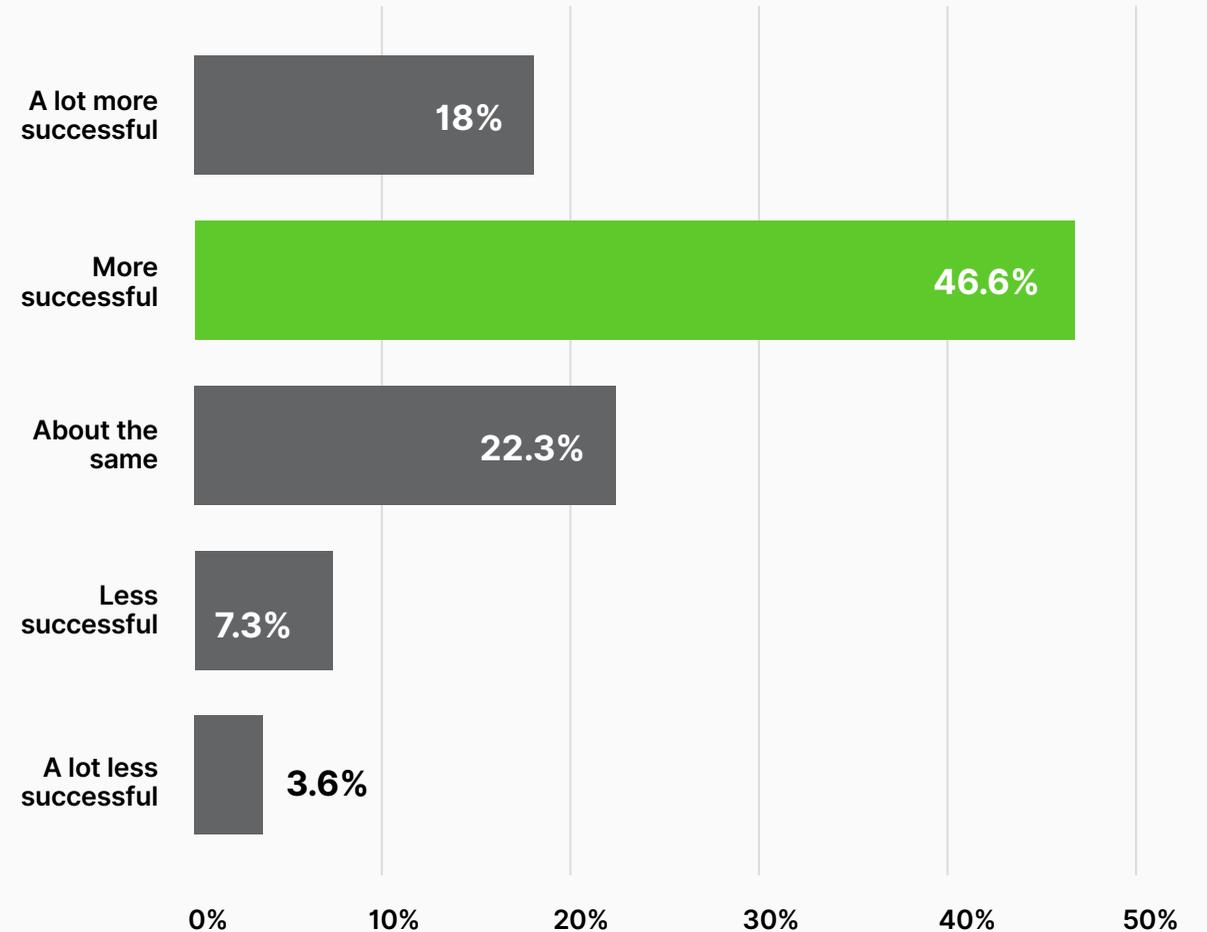
What the Experts Think

"SEO can be viewed as divided into two parts: Getting technical SEO right. In absence of doing this you have no chance of success. But ultimately, this is somewhat like buying a ticket to enter a competition. If you don't buy the ticket, you can't win. Executing the right SEO strategy. This is how/where you map out all of the plans for pages and content with a goal of offering a site superior to that of your competition. Once you have entered the competition (gotten the tech SEO right) this is how you win."

Eric Enge, Pilot Holding

"The most important SEO task will greatly depend on the stage of a website. If it doesn't have the foundations, then it's going to be intent/keyword strategy, research and content creation. In the later stages, checkups and SEO processes can be more important."

Kristina Azarenko, Marketing Syrup

"[I spend most of my time on] topic model development to support content strategy as programmatically as possible. I am not interested in big one-off blog posts or landing pages.. I want to understand how to satisfy intent for thousands (or tens of thousands) of queries leveraging things like content directories and product/service attributes."

Nick Eubanks, I'm From the Future

"An effective, long-term SEO strategy produces many benefits. Most important, our clients see higher ROI with SEO than with other marketing channels, and results are long-lasting. Our campaigns also help client teams work towards a common goal to improve site development, content creation and public relations."

Joshua Schmidt, Straight North

SEO CHALLENGES & THREATS

Challenges and Threats to Success in SEO

Over the last 12 months, internet traffic levels increased by 40%. For most SEO pros, the rising tide benefited their clients and sites.

However, at the beginning of the pandemic back in March 2020, many clients cut or suspended budgets as a knee-jerk reaction. SEO professionals waited to see what would happen.

As it turned out, ecommerce boomed and clients quickly switched back on. Despite budget cuts being the biggest challenge over the last year, 40% of SEO professionals saw budgets increase a little and only 4% saw budgets cut entirely.

Lack of resources was the third biggest SEO challenge, and this could be in part to a shortage of talent in the industry. In the last six months, many SEO professionals have reported difficulty recruiting. Any available talent is negotiating on their terms. Some salaries are inflating due to lack of supply.

Last March started like an apocalyptic zombie movie, but we are now settled in the new mode of operation.

We're back to business as usual, and the biggest SEO challenges still involve Google.

Zero-click Google SERPs were identified as the number one threat in SEO by 38.7% of respondents. As a result, strategies will have to adapt to circumnavigate results pages that answer the query outright.

Google updates were identified as the second-greatest threat, with machine learning/AI, third-party cookies, and messaging platforms rounding out the top five.

SEO Challenges Over a Year of COVID

Even though COVID-19 dominated the world over the last 12 months, pandemic-related issues came fourth in the challenges ranking and were less an issue for SEO professionals than strategic ones.

Budget cuts topped the list, with 37.6% of SEO pros identifying this as their greatest challenge. But only 4% saw their budget cut entirely (see client section).

Strategy issues were second on the list (34.8%), followed by a lack of resources (32.9%) as the third-most pressing challenge for SEO pros.

5% of SEOs didn't experience any issues at all.

Q: In the last 12 months, what were your biggest challenges that blocked SEO success?

Up to 3 options could be selected. Open to all respondents.
Answered: 2,325. 1.76% selected 'other'.

Challenge	Percentage
Budget cuts	37.6%
Strategy issues	34.8%
Lack of resources	32.9%
Pandemic related issue	27.9%
Management/stakeholders	27.3%
Alignment with other	27%
Scaling processes	25.8%
Client relationship	14.1%
Legal approval	10.6%
Not experienced	5.2%
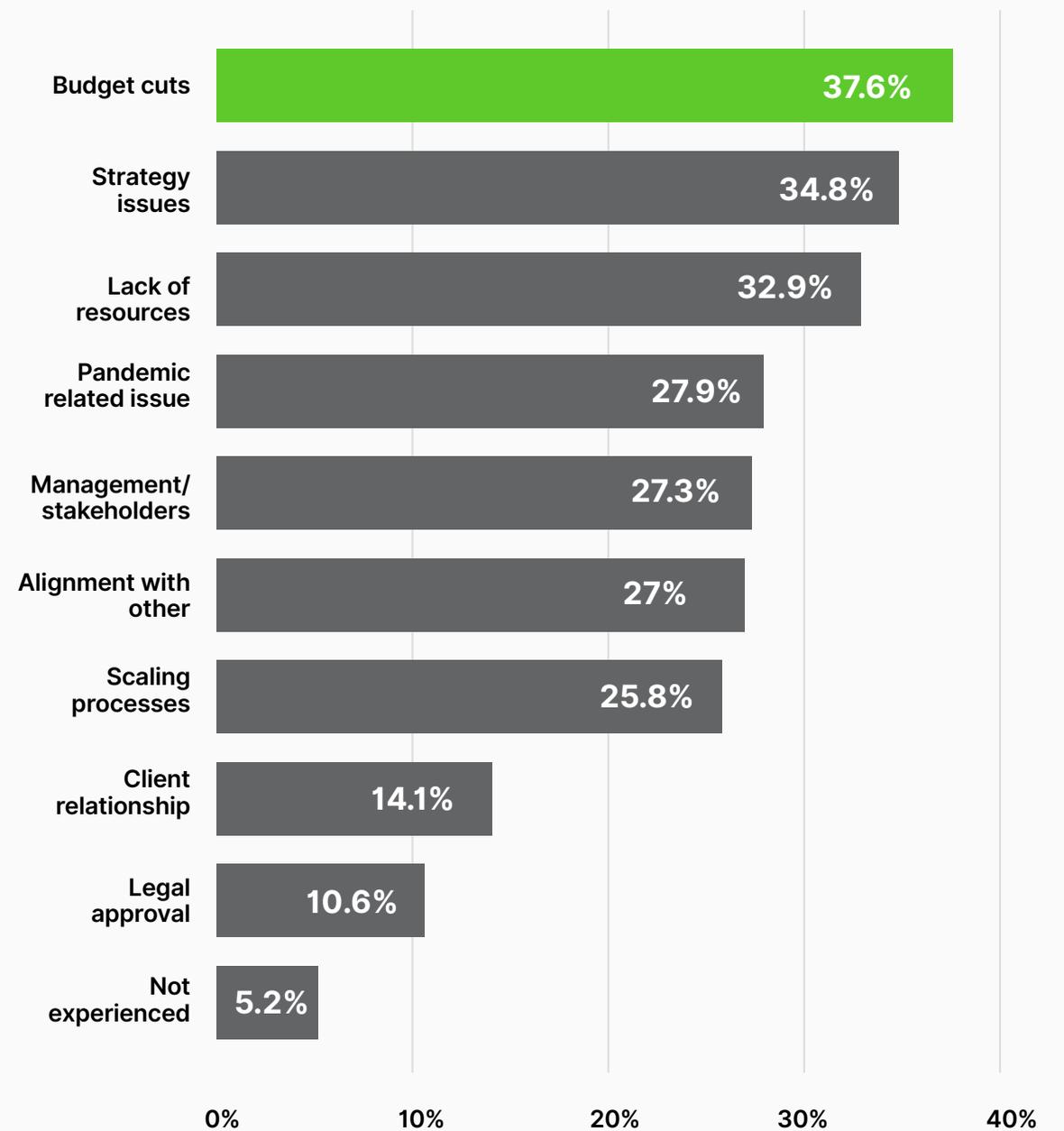
The Greatest Threats to SEO

Google still dominates our lives with updates and the continued SERP creep of zero-click results pages.

Nearly a quarter of respondents see the new third-party cookies changes to Chrome browsers as a threat that will impact how data is collected.

And 5% of SEO professionals don't think there will be any threats at all to the SEO industry in the next two years!

Q: In the next two years, what will be the biggest threat to SEO? (select up to 3)

Up to 3 options could be selected. Open to all respondents. Answered: 2,325. 1.2% selected 'other'.

Threat	Percentage
Google zero click pages	38.7%
Google updates	35.1%
Machine learning/AI	28.4%
Third-party cookies	23%
Messaging platforms	21.3%
Offline brand awareness	17.8%
Government regulation	16.7%
GPT-3	16.1%
Apps	14.1%
Site security	13.7%
Email marketing	12.7%
Don't think there are any	5%
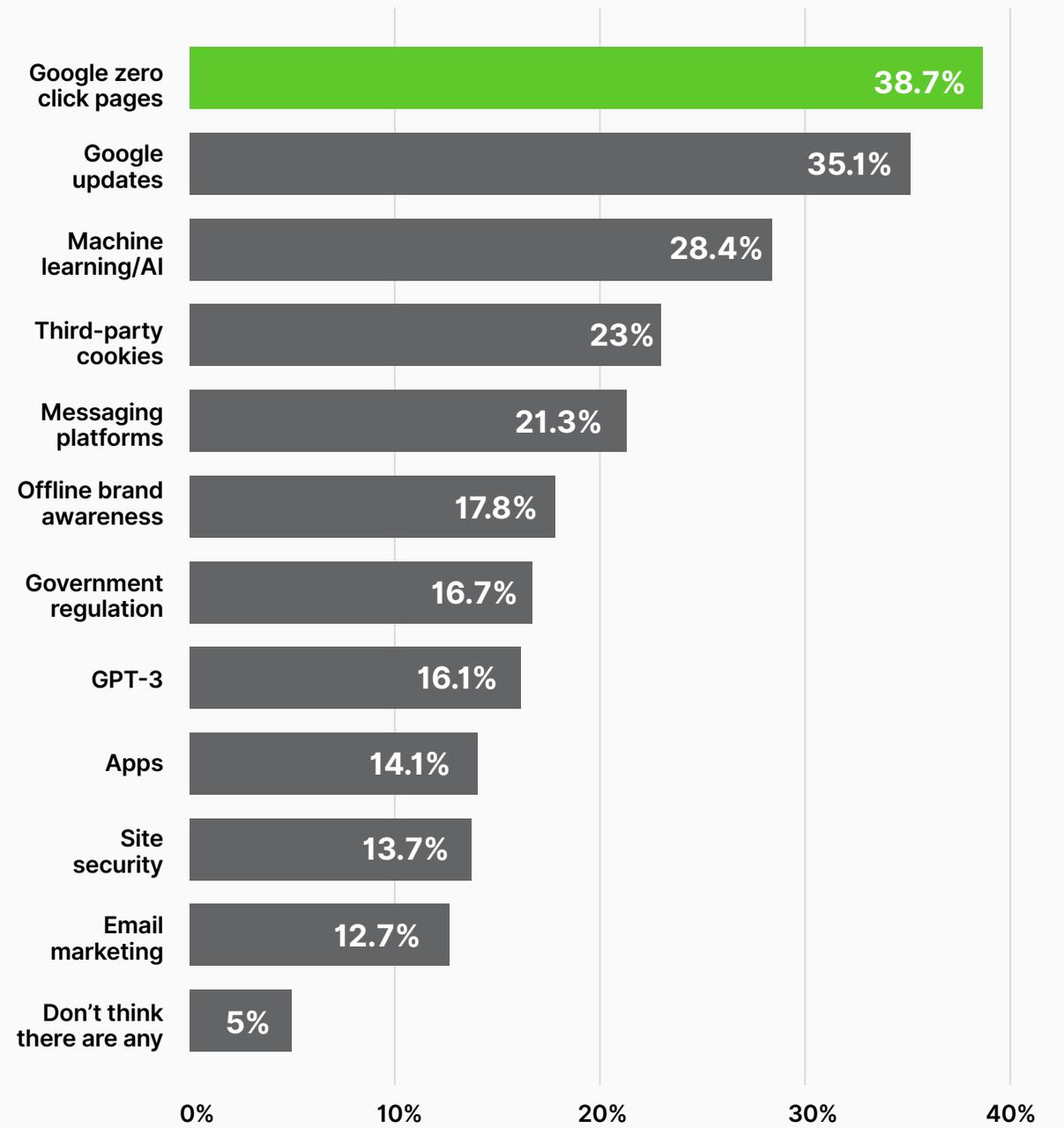
What the Experts Think

"[I think there's a shortage of SEO talent in the industry], especially on the overall strategy side. I can hire people to implement and do the most basics of work, but to find an SEO that truly understands the way everything works together - from on-page to off-page and a wise content marketing strategy - the task is nearly impossible."

Ron Lieback, ContentMender

"I personally disagree with a work process that results in [spending the most time on keyword research]. Now, that's not to say that keyword research isn't important, it's very important. But spending most of your time on keyword research seems to me a bit like taking the "measure twice, cut once" to a detrimental extreme. Most of an SEOs time should be spent producing results."

Dave Davies, Beanstalk

"Google seems to have become less reactive to new and updated content, whether through the normal process of crawling, or submission through Search Console. That has led to longer wait times for seeing any effect of those changes. Frustrating."

Jason Barnard, Kalicube.pro

"Ads are less intrusive and more numerous on Google SERPs, taking clicks away from organic listings, and at the same time shrinking the real estate available for organic results — big issues. Also, Google's frequent algorithm changes force SEOs to be exceedingly nimble with strategy and tactics."

Joshua Schmidt, Straight North

SEO TRENDS & OPPORTUNITIES

SEO Trends and Opportunities: Key Findings

The State of SEO 2021 survey gave us a great deal of insight into what working SEO professionals think makes the most difference to ranking, emerging trends, and how SEOs are generating new business.

Just under half of those Search Engine Journal surveyed said their website is the number one channel for new business. If you consider that the second most popular response was Google Search, you could say that just under three-quarters of all new business for SEO pros comes through organic search to their website.

How business is generated differs for large agencies, small agencies, and freelancers.

For example, agencies were twice as likely as a freelancer to use a dedicated sales team to generate new business. Freelancers are also more likely to use a marketplace such as Upwork.

In the contentious area of ranking factors, our survey told us what was working for a wide range of SEO professionals.

Over a third of respondents thought that meta titles, descriptions, and H1s were the most important factor. Over a quarter intended to spend time 'on-page' over the next year.

Surprisingly, not many thought that Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness (E-A-T) influenced ranking. Despite Google's drive to push for trustworthy content experiences, E-A-T still has more traction to gain with SEO practitioners.

Not as many agencies as freelancers thought site speed was a factor; more freelancers than agencies chose content freshness. And when it came to social signals, nearly twice as many freelancers as agencies said they are a ranking factor.

Understanding emerging ranking factors helps us to prepare for what is coming down the road. The big development in search this year has been Core Web Vitals, so it was no surprise this is the most important emergent factor for respondents.

SEO Trends and Opportunities: Key Findings

Despite the previous finding that E-A-T is not considered a ranking factor, 25% of SEO professionals responded that they do consider it an emergent factor. Perhaps it's time is yet to come. E-A-T underlines everything that Google is trying to move toward, making this an area to watch and prepare for.

A quarter of SEO pros (25.4%) also consider structured data an important emergent factor. Schema is a vital part of connecting entities to the knowledge graph as Google strives to make topical connections. Again, it's another area of opportunity to invest in now.

Interestingly, considerably more freelancers than agencies thought that site security was an emergent factor.

We also asked what areas SEO professionals intended to work on over the next 12 months. We thought this would give a true picture of what they think really matters.

User experience was top of the list to work on. Not a surprise considering this is a main factor for Core Web Vitals. For those who didn't address their Core Web Vitals in advance of the Page Experience Update, this is now a pressing area to address.

A surprising result was the lack of consideration for better understanding the audience.

With content marketing being the dominant sector of digital marketing, knowing your audience is vital for creating content that will connect with them.

Getting a user to the page is only half the job. Once they are there, you have to satisfy their intent and get them to take action. Knowing your audience is critical to that.

Top Drivers of New SEO Business

Unsurprisingly, websites are the number one driver of new business for SEO professionals.

Just over a quarter (27.4%) use a dedicated sales team, with more than twice as many agencies than freelancers employing that method of driving new business.

Despite COVID, in-person networking is still an effective and popular channel (22.8%) for developing new business.

Q: What is the predominant channel of new business for you, or the company you work for?

Up to 3 options could be selected. Open to all respondents, 2,643 answered. 2.19% selected 'don't know'.

1	Website	45.2%	1195
2	Google search	28.0%	740
3	Dedicated sales team	27.4%	724
4	Google ads	24.7%	653
5	In-person professional business networks	22.8%	603
6	Social media paid ads	19.0%	502
7	Referrals from your network	18.2%	481
8	Social media not paid	15.2%	402
9	Cold calling	10.9%	289
10	Paid referral platforms (e.g. Credo)	9.9%	262
11	Online job boards	9.0%	238
12	Upwork or similar platform	8.6%	227
13	Speaking at conferences	6.0%	159

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How Different Types of SEO Professionals Find New Business

Agencies vs. Freelancers

- An agency is more than twice as likely (32%) as a freelancer (12%) to use a dedicated sales team.

- A freelancer (18%) is more than twice as likely as an agency (7%) to use a marketplace such Upwork, or a referral from their network.

- 31% of freelancers get new business by referral from their network, compared to 22% of agencies.

B2B vs. B2C

- More B2C SEO pros use paid referral platforms (14%) than B2B (8%).

- B2B SEO pros are more likely to use their website to generate new business (47%), compared to B2C (42%).

- 30% of B2B SEO pros use a dedicated sales team to generate new leads, compared to 25% of B2C.

Important Factors for Ranking

Close to one-third (32.8%) of SEO professionals we surveyed indicated that meta titles/descriptions, H1 and other on-page elements were the most important ranking factor.

Social signals were considered the least important ranking factor.

Most surprisingly, brand awareness was selected as more important than links as a ranking factor.

Q. From the last 12 months, what do you think had the most impact for ranking?

Up to 3 options could be selected. Open to all respondents, 2,325 answered. 1.81% selected 'don't know', 0.60% selected 'other'.

1	**On-page (meta titles/descriptions, H1)**	**32.8%**	**763**
2	**Organic user behavior (CTR, bounce, time on site)**	**31.0%**	**720**
3	**Depth & accuracy of content**	**24.6%**	**572**
4	**Structured data (schema)**	**21.1%**	**490**
5	**Content freshness**	**19.0%**	**442**
6	**Mobile friendliness**	**17.9%**	**417**
7	**Brand awareness**	**17.8%**	**413**
8	**Topic relevance**	**17.5%**	**406**
9	**Links**	**17.4%**	**404**
10	**Site speed**	**13.8%**	**320**
11	**Internal linking**	**13.7%**	**318**
12	**Domain authority**	**12.4%**	**289**
13	**Site security (HTTPS)**	**12.0%**	**278**
14	**EAT**	**9.4%**	**218**
15	**Social signals**	**7.1%**	**164**

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Which Ranking Factors Matter Most to Different SEO Professionals

Agencies vs. In-house vs. Freelance

- 37% in-house SEO professionals think on-page factors are important, compared to 30% of agencies.

- A quarter of agencies (24%) think structured data is important, compared to 17% of in-house SEO professionals.

- Twice as many freelancers (24%), compared to agencies (11%), think site speed was an important factor.

- More freelancers (11%), compared to agencies (6%), think social signals are a ranking factor.

B2B vs. B2C

- More B2C SEO professionals (18%) think internal linking is an important ranking factor, compared to B2B SEOs (11%).

- 19% of B2B SEO professionals think links were an important factor, compared to 14% of B2C.

- Nearly a quarter of B2C SEO professionals (24%) rate structured data as an important factor, compared to only 19% of B2B SEO professionals.

Emerging SEO Factors to Watch

Based on our survey, Core Web Vitals is the most important emergent factor for the next few years.

A quarter of SEO professionals consider structured data important. A quarter also think that E-A-T is the most important emergent factor.

Meanwhile, 2% think that there won't be any important emergent factors in the next few years!

Q: In the next two years, what will be the most important emergent factors in SEO?

Up to 3 options could be selected. Open to all respondents, 2,325 answered. 0.82% selected 'other'.

#	Factor	%	Count
1	**Core Web Vitals**	36.6%	850
2	**Structured data**	25.4%	591
3	**EAT & trusted sources**	25.0%	580
4	**Machine learning/AI**	24.0%	557
5	**Voice search**	22.8%	531
6	**Mobile SEO**	21.0%	487
7	**Google Discover**	19.1%	445
8	**Automation (tools)**	18.2%	424
9	**Site security**	14.8%	344
10	**Knowledge graph and entities**	14.6%	340
11	**SERP features**	13.9%	324
12	**Video search**	13.3%	308
13	**Google Passages**	13.2%	307
14	**Don't think there will be any**	1.8%	42

Which Emerging Ranking Factors Matter Most to Different SEO Pros

Agencies vs. In-house vs. Freelance

- Just under a quarter (24%) of in-house SEO professionals think mobile is an important emergent factor, compared to 15% of agencies.

- More agencies (22%), compared to in-house brands (15%), think Google Discover is an emergent factor to watch.

- More freelancers (21%) than agencies (12%) think site security is an emergent factor that will be important in the next two years.

B2B vs. B2C

- A quarter of B2C SEO professionals (25%) think Google Discover is an important emergent factor, compared to 16% of B2B.

- More B2B (39%) than B2C (33%) SEO pros think Core Web Vitals is an important emergent factor.

- More B2C (17%) than B2B (11%) SEO pros think Google Passages is an important emergent factor.

Top Areas of Focus in SEO Over the Next Year

Over a third are going to focus on user experience over the next 12 months. Presumably, this translates to work on Core Web Vitals.

Over a quarter are going to focus on content production, which aligns with content marketing dominating SEO budget allocation.

Only 11% of SEO professionals want to demonstrate ROI!

Q: In the next year, what are the top areas that you intend to focus on?

Up to 3 options could be selected. Open to all respondents, 2,369 answered. 1.18% selected 'other'.

#	Area	%	Count
1	User experience	34.7%	823
2	Content production	27.2%	645
3	On-page factors	26.9%	638
4	Search intent for pages	25.7%	609
5	Link building	21.0%	497
6	Lead generation	20.8%	493
7	Building a subscriber list	17.9%	423
8	Digital PR	17.7%	420
9	Workflows and processes	16.2%	384
10	Paid search	15.4%	365
11	Social media	13.9%	329
12	User journey	11.0%	261
13	Demonstrating ROI	10.6%	250
14	Better understanding the audience	9.8%	232

How Areas of Focus Vary for Different Types of SEO Professionals

Agencies vs. In-house vs. Freelance

- A third of in-house brands (31%) are going to focus on content compared to less than a quarter of agencies (23%).

- Surprisingly, more agencies (21%), compared to in-house SEO professionals (14%), are going to focus on building an email list.

- More in-house SEO teams (24%) than agencies (17%) are going to focus on lead generation.

- More freelancers (18%) than in-house SEO teams (8%) are going to focus on demonstrating ROI.

B2B vs. B2C

- Almost a third of B2B SEO professionals (30%) are going to focus on content production, compared to just under a quarter of B2C SEO professionals (22%).

- A quarter of B2B SEO professionals (25%) intend to focus on lead generation, compared to 16% of B2B.

- 23% of B2C SEO professionals plan to focus on digital PR, compared to 16% of B2B.

What the Experts Think

"Recently Google seems to rely less on off-page ranking signals (i.e. links) and has put more emphasis on relevancy and quality of content, so I agree with this consensus that on-page is now the single most important area of SEO."

Barry Adams, Polemic Digital

"Google is going to continue it's push for the next billion users. Those users are on mid range mobile devices that *cannot handle* the obscenely bulky scripts we ship on every page. The most important emergent factor in the new few years? It's going to be 'can real humans actually use this page?'"

Jamie Indigo, Not a Robot

"Whereas I believe that on-page factors can certainly move the needle, there isn't anything you can do if your content isn't topically relevant so I would have expected to see this at the top of the list."

Izzi Smith, Ryte

"Over 36% said Core Web Vitals will be the most important emergent factors in SEO. That's a shocker! From experience and early analyses, I think it's fair to say that there is no indicator that CWV have even remotely the same impact as content, links, or even meta titles."

Kevin Indig, Shopify

"We see many technical ranking factors becoming more important to Google, such as granular metrics around site speed (Core Web Vitals), data security and user experience. New technology platforms create significant opportunities to help SEOs develop content strategy, evaluate link building and make SEO-enhancing web development recommendations."

Joshua Schmidt, Straight North

SEO CLIENTS: BUDGETS & EXPECTATIONS

What Do Clients Want from SEO?

There are many challenges to running a business. Knowing what level to set prices is critical to winning new clients. Understanding market demands is another essential component to stay competitive.

For part of our survey, we restricted respondents to those who worked directly with clients to gather data about SEO services.

The focus of the data was on budgets, and we found that the average monthly SEO client budget is between $1,000 to $5,000.

Comparing the data between freelancers and agencies shows freelancers charge less than agencies. This was no surprise.

What was a surprise was the amount of agencies charging a monthly budget under $1,000.

The general assumption is that agencies target the bigger clients and have a higher minimum rate. But clearly, there are plenty of agencies servicing smaller clients.

From our survey, results showed that budgets increased a little or stayed the same. The data also shows a clear correlation between traffic and budget increase/decrease.

Where budgets increased a little, over half saw a little increase in traffic. Where budgets increased a lot, 60% of those saw traffic increase a lot. On the reverse, for a budget reduced by a lot, 30% of those saw traffic decrease a lot.

SEO is a continual investment and it's encouraging to see that 38% of clients regard it as an essential part of marketing. Even if 12% still think it's unnecessary.

When we see a direct line between budget and traffic, it offers clear evidence to present to clients.

Average SEO Client Budgets

The average SEO client budget is between $1,000-5,000 per month. Out of this bracket, twice as many are agencies (33%), compared to freelancers (14%).

Twice as many B2C clients (10%) have a budget of $10,000 to $50,000, compared to B2B (5%).

From those who have budgets under $500 per month, 28% are freelance and 9% are agencies.

Q. What is the average/usual monthly budget paid, per client, for SEO services (USD)?

Restricted to those who answered 'I work for an agency' or 'I'm a freelancer/contractor'. 1,219 answered. 9.46 % selected 'prefer not to say'. 0.9% selected 'No budget - profit revenue share', 4.02% selected 'no budget - per project, 0.66% selected 'No budget - other'.

<$500	14.4%
$500 to $1,000	23.1%
$1,000 to $5,000	26.8%
$5,000 to $10,000	13.4%
$10,000 to $50,000	6.9%
$50,000 to $100,000	3.6%
>$100,000	1.9%
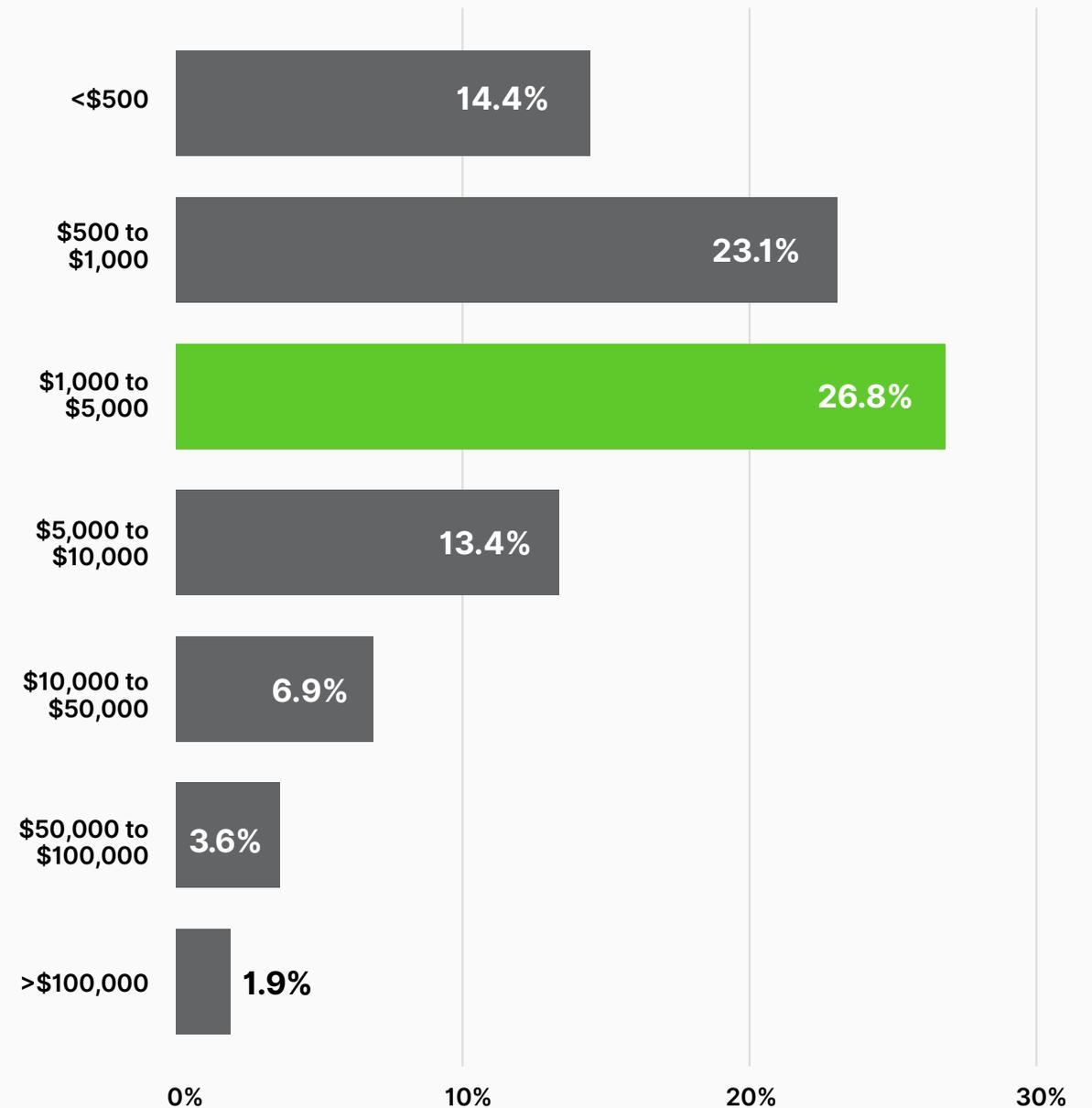
How SEO Client Budgets Have Changed This Year

3.8%
Was cut completely

5.5%
Decreased a lot

10.3%
Decreased a little

11.7%
Increased a lot

23.8%
Stayed the same
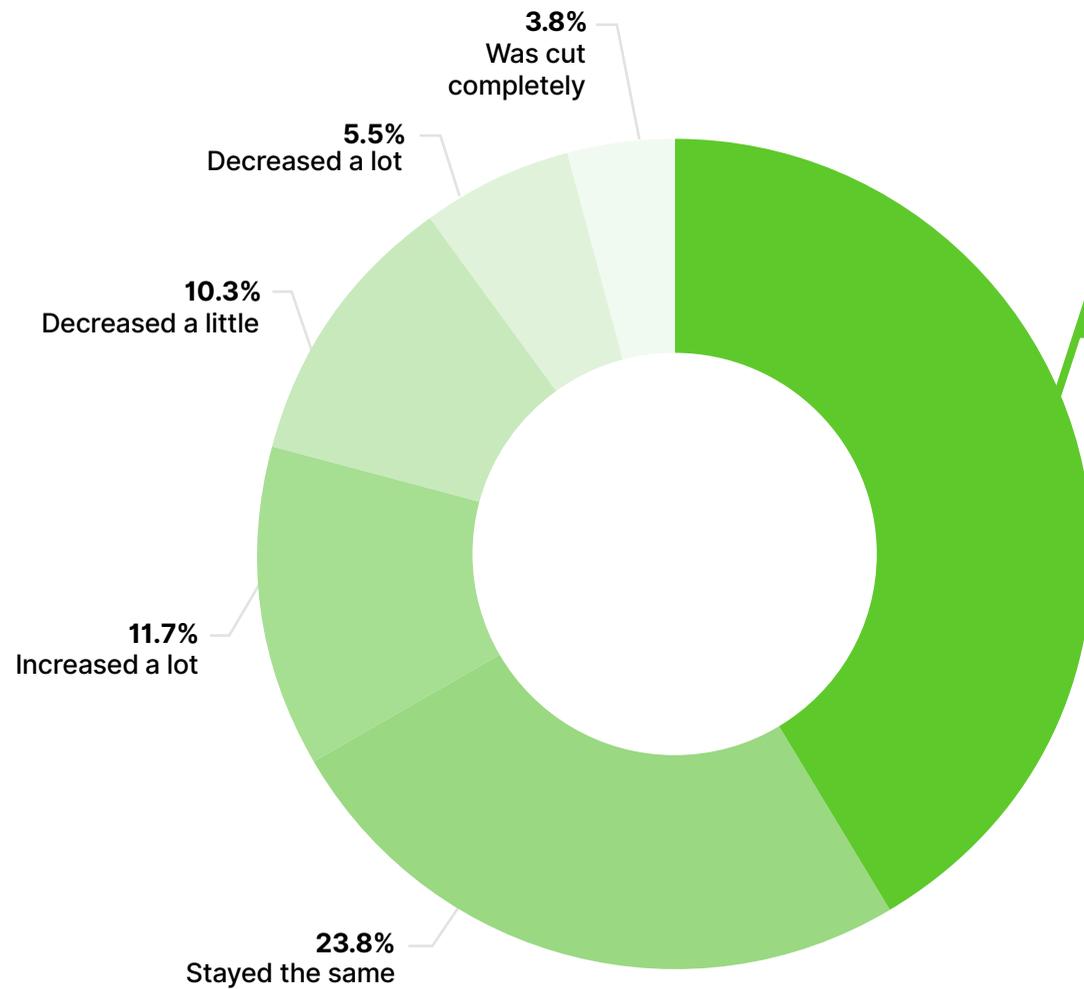
39%

of budgets increased a little from last year.

Q. In the last 12 months, how has your client's budget for SEO changed from the year before?

Restricted to those who answered 'I work for an agency' or 'I'm a freelancer/contractor'. 1,219 answered. 6.15% selected 'Don't know'.

Budget Changes Compared to Traffic Changes

Over half of SEO clients (59%) who increased the budget "a lot" experienced a corresponding "increased a lot" in traffic. However, even those whose budget stayed the same enjoyed the benefits of increased search traffic this past year, as we see that 61.4% of SEO clients with stagnant budgets still saw traffic increase from a little to a lot.

		TRAFFIC			
BUDGET	**Increased a lot**	**Increased a little**	**No change**	**Decreased a little**	**Decreased a lot**
Increased a lot	59.2%	23.9%	23.9%	5.6%	4.2%
Increased a little	26.8%	54%	12.2%	6.2%	0.9%
Stayed the same	14.4%	47%	22.1%	11.6%	4.9%
Decreased a little	11.3%	29%	28.2%	20.2%	11.3%
Decreased a lot	10.8%	18.5%	21.5%	29.2%	20%
Cut completely	13%	23.9%	21.7%	19.6%	21.7%

Q: In the last 12 months, how has your client's budget for SEO changed from the year before? In the last 12 months, did you experience any change in rankings or traffic for clients?

Restricted to those who answered 'I work for an agency' or 'I'm a freelancer/contractor'. 1,219 answered.

What Clients Expect from SEO

3.8%
More links

1.6%
Other

17%
Better ranking

17.8 %
They want all
of these

18.5%
Brand awareness

19.7%
New
customers
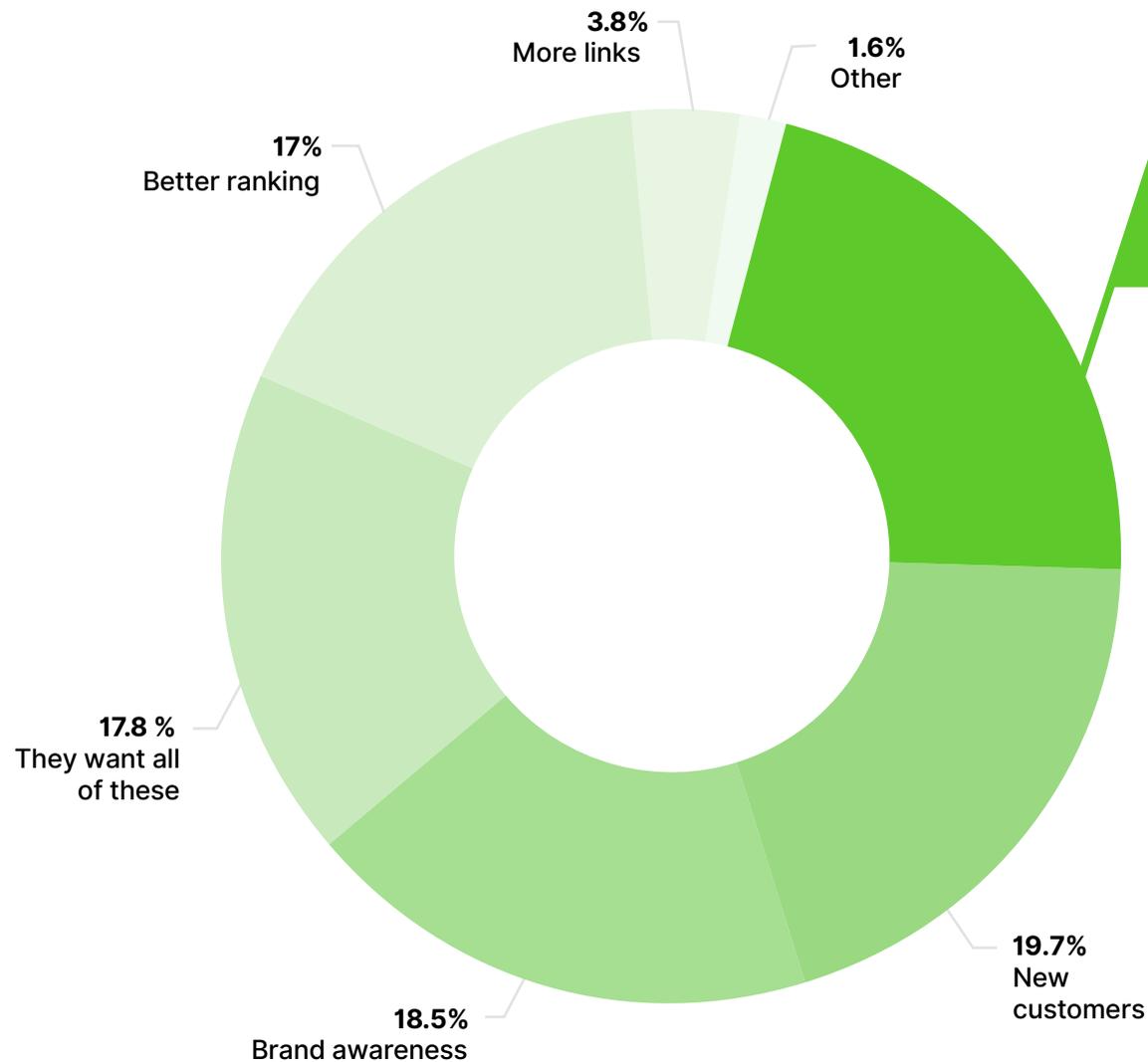
**22%** **of clients want an increase in traffic.**

"They [clients] don't understand it's a continuous maintenance. Often they want to hire me for one month thinking that's how 'SEO is done.'"

Survey respondent

Q. In your experience, what is the most common client expectation for SEO?

Restricted to those who answered 'I work for an agency' or 'I'm a freelancer/contractor'. 1,219 answered.

What Clients Really Think About SEO

2.7%
Other

15.1%
We don't see the value, but convince us we need it

12.1%
It's unnecessary, but we have budget to spend

27.7%
Everyone does it, so we have to do it
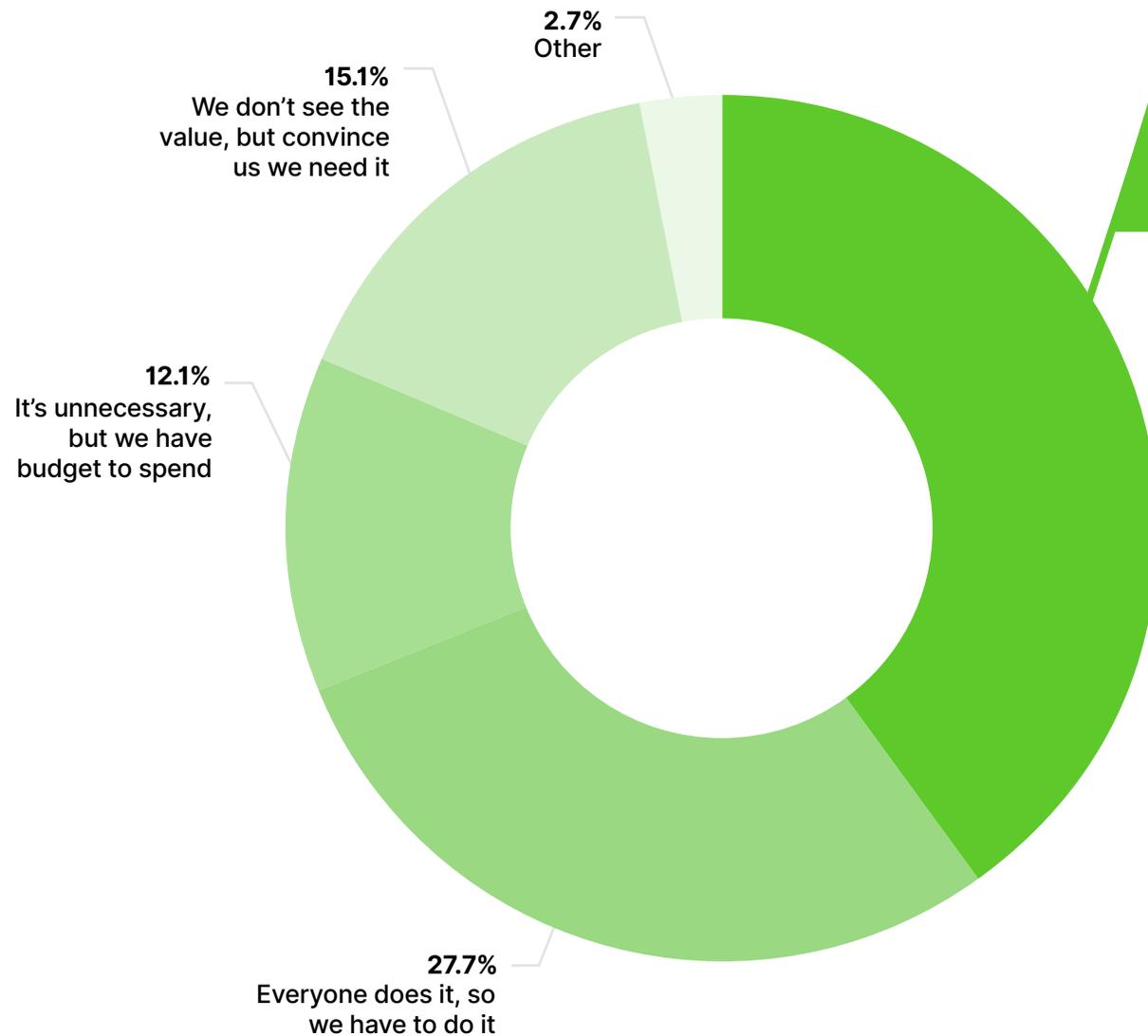
38% of respondents report their clients think SEO is an essential part of marketing.

"They seem to know they 'want' it, because everyone else is doing it. But not why or how it will actually benefit them."

Survey respondent

Q. What is the most common feedback from clients about SEO?

Restricted to those who answered 'I work for an agency' or 'I'm a freelancer/contractor'. 1,219 answered. 3.69% selected 'Don't know'.

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Most Requested Client Services

Content strategy has increased in popularity over the last 10 years and is now the most in-demand service from SEO clients. Content production is seventh on the list.

Q: Which services did your clients request the most?

Up to 3 options could be selected. Restricted to those who answered 'I work for an agency' or 'I'm a freelancer/contractor'. 1,219 answered. 1.23% selected 'Don't know'. 0.98% selected 'None of the above'. 0.98% selected 'other'.

1	Content strategy	31.3%	381
2	Keyword strategy	30.8%	376
3	Web design	25.5%	311
4	User experience	23.9%	291
5	Local SEO	23.9%	291
6	Technical SEO	22.7%	277
7	Content production	20.9%	255
8	Social media marketing	17.4%	212
9	Paid search	17.3%	211
10	Link building	17.2%	210
11	Mobile SEO	13.5%	164
12	Email marketing	13.3%	162

What the Experts Think

"It's possible to do more with a bigger budget and allocate resources quickly and efficiently. However, it's often not that easy to define success without looking at the customer buyer cycle. If we are doing SEO for a car dealership the buyer cycle is longer and results might not come in quickly. If it's a SaaS business then it's often easy to see the subscriptions and LTV. "

Suganthan Mohanadasan, Snippet Digital

"COVID caused a lot of multi-location brands to re-evaluate their marketing mix last year. Most of them likely were significantly under-invested in SEO. We see this in particular with retailers that have a big ecommerce business. They often ignore the locations and are missing out on a huge amount of potential local search revenue."

Andrew Shotland, Local SEO Guide

"Like everything else, budgets correlate with SEO success only when well executed. Sadly, I've seen huge SEO budgets wasted when that wasn't the case."

Cyrus Shepherd, Zyppy

"Most often, our clients judge us on growth in conversions (leads, revenue or both), but for some clients, our initiative and attention to detail are equally important. Our most successful clients are involved and provide feedback, do not expect overnight results and bring new ideas to the table."

Joshua Schmidt, Straight North

ABOUT THE REPORT

Methodology

- United States
- India
- United Kingdom
- Canada
- Other

- B2B
- B2C & ecommerce
- Other

- Less than two years
- Between 2-4 years
- 5-10 years
- 11-20 years
- 20+ years

- Junior/Mid-level
- Team leader/Manager/Head of department
- C-level/VP/Director
- Founder
- Freelance/contractor

- I work for an in-house brand
- I work for an agency
- I do SEO for my own business/website
- I'm a freelance/contractor
- Other (please specify)

This survey was sent to Search Engine Journal email subscribers and readers (majority), along with outreach to non-SEJ readers (minimal). Respondents are all SEO professionals from around the world. 61.4% are from the US. The survey collected data from April 30 to June 4, 2021.

2,830 Total responses

2,325 Completed

1,223 B2B completed

951 B2C completed

1,219 SEO clients: agencies & freelance only

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Thank you to all our survey participants who made this report possible and to our exclusive sponsor, Straight North.

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Formed in 1997, Straight North is a full-service internet marketing company specializing in SEO, PPC, website design and development, email marketing and graphic design. With 100+ full-time, in-house employees, we help B2B and B2C companies of all sizes generate sales leads and e-commerce revenue in the lucrative but highly competitive online marketing space.

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