

The Ultimate

E-Commerce Brand's

Guide for Growth

in 2021: Q1

**How to Best Optimize
Your E-Commerce
Site For Conversions**



2021 Q1 Planner

For many companies, 2020 was unprecedented — COVID-19 derailed marketing campaigns slated for the year, forcing brands to adapt their marketing strategies and even product offerings on the fly. Brick-and-mortar storefronts went **online**. Marketers were challenged to craft **sales-driving messaging** while still being reassuring and sensitive to the changing times. And some of the most innovative brands shifted their resources to develop digital experiences, from **Zoom happy hours** to **at-home virtual challenges**.

As 2020 comes to an end, we can all confidently agree that this has been the year of **digital acceleration**, with shoppers adopting new online behaviors and expectations. Though no one is certain as to when life will return to normal, we do know one thing: 2021 will be a pivotal year for brands to **recoup lost value**. They must master their digital channels to stay competitive — and it all starts with building an effective website.

Using This Guide

Q4 is the best time to re-evaluate your marketing efforts and resources, so you can start fresh and early come the new year. This 2021 Q1 planner is full of resources, ideas, and weekly actionable tasks that will help marketers and brand managers optimize their websites and prepare their companies for growth.

Before you get started, remember that every company has its unique goals and challenges, and every website serves a different purpose. Some of these planning notes might not be completely relevant to you, but that's okay! We're giving you everything, so you can take what you need and apply it for success.

Calendar Planner

Consider this your roadmap for success:

January: SEO Planning



Refresh your marketing strategy



Conduct website audits



Set goals and keywords



Develop a content strategy

February: Content Creation



Onboard your content creators



Start creating content



Plan link building opportunities



Review and prep your content

March: Site Optimization



Optimize key pages



Tackle the technical SEO basics



Implement site improvements



Consider off-site improvements
(and think about what's next!)



Month 1:

SEO

Planning

As you start to revamp your website from the ground up, you'll want to review how your website, as a whole, fits into your marketing efforts. Have your website needs changed in the face of COVID-19? How are your competitors boosting their digital presence? How are new privacy regulations impacting the user data you've been collecting?

Month 1 is all about re-evaluating your marketing plan and finding opportunities to offer your customers more.

Week 1:

Take a Refresher

Take a minute to refresh your marketing strategy. Discuss these questions with the whole team to make sure everyone is on the same page:

- **What is your brand identity?**
- **Who is your audience?**
- **What are your customer personas?**
- **Who are your competitors?**
- **How does your website fit into your marketing strategy?**
- **What is the goal of your website? Has it changed? Some ideas:**
 - Capturing orders
 - Capturing leads/email addresses
 - Helping customers to locate nearby stores
 - Brand building
- **What were your historical and present website optimization efforts?**
- **What are your website KPIs? Is it traffic? Conversions?**

Conduct Audits

We know how easy it is for marketers to get lost in the daily grind, whether for a big-box retailer or a small mom-and-pop shop. Cue the annual marketing audit — an exercise that'll allow you to identify and celebrate your strengths while finding areas for improvement. We recommend that marketers complete an audit at least once a year to better understand where to best place valuable resources.

Conduct a Basic Website Audit

Your company website is an owned channel, which means it's one piece of digital real estate that is truly under your control. In other words, if it's not optimized, you're wasting a valuable opportunity. By conducting a basic website audit and reviewing everything from site speed to mobile-friendliness, you now have a basic roadmap that directs you to exactly what needs to be addressed.

To make things simple, we've created a [worksheet](#) that you can follow and check off as you go.

Conduct a Competitor Audit

You'll then want to conduct a competitor audit to get a sneak peek at how well your website is doing compared to those of your competitors. Simply plug your URL into the [SEMrush Domain Overview tool](#) — it'll spit out a list of websites in the same space and show how their content and link profiles compare to yours. These insights will ultimately help inform your strategy to outrank them.

For more on conducting a competitor audit, [visit our blog](#).

Set Goals and Keywords

At this point, if you're fighting the urge to jump straight into creating new content for your website, remember that there's still legwork that needs to be done. Content creation is a process that needs to be tackled systematically, and it starts with developing a keyword strategy.

Research and Compile a List of 20 Keywords

SEO is all about optimizing your website around topics that netizens are searching for on Google or Bing. That's why sites with a proper keyword strategy are ranked higher on Google, see higher traffic, and enjoy better conversion rates (assuming they get everything else right!).

To start, brainstorm 20 keywords that are relevant to your business, product, or service. It helps to think about what topics your customers might be interested in, are curious about, or need help with. Then, plug these terms into an SEO tool, such as [Google's Keyword Tool](#), [Ahrefs](#), [SEMRush](#), or [GrowthBar](#), to check their search volume. Ideally, you'll want to generate keywords that have low competition, high search volume, and a higher cost per click. Continue ideating, coming up with variations, and analyzing.

Pro tip: For more ideas for keywords, you can look at your Google Search Console data to see which ones are currently driving traffic.

Here's how Google decides which sites sit at the top of the search page:

- **On-page SEO.** Is the site's content optimized for specific keywords that map onto what people are frequently searching for?
- **Off-page SEO.** How many links redirect to the site from elsewhere on the internet? (These are called backlinks). Are these backlinks from authoritative and relevant sites (publications like *The New York Times*), or are they from untrustworthy sources (a spam site riddled with typos)? Is your site content shared on social media? (More social shares = more traffic = better ranking.)
- **Technical SEO.** Is the backend architecture optimized? Or is the code disorganized and messy, making it hard for search engines to crawl it properly?

Develop a Content Strategy

Now that you have set your keywords, it's time to develop your **content strategy**. Start brainstorming content topics and web page ideas that are related to the keywords you've listed. But remember: Hitting keywords shouldn't be your only goal — it's vital to create content that site visitors will genuinely want to engage with, whether it's because it provides quality information or entertainment value.

Then it's time to create your content calendar. Determine your posting frequency, resources, and writers. To begin, try aiming for at least one post per week. You'll want to be consistent with posting, so site visitors know what to expect — once your content creation process becomes a well-oiled machine, you can increase your posting frequency. And don't forget to identify opportunities, such as seasonal holidays, so that you can plan ahead for timely posts.

Good thing we created an awesome template to help you tackle the beast that is a content calendar. Find it [here](#).



Month 2:

Content

Creation

Quality content is always the goal, but it's not easy to come by. We broke down the process into smaller steps to help it feel less intimidating.

Week 1:

Onboarding Your Content Creators

If you don't already have one, spend an hour or two developing a **tone and voice document**. Think of it as a guide to ensure that all the content you produce reflects your brand personality and has consistency, which is super important if you have several writers with their styles and quirks.

If you have external writers who are freelancers or part of an agency, spend this week onboarding them. Provide them with all the tools and resources they need, from access to your project management software to background information on your brand identity and purpose.

Week 2:

Start Creating Content

It's finally time to start writing! Provide your writers with descriptions, titles, and keywords for each blog post. (You'll want the keywords to be sprinkled throughout a 1,000-word post at least three to four times.) Here are some good tips to remember:

- Content written in a conversational tone performs better than articles rife with jargon. Yes, this applies even if you belong to a niche and technical industry.
- Try to keep your posts between 800-1,200 words, unless it's an e-book or downloadable resource.
- Use subheadings whenever possible to break up complicated ideas.
- Keep paragraphs relatively short — it's easier on the eyes.
- If it works better as a listicle, go for it. (That's how BuzzFeed's posts go viral!)
- Supplement your information with catchy images, videos, gifs, or even audio.
- Make sure to summarize your content at the very end with few actionable takeaways. A TL;DR, if you will.
- Consider adding a question at the very end to encourage engagement.

For more tips on writing content, [check this out](#).

Expand Beyond Your Site

As your writers populate your shared Google Drive with content, spend this week researching link building opportunities. Link building is when you develop off-site content to drive visitors back to your site. Spoiler alert: It's a massive part of SEO.

To start, have the team brainstorm different ways you can attract inbound links. Here are some ideas to kick it off:

- Penning a guest post on an industry leader's blog
- Trading posts with a content partner
- Incentivizing employees to share company blog posts on their social media
- Repurposing existing content in different formats (e.g., an infographic) that can then be posted elsewhere

Finding these opportunities, reaching out, and making it happen are no easy feats. Check out SEMrush's [link building tool](#), which simplifies this process and churns out a stream of websites you can potentially reach out to.

Review and Prep

By week 4, your writers have (hopefully) provided you with first drafts of content. But don't hit "publish" just yet. For every post, make sure to:

- **Go through at least one round of editorial revisions.** Check for grammar and typos, content substance, catchiness (without being clickbait-y), and whether the CTA is compelling.
- **Optimize title tags.** Title tags are displayed in search engine results pages as the blue, clickable headline. Essentially, it's a part of the code that informs search engines what a page is about. Make sure the title tags you draft are unique, short, and informative.
- **Draft meta descriptions for each post.** Meta descriptions are the tiny preview paragraph underneath the clickable headline. If you don't provide a meta description, search engines will just pull part of your page's content (but this could include unnecessary navigation text and be far from enticing). Instead, draft meta descriptions that are descriptive and engaging, encouraging users to click on your link over other ones.

Month 3:

Site

Optimization

Optimize Key Pages



You've set your strategy, developed your content, and planned for off-site SEO. All that's left is to check off the technical SEO boxes, ensuring all your pages are properly optimized, so you can start sharing and getting clicks.

Homepage

Your homepage is often the first thing site visitors see — if it's not beautifully designed, captivating, and fast-loading, people will bounce off the site. Review your homepage using this checklist:

- Is your headline short, clear, and catchy?
- Are your visuals high-res? Do your visuals load quickly on all devices?
- Does your copy address how your product or service can solve customers' problems (in a way that speaks directly to them)?
- Does the page show credibility? Does it have testimonials or social proof?
- Is the flow of the homepage intuitive? Does it tell a clear story?

Product Page

This is arguably the most important page that pushes visitors to consider your products and make a purchase:

- Do you describe your offerings in an easily digestible way? (Do not assume that everyone has the same expertise and technical background.)
- Does your product page showcase benefits that are centered on the customer and not your company? Is it clear how your product or service can improve the lives of customers? (Remember: People buy emotions, not products)
- Are the features of different products laid out clearly?
- Do you have clear product visuals? If they include text, ensure they are high res for legibility.

About Us Page

The "About Us" page, if you have one, is about sharing your company's story, history, mission, and broader impact:

- Is your story conveyed in a meaningful and compelling way that builds a connection with site visitors? Does it motivate them to care about your company?
- Does it show that your company serves a greater purpose beyond your bottom line?
- Does it introduce the team? (People are more likely to be interested in bios and pictures of real people than stock imagery because it shows personality and authenticity.)

Navigation

Navigation applies to each and every page of your website:

- How many tabs do you have in the navigation bar? (Sometimes, the fewer, the better, so users aren't paralyzed by choice.)
- Do you have a clear CTA for each page so users know what to do next?
- Are visitors inundated with distracting pop-ups?
- Is the design of the site clean, organized, and attractive?
- Are there fonts that hard to read?
- Is there an overwhelming amount of text? Can you replace some of the text with a visual or a video?
- Are the colors garish and hard on the eyes?
- Do you have fast loading times for mobile devices, especially for your top-performing pages?

Simply put, you'll want to make it easy for site visitors to convert by limiting the decisions they have to make.

Tackle the Technical SEO Basics

It's finally time to dive into the technical aspects of SEO, which will ensure that search engines can properly crawl and index your site.

Check for Mobile Friendliness

With **53%** of all global web traffic coming from mobile users, Google switched to mobile-first indexing last year. If your site isn't mobile-friendly — whether it's because certain functions aren't supported or if pinching and scrolling are required — your organic visibility will suffer.

If you're not sure how you're faring on the mobile front, plug your site into this [Google mobile-checking tool](#).

Check for Crawl Errors

Take a look at your Google Search Console's coverage report to see if there are any excluded pages or crawl errors (either 404 errors or incorrectly canonicalized pages). Clicking on a link that leads to an incorrect page or error message is the epitome of a poor website experience. Resolve the errors you find and fix any broken internal and outbound links — it might just be a matter of updating the target URL.

Review Your Site Structure

Ideally, no web page should be more than three clicks deep in your site. If you have these deeply buried pages, consider updating your site structure — the deeper they are, the less likely site visitors (and search engines) will come across them. Ensuring that all pages are linked from at least one other page is a good rule of thumb to follow. Why waste perfectly good content?

Make Sure Images Have Alt Tags

Website optimization includes image optimization. Every image you upload onto your website — whether a team selfie or an infographic — should be saved with a descriptive file name rather than, say, `img_1`. You'll also want to check that each page's main images have alt tags that summarize its content correctly and descriptively. Image optimization is a facet of SEO that marketers may gloss over, but it is worth paying attention to.

Make Sure Each Page Only Has One H1 Tag

A page's H1 tag is its headline, so you should only have one per page. Make sure the H1 tag includes your primary keyword so that search engines can tag the right content.

Implement Site Improvements

Now that you've got the basics of SEO covered, it's time to implement SEO improvements.

Improve Your Site Speed

There's nothing more frustrating than a page that takes forever to load. Use Google's [PageSpeed Insights tool](#) to see how your site fares in terms of load time. Experts say that **two seconds** is the maximum acceptable load time for e-commerce websites. If your page speed is slower than that, it might indicate image sizes that are too large or backend infrastructure that needs some work.

Use an SEO-Friendly URL Structure

If you have long URLs that are a string of random letters, you'll want to update those to something more descriptive so search engines can better understand what each page is about. Avoid hyphens and underscores to separate words and keep the overall URL as short as possible — one study showed that **shorter URLs rank higher**.

Optimize Your Historical Content Continuously

This is a huge but necessary undertaking. Take some time each quarter to update your old blog posts with new statistics, details, information, or perspectives. While you're at it, add alt text or meta descriptions that are missing, and find opportunities to add one or two internal links from high-ranking pages elsewhere on the site.

It's natural for content to become less relevant over time. For site content that no longer adds high-quality value, is duplicated with newer content, or is so outdated that it simply doesn't warrant a facelift, consider pruning it.

Implement Off-Site Improvements (and Consider What's Next!)

It's the last week of Q1! Both your site's frontend and backend have been cleaned up and polished. But remember — site optimization is more than just what you do on your site. During this last week, you'll be looking at off-site improvements to generate better backlinks and considering how to add even more oomph to your new and improved site:

- **Brainstorm how else to wow your site visitors.** More retailers are implementing new functions to their sites, such as [augmented reality experiences](#) and customer service chatbots. Some have even optimized sites for [voice search](#). If you're not ready to hire a developer to build a massive digital experience, check out what add-on capabilities your e-commerce provider offers.
- **Optimize external pages, such as a Google My Business listing and Yelp.** Though you don't have direct control over external pages, you can ensure there is up-to-date information, especially if you have a physical storefront. These pages do wonders for local visibility.
- **Recover press coverage.** If your business is landing press coverage, make sure each article that mentions your business name links back to your website. If it isn't, it's worth the effort to reach out to the author or publication to request a backlink. You can use SEMrush's [brand monitoring tool](#) to identify these unlinked mentions.

What's Next?

Although you've successfully improved your site, the work doesn't stop here — making sure your website is in tip-top shape requires continuous optimization beyond the first three months:

- **Measure your content's success.** Whichever analytics tools you use — [Google Analytics](#), [Matamo](#), [KISSmetrics](#) — you'll be able to see the conversion paths of your site visitors and figure out how each unique page supports your conversion goals. Improve the pages that aren't driving traffic and nurture the ones that are. It's also a good idea to track inbound links and your ranking on search engines over time.
- **Monitor popular keywords.** Continue to post fresh content and fine-tune your strategy by having a firm grasp of new search intent and ranking keywords. You can then develop even sharper content topics and headings.
- **Stay abreast of the latest SEO news and best practices.** Check out these resources: [SEOMoz](#), [SEOBook](#), [Search Engine Roundtable](#).
- **Tune in for the Q2 guide.** Q1 laid a solid foundation for which your website transformed into a crazy converting one. To keep the marketing momentum going, be sure to check back in for the 2021 Q2 guide.

To stand out in a noisy digital landscape is to stop reacting to new behaviors and start being proactive. There's a reason why more than 120,000 brands have trusted AdRoll since 2006 — we provide marketers with the tools to drive growth. Now that your website is optimized, check out our [growth marketing platform](#) and see how else you can impress potential customers.



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