

HOW TO ADOPT AN EVIDENCE- BASED SEO APPROACH

Managing SEO globally across multiple markets, sites and platforms is a complex activity. Without a clear business case behind recommendations, implementation can be difficult, leading to performance stagnation. In this guide we discuss how we use an evidence-based approach to deliver SEO success.

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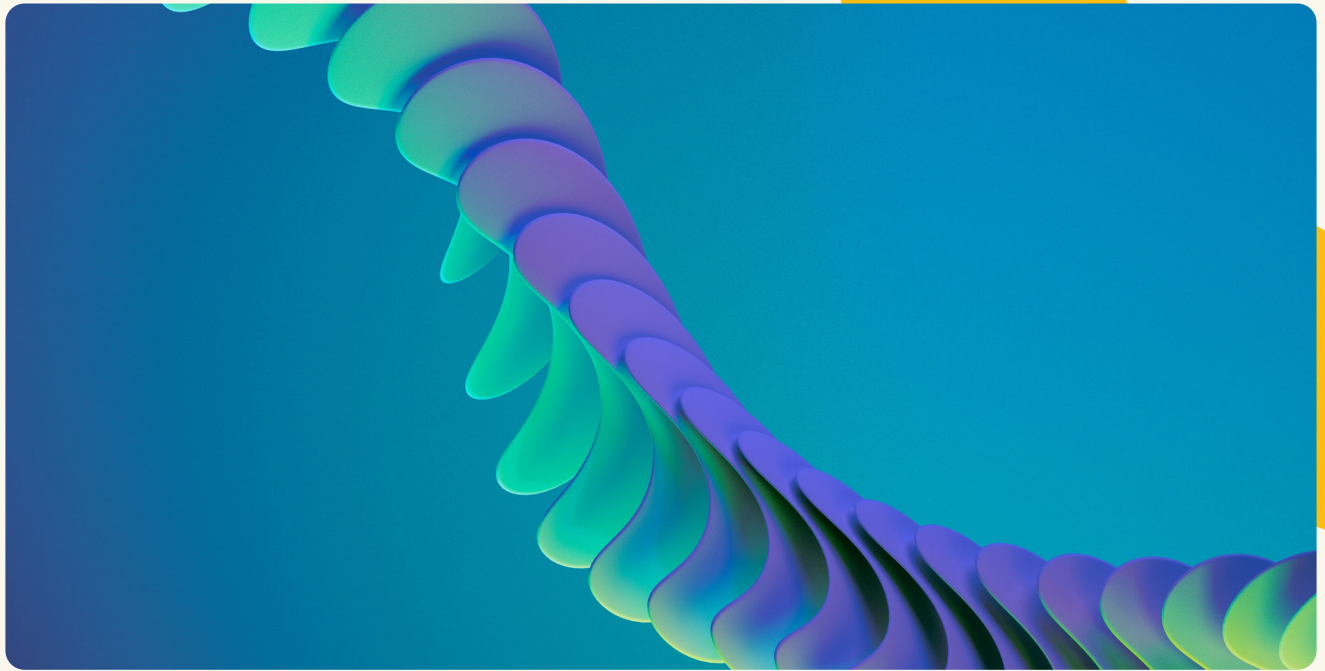
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INTRODUCTION

In a world where marketing budgets are becoming more scrutinised than ever before, brands are doubling down efforts on their SEO approach to deliver better overall marketing ROI.

However, being able to master the nuances of SEO remains a significant challenge for marketers. Brands can struggle to unlock the value of the channel when it comes to complex tasks such as enabling implementation, forecasting value and demonstrating incrementality.

When effectively implemented, these tactics can funnel traffic to a brand's website, spark conversions, boost brand awareness and ultimately drive an impressive return on investment.

Challenges in understanding SEO

In the past, despite its importance, grasping the intricacies of SEO was traditionally something of a guessing game. The ever-evolving algorithms and ranking factors employed by search engines made the process complicated and at times confusing. Google even admitted 'We do not understand documents. We fake it. Today, our ability to understand documents directly is minimal. So we watch how people react to documents and memorise their responses.'

This underscores the challenges in understanding the mechanisms of SEO. Rather than relying on a comprehensive understanding of documents and content, search engines have historically resorted to observing user behaviour and reactions as a proxy for relevance and quality.

Understanding SEO today

Today, we have more evidence than ever before on how to achieve SEO success. The community is thriving and the guidance is becoming increasingly transparent and actionable, enabling us to grasp what truly drives positive ranking outcomes and why.

Resources like Google's page quality rating scorecard and their general Webmaster Guidelines offer perspectives into the criteria used to evaluate websites. On top of this, advancements in natural language processing and generative AI experiences are raising the bar and forcing us to improve the quality and sophistication of our content to provide more value to users.. Even the Yandex leak, which revealed 1,922 search ranking factors, highlights the complexities that modern algorithms navigate.

As our understanding of this continues to evolve, our approach to SEO must adapt accordingly, incorporating these newfound insights to craft strategies that align with the changing landscape of search.



HOW TO BUILD A BUSINESS CASE FOR SEO

Securing buy-in and resources for SEO initiatives often requires a compelling business case that speaks to senior leadership and decision-makers. One crucial step in this process is to adjust the way we communicate our goals and targets, ensuring they're impactful to – and resonate with – those outside the SEO sphere.

How to get buy-in from senior leadership

In order to secure buy-in from senior leadership, it's important to reframe our objectives in terms of tangible business impacts. Rather than relying on jargon-heavy statements such as 'we need to optimise 100 page titles', we should communicate our goals in a language that resonates with executive stakeholders, such as 'we will deliver £XYZ in incremental revenue in X months'.

To engage with senior leaders, you need to be able to demonstrate the overall revenue lift that your proposed strategy will deliver for the business, coupled with the cost to execute that activity to build an overall ROI.

To execute your proposed strategy you then need to demonstrate the individual value of each project within your strategy. This is so that you get stakeholders bought in from the teams that will support you in delivering your vision (e.g., development, PR, brand).



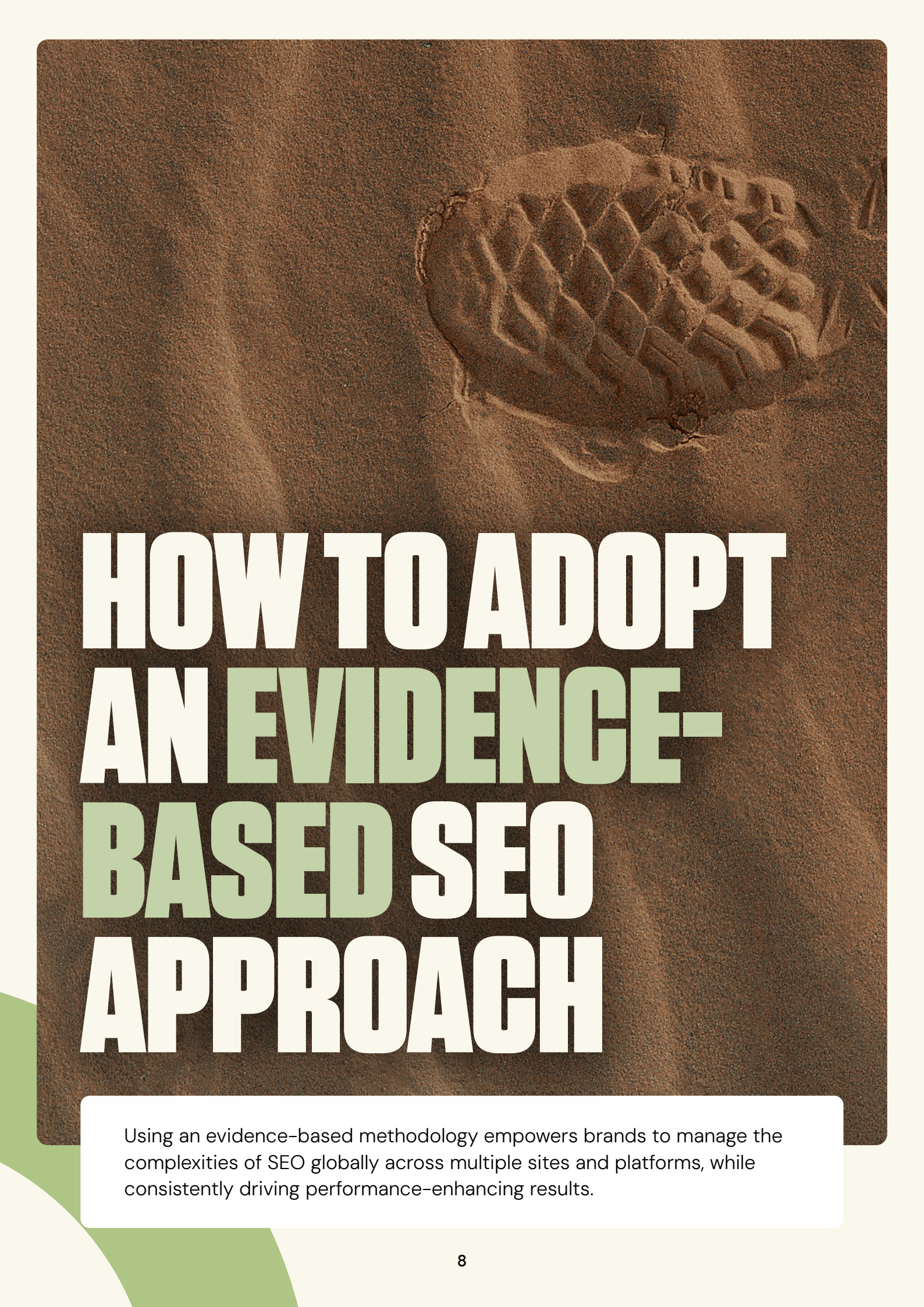
Leveraging incrementality is essential

Leveraging incrementality can be an influential and evidence-based way to back a persuasive business case for SEO. For more detailed information on incrementally and how to go about measuring it, check out our recent guide on [how to maximise your analytics impact](#).

Drawing from the insights of Croud's Chief Strategy Officer and renowned digital marketing thought leader, Avinash Kaushik, it's important to be able to prove the actual value and impact of your SEO efforts.

"With marketing spend being scrutinised more closely than ever before, being able to measure effectively and demonstrate the success of marketing efforts is absolutely essential. Incrementality is the art and science of identifying results that would not have occurred otherwise – in essence, marketing's actual conversions. Attribution on the other hand, is based on marketing's claimed conversions." Avinash Kaushik, CSO, Croud

By leveraging these principles, we can build an evidence-based and data-driven case that speaks directly to the concerns and priorities of financial stakeholders, such as Chief Financial Officers – which helps to build a business case for SEO.



HOW TO ADOPT AN EVIDENCE- BASED SEO APPROACH

Using an evidence-based methodology empowers brands to manage the complexities of SEO globally across multiple sites and platforms, while consistently driving performance-enhancing results.

What do we mean by an evidence-based SEO approach

At its core, an evidence-based SEO approach involves quantifying various SEO factors, creating a comparative view between a brand and its competitors. This strategic analysis provides insights into why certain competitors may be outperforming others in specific areas, and over time, reveals the areas in which brands should invest their resources.



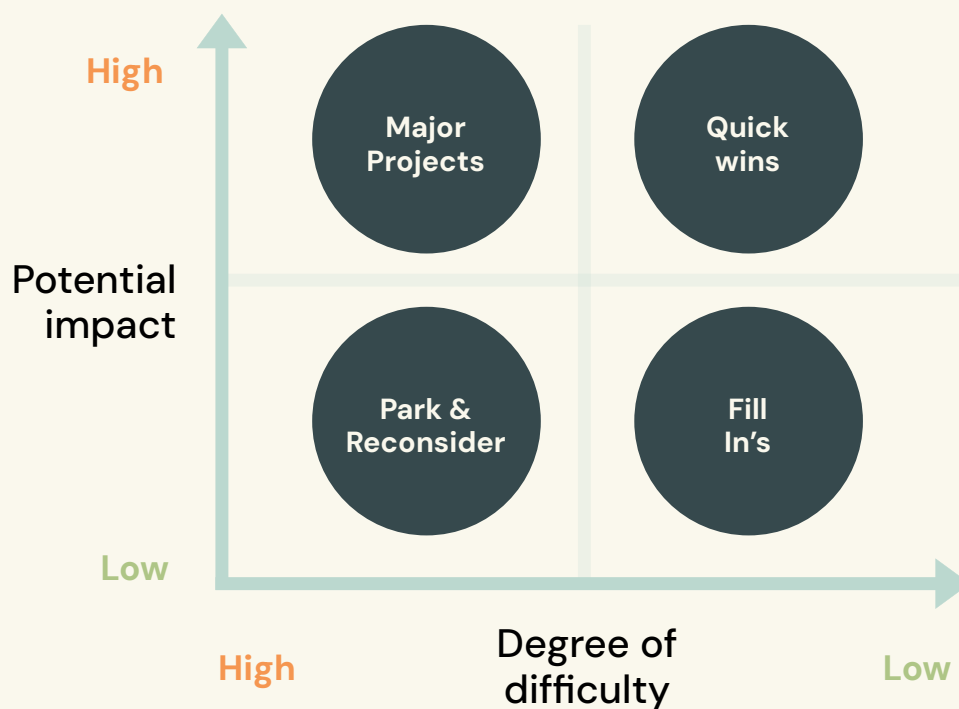
The two prerequisites to adopting this approach

There are two prerequisites that brands should note when adopting an evidence-based SEO approach.

Identifying the size of the prize

Before starting your evidence-based SEO journey, it's crucial to identify the size of the prize – the potential rewards that can be gained from successful implementation. This process involves creating a performance baseline, calculating incrementality, and prioritising efforts.

- 1. Create a performance baseline:** establish a comprehensive understanding of your current performance by leveraging a time-series model to generate a forward-looking performance baseline.
- 2. Calculate incrementality:** develop a forward-looking performance scenario that accounts for potential improvements in areas such as forecast position and conversion rate (CvR). This analysis will quantify the incremental gains that can be achieved through targeted SEO efforts.
- 3. Prioritisation:** make a weighted priority calculation based on a 'difficulty/opportunity' matrix to identify the most promising categories or areas for initial focus.



Understand how to get there

With priorities established, the next step is to develop a clear roadmap for achieving your evidence-based SEO goals.

- 1. Create a checklist:** develop a comprehensive checklist tailored to your specific business objectives. For instance, in the context of ecommerce, this checklist may include elements such as ensuring indexable facet pages (size, colour), optimised copy blocks on product listing pages (PLPs), adequate product depth on indexable PLPs, fallback rules for metadata, proper pagination implementation, the use of user-generated content (reviews), and controlled brand text ad visibility.
- 2. Measure and record results:** implement a rigorous test and learn approach, meticulously measuring and recording the results of your SEO efforts in a centralised log.
- 3. Begin relative weighting:** analyse the collected data to begin relatively weighting the impact of various SEO factors, enabling you to create a clear scoring comparison against competitors.
- 4. Experiment:** continuously experiment, test, and refine your strategies based on the insights from your evidence-based approach, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and adaptation.

By following these prerequisites and using a structured, data-driven methodology, brands can unlock the full potential of an evidence-based SEO approach, driving sustainable growth and outpacing competitors.

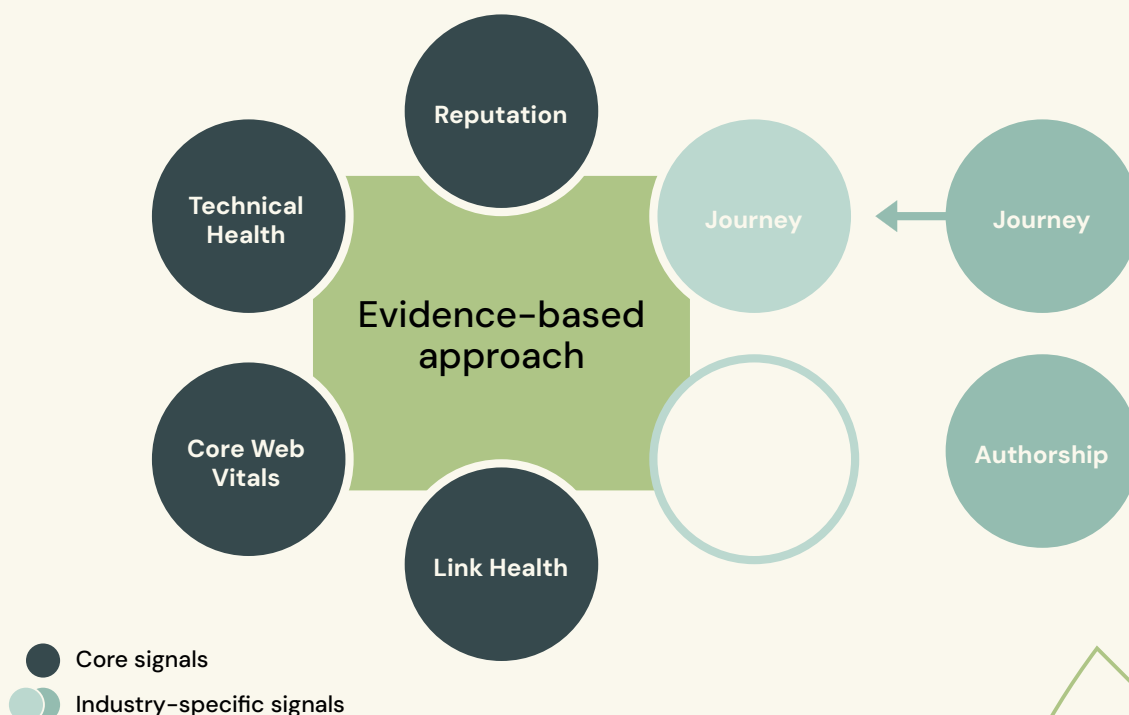
Core elements of the approach

While an evidence-based SEO approach involves tailoring strategies to specific industries and websites, there's a core set of signals that are universally applicable. These core elements form the foundation of an evidence-based approach.

Industry-specific signals can – and should be – also added to the mix; however, the core signals serve as a starting point for comprehensive analysis and represent the essential building blocks of a strong SEO foundation.

Core signals

Core signals serve as the backbone of an evidence-based approach to SEO, comprehensively assessing website performance and identifying areas for improvement.



Technical health

This signal assesses how accessible the content is and how quickly it's served to the user. It evaluates factors such as crawling, indexation, directives, XML sitemaps, metadata, on-page content, and security.

Core Web Vitals

This signal measures how effective the user experience, interactivity, and stability of the site are. An averaged score across Largest Contentful Paint (LCP), First Input Delay (FID), and Cumulative Layout Shift (CLS) are provided in order to understand the overall Core Web Vitals maturity.

Links

Link score is also a crucial core signal. It evaluates how well a website performs when it comes to external factors that influence visibility. This includes assessing the quantity and quality of backlinks.

Reputation

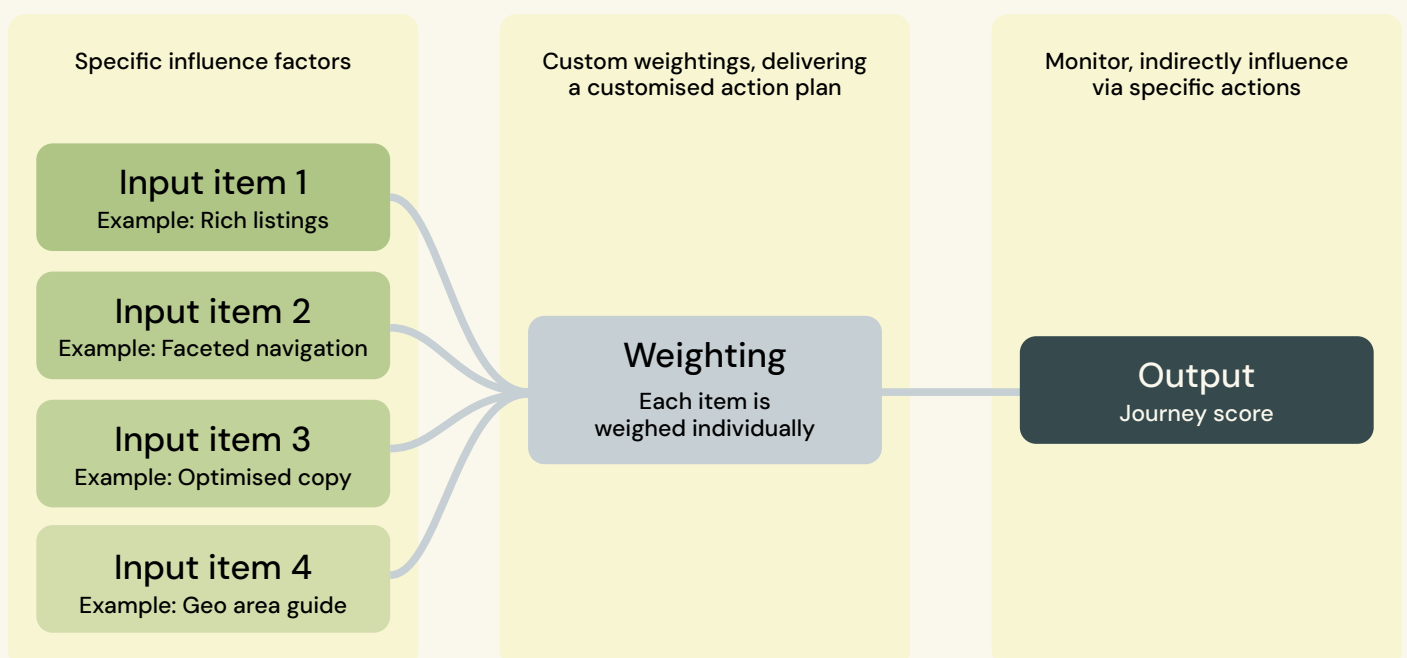
Reputation is a core signal that measures the level of positive and negative sentiment within online conversations. It assesses specific ratings and sentiment scores captured from social media mentions.

Industry-specific signals

While core signals provide a solid foundation, certain elements vary according to industry and website type. Here are a few examples of what we mean:

Journey

For ecommerce websites, the Journey signal is essential. It evaluates the key page templates used across the site, scoring them against best-in-class benchmarks. This includes assessments of product listing pages (PLPs), product detail pages (PDPs), and editorial pages. It also assesses geo-specific pages, Google Business Profiles, PLP (product landing page) strategy and PDP (product description page) optimisation.



Experience

The Experience signal measures how well websites demonstrate first-hand experience on their subject matter. This includes evaluating new content production and the execution of existing content.

Authorship

In the YMYL (Your Money or Your Life) sector – which covers sensitive topics like finance, health, and legal matters – the Authorship signal is essential, since it focuses on establishing trustworthiness and authority.



By combining universal core signals with industry and website-specific signals, the evidence-based SEO approach ensures a comprehensive and tailored analysis, enabling brands to identify and prioritise the most impactful areas for optimisation.



Introducing SEO.max

We created SEO.max – our proprietary methodology that provides our clients with an evidence-based SEO approach – to introduce scalability and efficiencies in how we see and deconstruct SEO. This tool provides guidance at scale, allowing us to assess and compare markets based on their competitiveness and the weighting of importance, rather than relying on a universal checklist. It is consistent enough to be used across markets for comparison, but tailored enough to provide an individual strategy.



SEO.max assesses a website against 100+ influence factors, categorised into five headline core signals – Journey, Experience, Links, Core Web Vitals and Technical Health. Data is automatically ingested from multiple sources, with AI being used to assess at scale, and each area is given a normalised score out of 5 to benchmark maturity (0 is nascent, 5 is expert). Each influence factor is individually weighted based on its contribution to positive ranking performance, while also considering the business context, such as operational restrictions.

Using SEO.max across markets gives us a consistent benchmark that is locally nuanced, based on the competition in that market. This forms the basis of our roadmaps.

Weighted aggregated score	Core signals	Competitor		Delta to Leader	Weighting
		1	2		
	Core signals	2.2	3.4	3.8	
	Technical health	1.82	3.65	3.57	1.83 25%
	Core Web Vitals	2.13	3.21	4.1	1.97 35%
	Links	1.82	3.2	3.9	2 25%
	Reputation	1.40	2.7	2.9	1.5 15%

Optimising authorship for a leading YMYL client

In the highly competitive YMYL industry, where trustworthiness and authority are critical, our client, a leading brand in the sector, faced significant challenges in establishing a strong online presence. Using our proprietary methodology that allows us to adopt an evidence-based approach to SEO, we identified authorship as a key area where our client lagged behind their competitors in search rankings.

Our client only had basic authorship elements in place, leaving room for improvement. Recognising the importance of authorship in the YMYL sphere, we put together a comprehensive strategy that would enhance our client's authorship signals across their website and key pages. This involved restructuring the content itself, while improving authorship elements to bolster the brand's perceived expertise, authoritativeness, and trustworthiness.

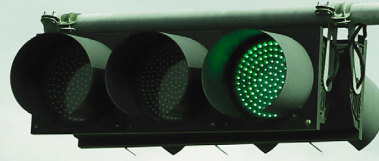
Our efforts coincided with Google's E-E-A-T (Experience, Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness) update, which placed even greater emphasis on authorship and trustworthiness signals.

As we worked on various authorship improvements, the results became clear. According to our SEO.Max scores, our client's primary competitor experienced a regression across the board in terms of authorship signals. In contrast, our client significantly increased their scores, establishing themselves as the leading brand against competitive benchmarks.

These insights and tactics, facilitated by our proprietary SEO.Max methodology, enabled us to identify and execute the best course of action to outperform competitors in the hyper-competitive YMYL industry. By leveraging our scalable and data-driven approach, we empowered our client to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage, solidifying their position as a trusted and authoritative voice in their industry.

"Even for one of the largest advertisers in the U.K, the Croud difference was noticeable from day one. We have built a deep partnership that has accelerated our approach to data, measurement and efficiency to stay ahead of the market. I can't wait to see what comes next."

Director of Performance



IN SUMMARY

In today's digital landscape, where search engines are constantly refining their algorithms and user expectations continue to rise, embracing an evidence-based approach to SEO is a real competitive advantage.

The principles outlined in this guide empower brands to navigate the complexities of global SEO management across multiple markets, sites, and platforms, while consistently driving performance. By quantifying various ranking factors, creating comparative analyses against competitors, and tailoring strategies to specific industries and website types, brands can unlock invaluable insights.

This data-driven, evidence-based approach not only reveals why certain competitors may be outperforming others in specific areas but also highlights the areas where investment and optimisation efforts should be focused. Armed with this knowledge, brands can build compelling business cases that resonate with senior leadership, secure buy-in, and allocate resources effectively.

However, adopting an evidence-based SEO approach requires a commitment to continuous experimentation, testing, and refinement, fostering a culture of agility and adaptability.

The true power of an evidence-based SEO approach lies in its ability to drive sustainable growth, outpace competitors, and deliver tangible business impact. By embracing this methodology, brands can confidently navigate the intricacies of SEO, unlock new opportunities, and solidify their position as industry leaders in their industries.

About Croud

Croud is a global, full-service digital agency that helps businesses drive sustainable growth in the new world of marketing. With a rich heritage in performance, we apply that mindset to everything we do; brand planning, strategy, integrated media, social, creative, and data.

Founded in 2011 with the mission to reinvent the agency model, we combine 500+ in-house digital experts with a global, on-demand network of marketing specialists. This agile, scalable model gives us more time to really understand our clients' businesses, and deliver truly incremental growth.

Croud is proud to partner with leading global brands, including Audible, Vans, IWG, and AllSaints.



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