



# THE COMPLETE **REAL ESTATE SEO** PLAYBOOK



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# INTRODUCTION

Today, tens of thousands of homebuyers will go to Google and type “homes for sale in [LOCATION]” or “[LOCATION] real estate agent.”

Just as many will ask Google things like, “is [LOCATION] a good place to retire” and “pros and cons of living in [LOCATION].” Some will be deciding between two cities, so they might type “cost of living [LOCATION] vs. [LOCATION].”

Likewise, home sellers all over the country will search “what’s my home worth,” “how to sell my home fast,” or “do I need a real estate agent to sell my home.”

And it’s not just buyers and sellers doing this. Real estate agents all over the country will go to Google and type “best REALTOR® in [LOCATION]” because they have a seller who’s relocating and need a buyer’s agent to help them in their new city.

Google sees billions (yes, with a B) of searches per day. In fact, some sources say up to 8.5 billion per day, so it’s probably more than tens of thousands of home buyers and sellers (and agents) searching the above terms.

## **Is your website ready to capture traffic from those searches?**

If it’s not, you’re missing out on a significant source of leads and, ultimately, transactions. When buyers and sellers go to Google to ask a real estate-related question, or when an agent searches for a great referral agent across the country, they’re doing so with high intent: They need to buy, sell and/or find an agent.

SEO, or search engine optimization, is how you earn traffic and leads from those searches (and all the other searches that buyers and sellers do every day). When it’s done right, SEO will help you rank higher for important keywords – i.e., search terms – that will bring high-intent buyers and sellers to your website.

## **THE SEO GAP IN REAL ESTATE**

SEO is often overlooked by real estate agents, teams and brokerages. The same is true of websites, in general. According to the National Association of REALTORS®’ 2023 Member Profile, only 66% of REALTORS® have their own website, and the typical REALTOR® got just two percent of their business directly from their website.



Statistics like that tell us there are a lot of team leaders and brokers who don't understand SEO at all, or don't see it as the lead-generating priority it should be. But we also know many who've made SEO and their website a priority and are consistently getting organic website leads. In the middle are the team leaders and brokers who know that they should devote more attention to their website and SEO, but don't know where to begin.

This playbook exists to bridge that knowledge gap.

You've already read above why SEO matters: Because buyers and sellers are Googling every day to find real estate professionals like you and get answers to their questions.

But you may not know what SEO is or how to do it effectively. We'll tell you in this playbook. You'll learn how to use SEO best practices – not tricks and gimmicks – to attract more buyers and sellers to your website. You'll learn actionable strategies and tactics and be better prepared to decide if you want to implement the lessons yourself or have a third-party consultant help.

So without further ado, let's dive into Sierra Interactive's 2024 Real Estate SEO Playbook!



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*Sierra Interactive develops residential real estate software and services for agents, teams and brokers in the U.S. and Canada. Sierra's proven lead generation and management solutions are trusted by top-performing teams and influential coaches in the real estate industry.*

**For more on our authors, [click here.](#)**



## WHAT IS SEO?

Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of improving your website's visibility in search engines. There are several different search engines, but the most ubiquitous is Google, so we'll mostly refer to that in this playbook since it has ~90% of the search engine market share.

In practice, it's about a) creating high-quality, original content on your website that matches how buyers and sellers search for your products and services, and b) earning or creating trust signals to demonstrate the quality of that content; these signals usually come in the form of links.

SEO is often broken down into three sub-areas:

- On-page SEO (or On-site SEO)
- Technical SEO
- Off-page SEO (or Off-site SEO)

On-page SEO is exactly what it sounds like: all the things you can do on your website to improve its visibility. Technical SEO involves some on-page factors like page speed, but it also includes issues that impact Google's ability to crawl and index your content. Off-page SEO includes things that happen away from your website that can improve your business' visibility. We'll share actionable tips and advice about each of these later in this playbook.

Done right, SEO helps your website rank higher in organic search results. It has no impact on pay-per-click (PPC) advertising, and the opposite is also true: PPC does not help you rank higher in organic search results.

For most searches, Google will show a mix of organic (SEO) and paid (PPC) results, like this:



(That's admittedly an oversimplification. Google's search results change regularly and will often include images, videos, suggested searches, and much more.)



Before we dive into the actionable advice, let's do a quick overview of how search engines work and, more specifically, how Google ranks web pages.

## HOW SEARCH ENGINES WORK

Entire technical documents are available that explain in great detail how search engines work, but let's do a quick overview so you understand how Google finds your website, determines what your content is about and decides how valuable it is.

Search engines send crawlers (or bots) across the internet to discover content. The bots use links to find new pages. They go from link to link, analyzing the pages they find. If they come upon a page they don't already know about, the bots might add the page to its index of web pages. If they come upon a page they already know about, the bots will look for any updates or changes and may make those changes in its index, too.

This is important: Just because the bot finds a new web page, there's no guarantee the page will get added to Google's index. There are many reasons why this might happen, including:

- ◆ The website might have signals telling the bot – intentionally or accidentally – not to crawl and/or index the page. (This is why Technical SEO is important.)
- ◆ The page might be a copy of, or similar to, another web page already in Google's index.
- ◆ The page might have poor content or other low-quality signals.

When Google's bot finds a new website or page, it may not crawl all of the links nor add all of the content on that site to its index. Google assigns every website a "crawl budget" -- a number of pages that it will regularly crawl and index. Sites that are new to Google typically have a small crawl budget. As your site matures and earns Google's trust through consistently publishing high-quality, original content, your crawl budget will increase.

## HOW DOES GOOGLE RANK THE PAGES IN ITS INDEX?

Ahhh, yes...the million-dollar question. There are likely thousands of individual factors across Google's ranking systems, but Google doesn't reveal what those exact ranking factors are.

At a high level, Google says ranking is a matter of combining the meaning and context of the search term with the relevance and quality of content along with the usability of the web page/site that content is on.



Google hires thousands of “search quality raters” around the world to constantly grade the quality of its search results. When training these raters, Google tells them there are four main considerations they should use to judge the quality of a page:

- Experience
- Expertise
- Authoritativeness
- Trustworthiness

Commonly called E-E-A-T, these are not ranking factors. They’re what Google wants to show in its search results. In other words, when Sally Homebuyer types “pros and cons of living in [LOCATION],” Google wants to show her search results that demonstrate experience, expertise, authoritativeness and trustworthiness. Practically speaking, then, SEO is about taking your experience, expertise, authoritativeness, and trustworthiness...and putting it on your website.

We may not know Google’s exact ranking factors, but we know what kind of content wants to rank highly: content that demonstrates E-E-A-T. So that kind of content should be a big part of your 2024 SEO playbook.

### **THE SECRET SAUCE BEHIND SIERRA’S WEBSITES**

One of Sierra Interactive’s primary advantages is that we’ve built our websites and content management system (CMS) natively from the ground up. Many competitors took a shortcut and built on top of an existing third-party framework like Wordpress or Squarespace. Because Sierra doesn’t rely on a third-party framework, we are in control of the underlying technology and can optimize sites in a way that our competitors cannot. That’s one key reason that our sites rank better organically out of the box than many of our competitors’. We fully own the code, and we can (and do) continually improve it to boost performance and keep pace with Google’s evolving standards and performance metrics.



### **PATRICK KELLER**

Realtor / Broker, Crest Point Real Estate

“We were looking for more than just keyword reporting to optimize our SEO,” Keller said. “Sierra offers my agency unparalleled expertise with industry keywords I can’t find anywhere else.”



## KEYWORD RESEARCH

You might be tempted to start optimizing your website and writing new content today so you can start getting more Google traffic as soon as possible...but don't!

The first step of a successful SEO campaign is keyword research.

### What is keyword research?

Keyword research is the process of discovering how your potential customers use search engines to find the products and services you offer. To put it in real estate-specific terms, keyword research helps you understand what buyers and sellers type into Google at each stage of the real estate journey.

Think of it this way: Creating and optimizing content without first doing keyword research is like looking at homes before getting pre-approved for a mortgage. Your buyer client could be looking at homes in the wrong price range. You might be creating and optimizing content for the wrong terms. In both cases, it could be a huge waste of time and resources.

### What makes a good keyword?

Not all keywords are created equal. As you do keyword research (and we'll show you how a little later in this playbook), you'll need to know how to decide which keywords are worth targeting. Generally speaking, good keywords have these traits:

#### Relevance

A good keyword is relevant to your business and your location. If you work in Philadelphia, but you're not licensed to work across the river in Camden, NJ, any keyword related to Camden is a bad keyword.

#### Balance of Search Volume and SEO Competition

Search volume is how many times a keyword is searched. SEO competition refers to how many sites are trying to rank for a keyword. Consider the term "real estate." That term has really high search volume, but it's also super, super competitive. Zillow, Realtor.com, Redfin and all of the national real estate brokerages want to rank for that term. It's far too competitive for the typical real estate team or brokerage. Good keywords exist in the middle: they have enough search volume to make it worth the SEO effort and not an extreme amount of competition.

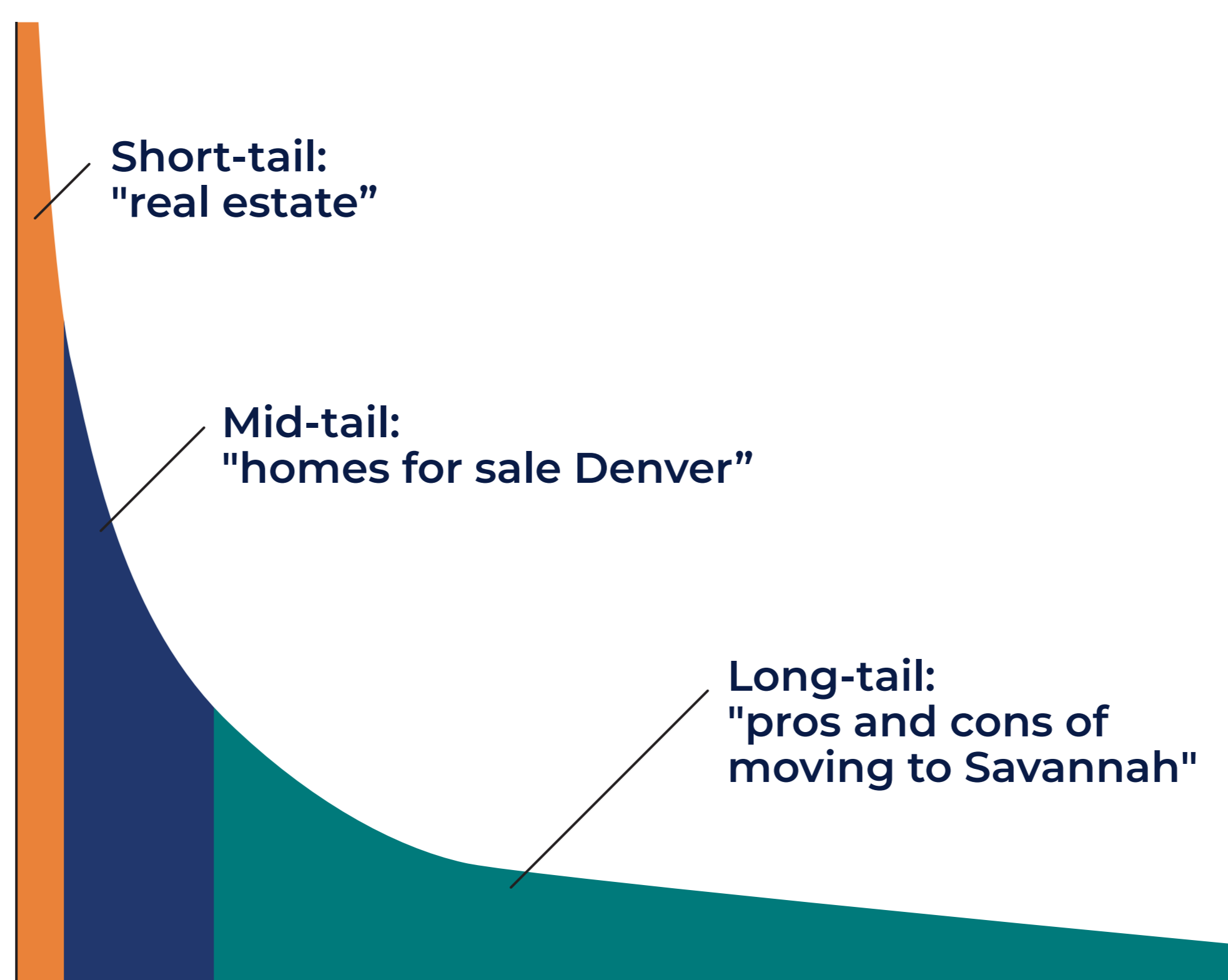


## High Intent

Let's look at "real estate" again. Sure, there's a chance that a buyer or seller might begin their real estate journey by Googling "real estate." But it might also be a term that a lot of students are typing for a term paper or class project. Not only is it too competitive, it also doesn't reflect strong buyer/seller intent. Compare that to terms like "homes for sale Denver" or "pros and cons of moving to Savannah." Keywords like those have lower search volume than "real estate," but they're better keywords because they indicate strong buyer or seller intent.

## THREE TYPES OF KEYWORDS

Keywords are commonly grouped into one of three buckets: short-tail, mid-tail, or long-tail.



TERM	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
<b>Short-tail</b>	A keyword that has super-high search volume but is likely to have vague intent and low conversion. Also called a "head" keyword.	Real estate
<b>Long-tail</b>	A keyword that has very low search volume but very specific intent and a higher chance of conversion.	Pros and cons of moving to Savannah
<b>Mid-tail</b>	A keyword that (as you'd expect) is somewhere in the middle of those two extremes.	Homes for sale Denver

If you're just beginning your real estate SEO work, long-tail keywords will be easiest to rank for because there's probably not a lot of competition. Zillow and other national real estate sites usually ignore keywords like these, opening the door for a local expert like you to answer buyer and seller questions. Your blog, especially, will be a great place to create content that targets long-tail keywords.



As you continue to write high-quality content, earn quality links and win Google's trust, it should become easier to rank for mid-tail keywords.

### Go After the Easiest Target: the Long Tail

Your advantage is your knowledge of your market and of what makes it unique -- not just the largest cities and developments, but the neighborhoods and types of properties that are most attractive to buyers.

The Sierra CMS makes it easy to create content targeted to those topics. This type of long-tail content is the weakest link of national sites like Zillow and Redfin, making it an optimal strategy to help your site rank quickly.

## KEYWORDS AND THE BUYER/SELLER JOURNEY

You've probably heard the term "client funnel." It describes the process we typically go through when making a buying decision – or in the case of real estate, a "hiring" decision.

Most homebuyers and sellers go through a process, a journey that begins with realizing they might need to buy or sell, to doing research about agents and homes, to ultimately choosing you as their agent.

There are several models of what a client funnel looks like. One of the most common is A-I-D-A, which stands for Awareness, Interest, Desire, Action. Last time you bought a new car or found a new doctor, you probably went through each of those steps.

### Why the client funnel matters in real estate SEO

Buyers and sellers will search differently as they move through each stage of the funnel – i.e., the real estate journey. And as we said earlier, SEO is about creating content on your website that's consistent with how buyers and sellers search. So let's apply that AIDA model to real estate SEO.

**Awareness:** At this stage, a buyer or seller is aware that they might need to buy or sell their home at some point. There's no urgency. They might casually ask a friend or co-worker if they know any good real estate agents. When that friend gives them your name, the buyer or seller is probably going to look you up on Google. What will they find?

Examples of "awareness" keywords: your name, team name, brokerage name

(Note: This "ask a friend for a recommendation" scenario can happen at any time during the real estate journey, so these keywords are important at each stage.)



**Interest:** At this stage, the buyer or seller realizes they might need to buy or sell soon. Maybe they're having a baby. Maybe they're applying for jobs in another state.

Examples of "interest" keywords: "how to get a mortgage," "best time to sell a house in [LOCATION]," "[LOCATION] housing market"

**Desire:** At this stage, the time to find an agent or buy/sell a home is much closer. The buyer or seller is serious and there's a sense of urgency. Their searches reflect the final steps before taking action.

Examples of "desire" keywords: "[LOCATION] homes for sale," "moving to [LOCATION]," "what is my home worth," "best Realtors® in [LOCATION]"

**Action:** This is where the buyer or seller decides to hire or contact you. At this point, it's less about SEO and more about social proof: reviews on your website and your Google Business Profile, videos that show your personality, a map of your sold homes, and so forth.

So that's a high-level look at how buyers and sellers might search at different stages of their real estate journey. We talked earlier in this playbook about "which keywords to target," but a better way to think about SEO is to focus on buyers and sellers. How do they search? What questions will they have at different stages of their real estate journey? And how can you answer those questions and searches on your website? Instead of trying to create content for Google, create content for buyers and sellers.

## HOW TO DO KEYWORD RESEARCH

There are countless tools that will help you do keyword research!

Semrush.com, Ahrefs.com, and Moz.com are three of the more advanced and expensive options. Each offers keyword research as part of a larger suite of SEO and digital marketing tools. If you hire a professional SEO consultant or agency, they'll likely use a tool like these to compare keywords and generate new keyword ideas. These tools typically also provide a "keyword difficulty" score to help you determine how challenging it might be to optimize and rank for a specific keyword.

AlsoAsked.com and AnswerThePublic.com are less expensive tools that focus on helping you discover the questions that people search; this can be super helpful for brainstorming blog content. Keep reading for other ways to see what questions people ask Google.



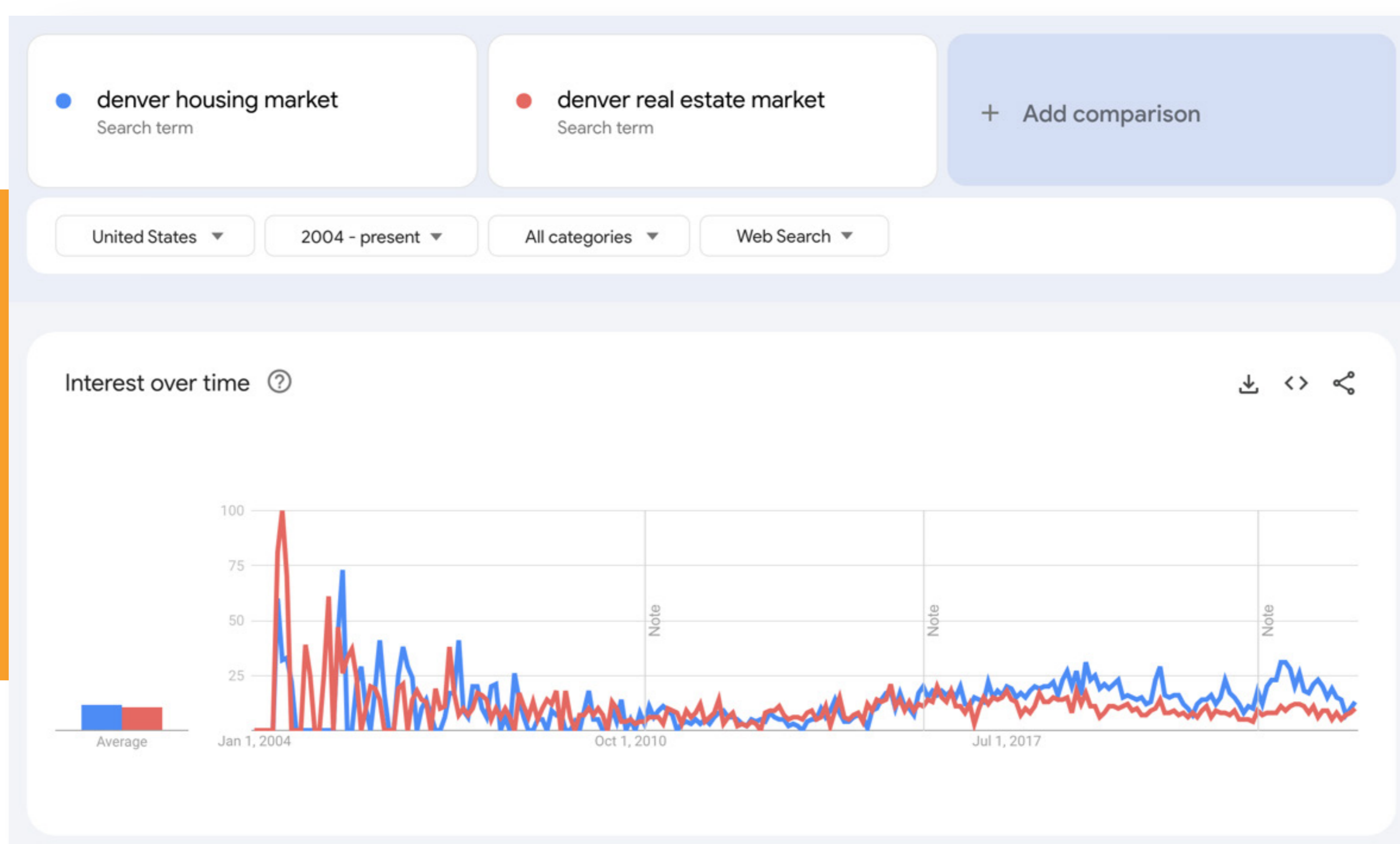
When you use tools like these, remember what you learned earlier in the “What makes a good keyword?” section: The best keywords are relevant to you, have a good balance of search volume and SEO competition, and reflect high buyer/seller intent.

## Using Google for Free Keyword Research

Google also offers a number of ways to do keyword research, all of which are free.

**Google Keyword Planner** is a free tool with some of the same features as the pro-level keyword tools. It can generate new keyword ideas and show how competitive a keyword is, but it’s important to remember that this is a tool for advertisers more so than for SEOs. The data and recommendations should be viewed with that in mind.

**Google Trends** is a free tool that can help you compare the popularity of keywords. You might wonder, for example, if you should optimize your market report content for “housing market” or “real estate market.” If you work in Denver, Google Trends shows that “denver housing market” has become more popular in recent years than “denver real estate market.”

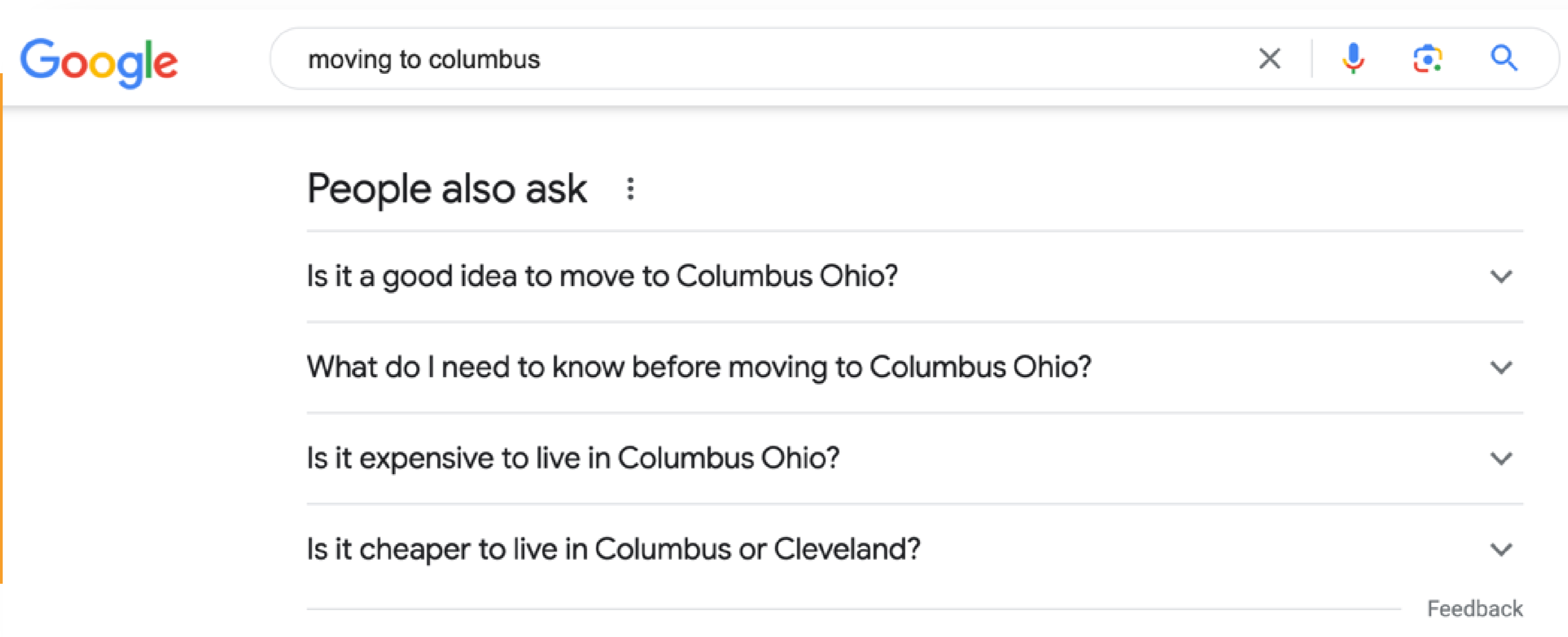


Google’s search results are another place you can do keyword research. This is particularly helpful to find topic ideas for your blog and the specific phrases to use when creating articles and/or videos.

Buyers in the Interest and/or Desire stages might Google a phrase like “moving to Columbus.” When you do that search, you should find new keyword and content ideas in three specific elements of Google’s search results.

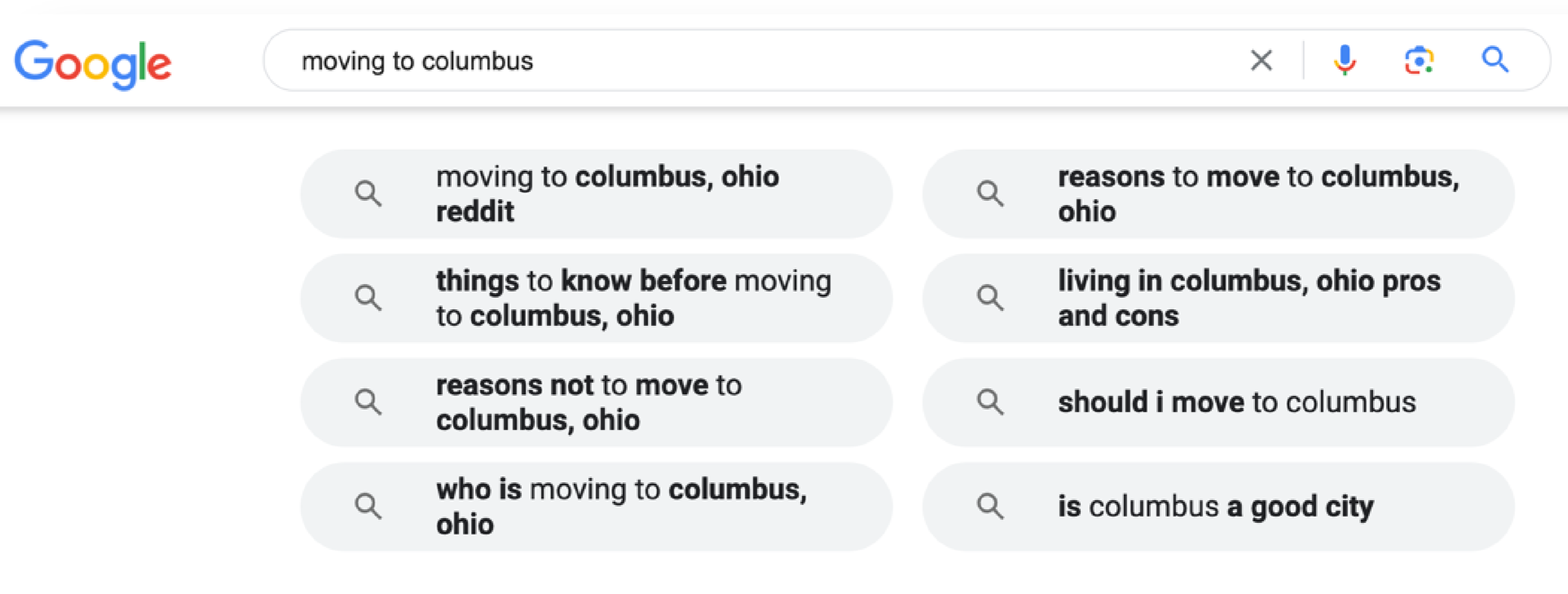


**1. People Also Ask.** Google will often show a list of four questions related to your search that people often ask. If some or all of these questions are things a buyer or seller might ask Google during their real estate journey, you should consider answering them in a blog post (or in multiple blog posts if needed).



When you click on a question in the “People Also Ask” feature, Google will show you a preferred answer and source while also adding more questions to the bottom of the list. The more you click, the more questions (i.e., keyword research) you’ll see.

**2. Related Searches.** Further down the search results page, you should see 8-10 suggestions under the “Related searches” heading. These can also be good sources of keyword research for content and blog posts to add to your website.



**3. Google Autocomplete.** When you put your cursor in the search box at the top of these results, Google Autocomplete will kick in and show you even more popular keywords and terms related to your search. These will often be similar to the “Related Searches” above, but it’s good to check here to make sure you’re not missing any keyword/content ideas.



One drawback here is that you don't immediately get a sense of how difficult it might be to rank for these keywords/topics. We suggest you look at the sites that already are ranking and read their content. Can you do as good or better? Do you have experience and expertise you can share that's not already reflected in the other articles? If so, those could be good questions/keywords to write about.

To summarize, buyers and sellers are asking Google questions like these every day at different stages of their real estate journey. The essence of content-focused SEO involves answering these questions on your website.

## ON-PAGE SEO

After doing your initial keyword research, it's time to start optimizing your website. In this section, we'll talk about three elements of on-page SEO: content, user experience and internal linking.

### The First Rule of Website Content

Let's be clear: Your website content should be written for people, not for Google. People are your audience. People have questions about buying and selling, Google doesn't. People will hire you to help them buy and sell, Google won't.

Google rewards websites that people find helpful. If you focus first and foremost on writing content for buyers and sellers, Google is more likely to reward you with higher search rankings. "How helpful your content is" is much more important than "how many times you used a keyword."

Keep that in mind as we talk about using keywords for SEO.

### How to Optimize a Web Page

Every page should have a primary keyword and most will also have 2-3 secondary or related keywords. Your goal, since you write primarily for buyers and sellers, is to use these keywords as signals to help Google understand what each page is about.

Generally speaking, there are eight places to use keywords on a web page.

**1. Title tag.** This is the most important on-page SEO signal. Your primary keyword needs to be in the title tag and preferably at the beginning. It's not something a human will see on the page, but it's what Google will often show as the clickable link in search results. The title tag can be as long as you want, but Google will only show about the first 60 characters.



**2. Meta description tag.** Like the title tag, this isn't something a person will see on the page. It's not even a ranking factor. So why are we including it here? Because Google will often use some or all of the meta description tag as the snippet below your link in its search results. So while it may not help you rank higher, it will likely play a role as buyers and sellers decide which link to click. The meta description tag can also be as long as you want, but Google will typically only show about 155-160 characters. Use your primary keyword and include the related/secondary keywords, too. Write this in such a way that it's likely to invite a searcher to click your link.

**3. Page URL.** The URL is another signal to Google (and the searcher) of what the page is about. If you have a page for homebuyers that explains the steps to buying a home in your city (let's use Denver as an example), and your primary keyword is "buying a home in Denver," the page URL should be [www.yourdomain.com/buying-a-home-in-denver](http://www.yourdomain.com/buying-a-home-in-denver), and you'll want to use hyphens, not underscores.

**4. Header Tags.** These are visible to a person as they read your content, and they also send a signal to Google of what the content is about and how it's organized. A good page structure has the visible title of the page as an H1 tag and then sub-sections are H2s. If you have further sub-sections under your H2s, they become H3s, and so on.

So using that same example, the H1 on your page for homebuyers should use your primary keyword: Buying a Home in Denver. Then you have sub-sections (H2s) that say "How and Why to Get Pre-Qualified," "Beginning Your Denver Home Search," and so forth.

**5. Page Copy.** It's probably pretty obvious, but you should also use your primary and related keywords in the copy that you write for each page. But don't overdo it. Remember, you're writing for people, not for Google. Don't cram keywords into your copy every chance you get; write naturally and use them when it makes sense.

**6. Image filenames...if it makes sense.** On that same page for homebuyers in Denver, if you've made a great flowchart graphic that shows each step in the process, you can use the primary keyword in the filename: [buying-a-home-in-denver.png](#). Again, use hyphens, not underscores. But only do this if it makes sense. If you're putting a photo on this page of a beautiful kitchen, don't name that image [buying-a-home-in-denver.png](#).

**7. Image alt text...again, only if it makes sense.** That same advice applies to adding alt text to your images. Alt text exists primarily for blind and vision-impaired people, and you should add alt text to all images for their benefit. But if you're uploading that great flowchart to your page for homebuyers, you can add alt text like this: "A flowchart that shows the process for buying a home in Denver." In this example, you have great alt text that tells what the image is, but also has the primary keyword.



Both this and putting the keyword in image filenames (#6 above) are very small signals to Google of what the content is about. It's not the end of the world if you don't put keywords in your image filenames and alt text.

### 8. Internal link anchor text.

When linking from one page on your site to another page on your site, the text you use for the link (i.e., the anchor text) should include the primary keyword of the page you're linking to. This is a very important signal, so much so that we'll expand on this a little later in the playbook.

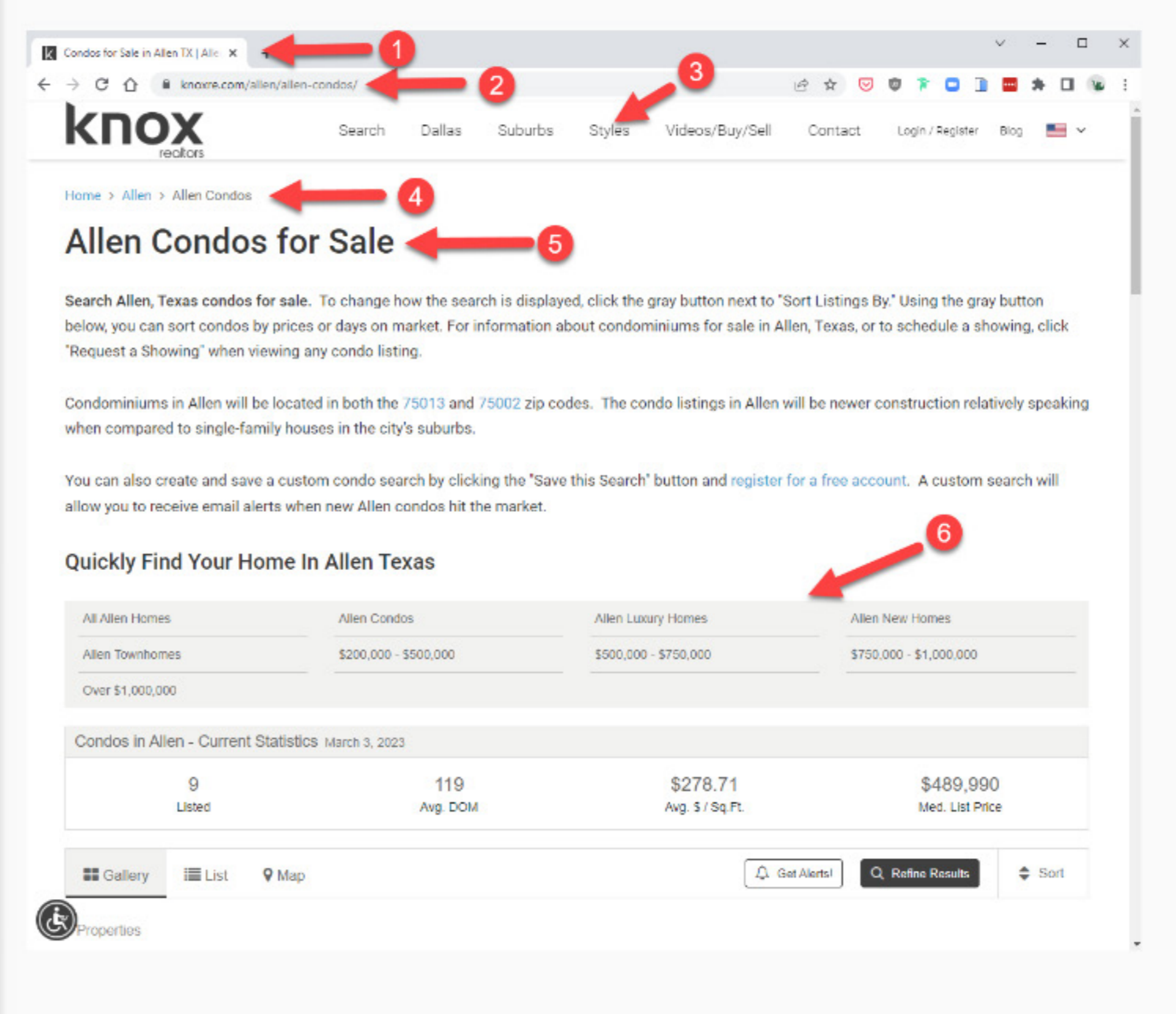
## OPTIMIZE YOUR ON-PAGE SEO WITH A CMS THAT GIVES YOU FULL CONTROL

Sierra's website content management system (CMS) gives you full control over your site's meta tags like the URL structure, navigation, breadcrumbs, page keyword content and interlinking of site pages. This allows you to optimize your site at the macro level, including the structure of the site and how the pages link together, and the micro level, including the content and structure of each page and blog post, in a way that truly aligns with Google's recommended best practices.

## Content Optimized from the Top Down and the Bottom Up

Our CMS gives you full control over your site's meta tags (1), URL structure (2), navigation (3), breadcrumbs (4), page keyword content (5) and interlinking of site pages (6).

This allows you to optimize your site at the macro level (including the structure of the site and how the pages link together) and the micro level (including the content and structure of each page and blog post) in a way that truly aligns with Google's recommended best practices.





## BLOGGING IS YOUR #1 SEO TOOL

For real estate websites there are a few standard pages that are table stakes and therefore show up in some form on all of them: the home page, buyers page, sellers page, About Us/Me page and contact page. In addition, you should have IDX listings along with Community pages that are unique to your market (remember the long-tail keywords!). But the most important tool in your SEO toolbox is a blog because it's the primary way your website will help you stand out from the crowd. Here's why:

**1. You'll attract buyer & seller leads.** Your blog is where you'll answer all those questions that buyers and sellers are Googling today, like the ones we mentioned at the beginning of this playbook (and more):

- “is [LOCATION] a good place to retire”
- “pros and cons of living in [LOCATION]”
- “cost of living [LOCATION] vs [LOCATION]”
- “how to sell my home fast”
- “do I need a real estate agent to sell my home” and so on

**2. E.E.A.T.** Your blog is where you'll establish the experience, expertise, authoritativeness and trustworthiness that Google wants to show in its search results.

**3. Opportunity.** Most of the national real estate portals are ignoring long-tail searches like these. That's an opportunity for you to earn Google traffic and new leads by writing great blog posts that answer those questions. Bonus: Most other agents in your market are also not creating content to answer long-tail searches!

It's okay if you're not a great writer; buyers and sellers aren't expecting you to be another Hemingway or Maya Angelou. They just want their questions answered. They want to learn from your experience and expertise.

If you really dislike writing, or don't have time, have someone write posts for you. You could even hire a great, local freelance writer who knows your area. Make sure the person understands the “voice” of your brand and the style/tone you want on your blog. And always double-check their work before you publish it.

You could even use an AI tool like ChatGPT to help. Google has said it's more concerned about the quality of your content than how it was created. But understand this: ChatGPT and tools like it are probably not going to write the kind of high-quality articles that Google wants to rank highly (i.e., articles that reflect E-E-A-T) and that will convince buyers and sellers to hire you.



While ChatGPT and other tools like it (Jasper.ai, Copy.ai, etc.) can help you develop article ideas and outlines, we do not recommend publishing AI-written content word-for-word without editing, improving and adding your own unique brand and voice to it.

## The Importance of Internal Links

An internal link is a link from one page on your site to another page on your site. If you ask 100 SEO practitioners to list the most underrated tactics, internal linking would surely show up on most of their lists.

First, you should use internal links generously. When you're writing a blog post that mentions "searching for homes in Savannah," you should link to the IDX page on your site where people can search for homes in Savannah. When you're writing a blog post with advice for first-time buyers, and you mention "buying a home in Denver," link to that page on your site for homebuyers – the one with the great flowchart that we talked about earlier.

Second, when you create internal links, optimize the anchor text to include the keyword of the page you're linking to. Anchor text is the text that makes up the clickable link. Using that same Denver homebuyer example, when you link from your blog post to the page for homebuyers, try to write it so the clickable link uses the primary keyword of the page you're linking to or one of the related/secondary keywords.

It might look like this one time: "If you're thinking about buying a home in Denver, there are five things you need to know..."

It might look like this the next time, using a related/secondary keyword: "Call or text us when you're ready to learn how to buy a home in Denver. We can't wait to meet you!"

Anchor text is an important signal telling Google what the page that you're linking to is about. Don't use "click here" as the clickable link when you're linking to an important page.

You may struggle to get links from other websites (which are also a very strong SEO signal), but you can make up for that to some degree by linking generously to your own content.

### Internal Page Linking Structure Is Extremely Flexible

This sounds technical, but what it means is simple: when you create content pages around long-tail keywords, it's easy to make those pages visible within your site so that Google can easily find them and understand how the pages relate to each other. This helps more of your pages rank more highly more quickly, and also increases site visitors' pages per visit and time on site.



## A QUICK NOTE ON USER EXPERIENCE

SEO isn't just about getting traffic to your website. It's also about converting that traffic.

The experience a buyer or seller has when they get to your site will go a long way toward deciding if they raise their hand and say, "Can you help me buy/sell?"

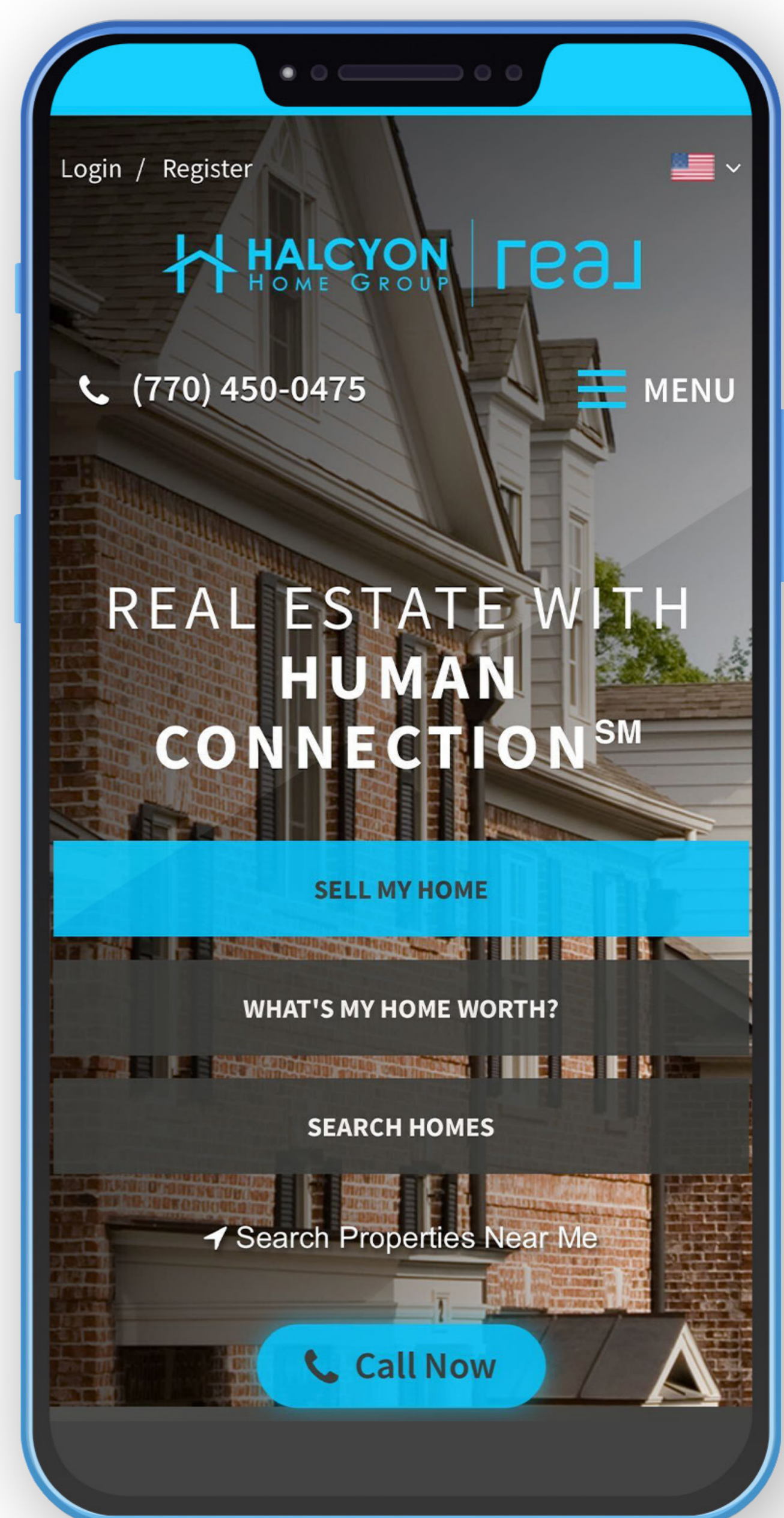
Some aspects of user experience will also impact your site's ability to rank highly in Google's search results.

**Mobile-friendly design:** For years, mobile search has been more common than desktop search. Google doesn't want to show sites in its mobile search results that don't look good or work well on mobile devices.

**Page speed:** Users don't like slow-loading pages. Google doesn't, either. Page speed is a small SEO ranking factor. Make sure images, for example, are optimized to load quickly.

**Intuitive site navigation:** It should be easy for both users and Google's crawlers to navigate from page-to-page on your site. Make sure all of your important pages are accessible from your main site navigation. Breadcrumb navigation, especially on an active blog, are also good for user experience and can help bots better understand your site's content hierarchy.

**Readability:** Using header tags (H1s, H2s, etc.) helps both users and Google understand the importance and relationship of concepts you write about. Short paragraphs and bullet lists do the same.



## TECHNICAL SEO

Technical SEO can get extremely...well, technical...and many of the best practices in this area apply primarily to large, enterprise-level sites. But there are several things you should know that can impact your site's ability to rank and be found in Google and other search engines.



**Robots.txt:** This is a text file that lives at yourdomain.com/robots.txt. It tells search engines whether you want your site to be crawled, indexed and eligible to show in search results. You obviously want that tag to ALLOW Google to do that. It should be set to “index.” We’ve seen incidents where the robots.txt file was written incorrectly and search engines ignored entire sites.

**XML Sitemaps:** While robots.txt can be used to stop crawlers, XML Sitemaps can make the crawlers’ job easier. An XML Sitemap tells Google and other search engines where to find the pages on your website. They help Google crawl your website more effectively and efficiently. XML Sitemaps aren’t a required element of technical SEO, but they’re a best practice.

**Schema:** This is a set of tags that you can add to your website to help search engines understand your content better. It creates “structured data” that Google can more easily understand and even show in search results. Your website can benefit from some industry-specific tags like those for real estate listings, as well as non-industry specific tags like those for events (think Open Houses), reviews, and FAQs, among others. Like XML sitemaps, Schema isn’t required, but it is a good idea.

### **PRIORITIZE THE PAGES AND PROPERTIES THAT MATTER MOST**

Google allocates each site a certain “crawl budget” -- a number of site pages which it will regularly crawl and index. As your site matures and gains traction this will increase, but initially the budget is small. Sierra’s dynamic sitemap tool allows you to submit to Google Search Console the specific property detail pages that are most important to your business and your market, so that you can allocate your crawl budget wisely.

### **STRUCTURED DATA (SCHEMA) IS BAKED IN AUTOMATICALLY WITH SIERRA SITES**

Google, Amazon, Microsoft and other tech giants agreed many years ago to implement a hidden tool within the source code of web pages called “Structured Data.” This allows advanced website providers like us to make the most important elements in the page data clearly readable by bots like the Google Bot. The result is more ranked pages and more visible search results for your site pages.

**HTTPS:** This is a protocol that secures the connection between a web browser and your site. Your site should be encrypted; in other words, when someone visits your site, they should be on https://yourdomain.com instead of http://yourdomain.com. Google has stated that using HTTPS is a minor ranking factor.



**Page speed:** As we mentioned earlier in the User Experience section, users prefer fast-loading pages and Google does, too. Page speed is another minor ranking factor. Google monitors your page speed,, and you can monitor it, too in Google Search Console, so make sure to connect your website there. (We'll share more on Google Search Console later in this playbook.)

**Broken links:** As you learned earlier, Google's crawler discovers new pages by going from link to link to link. If you have broken links on your site – i.e., links that point to pages that no longer exist – that's a technical SEO problem. It undermines Google's ability to crawl your site. Some of the pro-level tools like Semrush and Ahrefs can help you identify broken links on your site. Whether you use those or not, it's best to fix broken links as you find them.



**DUSTIN OLDFATHER**  
CEO, The Oldfather Group

“

*Two years after implementing, we've had a 2,000% increase in the number of users on our site, with the largest source being organic traffic,” Oldfather said. “In 2022 alone, we've had more inquiries from our website since we've started in business.*

”



## OFF-PAGE SEO

We've focused so far on things you should do on your website to get more traffic and leads from Google and other search engines. There are also things that happen away from your website that will impact your site's search rankings and visibility. We call this off-page SEO. Here's what you need to know.

### Links are a Really Important Ranking Factor

Google pioneered the use of links to judge the importance of a web page. This includes the internal links that we discussed earlier, but Google relies even more on external links (also called backlinks) to determine how important a web page is.

An external link is a link from another website to your website. Google looks at these links as an endorsement of your site's value. Here are a few things to know about external links and SEO.

**1. Quality over quantity.** The quantity of external links to your site is important, but even more important is the quality of those links. One link that you earned from a trusted news organization by being a news source will have more value than 10 links from low-quality websites. Generally speaking, links that are harder to get will have more value.

**2. Anchor text matters.** As with internal links, the anchor text (i.e., the words that make up the clickable link) of external links are an important ranking factor. For example, if you work in San Jose, getting quality links to your website with "San Jose real estate agent" as the anchor text will help you rank for that term.

**3. "Dofollow" links count the most.** When another site links to you, they might add a "nofollow" tag to the link. (Links from most social media profiles have this tag.) This is a way to tell Google that the link isn't really an endorsement. These aren't "bad" links. But generally speaking, links without the "nofollow" tag (often called "dofollow" links) are more likely to help you rank higher.

Even though a "nofollow" link may not help you rank higher, it can still be a great source of traffic to your website. A "nofollow" link on a popular website can be more valuable to your business than a "dofollow" link from a low-quality website.



**4. Don't buy links.** Buying links to influence search engine rankings is against Google's guidelines. In those guidelines, Google says "buying and selling links is a normal part of the economy of the web for advertising and sponsorship purposes," but adds that any such links should be marked with a "nofollow" or "sponsored" tag.

**5. You have a link profile.** Every site has what SEOs call a "link profile." It's the collection of all links that point to your site. A diverse link profile is good for SEO. You should be getting links from a variety of sources and types of websites. For example, it makes sense that you might trade links with some of your business partners – i.e., you link to them in exchange for them linking to you. These "reciprocal links," as they're called, aren't bad, but they shouldn't be the only kind of links in your link profile. Google puts more value on a link profile that has earned backlinks, not just traded for them.

## HOW AND WHERE TO GET AND EARN LINKS

If links are so important, it begs the question where you can get links and how you can earn them. As you look at the sources below, keep in mind that links you earn are usually more valuable than links that anyone can get.

**Your portal and social media profiles.** Be sure to link to your main website from your Zillow, Realtor.com, Facebook, TikTok, and other profiles. These links might be nofollowed and have little SEO value, but could still drive traffic to your website.

**Business partners.** It makes sense that you might trade links with preferred lenders, stagers, landscaping services, and so forth. Remember, though, that traded links shouldn't be the only kind in your link profile.

**The website your brokerage gives you AND your brokerage's website.**

If your brokerage provides a small, business card-style website, you should link from that to your main website. Likewise, if your brokerage has its own website with an agent directory, be sure your profile on that site links to your main website.

**Chambers of Commerce and similar organizations.** Many local organizations like these will have a member directory online. If you're involved in any such groups, make sure your profile includes a link to your website.

Those are the low-hanging fruit of the link world. They're easy links to get and won't do much to move the needle for you in a competitive real estate market, but they're a good starting point if you've never focused on building backlinks to your site.



## DIGITAL PR AND GUEST POSTING

Earning visibility and links on popular websites is another effective off-page SEO tactic. Two common ways to do this are writing guest posts on other blogs and connecting with journalists who need expert sources for their news articles.

**Guest Posting.** Does your favorite lender have a blog on their website? What about your financial advisor? Offer to write a high-quality article to be published on their website. Your financial advisor might appreciate an article about the current state of real estate investing in your market, for example. Be sure to let the other site know that you'd appreciate a link to your site in case any of their readers have questions or want more information. That kind of link can boost your SEO efforts and also bring new visitors to your website.

**Digital PR.** There are two common ways to do digital PR: The first is where you do the outreach to local reporters, and the other involves reporters doing outreach as they look for expert sources. Both can be great sources of links and new traffic to your website.

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### ABOUT LOCAL REAL ESTATE?

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## WORLD ECONOMICS NEWS

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OUR PARTNERS PROMOTION

\$150 Our office 1st Street 14

Volume 51 / Est. 1987

- ◆ **Contacting local reporters.** As you publish great content on your blog, look for occasions when what you're posting might be worthy of local news coverage. The media especially loves unique, new, and interesting data. So if your regular housing market update includes a new record for local home prices, for example, it's worth doing some digital PR. Contact your local media outlets – start with the local real estate reporter if they have one. Give them specifics about the new record and let them know you're available for an interview if they want to understand why prices hit a new record.t

- ◆ **Reporters doing outreach.** Many reporters use services like HARO (HelpAReporter.com) to find experts to interview for upcoming stories. HARO sends three emails per day with those requests. Monitor those emails for real estate-related stories, then reply when you have expertise or information that matches the reporter's request. Be sure to follow the reporter's instructions when you reply, and make sure their deadline hasn't passed.



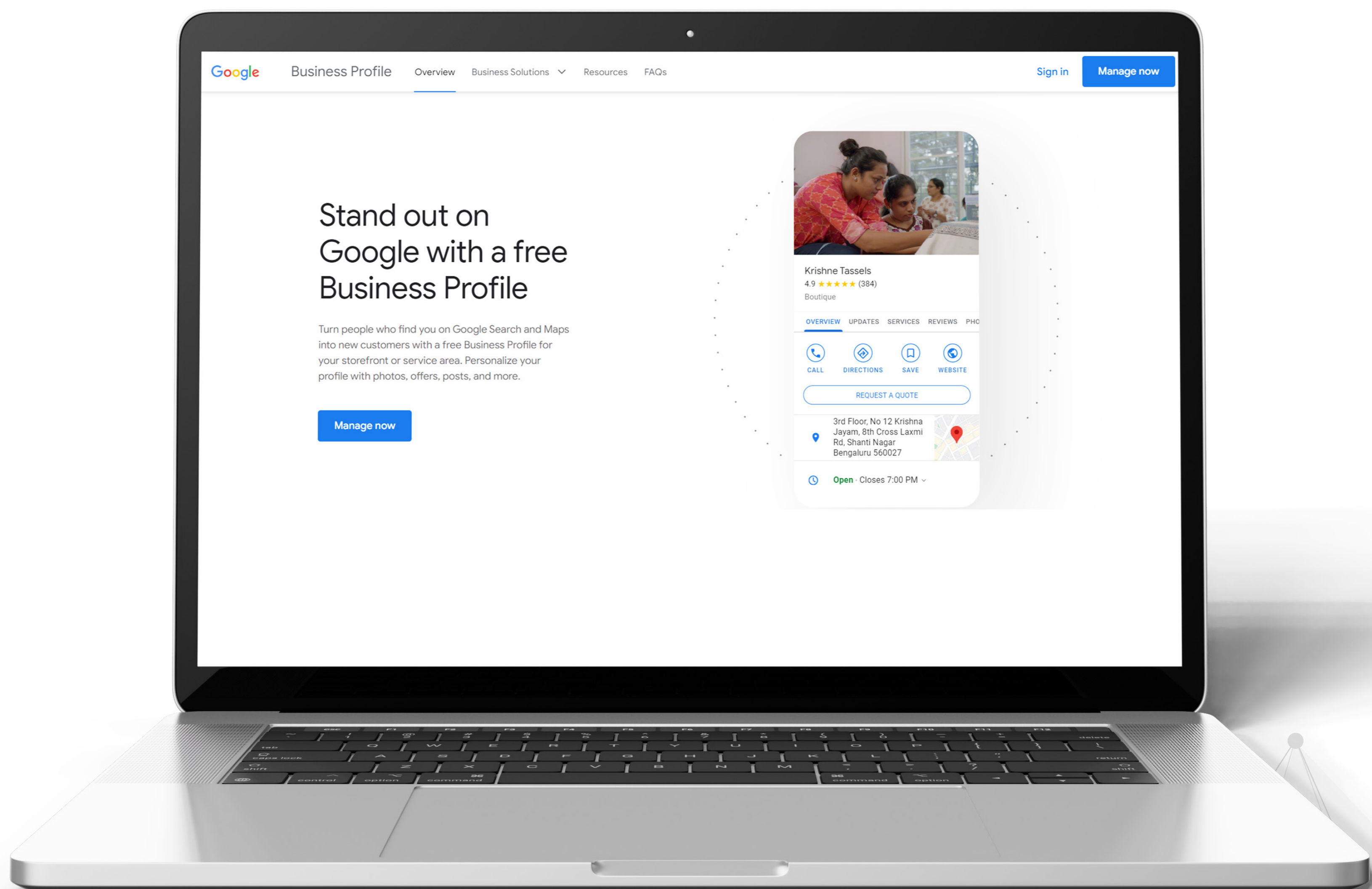
Whether you're doing digital PR or writing guest blog posts, the other sites where you'll appear will often link to your website as a courtesy. (If they don't, there's no harm in asking them to do so.) These links can be very helpful for SEO purposes and might also bring a lot of new visitors to your website.

## GOOGLE BUSINESS PROFILE OPTIMIZATION

Your Google Business Profile (GBP) is another key element of off-page SEO. It can help you rank when buyers, sellers, and even other agents search for you by name. It may also help when they search for things like “[LOCATION] real estate agent” or “best Realtors® in [LOCATION].”

You may already have a Google Business Profile, even if you've never set one up. Go to Google and search for your business name – either your personal name if you're a solo agent or your team/brokerage name.

If you see a Google Business Profile on the right side of the page, look for a link that says “Own this business?” If you don't see an existing profile, go to [google.com/business](https://google.com/business) to create one. It's free. Either way, you'll need to verify that you're the business owner before Google will allow you to manage the profile.





There's a lot you can and should do with your GBP, but there are only six sections that impact your local rankings:

**Business name.** Having a good keyword in your business name will help you rank higher for that keyword. A team name like "Prosperity Real Estate Team" is better for local SEO than "Prosperity Team." That said, you should use your legal business name here. Resist the urge to include keywords that aren't part of your legal name; doing so can get your profile flagged and penalized.

**Website.** The URL you link to from your GBP can impact the rankings of your GBP. Generally speaking, the stronger the page you link to, the more that page will boost the performance of your GBP. That's why it's often best to just link to your home page; it's probably the strongest page in Google's "eyes." But if you're part of a team and have your own GBP, you could link to your agent profile on the team's website (or to your own website if you have one).

**Categories.** Add all the categories that are relevant to your business. Don't spam here by putting your business in categories that don't match what you do.

**Reviews.** What matters most here is how many reviews you have, the frequency with which you get new reviews and your overall star rating. The jury is out on whether having keywords in those reviews matters; some SEO experts say it does, others disagree. Regardless, it doesn't hurt if your clients include important keywords in their reviews.

**Attributes.** In your GBP, you can identify yourself as a "woman-owned business," "Black-owned business," and several other attributes. Do this for any attributes that accurately describe your business. It can help you rank if/when someone searches specifically for those attributes – i.e., "Black-owned real estate agency."

**Services.** After selecting your category(ies), you can choose from a long list of pre-existing services to describe your business. Choose all the services that match your business. If you provide services that aren't listed, you can add them manually. For example, as this playbook is being published, "military relocation specialist" is not one of the pre-existing options. Adding it can help you rank higher when buyers or sellers search with that term in their query.

There are many, many more things you can do with your Google Business Profile: add a business description, add photos, add your listings as "products," and so forth. That content won't help with your local/map rankings, but it can help with conversion. An active profile with recent posts, photos, etc., may be more likely to convince a buyer or seller to call, text, or visit your website.



## ANALYTICS

Using an analytics tool – even Google Analytics! – won't help you rank higher. But it's an important piece of any SEO playbook. An analytics tool is how you'll measure success, so you can learn what's working and where you have room for improvement.

There are countless web analytics tools available, ranging from free to very expensive. Google Analytics is one of the free options, and by far the most-used, but the recently launched 4th generation (called GA4) has been met with poor reviews in the SEO industry. Many say it's an inferior product that's harder to use. Many are looking for new analytics tools to use on their own website and on client sites.

With that in mind, we're going to recommend one other Google analytics product and then talk in more general terms about the types of metrics you should be measuring, no matter what analytics tool you use.

## THE GOOGLE ANALYTICS TOOL WE RECOMMEND

We briefly mentioned Google Search Console (GSC) back in the Technical SEO section, and that's one analytics tool we recommend you use.

After you connect your website, GSC will provide a snapshot of your performance in Google's search results. You'll see impressions, clicks, click-through rates, and position in search results. GSC will show you what keywords are bringing visitors to your website. You'll also learn if Google is having any problems indexing your website, and you can track certain "page experience" signals, too.

GSC is a great start, but it's much less sophisticated than many analytics tools. You should also keep in mind that its data typically lags 2-3 days behind and you can only see the past 16 months of your site's performance.

## IMPORTANT METRICS TO TRACK

Whether you use Google Analytics or another platform as your primary analytics tool, here are several website metrics worth tracking.

**Pageviews and Visitors.** You want both of these metrics to continue rising over time. It's a sign that your content is reaching new buyers and sellers.

**Most popular pages.** Your home page will probably be #1 on this list. But if you're blogging, knowing which articles are bringing in the most search traffic can help you learn the topics and keywords where Google considers you an expert. These articles and pages should be optimized with strong calls to action to convert visitors into leads.



**Traffic sources.** With a full content marketing plan, you'll probably get traffic from search engines, social media, other websites (called "referral traffic"), your newsletter, "direct" traffic (when people type your URL into their browser address bar) and other sources. It's good to keep an eye on which sources are driving the most traffic.

**Traffic from organic search.** Consistent growth in how much traffic Google and other search engines are sending you is a great way to monitor the overall success of your SEO efforts.

**Percentage of traffic from organic search.** A healthy website gets traffic from a variety of sources – search, social media, referral traffic, pay-per-click ads and more. While it's good to grow your organic search traffic, you don't want too much of your overall traffic to come from search engines (or any other single source). If you become too reliant on SEO traffic, you risk significant losses if Google's algorithm changes. Unfortunately, those updates can accidentally (and usually temporarily) hurt even high-quality sites that are following SEO best practices.

**Average time on page.** This can be a signal of the quality of your content. A longer time-on-page may indicate that your content is keeping visitors engaged and interested. The reverse is also true: If you have a long article on your blog that should take 6-8 minutes to read, but it has an average time on page of 20-30 seconds, it could be a signal that the content isn't as engaging as you hoped.

**Bounce rate.** This is a metric that tells what percentage of visitors leave your website after seeing just one page. A high bounce rate is widely considered a negative – the visitor didn't find what they were looking for. But when you have an active blog with high-quality content, the flip side might be true: Some visitors might find the exact answer they wanted on your blog and then leave. You didn't convert that visitor, but it's possible they're still a happy site visitor and will return in the future. While bounce rate is a good metric to keep an eye on, it's important to look at it in context with the other metrics listed here, too.

**Conversions and conversion rate.** That said, just getting people to visit your website isn't the goal. You want to convert them. This can mean getting them to register to look at homes on your IDX pages, filling out a contact form, downloading a lead magnet, or something else. Track which content drives the most conversions and has the best conversion rate, then look for opportunities to double-down on what's working to turn website visitors into leads.



There's much more you can track with a full-featured analytics platform, but these are some of the metrics worth watching no matter which one you use.

And it should go without saying that the most important metrics are how many leads you get from your website, how many of those leads get to the closing table, and how much GCI you can attribute to your website.

## SEO MYTHS

Before we wrap up, let's cover some SEO myths that are common in the real estate industry.

### **Myth #1: Geotagging images will help your local SEO rankings.**

Not true. Both current and former Google employees have confirmed that Google strips all image metadata (with the exception of copyright/licensing data) when you add photos to your Google Business Profile.

### **Myth #2: For SEO, your blog posts need to be at least \_\_\_\_\_ words long.**

Google's search help site specifically refutes this myth: "Are you writing to a particular word count because you've heard or read that Google has a preferred word count? (No, we don't.)"

When you're writing blog posts or web page content, write exactly as many words as you need to help the person you expect to read your content. If you're writing about an upcoming open house, a couple paragraphs is probably enough. If you're writing a guide to senior housing options in your town/city, it probably needs to be longer than a couple paragraphs.

### **Myth #3: Your main keywords should appear at least 10 to 13 times per 700 words on a page.**

No. Keyword density hasn't mattered since the late 1990s when Lycos and Excite were the main search engines.

You definitely want to use your primary keywords in blog posts and web page content, and secondary/related keywords, too. But you don't want to stuff your content with repeated mentions of your keywords. Write naturally for humans. They're the ones who buy and sell houses.

### **Myth #4: You don't want comments on your blog because comments dilute the keyword density of your post.**

Again, keyword density is not a thing. Blog comments can even help your SEO if the comments offer good information.



## Myth #5: You can "10x your SEO by embedding your social media posts on your blog."

Embedding your Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, Twitter/X, etc., posts won't help your website or blog SEO but they can refer valuable traffic to your site.

But here's a caveat: If you have a blog post and a YouTube video on the same topic, it's good to embed the video into the article and it MIGHT help with SEO. The general consensus in SEO circles is that embedding the video into the article about the same topic can increase your chances of getting both pieces of content to rank. This is more likely to happen if you have a trusted/authoritative website and/or YouTube channel.

## Myth #6: Clicking links in your email newsletter helps with SEO.

The idea is usually positioned this way: "Include links to your blog posts in your newsletter, and if someone reading your newsletter clicks one of those links, it helps your SEO."

Unfortunately, not true. A click inside an email has zero impact on SEO. If it did, spammers would run bots that click thousands of times a minute on links in emails to get their crappy sites and pages to rank.

There are a lot more SEO myths out there, but we hope this clears up some of the more common myths we've heard.

## SEO CHECKLIST

Use this checklist as a quick reference tool to help guide your content and SEO strategy.

- ◆ **Conduct keyword research.** Identify terms and topics relevant to your business and market and convert them into initial keywords. Determine which keywords you want to rank for and do some research to see if there is adequate search volume and, ideally, low competition for those terms. Take the time to develop this strategy and leverage tools like SEMRush, Google Keyword Planner or Google Trends to help. Pro tip: factor in terms related to both home buyers and sellers to develop a comprehensive keyword list.
- ◆ **Write long-tail keyword blog articles.** Remember, long-tail keywords typically have less competition and allow you to establish yourself as the local market expert. Some long-tail topic examples are best places to live near Charleston South Carolina, homes for sale in the Franklin county school district, best time to sell your home and things first time home buyers should know.



- ◆ **Optimize your on-page SEO.** Update the places throughout your page where you should be using your keyword for that specific piece of content: title tag, meta description tag, page URL, header tags, page copy, image alt text and internal link anchor text. If you're writing about how to sell your home, make sure that your SEO optimization metadata matches.
- ◆ **Don't neglect your technical SEO.** Regularly check your website pages for technical-SEO deal breakers that can impact your site's overall performance such as broken links, page speed and making sure your robots.txt file is set to "index". Pro tip: don't forget to create and submit your property listings in Sierra to make sure they get crawled!
- ◆ **Develop an off-page SEO strategy.** Drive traffic to your site via other websites, such as your social pages, portal pages (like Zillow), business partners (such as lenders, home inspection companies, etc) and your Google Business Profile (more on that below!). Remember that quality over quantity is the name of the game when it comes to off-page SEO and that the link anchor text is equally as important as the link itself.
- ◆ **Set up and optimize your Google Business Profile.** Claim your profile and make sure you optimize the six main sections that impact your local rankings: business name, website, categories, reviews, attributes and services. And maintain this – remember, an active profile with recent posts, photos, etc., may be more likely to convince a buyer or seller to call, text, or visit your website.
- ◆ **Track your SEO efforts and make data driven decisions.** Leverage tools like Google Search Console to track important metrics such as your number of pageviews and visitors, your most popular pages, traffic sources, average time on page and bounce rate. It's almost important to know what your organic traffic and conversion rates were before you implemented your SEO strategy so that you have a benchmark to compare your efforts against. Once you see your traffic and conversions start to rise, track which content is driving those results and then look for opportunities to double down on to turn website visitors into leads.



# ABOUT THE AUTHORS



## ABOUT MATT MCGEE

Matt McGee is an SEO and real estate veteran. You might know him from his 3+ years working at HomeLight, where he was head of agent content. During that time, he created and hosted HomeLight's weekly agent podcast, The Walkthrough™. He's been surrounded by real estate his whole life: Matt's dad owned an independent brokerage from 1953 until he retired in 2001. His sister is a licensed agent in Pennsylvania and his wife has been a Realtor® since 2004.

Matt began doing SEO in the late 1990s, before Google was a thing. Over the years, he's consulted for clients as big as Target and The Weather Channel, and as small as a mom-and-pop selling handcrafted gifts from their garage.

In 2017, he began working as Marketing Director for his wife, Cari, a top 5% agent in southeastern Washington. He made SEO and website content a focus for her new real estate team, and by 2019 they were able to stop paying for leads from Zillow, Realtor.com, and Google PPC. Today, SEO is the team's #1 source of leads, responsible for \$90,000 in GCI in 2022.

Today, Matt is the founder of SEOSavvyAgent.com, an online real estate SEO course that teaches the strategies and tactics he and his wife use to attract and convert website visitors through great content and SEO. He consults and coaches with real estate agents, teams and brokerages across the country who need marketing and SEO help. He also speaks on SEO and marketing at both in-person and virtual real estate events.



## ABOUT SIERRA INTERACTIVE



Sierra Interactive develops residential real estate software and services for agents, teams and brokers in the U.S. and Canada. Sierra's proven lead generation and management solutions are trusted by top-performing teams and influential coaches in the real estate industry. Founded in 2007, Sierra is headquartered in Louisville, KY, but has a remote-first workforce across the U.S. Sierra is owned by Alpine Software Group (ASG), a unique software business specializing in building vertical SaaS companies and backed by private equity firm Alpine Investors. For more information, visit [sierrainteractive.com](https://sierrainteractive.com)