

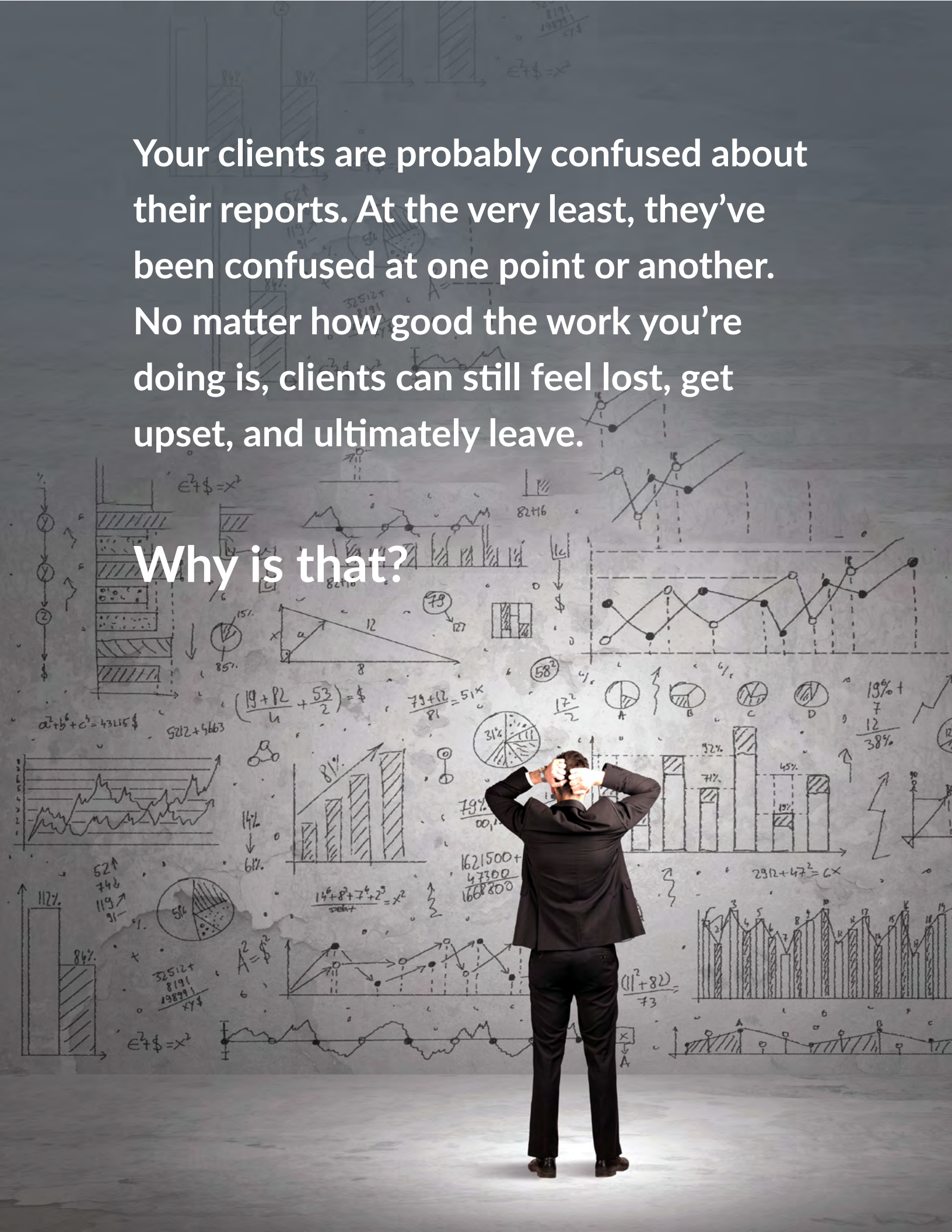


High-Impact SEO Reporting for Agencies



**How to Choose the Right KPIs
and Demystify Your SEO Metrics**

Why is that?



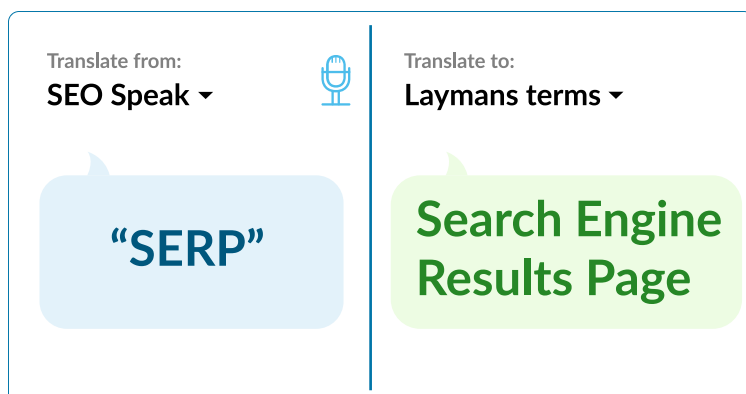
Don't give me that jargon

SEO is a language unto itself. Not only do we have our very own words for things (ex: “SERP” or “featured snippet”). We also use common-vernacular words in uniquely SEO applications (ex: “traffic” or “sessions”).

To make matters even more complicated, SEOs have no regulating body like doctors or lawyers do. We've created multiple terms that can mean exactly the same thing (ex: “backlinks” vs “inbound links”) and we use them interchangeably, with no rhyme or reason why.

Your clients don't live in the same world that you do. They work in the hospitality industry, the financial sector, the home services field, and more. Their time is spent perfecting their own craft, leaving little time for them to spend learning the ins and outs of SEO.

SEO jargon is to your clients as garlic is to vampires. When they see it, they're going to want to run in the opposite direction.

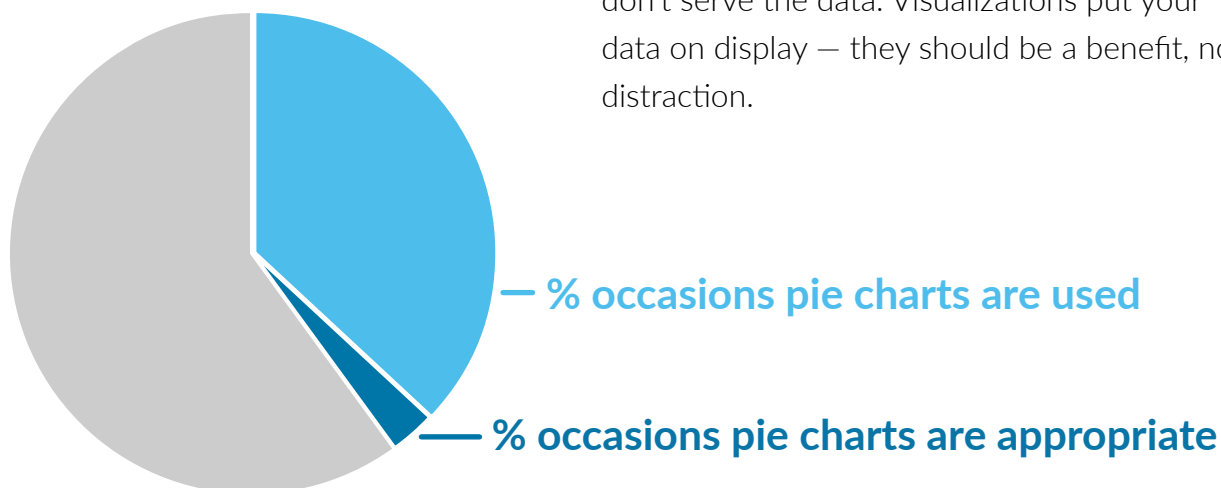


Why is this a pie chart?

Even the best data can be spoiled by a bad visualization. Your reporting UI is the vehicle by which your clients will consume your data — is it confusing them?

The format in which you choose to display your metrics can actually change the whole meaning. Your clients might be drawing bad conclusions from your data if there's a visualization conflict.

On the flip side, even the most visually stunning reports won't hold your client's attention if they don't serve the data. Visualizations put your data on display — they should be a benefit, not a distraction.



Your clients misinterpret your data

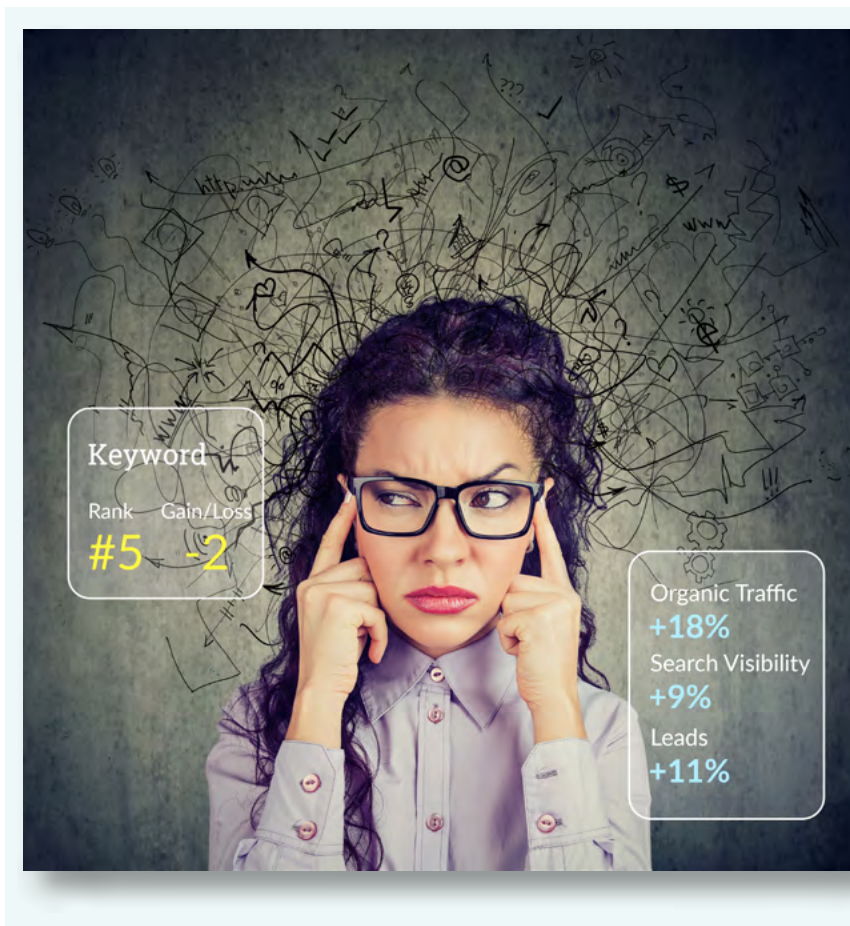
Even when clients do understand the metrics you share, they're still at risk for drawing the wrong conclusions. We've all been there when a client obsessed over the bounce rate on a page where a second site interaction wasn't important. Client misinterpretation can be a real concern, but what forms does that take?

Inflated importance

Your client might understand exactly what a metric is showing them, but are they ignoring its role in your overall marketing strategy? When you decouple a metric from the big picture, you risk inflating its importance. This can lead to clients thinking the situation is much more dire than it is in reality.

Incorrect applications

An example of this could be a client that sees a low average time-on-page and wants to focus on increasing that number. The problem occurs when this happens on a page where the intent is actually to spend very little time on the page, such as with a "contact us" page. The client understood what average time-on-page meant, but because they failed to realize that "good" and "bad" time-on-page metrics are relative to the purpose of the page, they drew an incorrect application.



Conflated correlation and causation

Let's imagine that a site that you manage experiences a dip in traffic during the same time that it experienced an increase in bounce rate. Did the traffic dip cause the higher bounce rate? Not necessarily. What you have is a correlation, not causation.

This is something that's very easy for people to get wrong — even SEOs.

SEOs often fail to tie metrics to goals

Another problem with a lot of SEO reporting is that there's so much concentration on the metrics that you and your clients end up forgetting what those numbers were supposed to be accomplishing. Metrics that don't connect to your main objectives are only vanity metrics.

It's important to start with a business goal and work your way back from there, choosing an SEO strategy that will help accomplish that business goal, then selecting KPIs and specific metrics that will help you evaluate whether your efforts were successful or not.

Metrics, KPIs, and goals

It's important to disambiguate between metrics, key performance indicators (KPIs), and goals because knowing those differences can help you create more meaningful reports for your clients.

KPIs use performance **metrics** to evaluate the success of a specific activity or initiative.

A **goal** is a desired result; the object of your efforts.

While your goal as the SEO might be to increase traffic and rankings, your client has goals that go beyond that. They need to increase leads, purchases, and achieve the other business goals their organization has designated. SEO metrics and KPIs aren't the end goal for your clients — they're important steps toward reaching a client's bigger goals.



Start with a business goal



Choose an SEO strategy that will help accomplish that goal



Set KPIs that will measure the success/failure in accomplishing that goal

Vanity metrics

When individual metrics, like keyword rankings, are divorced from goals, they're little more than vanity metrics. Here's the thing: all metrics mean something. It's your job as the SEO to map those metrics to your client's goals.

Your clients hired you because they're not SEO experts, so low SEO maturity is to be expected. This lack of deep understanding can lead clients to obsess over tangible “vanity” metrics if you don't correct course and show them how those metrics help them accomplish their real goals.

Don't worry — this isn't just a list of endless problems. Thankfully, there are solutions.



How to explain your metrics better

If you've ever had a client approach you with a request along the lines of "We need to rank for X keyword," this section will help. Without mapping metrics and KPIs to goals, your client will miss the big picture and may leave out of frustration when you fail to meet their metric-focused demands.

When your client requests a metric, ask them why. "What do you believe improving [specific metric] will accomplish for your business?" It's your job to recognize when your client's focus might be off and then guide their assumptions about SEO success to a better conclusion.



We need to rank for these keywords

What do you believe improving your rank for those keywords will accomplish for your business?



Metrics and their meaning

The tables below depict some common SEO metrics, a simple explanation of what each metric measures, common points of confusion for each metric, and tips on guiding your clients to think about the metric correctly. A pitfall for any of these is focusing on them in isolation. For example, obsessing over rankings and ignoring the traffic you're getting from those rankings, or obsessing over traffic while ignoring conversions.

Keyword Ranking



WHAT IT MEASURES:

The position a URL occupies on the SERP for a particular query.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS:

- ❌ Thinking that because your competitors target and rank for a keyword, that keyword is inherently valuable and should be targeted.
- ❌ Focusing too granularly on a few specific keywords.
- ❌ Tracking keywords without looking into how much search volume there is for those queries.
- ❌ Tracking keywords without looking at the SERPs to see how competitive the landscape is (SERP features, “big players” like Wikipedia, etc.)
- ❌ Thinking small fluctuations in rankings mean that you did something to cause it, while ignoring competitor rankings and algorithm updates.
- ❌ [For local] Thinking you can rank in the map pack without an office in the desired location. It’s certainly possible, but proximity plays a large role, especially for “near me” queries.
- ❌ [For local] Thinking ranking for non-geo modified local terms means you’re ranking “nationally” in multiple locales throughout the US.

HOW TO EXPLAIN:

The tangible nature of keyword rank position makes it one of the most latched-onto metrics in SEO, so it’s incredibly important to make sure your clients understand its place. Rankings are a means to the end goal, which can be things like awareness, leads, and purchases. Instead of focusing on individual keyword rankings, try the following with your clients:

- ✅ Report on “keyword market share,” AKA the total number of keywords ranking in a given period. You want to be growing your overall visibility, not obsessing over 1–2 keywords of inflated importance.
- ✅ Track only what gets searched by your client’s target audience. A client might want to rank for a keyword that has little-to-no search volume, has ambiguous intent, or an opposite intent of what your client targets. Let your client know why those terms won’t accomplish their desired goal.
- ✅ Show them the SERP on multiple devices. Don’t just report what rank position your client is in. Show them the results page so that they know how much visibility and prominence their position is actually getting them.

Organic Traffic



WHAT IT MEASURES:

Visits that arrive at a site through a non-paid search engine result.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS:

- ❌ Thinking more traffic is always better.
- ❌ Thinking that the amount of traffic from a certain channel is proof of the effectiveness of that channel, rather than a reflection of the effort you've invested in that channel.
- ❌ Some reports automatically aggregate all traffic, which can cause confusion. For example, if you stopped running social ads recently, the total traffic will have taken a dip. This can cause some clients to worry that their organic traffic dropped, whereas in reality, they just forgot to isolate organic traffic.
- ❌ Not factoring in seasonality. Clients who target terms with search volume/popularity that fluctuates by season, such as "AC repair" terms in winter, can forget that these terms will bring in less traffic depending on the time of year.

HOW TO EXPLAIN:

- ✅ Traffic might be growing, but are your goal conversions increasing proportionately? If your client's traffic grows, see if you can connect it to an increase in conversions.
- ✅ Instead of "Organic traffic is lower than social traffic, therefore social is a better channel" this can be explained as "Organic traffic is lower than social, therefore we might need to improve organic rankings or CTR."
- ✅ Reminding your client that each channel should have its own traffic goals. It's not always apples-to-apples to compare organic to social, paid, etc.
- ✅ Preparing your clients ahead of time for anticipated changes in traffic due to seasonality. If you're not sure which of their products/services are seasonal, look to Google Trends or ask your client directly!

Organic Click-Through-Rate (CTR)



WHAT IT MEASURES:

The number of clicks a search result receives divided by impressions.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS:

- ❌ Thinking there are objective “good” and “bad” CTRs.
- ❌ Thinking improving the result snippet (ex: title tag, review stars, etc.) will automatically improve CTR.

HOW TO EXPLAIN:

- ✅ CTRs are relative to specific queries. Obviously, the higher the better, since higher CTR means more website visitors, but make sure your clients know that comparing one URL's CTR to another page's CTR is a little like comparing apples to oranges. Rank position, rich snippets, and other special SERP features can all affect CTR.
- ✅ It's also important to remember what you want the clicks to accomplish — site visits and conversions! Just because you're getting more visits to your site doesn't mean they'll convert when they get there.

Bounce Rate



WHAT IT MEASURES:

The percentage of all sessions in which users viewed only a single page before exiting.

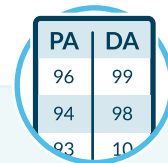
COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS:

- ❌ Assuming high bounce rate is always a bad thing.
- ❌ Assuming high bounce rate means all visitors dislike your pages equally.
- ❌ Assuming there are objective categories of “high” and “low” bounce rates.
- ❌ Assuming “bounces” didn’t read your page.

HOW TO EXPLAIN:

- ✅ Remind your clients that on pages where single-page sessions are expected, a high bounce rate is normal and nothing to worry about.
- ✅ Tell your clients that the bounces could be coming from a certain device or browser. Maybe bounces are only high on mobile, or on the Firefox browser.
- ✅ Another good way to talk to your clients about bounce rate is by comparing it to the site average. Is this individual blog post’s bounce rate higher or lower than the average bounce rate for all blogs?
- ✅ One last thing to remember is that bounced sessions will always show a duration of 0:00. This is because Google Analytics can only calculate time based on how much time elapsed before a visitor clicked the next page. If there is no next page, as is the case with a bounce, Google can’t count the time spent, and therefore all bounces show 0:00 time.

DA/PA



PA	DA
96	99
94	98
93	10

WHAT IT MEASURES:

Domain Authority is a metric created by Moz to predict how well a website will rank in search results. **Page Authority** is the same, except the metric is on a page level rather than a domain-wide level.

Other SEO tools have similar authority score metrics, such as **Domain and URL Rating (Ahrefs)** or **Trust Flow (Majestic)**.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS:

- ❌ There are “good” and “bad” DA and PA scores.
- ❌ DA/PA are ranking signals.
- ❌ DA/PA are like PageRank.
- ❌ The 0–100 scale of DA/PA is like an F–A grading on a test, meaning you want to get 90–100% for an A.

HOW TO EXPLAIN:

- ✅ Domain and Page Authority are comparative metrics, meaning there is no objectively good or bad score. You should look at your DA or PA relative to your direct competitors (those ranking on page 1 for your desired keyword)
- ✅ DA and PA were developed by Moz, not Google. They are not signals Google uses in its ranking algorithm. DA/PA are measures of objective realities about your site, such as its number of backlinks. They are not qualities in and of themselves.
- ✅ Although DA/PA and PageRank share the quality of being a numerical score, a DA/PA score is a prediction of how well a site will rank. PageRank is an actual component to Google’s algorithm that judges the quality of a page based on link signals.
- ✅ Since your DA/PA number is a rankability score, you’re just looking for a number that is higher than that of your competitors, not a “perfect” 100.

Backlinks & Referring Domains



WHAT IT MEASURES:

“Backlinks” refers to the total number of inbound links to a domain or particular page, whereas “referring domains” is the total number of domains linking to a domain or page. Because one domain can link to a site multiple times, the total number of backlinks can be higher than the total number of referring domains, but not vice versa.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS:

- ❌ The more backlinks the better.
- ❌ Ignoring referring domains and focusing exclusively on inbound link quantity.
- ❌ Ignoring “follow” and “nofollow” attributes.
- ❌ Ignoring how much referral traffic a backlink is sending to your site.

HOW TO EXPLAIN:

- ✅ The quality of links to your site should always trump sheer quantity. Google can penalize sites for having spammy links (links that violate their Quality Guidelines), so if you secure lots of links, make sure they’re coming from quality sources.
- ✅ It can look unnatural for a site to have lots of inbound links only from one or two domains. Focus on securing links from a variety of quality sources.
- ✅ Only followed links pass PageRank (link authority) from the referring domain to the destination domain. While nofollow links can still pass traffic and even lead to future followed link opportunities, it’s important to remember that you need followed links to move the organic rankings needle.
- ✅ Instead of pursuing links for links’ sake, pursue opportunities that are actually going to result in traffic to your site. You want those links to refer visitors to your website.

Conversions



WHAT IT MEASURES:

A conversion happens when someone accomplishes a goal you've set. If you've set a goal of "form fill," a conversion happens whenever a site visitor completes a form fill. Your site can have multiple goals.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS:

- ✗ Only paying attention to "last click" or the campaign that initiated the session in which a visitor converted.

HOW TO EXPLAIN:

- ✓ Assisted conversions are also valuable, and important especially for the organic channel. SEO can target searchers at many different phases of the marketing funnel, so it's important to pay attention to which conversions organic assisted. Even if PPC converted the visitor, it may have been organic that first captured their attention and won their trust.



SEO actions and the best ways to measure them

While not a comprehensive list of SEO activities by any means, the below table reveals how to measure common SEO activities. The performance indicators are in descending order of how directly they measure each activity. The ones lower on the list will be more indirect measures of the activity, but there could still be a relationship.

Remember to be specific, too! While “increase total number of inbound links” is a great start, it’s good to set numerical values for each of your KPIs to determine success or failure. If you’re embarking on a new activity and you’re unsure what a realistic target might be, use the performance of a related past initiative as your guide. You can always revise your targets later after you get more data.

Not everything is about improving ranking. Although clients can latch onto individual keyword ranking because it’s so tangible, remember to help them understand that keyword ranking isn’t the end goal, and that other SEO activities are valuable even if they don’t have a direct influence on a specific keyword’s ranking.

Knowing the best KPIs for different SEO initiatives is also crucial in ensuring your clients understand the impact your work is making. If you embark on conversion rate optimizations and your client is only judging your success by keyword rankings, they’ll miss out on the actual benefit of the work you’re doing.

SEO ACTIVITY			
Link building	Content marketing	Conversion rate optimization	Improving internal linking and navigation
WHAT TO MEASURE			
↑ # of backlinks	↑ Traffic	↑ Organic conversions	↑ Pages indexed
↑ # of referring domains	↑ Assisted conversions	↓ Exit rate on key pages	↑ Rankings of linked-to pages
↑ Referral traffic	↑ Ranking	↓ Bounce rate	↑ Pages per visit
↑ Rank position of page you built links to	↑ Backlinks	↑ Time spent on page	↑ Session duration
↑ DA / PA scores	↑ DA / PA Scores	↑ Returning visitors	↓ Bounce rate

↑ How directly it measures the activity

↑ = increase in...

↓ = decrease in...

How to show your metrics better

Now that you're armed with the knowledge to choose the best KPIs to explain your work and how to communicate those results, it's time to show it off in a way that's accessible to your clients, rather than intimidating.

Tips for better data visualization

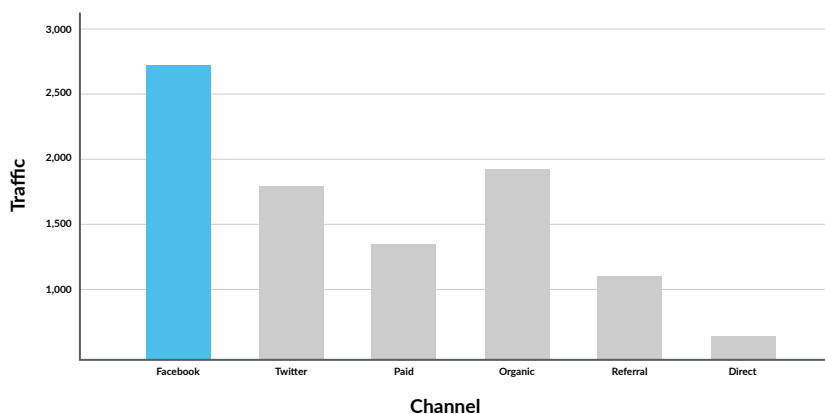
Effective visualizations communicate your data clearly, accurately, and leave an impression.

In fact, the right data visualizations can have a massive effect on how your clients receive (or don't receive) the information you want to communicate with them. The way we visualize data is nearly as important as the data itself, so if you want to make sure your clients understand your value and the impact of the work you're doing for them, choose the right visualizations.

Bar chart

Use when comparing categories of data

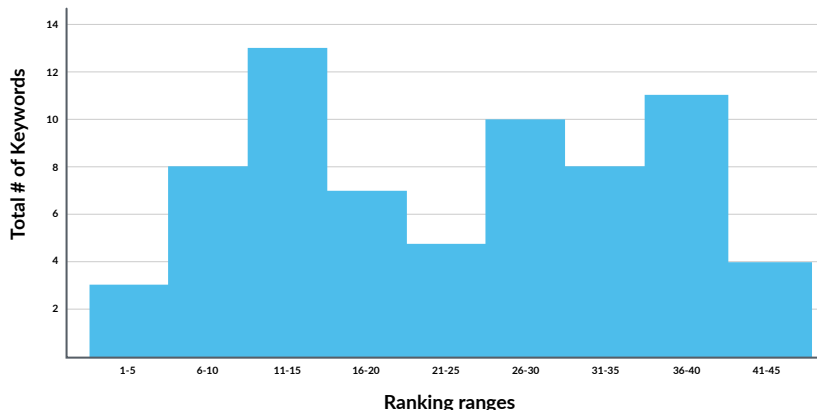
Ex: Quantity of traffic (y-axis) by channel groupings (x-axis)



Histogram

Use to show the frequency distribution of continuous data

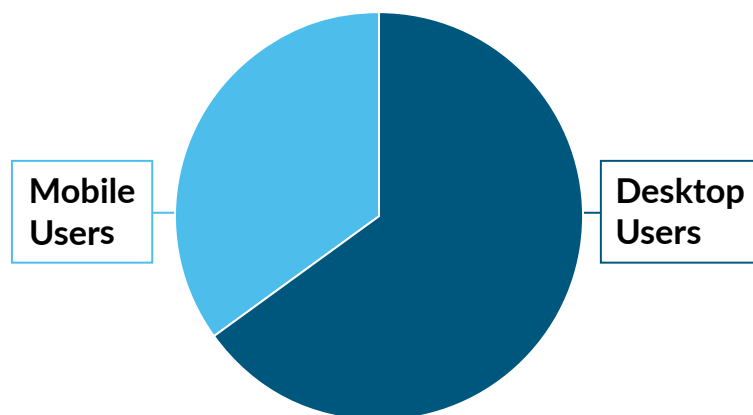
Ex: Total # of keywords ranking (y-axis) by ranges 1-10, 11-20, etc. (x-axis)



Pie chart

Use when comparing parts of a whole, especially when there is a clear winner

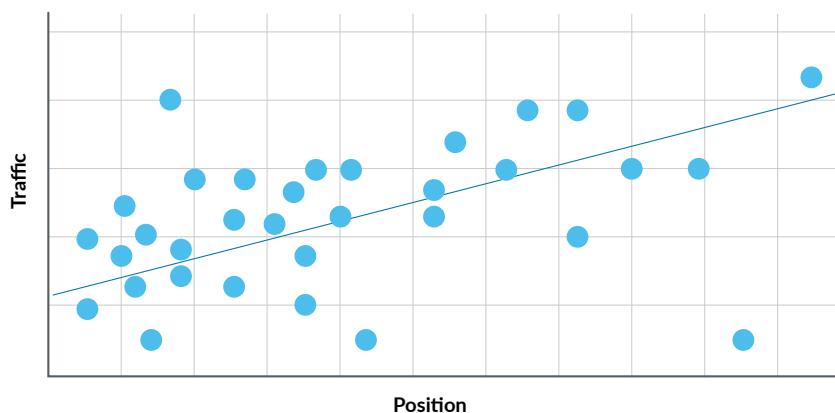
Ex: Percentage of mobile versus desktop visits to your website



Scatter plot

Use to show correlation, the relationship between two variables

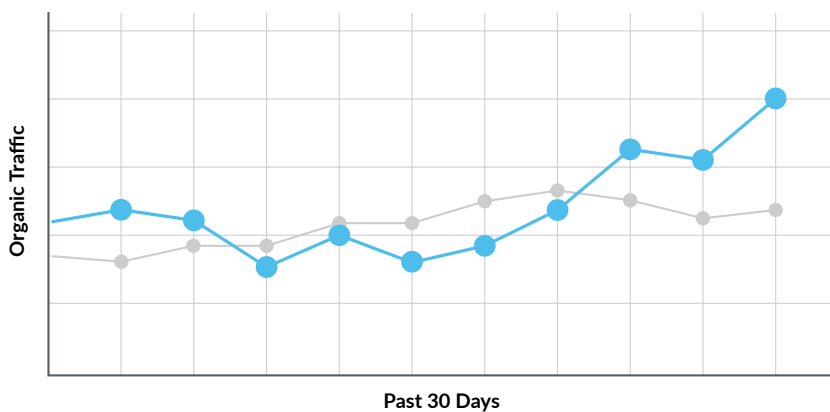
Ex: Keyword ranking's relationship to organic traffic



Line chart

Use to show changes over time

Ex: Increase in organic traffic (y-axis) over the past 30 days (x-axis)



Tips for grouping your data

Grouping your data into meaningful segments can also make an impact. Here are some ways you can consider grouping your data:

Segment content groupings:

If different sections of your client's site have very different intents, try separating those out. For example, report on blog metrics separately than product page metrics.

Segment by audience:

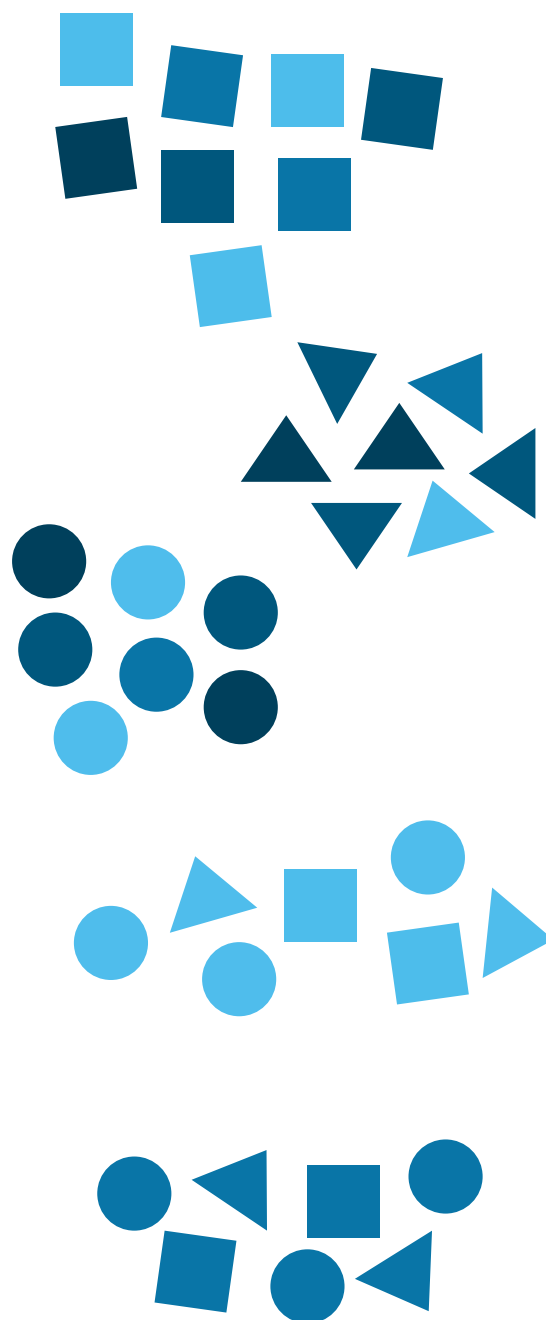
If your clients care about their reach in different markets, try grouping your data by dimensions such as demographics, geography, age, etc.

Segment results by marketing funnel:

You'll likely have different goals for content that targets your audience at different phases of the buying cycle. In this case, it might be helpful to break out your KPIs into awareness metrics, engagement metrics, and conversion metrics.

Segment results by volume, quality, value, and cost:

These four qualities are pillars of any successful SEO campaign, so it can be incredibly impactful to show the reach your efforts are having (visits, page views, etc.), the quality of that reach (bounce rate, time on page, etc.), the financial impact of that reach (dollar value of conversions), and the total cost it took to get there (so you can calculate SEO ROI).



Ask these final questions before sending your reports

If you want your clients to walk away from their reports knowing exactly how your work impacted their business, ask yourself these questions:

- ☒ Am I avoiding industry jargon that my clients won't understand?
- ☒ Am I using the most impactful and accurate visualizations to show the data?
- ☒ Is the report simple and clear rather than cluttered and overwhelming?
- ☒ Does the report include peripheral metrics that aren't integral to my client's success?
- ☒ Have I selected appropriate KPIs to measure my SEO activities?
- ☒ Am I explaining the data in a way that prevents my clients from drawing incorrect conclusions?
- ☒ Am I segmenting my data in meaningful ways for maximum impact?
- ☒ **Does this report ultimately help my client understand the connection between SEO success and their business's success?**

The last is bolded because it's arguably the most important. Your client should always be able to look at their report and know, unequivocally, the impact your work had on their business goals.

The example below illustrates the difference between stating facts and communicating value. Each sentence is based on the same data set, but the way that data is communicated vastly changes the impact.

GOOD



You have 10 keywords ranking on page 1.

BETTER



You are up 50% MoM in total keywords ranking on page 1.

BEST



We exceeded targets and hit 50% MoM growth in total page 1 rankings, which contributed to a 10% growth in leads valued at \$10,000.

Don't forget that your clients are business owners who, even if they're mildly interested in the finer points of SEO, care more about what SEO can do for their bottom line. Choose the right data and the right visualizations to communicate your value.

When you do, you'll have a client for life.



ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Written by:

Kameron Jenkins

SEO Wordsmith, Moz

Additional Contributors:

Felicia Crawford

Content Marketing Manager, Moz

Designed by:

Troy White

Senior Marketing Designer, Moz

About Moz:

At Moz, we believe there is a better way to do marketing. A more valuable, less invasive way where customers are earned rather than bought. We're obsessively passionate about it, and our mission is to help people achieve it. We focus on search engine optimization (SEO). It's one of the least understood and least transparent aspects of great marketing, and we see that as an opportunity: We're excited to simplify SEO for everyone through our software, education, and community.

Website: <https://moz.com>

Blog: <https://moz.com/blog>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/moz>

Want to give Moz Pro a try?

Sign up for a Free Trial