



# Search Ranking Factors and Rank Correlations

Google U.S. 2015

— *Understand how the deck is stacked* —

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## ABOUT SEARCHMETRICS

Searchmetrics, founded in 2005 is the pioneer and leading global enterprise platform for Search Experience Optimization. Search Experience Optimization combines SEO, Content Performance Marketing, Social Media and PR analysis to create the foundation for developing and executing a successful content strategy. It places the spotlight on the customer, contributing to a superior and memorable online experience.

Over 100,000 users from more than 8,000 brands use the Searchmetrics Suite to plan, execute, measure and report on their digital marketing strategies. Supported by its Research Cloud, which is a unique continually updated global data and knowledge repository, Searchmetrics answers the key questions asked by SEO professionals and digital marketers. It delivers a wealth of forecasts, analytic insights and recommendations that boost visibility and engagement, and increase online revenue. Many respected brands, such as T-Mobile, eBay, Siemens, Zalando, Tripadvisor and Symantec, rely on the Searchmetrics Suite.

Searchmetrics has offices in Berlin, San Mateo, New York, London, and Paris, and is backed by Holzbrinck Digital, Neuhaus Partners and Iris Capital.

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# FOCUS

Once again we have investigated the ranking factors for Google.com, with this year's focus on the following categories: **technical, user experience, content, backlinks and social signals**. This study is based on desktop search results and the corresponding ranking factors; a dedicated whitepaper on mobile ranking factors is planned for release later this year.

The goal of this study is to provide webmasters, SEOs and content marketers with concrete and detailed insights into which aspects are important for search rankings in 2015. By investigating average values of the top search results we are also able to provide useful benchmarks.



## THIS STUDY OFFERS ANSWERS TO THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

1. Which ranking factors are the most important in 2015?
2. How have these factors developed compared with previous years?
3. What values for the individual factors can provide useful insights? What are the benchmarks for top 10 search results?

From the answers to these key issues, it is possible to derive additional recommendations for your own web projects. For example, if marketers know the average file size and loading time of the top 10 Google search results – and much more importantly: what sets this content apart – then, this information can be used to optimize content and websites.

Searchmetrics has been publishing analyses of ranking factors and correlations since 2012. Wherever relevant, comparisons have been made with previous years. As always, we have further refined our existing ranking factors and added new analyses.

**Note:** All correlations are always calculated on the basis of a complete dataset – i.e. including Wikipedia results. However, when determining average values in some cases the Wikipedia results have been excluded (in cases where the data was dramatically skewed). In a few cases median values are given to aid interpretation. Exceptions are shown on the charts. Where relevant, we have included the data points from 2014.

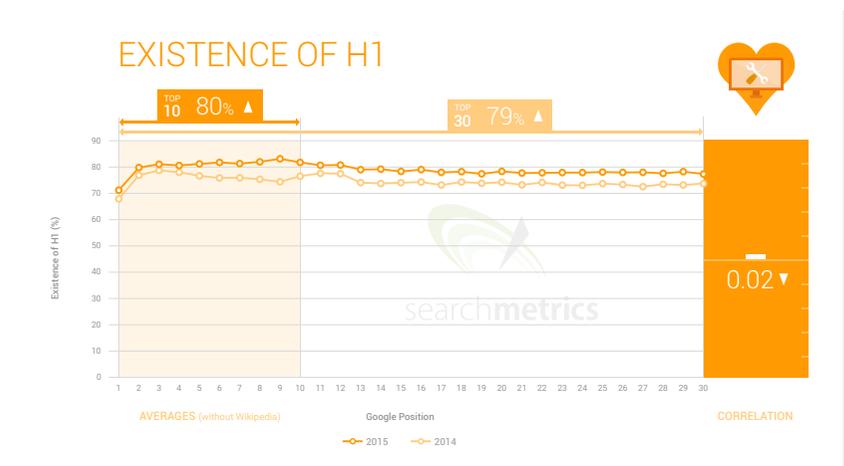
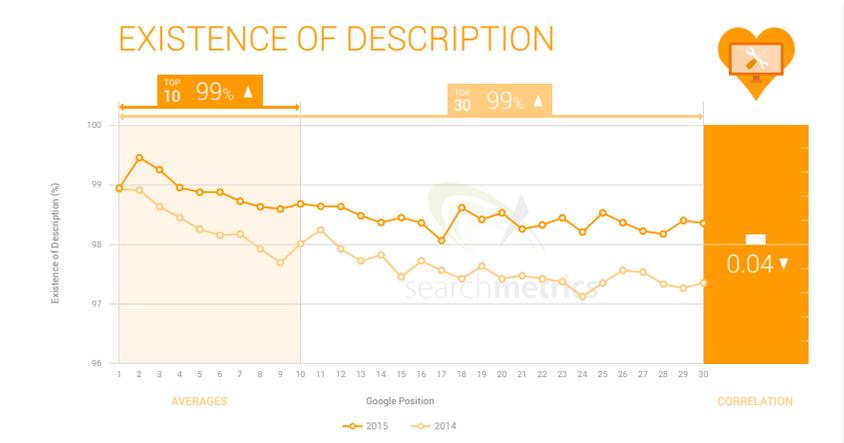
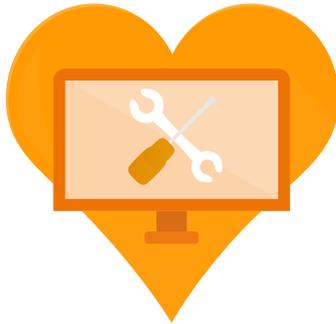
**Useful background information about the study, data and definitions:**

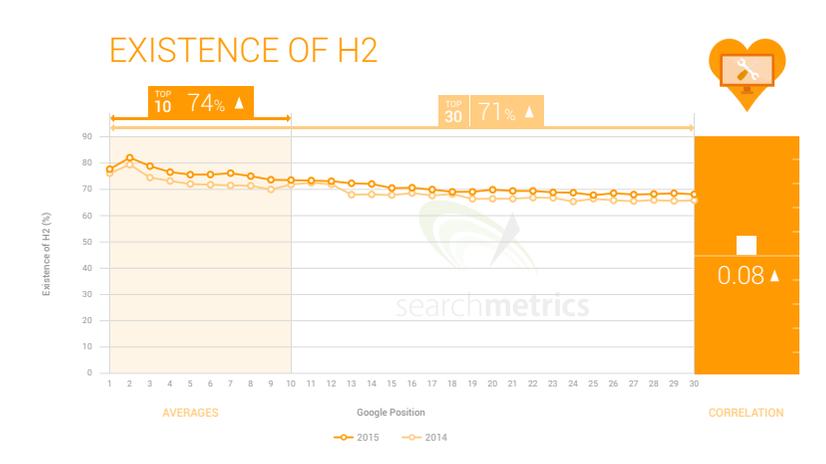
WHAT IS A RANKING FACTOR?

# 1

## TECHNICAL

This chapter is concerned with on-page factors that are primarily technical and not directly linked with a page's content, i.e. when 'description' is referred to we are talking about meta descriptions.





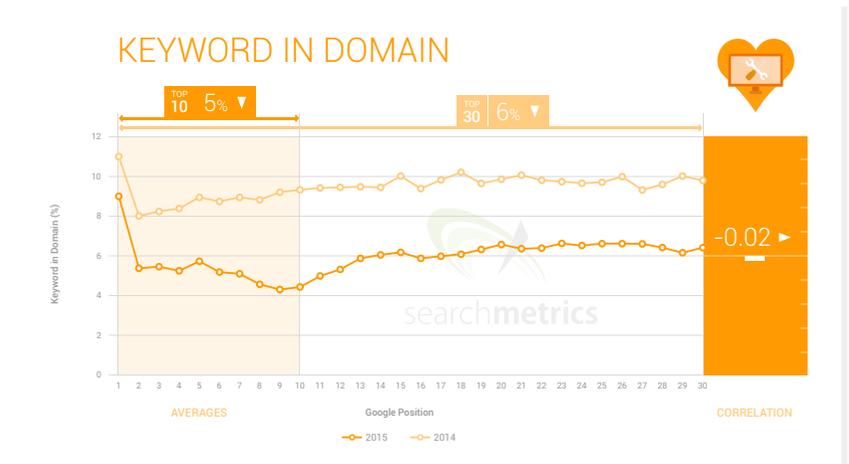
An increasing number of high-ranking websites use the meta description, H1 and H2 tags, and the frequency of these tags in pages ranking in the top 30 has increased across the board.

However, high-ranking websites are still always slightly better optimized. Except for position 1 (a phenomenon that we term "[brand factor](#)") we observed a slight increase from position 30 upwards. While the averages are very high (70-100%, depending on the factor) the correlation of these factors is low. This means that the differences in the top 30 in this regard are not very great – and are continuously blurred, as an increasing number of pages are now technically well optimized and these features are essentially a prerequisite for a good ranking.

The reasons for these three elements being a prerequisite are obvious enough: Not only is the search engine robot better able to obtain the relevant information from these parameters – implementation of these components also means an enhanced user experience:

1. The user experience is enhanced when search engines display an optimum description in the SERPs.
2. When on the page itself, the presence of H1 and H2 provide a header structure to outline the text on the page – these elements enhance the user experience.

When they are present, the click-through rate (CTR) and other user signals such as bounce rate or time on site may turn out correspondingly positive – and these additional data points can in turn push up the page's ranking.



Several years ago, having a keyword as a domain name had positive effects on the ranking of this domain for the respective keyword. As an example, it helped to rank for the keyword "cheap car insurance for students" to have a domain like [www.cheapcarinsurancestudents.com](#). The proportion of such keyword domains in the top 30 rankings of the investigated keyword set has fallen again this year. This decline is likely not only because of the fact that the domain name featured a keyword, but many exact match keyword domains simply did not provide a strong user experience in most cases. While 9% of the URLs included the keyword in the domain in 2014, this figure is down to just 6% in 2015. Also with respect to correlation, keyword domains as a ranking factor have lost their former positive effect.

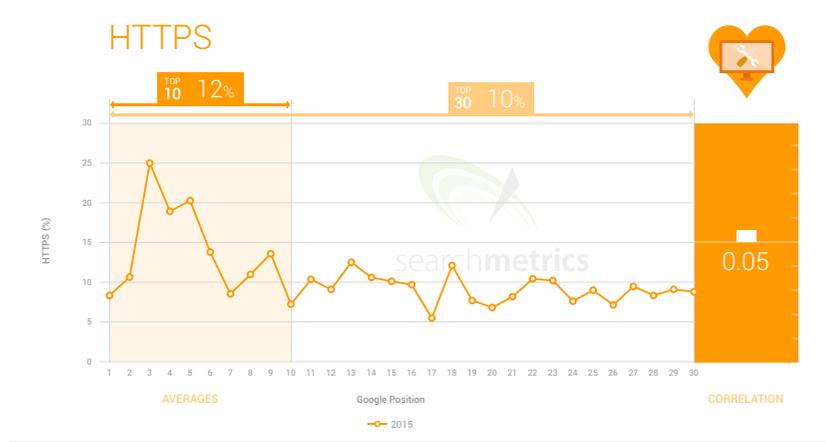


When choosing domain names, don't focus on keywords.



Strong meta description text will help optimize the search engine results page; headings help organize the landing page content. This improves the user experience, click-through rates and bounce rates, which will in turn improve rankings.

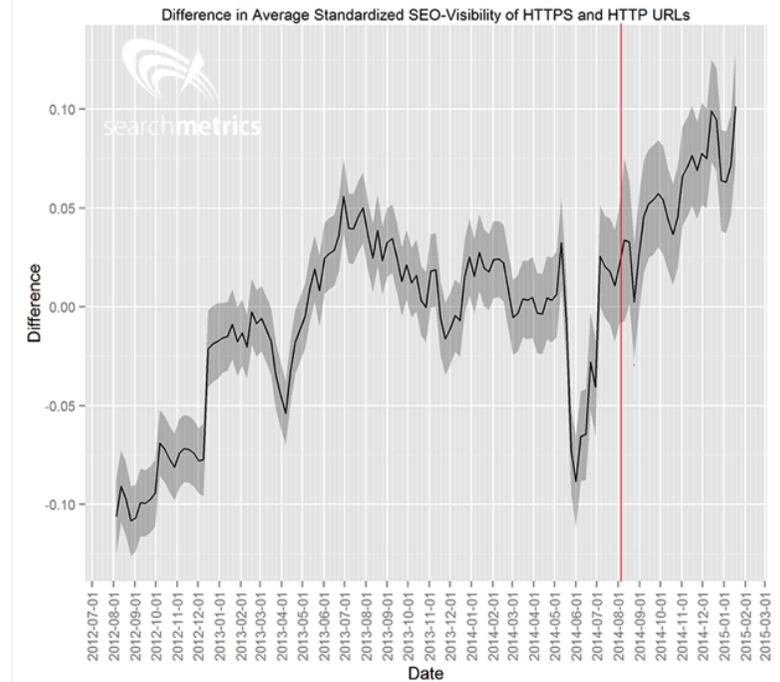
"The share of keyword domains in the search results has decreased continuously in recent years."



This year we investigated how HTTPS encryption acts as a ranking factor for the first time. It is apparent that the brand factor affects the first two positions – following them in positions 3 to 6, the proportion of HTTPS pages is up to 10% higher. We carried out our data analysis before Wikipedia's HTTPS migration, meaning that the proportion of HTTPS pages is likely to be higher now.



HTTPS is becoming more relevant and even a ranking signal for Google – but it is not necessary for every site. Encryption is primarily important for sites with purchasing processes or sensitive client information to increase trust and conversion rates.



In August 2014 Google announced that it wanted to use webpage encryption as minor ranking signal in future. According to Google, this would increase online security. In a [HTTP vs. HTTPS analysis](#) from February 2015, we were able to detect the first effects: the connection between encryption and SEO visibility can now be described as statistically significant. If you are interested, you can read our [Guide on HTTPS conversion](#) in full – here, the results in brief:

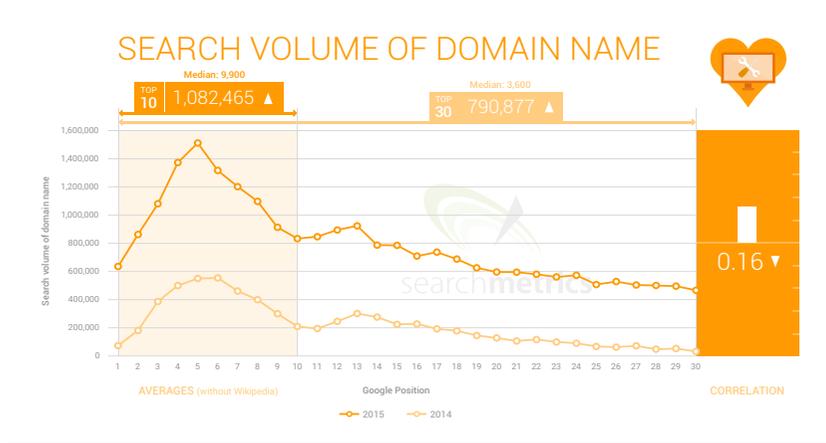
#### Advantages:

- Greater user trust, especially for websites with security-relevant data inputs (banking & e-commerce).
- Protection against phishing & hacks.
- Slight ranking advantages (minor ranking signal).

#### Drawbacks:

- Time consuming implementation and redirects necessary.
- Certificate-based (formerly SSL, now TLS).
- Modification of link structure required.
- Speed losses possible.

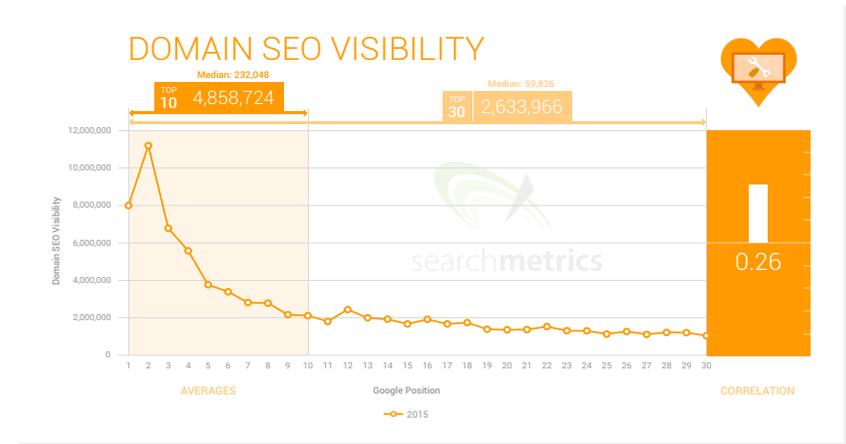
As Wikipedia is now set to completely migrate to HTTPS, it will be interesting to see in the next few months to what extent a correlation between HTTPS and with ranking improvements can be observed.



Once again, we measured the search volume of domain names including the top-level domain name (Searchmetrics.com, for example) for the ranking URLs. This value has increased strongly in comparison with 2014. Interestingly with exception of the top two positions – albeit this calculation discounts Wikipedia. It is thus possible to conclude that more domains feature in the top 30 which already have a brand character – there seems to be room for niche pages with lower domain name search volumes in the top positions. Presumably, bigger brand names are more often searched for without TLD and/ or have more direct traffic.



Recognized brands often rank on the first page or even occupy position one. This also means that brand searches (either brand only or also keyword + brand) influence the search results for non-brand searches.



The correlation between the URLs and Searchmetrics SEO Visibility Score of the entire domain is high. This means that success in search and content is also a domain based factor. The majority of analyzed URLs are part of successful domains that generally gain high rankings with large numbers of landing pages.

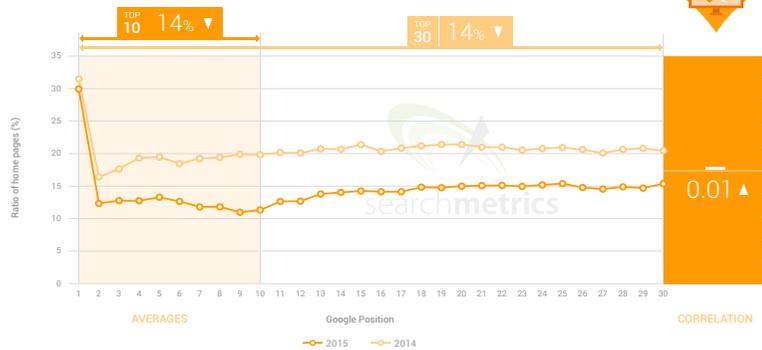


Domains with a high SEO visibility also obtain higher rankings with their URLs.

If you want to check your domain's SEO Visibility Score (and your competition's) for free, visit:

[SEARCHMETRICS SUITE](#)

## RATIO OF HOME PAGES



In general, somewhat fewer home pages have a 1st position ranking than in 2014. The proportion of home pages ranking in lower positions has significantly decreased in 2015. This means that from search result position 2 downwards, there are more interior pages, i.e. specific landing pages at directory or sub-domain level. This trend also holds between 2013 and 2014 rankings, indicating this is a long-term trend. This is in line with Google's development and endeavors to constantly direct the user to the best page on a site – the page with the answer. This trend is the same with or without Wikipedia results.

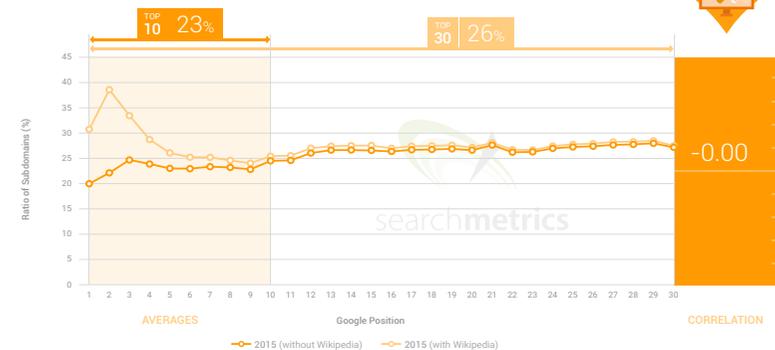


Approx. 90% of the results with rankings 2-30 are interior pages (not home pages). On the other hand, 30% of the URLs listed in position 1 are homepages.

We also analyzed the rankings of subdomains and directories. To help you better understand the difference, below are a few examples of domains vs. subdomains vs. subfolders:

<b>Domains</b>	www.example.com = domain www.example.com/blog = subfolder/ subdirectory on the main domain
<b>Subdomains</b>	Blog.example.com = subdomain Subdomain.example.com/blog = subdomain's subdirectory/folder

## RATIO OF SUBDOMAINS



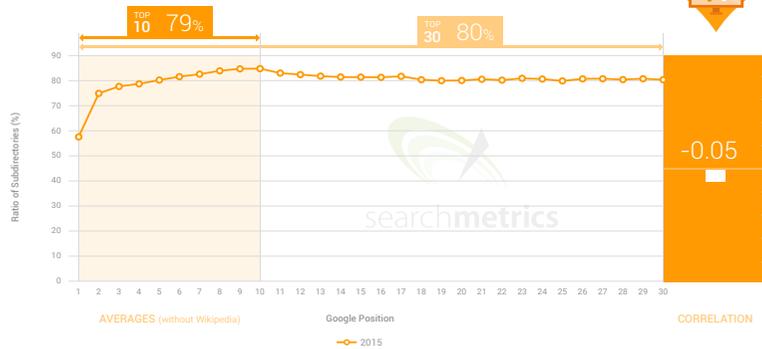
The influence of Wikipedia is clearly evident in the analysis of subdomains. Disregarding Wikipedia, there is a slightly negative correlation, which means the higher the ranking of the URL, the less frequently it is a subdomain.

When it comes to subdomain usage there is a slightly negative correlation, which means the higher the ranking of the URL, the less frequently it is a subdomain. With Wikipedia the correlation is positive. This is due to the fact that country specific Wikipedia results are directed via subdomains (<https://en.wikipedia.org>).



Roughly a quarter of all URLs in the top 30 are subdomains. This means roughly 75% are main domains and key content needed to rank in search engines should sit on the root domain.

## RATIO OF SUBDIRECTORIES

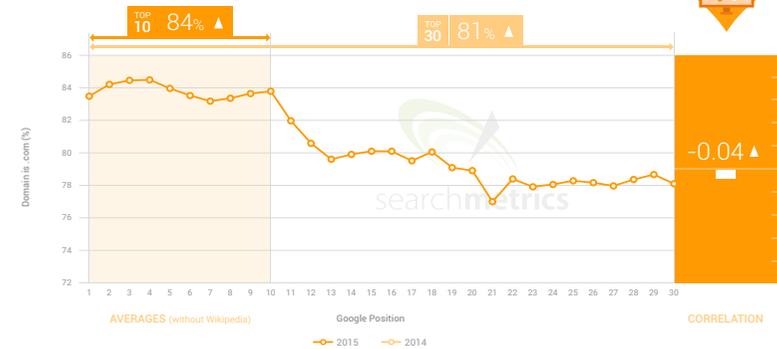


As can be seen on the chart there are significantly more directories in the SERPs. Root domains occupy most of the number one slots. The total of subdomains and subdirectories, as is to be expected, is over 100%, as both parameters may apply simultaneously. This means that a URL can simultaneously contain a subdomain and a subdirectory.



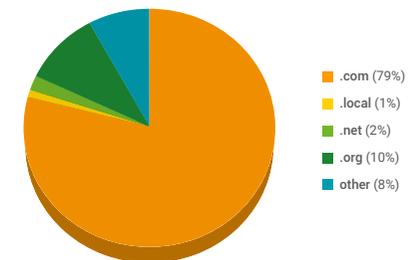
There are significantly more directories than subdomains in the top 3 SERPs.

## DOMAIN IS .COM

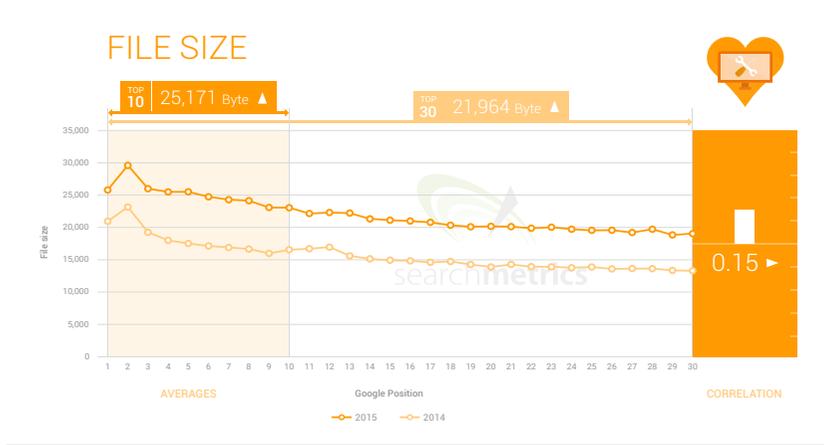


The proportion of .com domains has increased slightly in comparison to the previous year; the proportion of other domains has decreased accordingly. The Wikipedia domain exercises a decisive influence on this factor – the result is heavily influenced by the .org domain and its huge presence in the search results. Excluding Wikipedia, the proportion of com results in the top 30 rankings comes to 84%; in the top 10 this figure is 81%. The proportion of Wikipedia results is examined in section 4.

## TOP-LEVEL DOMAINS



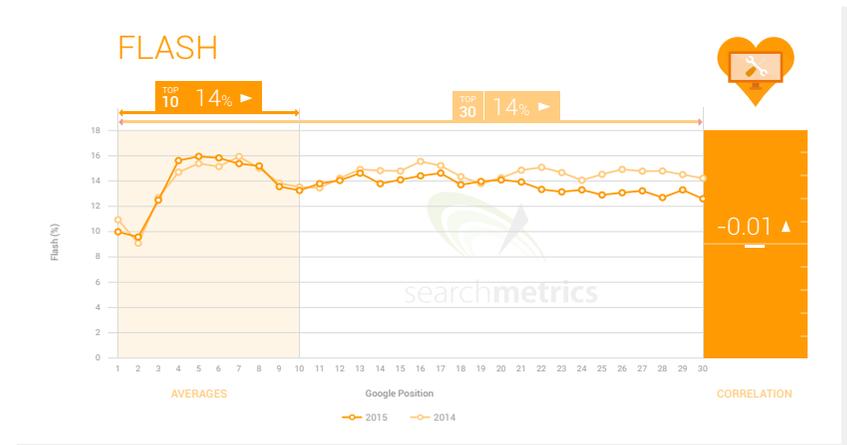
The proportion of .com domains in the search results has increased. Disregarding Wikipedia, the average of top 30 .com domains is 81% (top 10: 84%). TLDs are generally not a ranking factor.



In comparison with 2014, the size of websites has increased in 2015. The average page in the top 10 rankings has an average file size of 25,171 bytes. In the top 30, this figure is 21,964 bytes. This means that the average file size of the top 10 is larger but site speeds were quicker when analyzed.



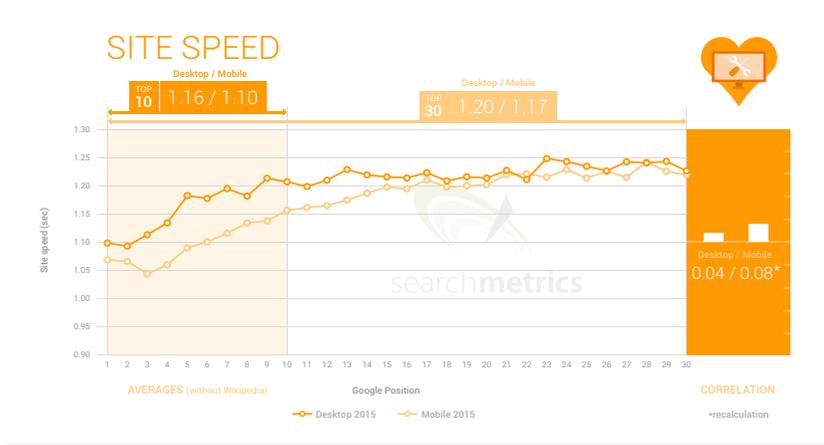
*Domains with larger file sizes have higher rankings – but keep an eye on your site speed!*



The proportion of pages that use Flash is significantly lower in the first two search result positions than in the following positions. This applies for desktop results; in the mobile SERPs the fraction of Flash pages is only 5%.



*Pages in the leading search result positions feature Flash significantly less frequently. In the mobile sector, only 5% of the top 10 feature Flash.*

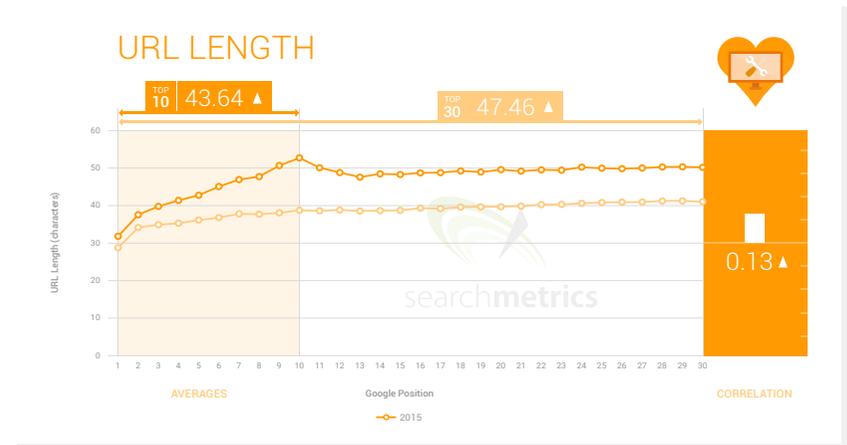


Instead of comparing average desktop loading times with the previous year, we present a comparison of this year's page loading times between desktop and mobile. This is because we have recalculated the page loading times and a desktop comparison with the previous is therefore not meaningful.

The difference in page loading times between desktop and mobiles is very clear. Mobile pages – also because of smaller file sizes – load more quickly, in some cases by around one tenth of a second. The average loading time in the desktop top 30 is 1.2 seconds. The desktop top 10 load more quickly – 1.16 seconds.



Pages with higher rankings have quicker loading times.



URL length has increased since 2014 according to our analysis. The average URL length in the top 10 is 43.6 characters; in the previous year it was 36 characters. The top 30 have a somewhat longer URL structure at 47.5 characters, in 2014 the average was only around 39 characters. In general cryptic URLs and unnecessary parameters should be avoided in favor of "speaking URLs".



Higher ranking URLs are shorter – position 1 is reserved for the shortest URLs because this is where homepages rank most often.



## LESSONS

### WHY TECHNICAL RANKING FACTORS MATTER:

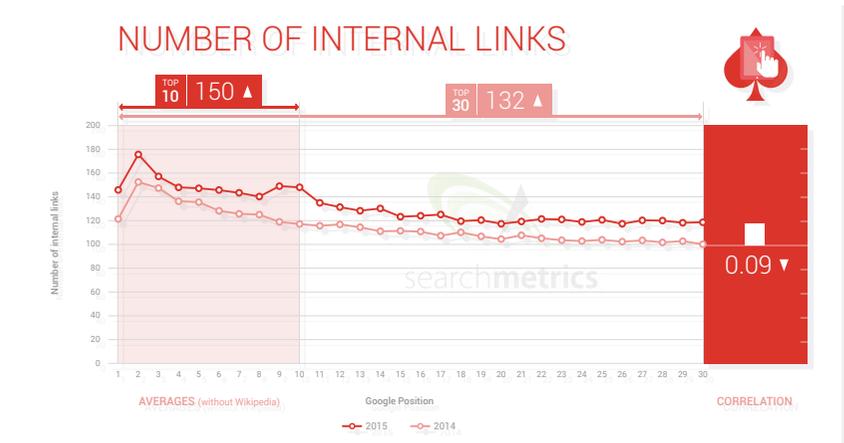
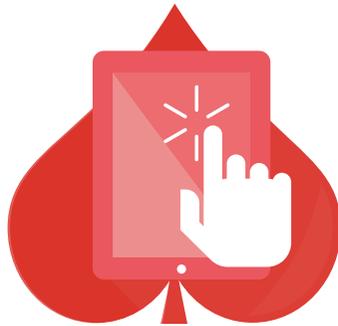
- *Technical factors continue to be an important, if not the most important prerequisite for achieving good rankings with good content – and this is not likely to change.*
- *The significance of the factor “keyword” continues to decline in most sectors. Instead it is a question of holistically optimizing topics, i.e. rationally associated groupings of keywords and the concept of entities.*
- *Domains with a high SEO visibility also have higher rankings with their URLs.*
- *Good URLs are worth thousands of keywords in the rankings.*
- *An ever increasing number of pages are technically optimized and are described via components such as H-labeling of the headers. This means - in addition to greater readability for search engine bots - an enhanced user experience.*
- *Online documents are generally becoming larger, while at the same time the loading time is falling – both factors correlate with better rankings.*

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# 2

## USER EXPERIENCE

In this paper, we introduce a new section called user experience factors. These factors are primarily aspects of design and usability. User experience is related to on-page optimization and fits somewhere between technical and content.



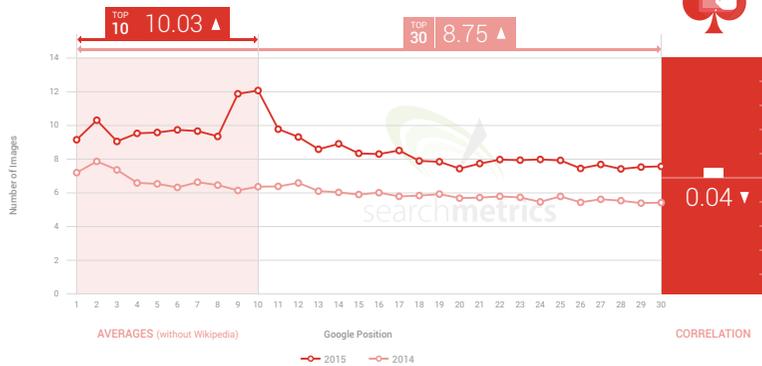
In comparison with 2014, the number of internal links per page has increased. The number of internal links in the top 10 rankings in 2014 was on average only 131, in 2015 the figure was 150. While the average number in the top 30 was 115 in the previous year, this year's average is 132. The trend is therefore going against the correlation of this ranking factor. The correlation has thus fallen in 2015 in comparison to the previous year.

Caution: These averages should not be regarded as targets or benchmarks. What counts is not the total number of internal links, but rather the optimization of the internal structure and page information so that the user (and also the search engine) is optimally guided through the provider's content and to ensure that the user stays on the page and is satisfied.



Besides enhancing the user experience, an optimized link structure also maximizes the crawlability of the search engine bot and hence the flow of the link juice.

## NUMBER OF IMAGES

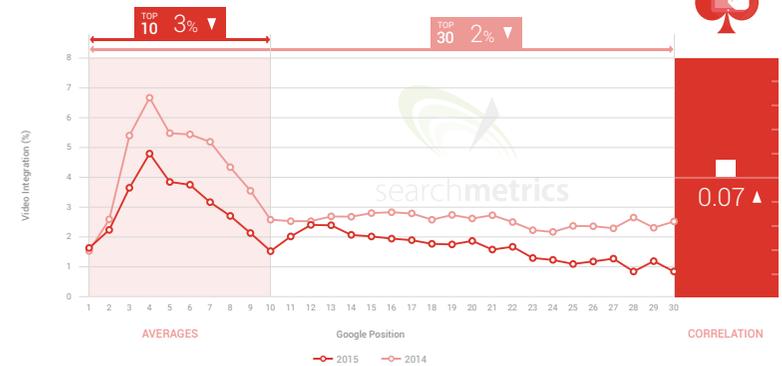


The number of images found in the analyzed landing pages which rank in the top 30 search results has increased in comparison to the previous year. The ranking websites use around a quarter more images – this is probably partially responsible for the increase in file sizes compared to 2014.



*Images placed in content increase time on site and enhance the user experience. Some keyword searches even lead to picture galleries ranking highest, for example "hairstyle trends 2015" – because the user is expecting them. Users can also be reached via separate Google image search.*

## VIDEO INTEGRATION



The proportion of ranking sites with integrated videos on the page has fallen in comparison with the previous year. One reason for this is very likely the modification by Google in relation to rich snippets, whereby since July 2014 only video thumbnails are still shown for ranking results of larger video platforms.

There is plenty of useful information on the prevalence of videos in search results in our Universal Search Study:

UNIVERSAL SEARCH STUDY 2015



*8 out of 10 videos in the top U.S. SERPs are from YouTube. It has also become more difficult to get high rankings for non-YouTube videos. However, videos are able to greatly improve the user experience on the provider's website and also increase time on site. Furthermore, people like sharing videos via social networks.*

## RESPONSIVE DESIGN



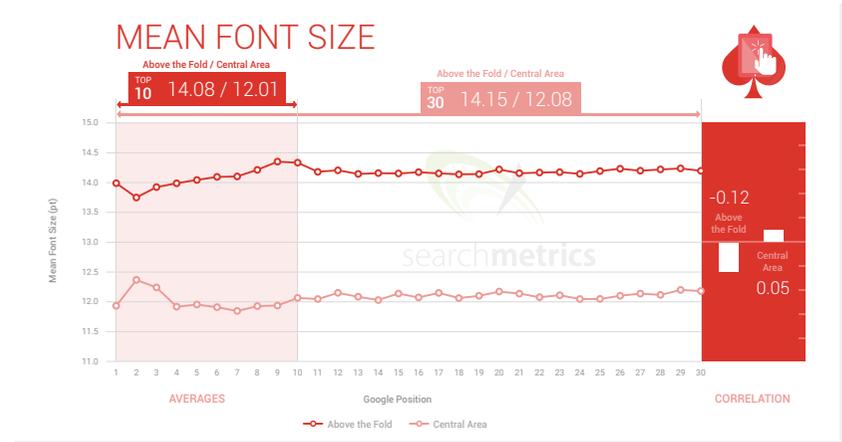
Responsive web design is an approach (one of several) that aims to automatically adjust page display to the corresponding end device (desktop, tablet, smartphone etc.).

Only about one third of the analyzed URLs use responsive design, with up to more than a 10% difference within the top 30 search results. The peak at position 2 is ascribable to Wikipedia. There is slight positive correlation, which means that the better a page ranks, the more likely it is to employ responsive web design. Please note that we have used a pattern that tries to measure the most common responsive web design JavaScript libraries, but that does not cover all of them. The actual proportion may be higher.



Make sure that your content display is optimized for each end device.

## MEAN FONT SIZE

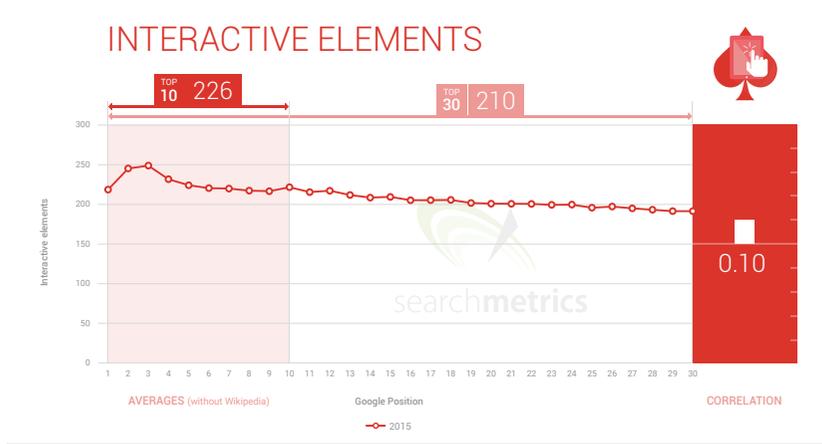


For the first time this year we analyzed font sizes for each page area. The results show that the top-ranking pages use font sizes uniformly. Above the fold (the visible area without scrolling) – influenced by header and navigation bar – the average font size is around 14 pts, in the central area the average font size is around 12 pts.



Ensure the best possible readability of your content – individually for each end device. The smaller the display, the larger the font should be.

## INTERACTIVE ELEMENTS

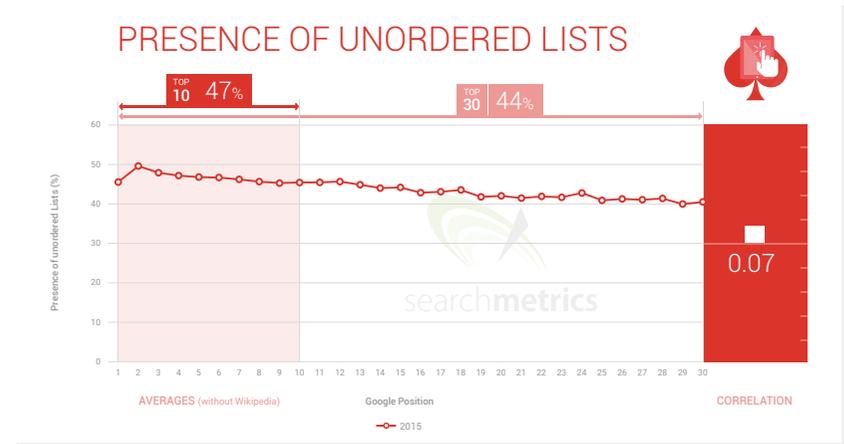


Even if Wikipedia is disregarded, the results show that higher ranking pages exhibit a higher proportion of components such as menus, buttons or other interactive elements on the page. Elements like these help to structure the content on a page for the user and make the page easier to use. This suggests better structured content ranks higher.



*Use interactive elements to enhance structured content in a logical way.*

## PRESENCE OF UNORDERED LISTS



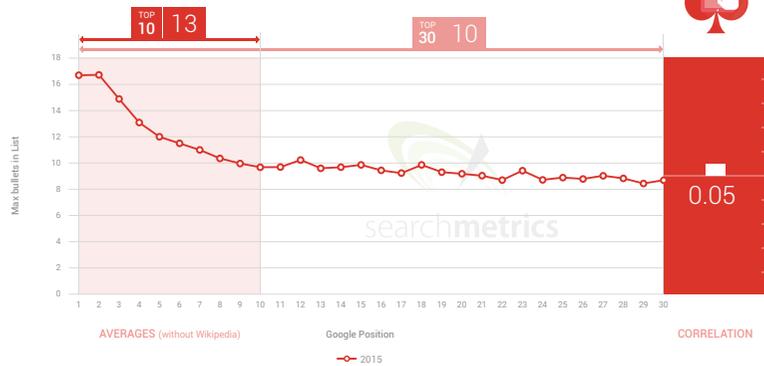
Unordered lists include, for example, bullet points or lists that are not numerically ordered (numbered lists = ordered).

On average, half of all URLs ranked 2nd have such unordered lists (not necessarily in the content, but also in the navigation, footer or sidebar) – compare that with position 30, where only 40% have such lists. In this case, too, no correlation is apparent. Many online retailers typically feature unordered lists, where products are often listed using bullet points.



*Higher ranked content is better structured.*

## MAX BULLETS IN LIST

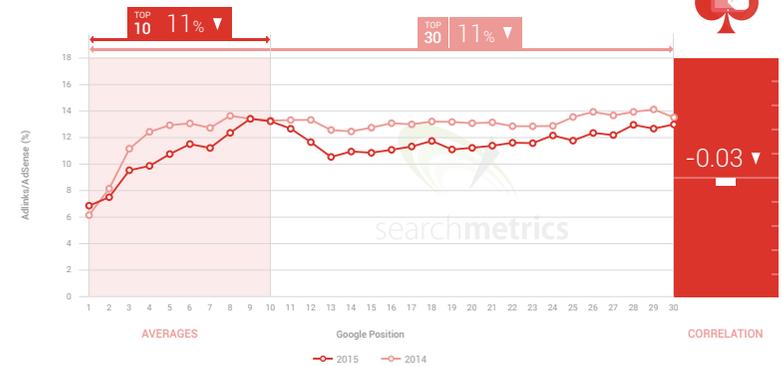


Interestingly, the greater the number of bullets per list, the higher the ranking is. The content of high-ranking websites therefore has more structured content in purely quantitative terms.



*Structured content is easier for users to decode.*

## ADLINKS/ADSENSE



The trend regarding the integration of Google AdSense is generally downward - this trend was already evident in the previous year and is now being maintained. In 2015, fewer pages had an integration of AdSense and other advertisements than was the case in 2014. Only the first two search result spots - usually occupied by the brand and Wikipedia - have an AdSense percentage in the double-digit range; from position 3 on, however, it is only around the 10 percent mark.



*(Too much) advertising can impair the user experience. Google gives particularly negative ratings to too much advertisement in the visible area (above the fold) and to interstitials/overlays that hide the entire actual content when the page is retrieved.*

## USER SIGNALS

User signals such as the click-through rate (the click rate of search results, also CTR), time on site, as well as the bounce rate (visitors who enter a site then leave, usually by clicking back to the search results) are amongst the most important ranking factors for search engines. This is because the direct analysis of users reactions to the search results allows an accurate insight as to whether the user was happy with the result. Google, for example, can measure these signals very efficiently across its wide reaching product base. Google's browser Chrome alone has market coverage of around 50%. Search machine algorithms can make relevance judgements based on this vast amount of users (big data), allowing a greater correspondence between search intention and result.

It is not necessary to recalculate these every year to analyze the relevance. Therefore we took the data from our 2014 analysis. It is clear that user signals have an absolutely decisive role in determining the rankings. This is because the analysis of user signals enables search engines to deduce whether the user was satisfied with the result – large user numbers (big data) enable relevance analyses to be performed which enable close harmonization between the search results and the respective search intention.



## CLICK-THROUGH RATE



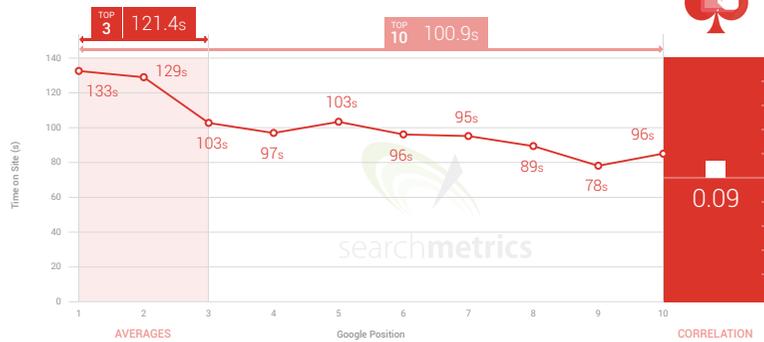
CTR measures what percentage of users click on a certain result in each position. The highest CTR correlation we have ever measured is 0.67. This means that differences between the top 30 positions are sizeable and that each positions drops in value.

The chart of CTR averages for the top rankings clearly shows that higher search results are clicked more often. That sounds trivial. However, in lower positions, landing pages with good SERP snippets that have an above average CTR can expect higher rankings.



*Optimize title and meta description and use rich snippets (for example by using micro data like schema.org) in order to improve click-through rate.*

## TIME ON SITE



Regarding time on site, we found that users stay longer on top search results that are clicked more often. The correlation found was 0.09. This means that the differences here are relevant.

If we take a look at the averages for time on site, we see that the values are much higher in the top 3 positions than in the lower results pages. It should be noted that time on site is not uniform across all searches: if a user is searching for current sport results or lotto numbers, then the time on site will be lower than if the user is booking a holiday or researching a topic.



Optimize time on site on your website – use videos, internal links and create engaging content.

## BOUNCE RATE



The bounce rate can be a strong user signal. It gives the proportion of users that click “back” in the browser and return to the SERPs.

This can be an indication that the user was not entirely happy with the search result or had a different search intention. This factor should be treated with respect to time on site: if a user reads an entire page's content and then clicks “back” in the browser, for example to research a topic from different sources, then this is also counted as a bounce.



When optimizing your site, consider the bounce rate with respect to time on site. Pages that create bad user signals should be either completely reworked or deleted all together.



## USER EXPERIENCE AS A RANKING FACTOR

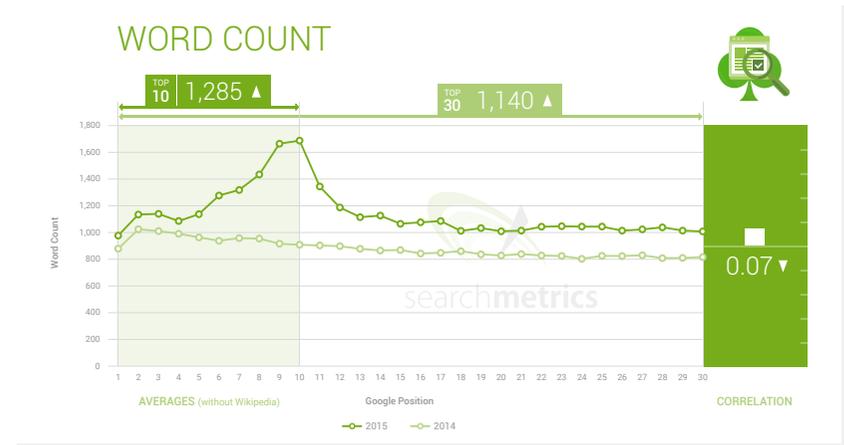
- *Internal link structure and optimum page information structure are important ranking factors – both for the user and the bot.*
- *While the number of images used on websites has increased in comparison to last year, the number of pages with video integration in the SERPs has fallen.*
- *The decline in embedded videos is probably associated with the decision by Google in July 2014 to only play video thumbnails in the SERPs for large video portals.*
- *The embedding of images and videos is a factor that can considerably enhance the user experience and also user signals on websites. The number of images and duration of videos is thereby strongly dependent on user intention (image galleries vs. tutorial videos).*
- *The content on higher ranking pages is better structured, contains more interactive elements and is thus more comprehensible and interpretable for both users and the bot.*
- *The percentage of websites in the top 30 rankings that integrate Google AdSense advertisements has declined compared with 2014.*
- *The top positions were dominated by responsive sites and sites that do not use Flash.*
- *User signals are essential for your content and rankings. The reaction of users offers search engines direct feedback about user satisfaction with your content.*

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# 3

## CONTENT

When it comes to search rankings, the importance of good quality, relevant content cannot be understated. Once again this year we have carried out detailed analyses of key content ranking factors including word count and Flesch readability. The aim is to give a clearer insight into which aspects of content in particular can improve the overall ranking of your site. As the trend away from keywords and towards relevant content continues, high-ranking sites are shifting their focus from using keywords based on search queries to trying to understand the user's intention as a whole.



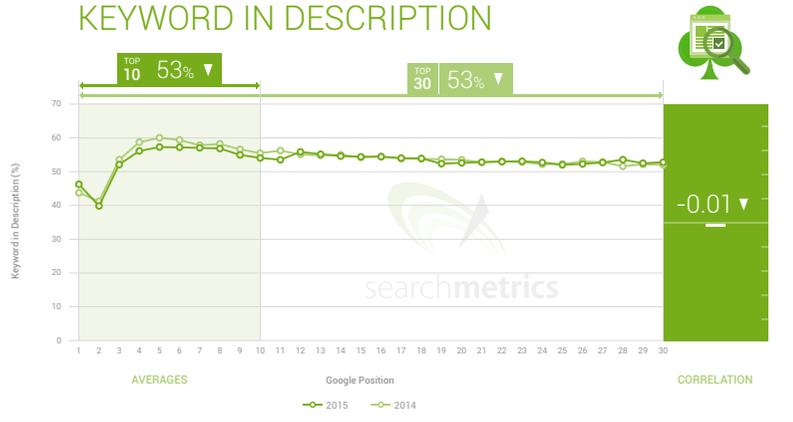
Compared to 2014, the average word count in HTML documents has increased. While landing pages in the top 30 rankings had an average word count of 902 in 2014, this figure has risen in our latest survey after the Google mobile update to on average 1140 words. The URLs in the second half of the top SERPs again have more words in the document: The average word count for the top 10 is 1285 words (cf. 2014: 975).

In the correlation analysis, we see that the factor has lost weight in comparison with the previous year - this means that the differences between the pages in the top 30 have gotten smaller. Longer content has thus become standard.



Don't just write more. Use information about the structure and context of topics to optimize your content.

## KEYWORD IN DESCRIPTION

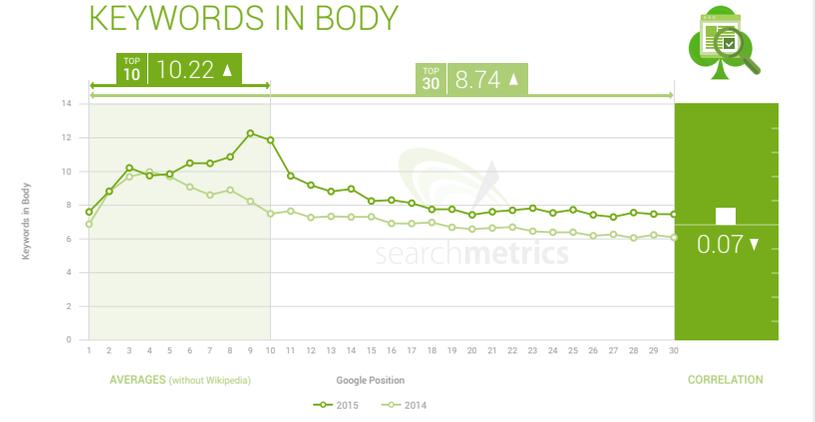


In the era of the semantic search, the relevance of keywords in the description is falling. Although almost 60% of the top 10 rankings still include the description of the landing pages, the correlation has dropped yet further. While it was slightly positive in 2014, it has now slipped into the negative zone.



*Ideally, good pages get rankings for hundreds or even thousands of keywords – but do you want to write them all into your meta title? Forget it – concentrate on an optimally formulated description with relevant content instead!*

## KEYWORDS IN BODY

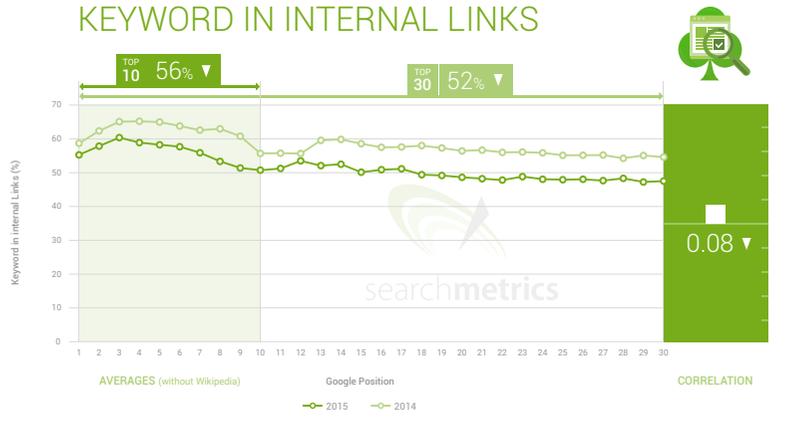


It is not surprising that with the increase in the word counts of online documents, the average number of keywords per page has also increased. The interesting point, however, is that this does not seem to apply to the very top search result positions. Here, too, the top 5 form an exception, as the percentage of websites with the keywords in the body is much lower than for the following rankings for SERP 1.



*Related terms, high semantic density and relevance of the text are much more important than keywords.*

## KEYWORD IN INTERNAL LINKS

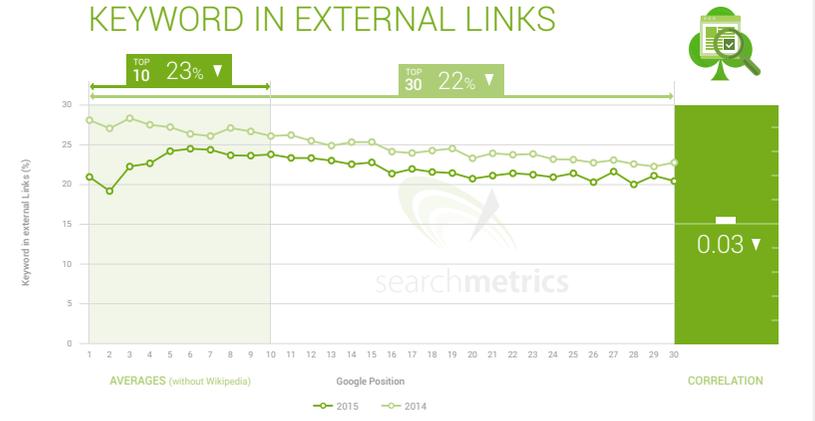


The percentage of landing pages that have integrated the corresponding keyword in internal links is still high but somewhat lower than in the previous year. As in the previous year, we found the highest percentage of corresponding landing pages in search result position 3.



*A good internal link structure with corresponding keywords is important for securing high rankings.*

## KEYWORD IN EXTERNAL LINKS



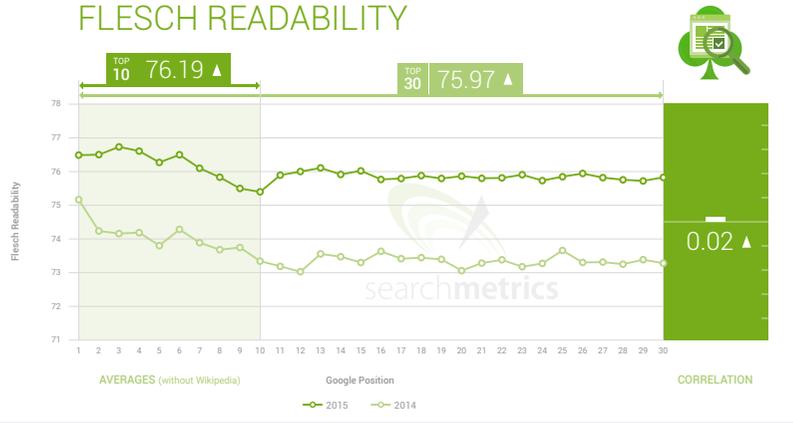
How important are keywords in internal and external links? Our study clearly shows that the percentage of pages that have the keyword they want to rank for as an anchor for an external link has fallen in this respect. Especially in the top 5, significantly fewer pages than in 2014 contain the keyword in an external link text on the page. The correlations for keywords in internal and external links have also decreased correspondingly.

The percentage of pages with the keyword in external links in the first 5 positions has changed particularly clearly. Significantly fewer top ranking URLs link directly with the keyword.



*In principle, the keyword with which a page is to be ranked should not be linked by the page. And above all not externally! This is because the relevance of this term is then assigned to another page. A special case internally is the link with the keyword to itself, e.g. in the navigation or bread crumbs.*

## FLESCH READABILITY



The Flesch reading ease score indicates the complexity of a text. The higher the value, the easier the text is to read. The content of the URLs in the rankings has become somewhat simpler since 2014, with the average value has remained fairly constant at around 76. The landing pages in the top 10 have a slightly higher (=less complexity) average.

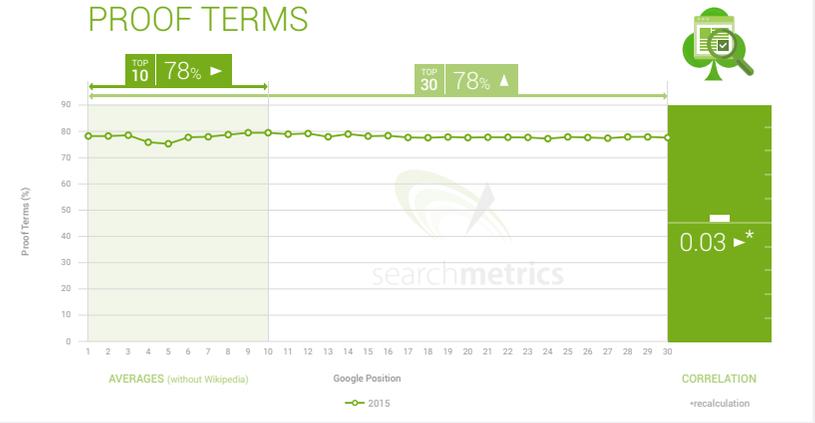


*The difficulty of the text for a page should match the respective target group. A technical article will naturally be much more complex than a tutorial text for beginners.*



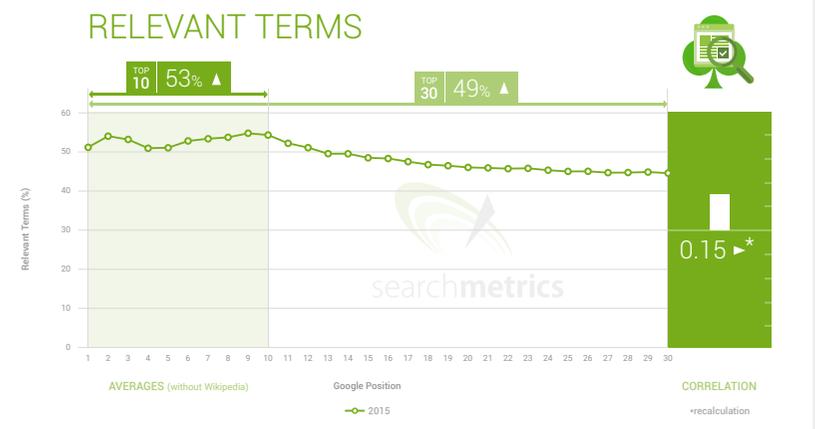
*Over on the right the charts show that the percentage of proof terms and relevant terms in the top 30 is relatively high and has even increased on last year. High-ranking pages are much more holistic.*

## PROOF TERMS



The use of important proof terms for a main keyword is essential for high rankings. For example if my primary keyword is "Panda Update", the proof terms could be "Google", "algorithm", "affected" or "Panda". Around 78 percent of the websites in our analyzed search results use proof terms.

## RELEVANT TERMS



Relevant terms are semantically more distant relatives of the primary keywords that indicate that the content policy of the website is highly holistic. If, for example, I write about the "Panda Update", relevant terms could be "webmaster" or "rankings" or also n-grams (multiple terms) such as "search engine optimization". Around 51% of the top 30 websites this year integrated relevant terms.



## CONTENT AS A RANKING FACTOR

- *The content of the top 30 webpages has become more comprehensive; the average text length has increased compared with 2014 by around a quarter.*
- *At the same time, the content has become more holistic. While the popularity of proof terms has remained unchanged, the percentage of relevant terms on high ranking websites has increased yet further.*
- *Beside longer and more holistic content, the complexity of the content has decreased; according to the results of the Flesch readability analysis the texts are somewhat less demanding to read.*
- *The importance of keywords in internal and external links has declined.*
- *Webpages with the most relevant content for a search query occupy the top positions.*
- *Focusing your optimization on single keywords or keyword lists without providing truly relevant content for the user will not result in long-term success.*

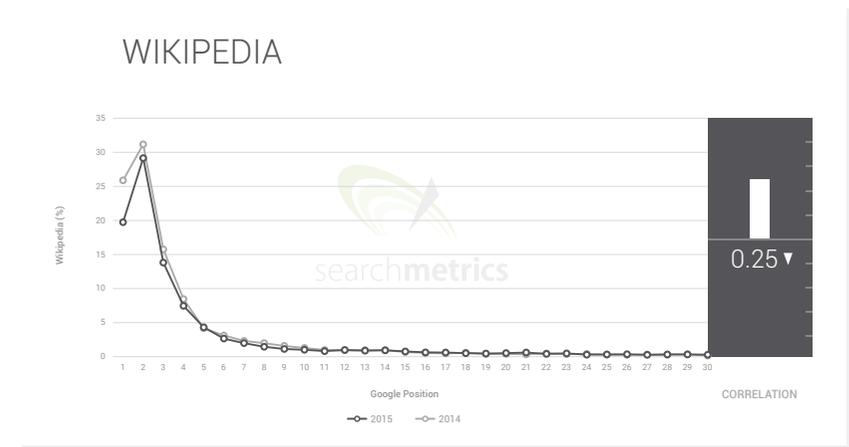
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# 4

## RELATED DISCUSSION: WIKIPEDIA & FACEBOOK RANKINGS

*In order to assess competition and to find a benchmark, the first step is to define who the competition consists of (this could, for example, be entirely different brands online and offline). Secondly, it is important to outline which webpages it is effectively impossible to compete against. The latter normally include Facebook and Wikipedia.*

*This is also the reason why in certain cases we discount Wikipedia values in order to provide a more realistic benchmark. Of course, it should not be overlooked that the corresponding percentage of URLs continues to be occupied by Wikipedia.*

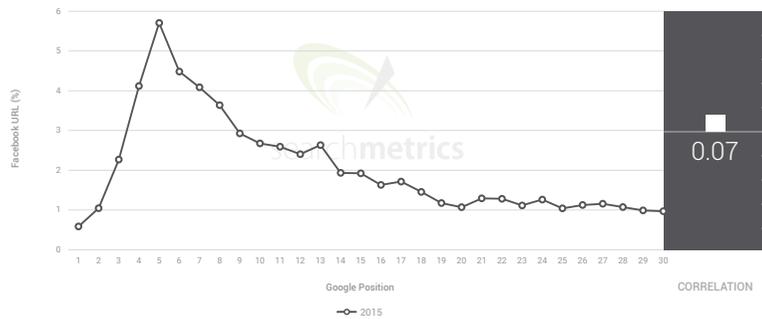


Obviously, many Wikipedia URLs rank very high in the SERPs – specifically mostly in places 1-4. While fewer Wikipedia results occupy search result position 1 in comparison to the 2014 results, the percentage in the positions has been relatively stable. Wikipedia most frequently ranks second – at 29%, almost a third of all results in position 2 are from Wikipedia. Interestingly, however, we find significantly fewer Wikipedia rankings in places 1 and 2 in 2015.



*Almost a third of all search results ranking second are from Wikipedia.*

## FACEBOOK URL



For the first time ever, we have also analyzed the rankings for Facebook results. The result: Facebook URLs are significantly much less frequent than Wikipedia (which in addition to the size and presence, is also due to keyword set) and most commonly rank in place 5; 6% of all results in this position are from Facebook.



*Know your competition, and be aware the fact that you often can't compete against domains like Wikipedia or Facebook.*

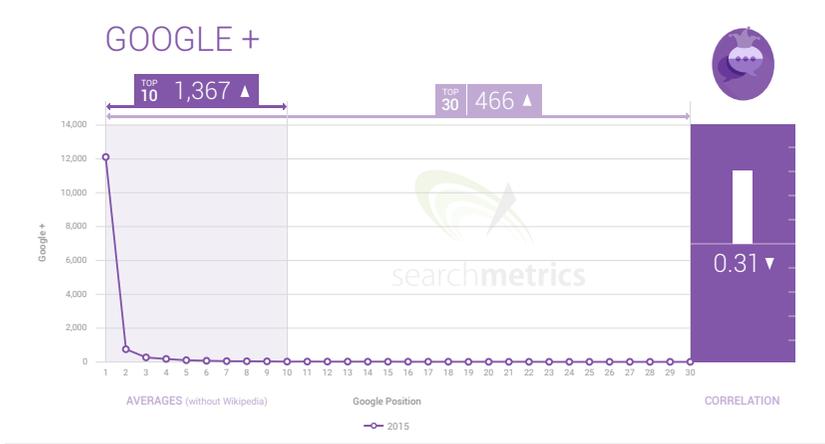
# 5

## SOCIAL SIGNALS

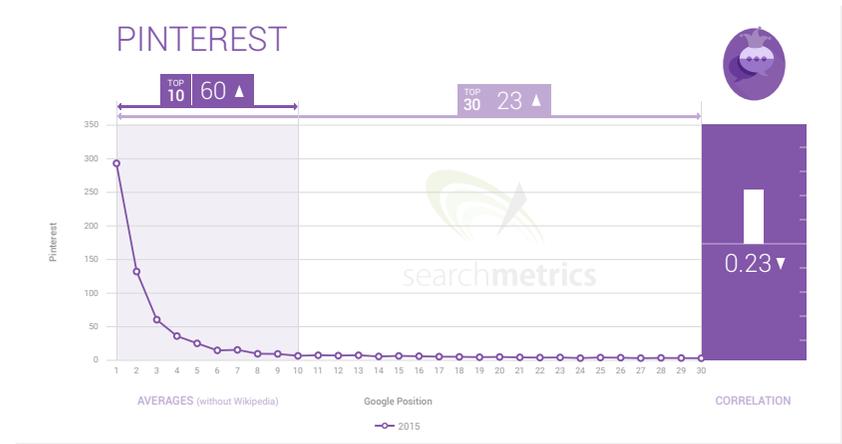
The correlations of social signals with rankings have remained practically unchanged at a high level. The following still applies: Top ranking URLs have more social signals – this factor increases exponentially in the top places.



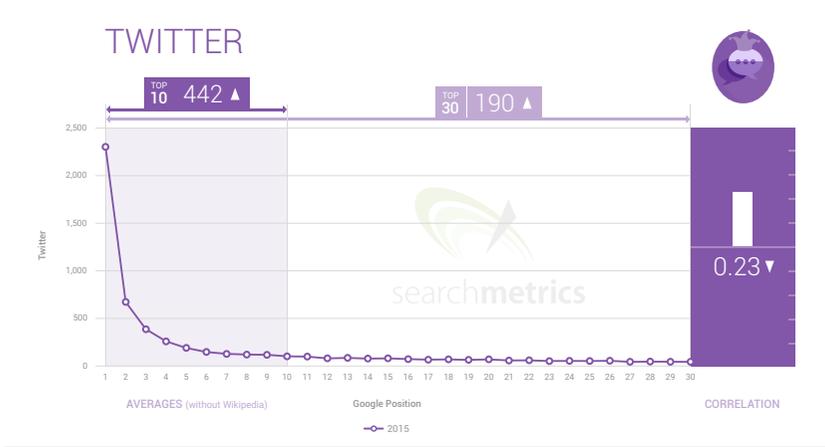
The number of Facebook likes & shares has risen across all examined search result positions. The rank correlations between the individual positions are high. Webpages at position 1 have twice as many Facebook signals than pages ranking second.



In general, webpages ranking in position 1 – mainly brands – have more +1s than lower ranked pages. The correlation here is also very high, even if it has slightly decreased compared to last year.



As for all social platforms, the number of Pinterest signals (pins) has increased across all search ranking positions compared to last year.



The number of tweets and retweets on websites that rank in the top 30 showed a high, slightly decreasing correlation compared to last year.



Higher ranking URLs have more social signals.



## SOCIAL SIGNALS AS A RANKING FACTOR

- *Social signals are factors that correlate strongly to better rankings.*
- *The question of how social signals directly affect rankings remains. As noted in our analysis, higher-ranked URLs have more social cues such as Likes, Tweets and +1s than those sites further down the ranks, but Google has continually emphasized that it is not using social signals as a direct ranking factor.*
- *In addition, a high number of social signals implies that the site is a brand or that it regularly adds new content.*
- *Last but not least, social signals definitely play a role in direct traffic, brand awareness, and the overall online performance of a domain. In general, good content performs better on social networks - and search engines want to recognize and display good, relevant and up-to-date content.*

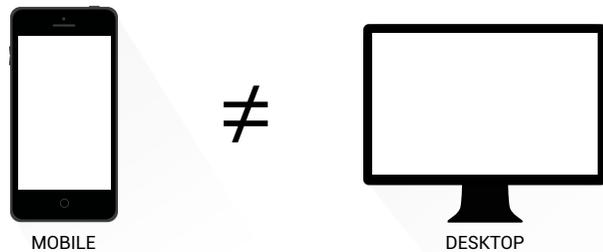
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# 6

## RELATED DISCUSSION: MOBILE RANKING FACTORS

Searchmetrics has analyzed the current mobile ranking factors separately. In some cases, the values diverge greatly from the desktop values – and in the context of the Google mobile updates, effective mobile optimization is increasingly important. A dedicated whitepaper on this topic will appear in the course of 2015.

### WHAT ABOUT MOBILE?

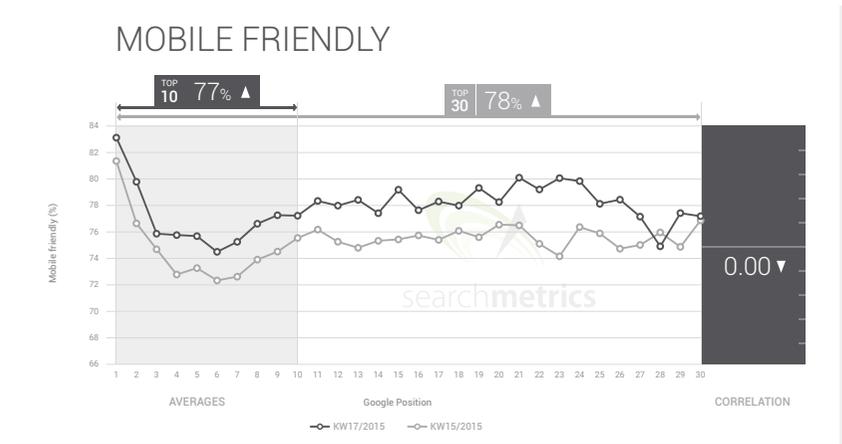


### MOBILE TRAFFIC

The percentage of mobile traffic has continuously increased in recent years. The proportion in the USA has increased from around 10 percent to around 25 percent in the period from May 2013 to May 2015. Furthermore, Google announced for the first time in the May 2015 that according to internal Google data surveys "...more Google searches take place on mobile devices than on computers in 10 countries including the US and Japan."

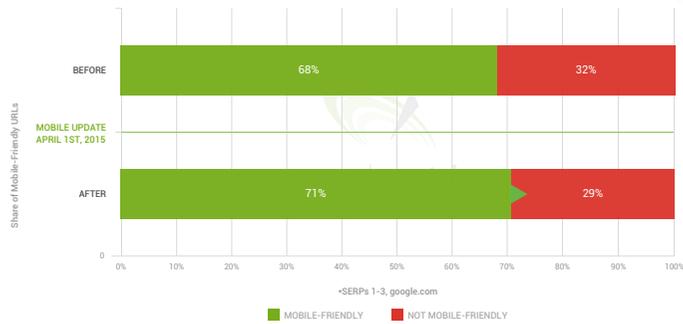
### MOBILE FRIENDLINESS - EFFECT OF „MOBILEGEDDON“

The Google mobile update that was rolled out on 21 April 2015 created less turbulence in the search results than the attributed hashtag #Mobilegeddon was expecting. In spite of this, the proportion of websites which has been assigned a "mobile-friendly" tag from Google within SERPs has increased by several percentage points since the start of 2015.



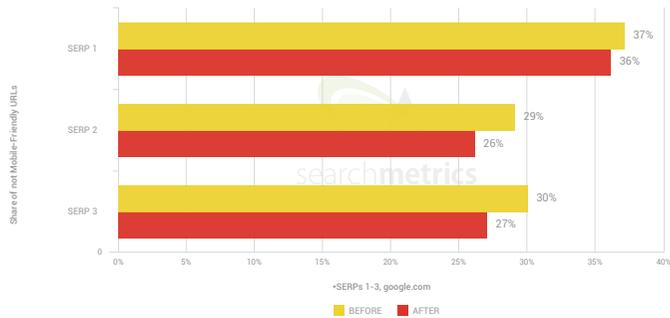
The number of mobile-friendly websites in the top 30 rankings has increased compared with the start of 2015.

## SHARE OF MOBILE-FRIENDLY URLs



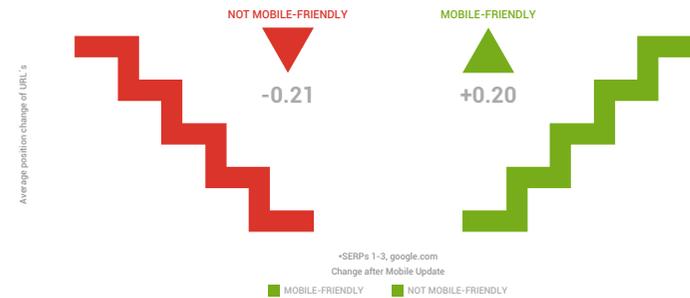
While 68% of the ranking URLs were mobile-friendly before the update, the percentage at the last measuring point in calendar week 17, 2015, increased to 71%.

## SHARE OF **NOT** MOBILE-FRIENDLY URLs

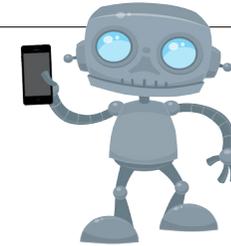


The percentage of mobile-unfriendly URLs has declined correspondingly. Our study shows that there was less movement in search result position 1 with there being more movement in positions 2 & 3.

## AVERAGE POSITION CHANGE OF URLs



*"Google searches on mobile devices are overtaking desktop searches."*



[SUBSCRIBE FOR MOBILE RANKING FACTORS STUDY](#)

# 7

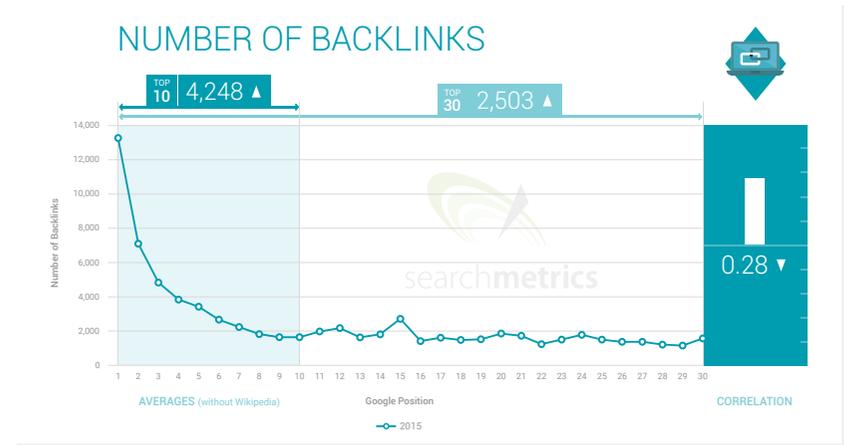
## BACKLINKS

For many years, links formed the absolute basis for search engine rankings, for SEO's, and for the analysis of ranking factors. This was also the reason for the highly tactical manipulations in this sector over a long period. These times have largely passed. We are also convinced that links will continue to lose relevance in the age of semantic contexts and machine learning with a user focus. For search engines it is a question of ranking the best and most relevant content. In the capability to determine this, they are continually improving – especially Google, as the data in this study shows.

Nonetheless, the correlations, although in part decreasing this year, remain high. This begs the question, what came first: the ranking or the link? (similar as with social signals) – or whether pages with good rankings only also get many more, high quality links a second step.

Secondly, since the introduction of the [disavow tool](#), it is not possible to make any reliable conclusions about which links Google still takes into account.

Finally, links are becoming ever less important with the continuing proliferation of smartphones, as content that is consumed on the move is rarely linked rather shared with friends.

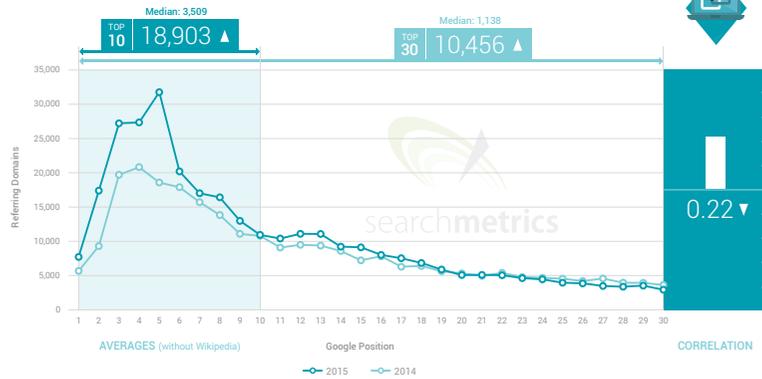


The value of the ranking factor remains extremely high, notwithstanding a slightly decreasing trend since 2013. This means that the gaps have narrowed between the front runners and the rest – even if these still remain large. Overall, pages in the top 30 have significantly more links than in the previous years.



There is still a correlation between high rankings and the amount of backlinks, but this trend will continue to decrease moving forwards.

## REFERRING DOMAINS

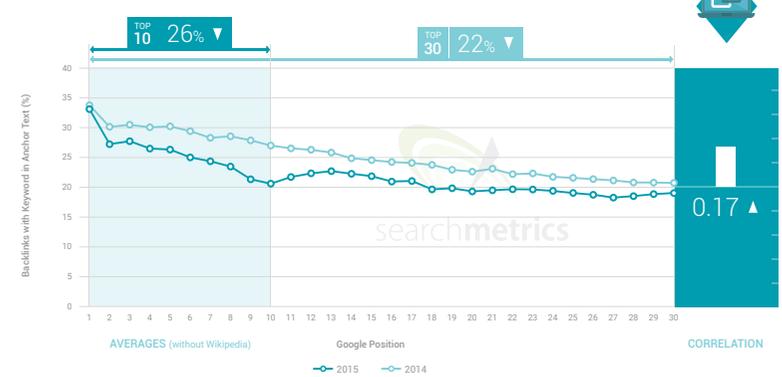


The number of different domains that refer to a homepage increased in 2015 compared with the previous year. This trend is particularly true of brands as they occupy the top ranking positions and it is here that the growth of referring domains is most clearly visible.



*Brand awareness and relevant content generate backlinks. Try to position your domain as a brand with good content.*

## BACKLINKS WITH KEYWORD IN ANCHOR TEXT



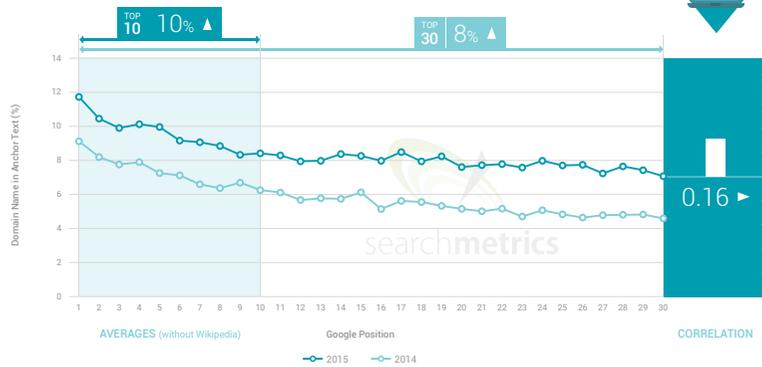
Fewer “hard” backlinks, which introduce the keyword into the anchor text – this is the conclusion for 2015 regarding the change of this backlink factor. Ultimately, it is not especially surprising as this is also due to the long-running attempts by Google to combat “unnatural” link building, which in 2014 resulted in the imposition of penalties against further link networks and their customers as well as the rollout of Penguin 3.0.

Although the top 10 rankings have somewhat higher values than the top 30, the decline is clear across all analyzed search result positions for our keyword set. On average, 26% of the backlinks still have the keyword in the anchor text, in 2014 it was still 29%.



*The percentage of links with keyword continues to decline.*

## DOMAIN NAME IN ANCHOR TEXT

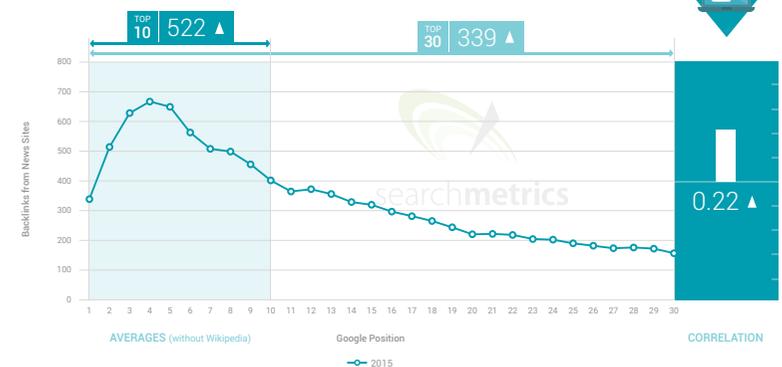


The proportion of backlinks with the domain name has increased compared with 2014. One reason: Brand and URL-Links are natural; keyword links are in most cases not. This also has something to do with brand authority. In the past, Google tended to boost the rankings of brands; at the same time the percentage of keyword domains in the rankings has fallen. In 2015, some 10% of the ranking URLs also have backlinks, whose anchor text also contains in the domain name – a year ago the figure was only 7%.



*The percentage of links with the complete domain name in the anchor are increasing. At the same time the importance of mentions of a brand/ domain without linking is becoming a more important factor.*

## BACKLINKS FROM NEWS SITES



Backlinks from news sites to the homepage of the ranking URLs occur more frequently in the search result positions for our analyzed keyword set. This applies above all in the top 10 rankings – in this case, 2014 there were still 333 backlinks from news sites on average; a year later there are now 522 backlinks.



*Pages in the middle of the first SERP have the most links from news domains. An indication that current content ranks highly.*

## BACKLINK AGE

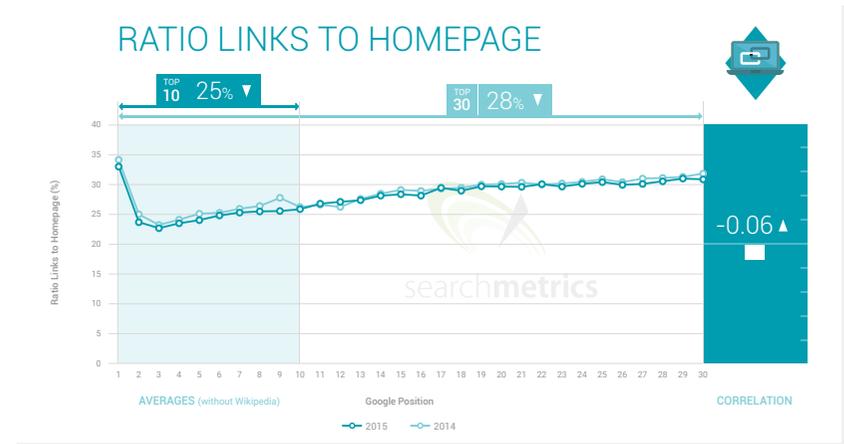


Webpages ranking in the top 10 feature older backlinks on average than pages that are ranked in the lower SERPs. This trend has remained constant since 2014, whereby the age of the backlinks has increased. This indicates that older and hence more established pages occupy the top search result positions.



*URLs ranked with positions 1-4 have significantly older links on average than in the previous year. The differences across all rankings have become greater.*

## RATIO LINKS TO HOMEPAGE

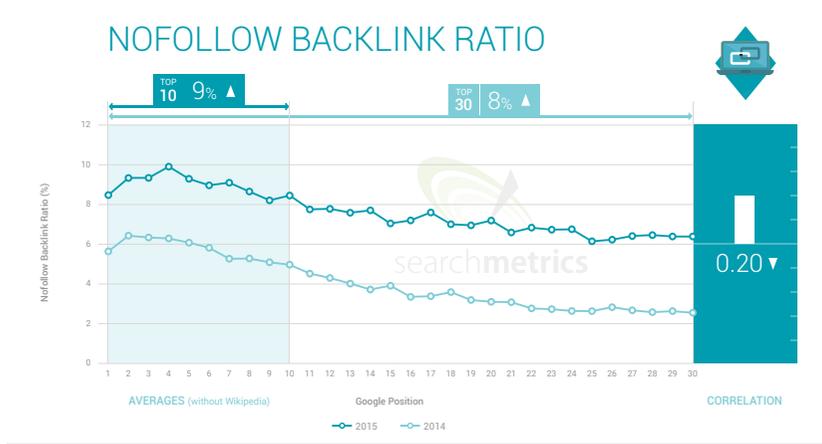


While the proportion and the significance of backlinks which contain the domain name in the anchor text have increased, this does not apply to backlinks that link to the domain. The proportion of backlinks among the ranked URLs has remained unchanged compared to 2014.



*The higher a page ranks, the lower the proportion of links to the homepage of the domain – except for position 1, where homepages also dominate the rankings*

## NOFOLLOW BACKLINK RATIO



The proportion of nofollow backlinks has increased strongly compared to the previous year. While in 2014, 6% of the backlinks in the top 10 rankings were nofollow, the figure had risen to 9% in 2015.



*The percentage of nofollow links in the SERPs has significantly increased in 2015*



## SOCIAL SIGNALS AS A RANKING FACTOR

- *Social signals are factors that correlate strongly to better rankings.*
- *The question of how social signals directly affect rankings remains. As noted in our analysis, higher-ranked URLs have more social cues such as Likes, Tweets and +1s than those sites further down the ranks, but Google has continually emphasized that it is not using social signals as a direct ranking factor.*
- *In addition, a high number of social signals implies that the site is a brand or that it regularly adds new content.*
- *Last but not least, social signals definitely play a role in direct traffic, brand awareness, and the overall online performance of a domain. In general, good content performs better on social networks - and search engines want to recognize and display good, relevant and up-to-date content.*
- *In the anchor text of the backlink, the domain name increasingly occurs instead of the keyword. At the same time, fewer backlinks have the homepage as the link target and increasingly refer to subpages.*
- *These changes are related to the attempts by Google to combat "unnatural" link formation – these include penalties against link networks and their customers as well as the rollout of Penguin and its iterations.*
- *The proportion of nofollow backlinks has increased strongly compared to the previous year.*
- **Conclusion:** *Try to create a link to your service or product in the mind of your potential customers and their target groups – and not on their page.*

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## CONCLUSION

### TECHNICAL

- Technical factors continue to be an important prerequisite for achieving high rankings with good content – and this is not likely to change.
- The significance of the factor “keyword” continues to decline heavily in most sectors.
- An ever increasing number of pages are highly optimized and feature a meta description as well as components such as H-tags. This means – in addition to improved crawlability for search engine bots – also an enhanced user experience.
- While the page documents are generally getting larger, the average loading time of the top 30 is falling.
- Domains with a high SEO Visibility, also have higher rankings with their URLs.

### USER EXPERIENCE

- While the number of images that are used on websites has increased in comparison to last year, the number of video integrations has fallen.
- The decline in video integrations is most likely associated with the decision by Google in July 2014 to only play video thumbnails in the SERPs for large video portals.
- The percentage of websites in the top 30 rankings that integrate Google AdSense advertisements has declined compared with 2014.
- The content of higher ranking pages is better structured, contains more interactive elements and is thus more comprehensible and interpretable for both users and the bot.
- The top positions were dominated by response sites and those which did not use Flash.
- User signals are essential for your content and rankings. The reaction of

users offers search engines direct feedback about user satisfaction with your content.

### CONTENT

- The content of the top 30 pages has become more extensive; the average text length has increased yet again compared with 2014 by around 25%.
- At the same time, the content has become more holistic. While the popularity of proof terms has remained unchanged at a high level, the percentage of websites that use relevant terms has increased.
- Beside longer and more holistic content, the complexity of the content has decreased; according to the results of the Flesch readability analysis the texts are somewhat less demanding to read.
- The importance of keywords in internal and external links has declined.
- Pages with the most relevant content for a search query are very likely to rank better.
- Keywords are a natural part of content but are not significant without relevant content and a logical context.
- Relevance and text length often go hand in hand. It is a good idea to write longer texts, whereby the sub-topics mentioned must also be relevant.

## SOCIAL SIGNALS

- Unsurprisingly, the correlations remain high.
- The average signals per URL and position have increased particularly strongly.
- Still, the question about the real impact of social signals on rankings remains. Most likely, social signals are one of several signals to show search engines where and what new and relevant content is.

## BACKLINKS

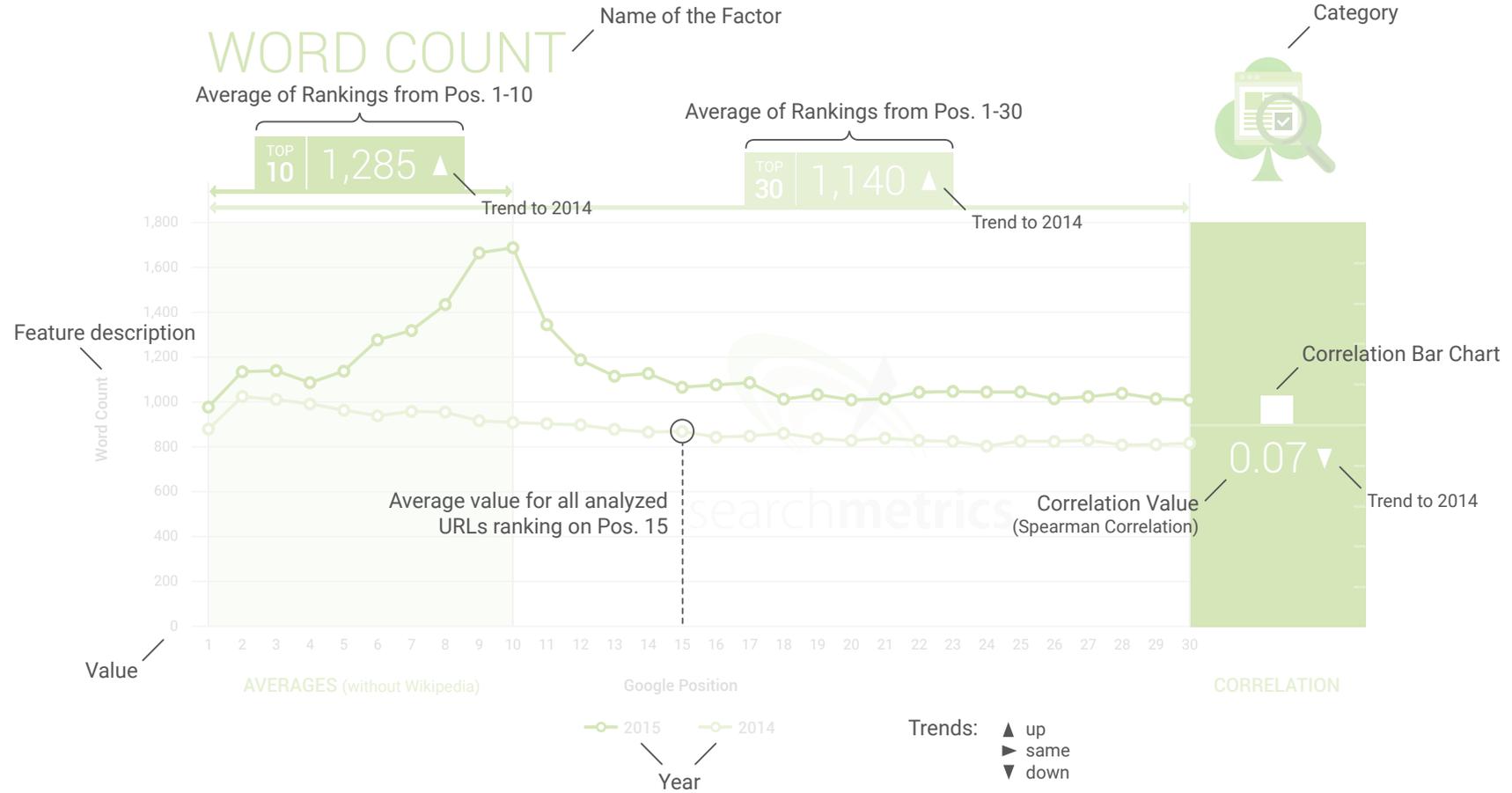
- From a statistical viewpoint, backlinks are still a prerequisite with high rankings. The correlations between the respective ranking factors are correspondingly high.
- According to our analysis, the relevance of links will decline in favor of other factors in future. Even now links should be viewed in the context of social signals – a ranking signal but also to some degree more a consequence of good rankings instead of their cause.
- In the anchor text of the backlink, the domain name increasingly occurs instead of the keyword. At the same time, fewer backlinks have the homepage as the link target and increasingly refer to deep link URLs.
- These changes may be related to the attempts by Google to combat “unnatural” link formation – such as penalties against link networks and their customers as well as the rollout of Penguin 3.0.
- The proportion of nofollow backlinks has increased strongly compared to the previous year.

## LESSONS

- *Create relevant content based on the search intention and type of the user:*
  1. *query type - transactional/informational etc.*
  2. *end device (desktop / mobile)*
- *Stop thinking in keywords. Users' searches are diverse, although they may have similar intentions.*
- *Structure topics in clusters of closely related terms and decided on an individual basis which topics belong together on a landing page, and which should have their own page. Don't work with lists, rather mind maps or topic clouds.*
- *Offer your content to users at the highest possible technical specifications. Your content should be optimized for readability and ease of interpretation and through structure and design should offer an optimal user experience.*

# 9

## CHART LEGEND



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# 10

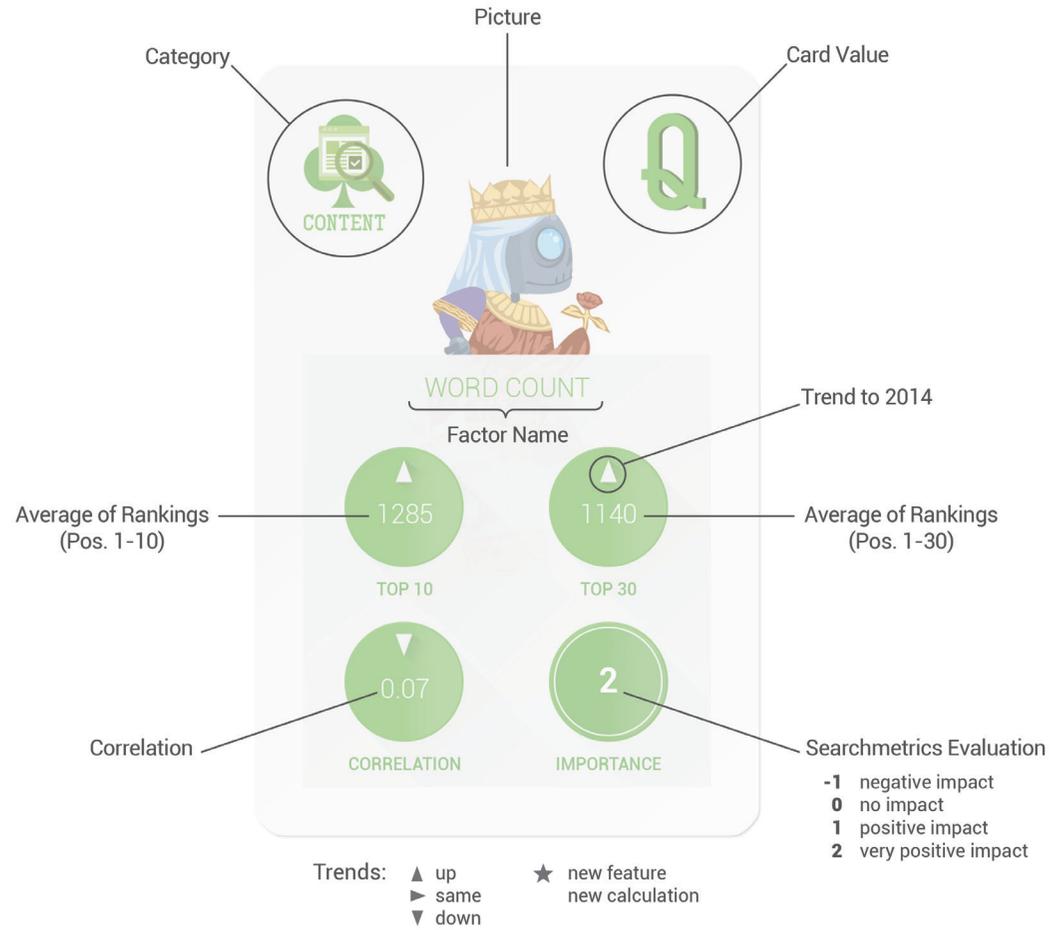
## INFOGRAPHIC: DECK OVERVIEW



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# CARD LEGEND



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