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SEARCHMETRICS

WHITEPAPER

searchmetrics



RANKING FACTORS 2018

Targeted Analysis for more Success on Google and in your Online Market

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Introduction: Why ranking factors for niches?

Ranking factors for niches are a further progression in Searchmetrics' ongoing efforts to better understand the search landscape. The ever-increasing diversity of Google's search results has rendered the approach of earlier studies of ranking factor obsolete. Conclusions drawn based on analysis of the search results for hundreds of thousands of keywords can give an overview of the state of the online world but will be at best too generic to be of practical value, at worst misleading and counterproductive to a company's online activities.

This understanding led to the development of *Searchmetrics Industry Ranking Factors*, which gave insight into the specificities of websites operating in different industries. The concept of Ranking Factors for niches takes this approach a step further, focusing the analysis of search results on an even more precisely-defined topical niche.

Within this paper, a "niche" refers to a specific online market that is characterized by a particular product portfolio, search interest and also certain websites. For example, eCommerce is considered an industry; specific niches within this industry include furniture and cars.

The striking contrasts in the results across niches, as revealed in this whitepaper, is renewed confirmation of the necessity of this kind of approach. Online marketers need relevant data they can trust to support the development of effective online strategies. That's why online marketers need ranking factors for their niche.

Ranking Factors 2018 for Niches: A Searchmetrics Whitepaper

It is Searchmetrics' mission to enable ever increasing transparency for the modern marketer. A big part of this mission is conducting analyses into the state of search and content marketing, from SEO ranking factors to best practices and content strategies. Data and analyses can be accessed in the *Searchmetrics Knowledge Base* and on the *Searchmetrics blog*.

Methodology: Which niches to analyze?

No whitepaper could possibly aim to include data on every single niche relevant to every single website. To maintain consistency with previous Searchmetrics whitepapers, this analysis looks at four major online industries that have been the subject of recent studies: eCommerce, finance, health and travel. Within each industry, we have then selected two niches that:

A) provide variety in terms of user intent across the different niches

B) can, at least in part, be representative of other niches in the industry (so nothing too highly specific)

C) correspond to sectors relevant to our current client base.



For each thematic niche, a set of around 500 keywords was created that included only terms relevant to websites in that area. These eight niche keyword sets form the basis of the analysis presented in this whitepaper.

Methodology:
Which ranking factors to measure?

In each of the eight niches, the same ranking factors have been analyzed, making it possible to compare niches and to see what current best practices are for different websites, depending on the topics that they deal with and the user intent that they seek to address.

For all ranking factors measured, we present the average values of all pages ranking in the top 10 of the Google.com desktop search results in the USA. This shows us the features that high-ranking pages in particular niches have in common.

The ranking factors analyzed are grouped into three categories: content, technical and user experience.

Content



- Images
- Videos
- Word Count

Technical



- File Size
- HTTPS

User Experience



- Ads
- Internal Links
- Lists
- Microdata
- Tables

Results: All the Data at a Glance

The following table summarizes the top 10 average values for all analyzed ranking factors in the eight niches that are the subject of this paper.

All the Data at a Glance

		CONTENT FACTORS			TECHNICAL FACTORS	
		Images	Videos	Word Count	File Size (KB)	HTTPS
eCommerce	Cars	18.2	0.0	2,209	165	59%
	Furniture	27.9	0.0	1,139	481	77%
Finance	Credit	6.5	0.0	1,836	91	86%
	Financial planning	8.4	0.0	2,581	145	49%
Health	Recipes	19.8	0.1	1,773	384	21%
	Weight loss	19.4	0.4	2,276	317	19%
Travel	Camping	14.7	0.0	703	128	55%
	Destinations	14.5	0.1	1,018	217	47%
	Average	**16.2**	**0.08**	**1,692**	**241**	**52%**

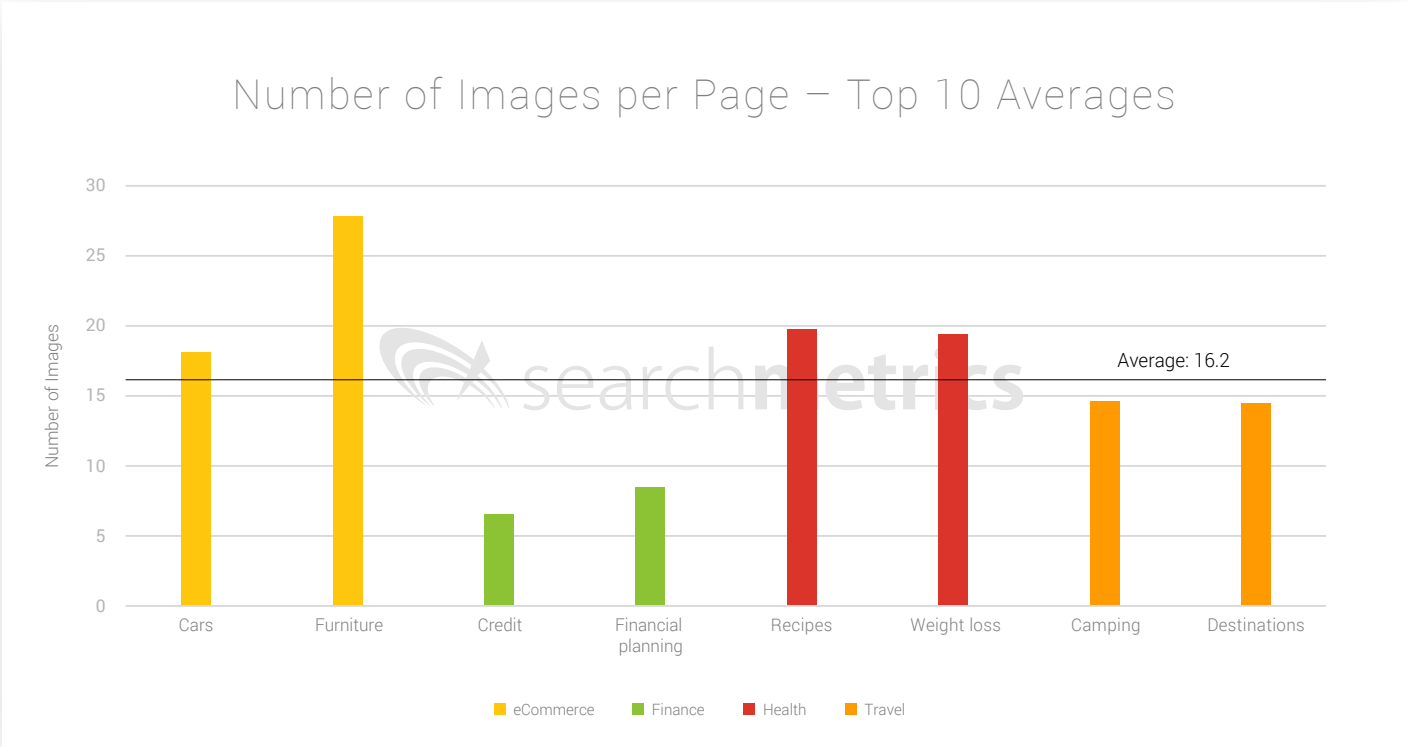
		USER EXPERIENCE FACTORS				
		Ads	Internal Links	Lists	Microdata	Tables
eCommerce	Cars	1.1	223	2.1	4.7	1.1
	Furniture	0.6	424	1.3	10.4	0.1
Finance	Credit	0.6	93	1.6	3.8	0.4
	Financial planning	1.4	134	1.9	5.2	1.5
Health	Recipes	3.2	186	1.3	15.6	0.0
	Weight loss	3.2	170	0.6	4.7	0.1
Travel	Camping	1.2	157	0.8	4.6	1.3
	Destinations	1.8	165	1.7	6.1	0.2
	Average	**1.6**	**194**	**1.4**	**6.9**	**0.6**

Content: Images

Definition

The total number of images on a page. All images are counted for each URL, yielding an average number of images per page in each niche.

Results



Analysis

Top 10 eCommerce pages in the furniture niche have the most overall images (27.9), suggesting a wide range of product options. Recipe pages also use lots of visuals, perhaps, for example, to guide users through the steps of the cooking process.

By contrast, we see very few images in the credit and financial planning niches, suggesting users' queries in these information-driven areas are better served by text content than by images.

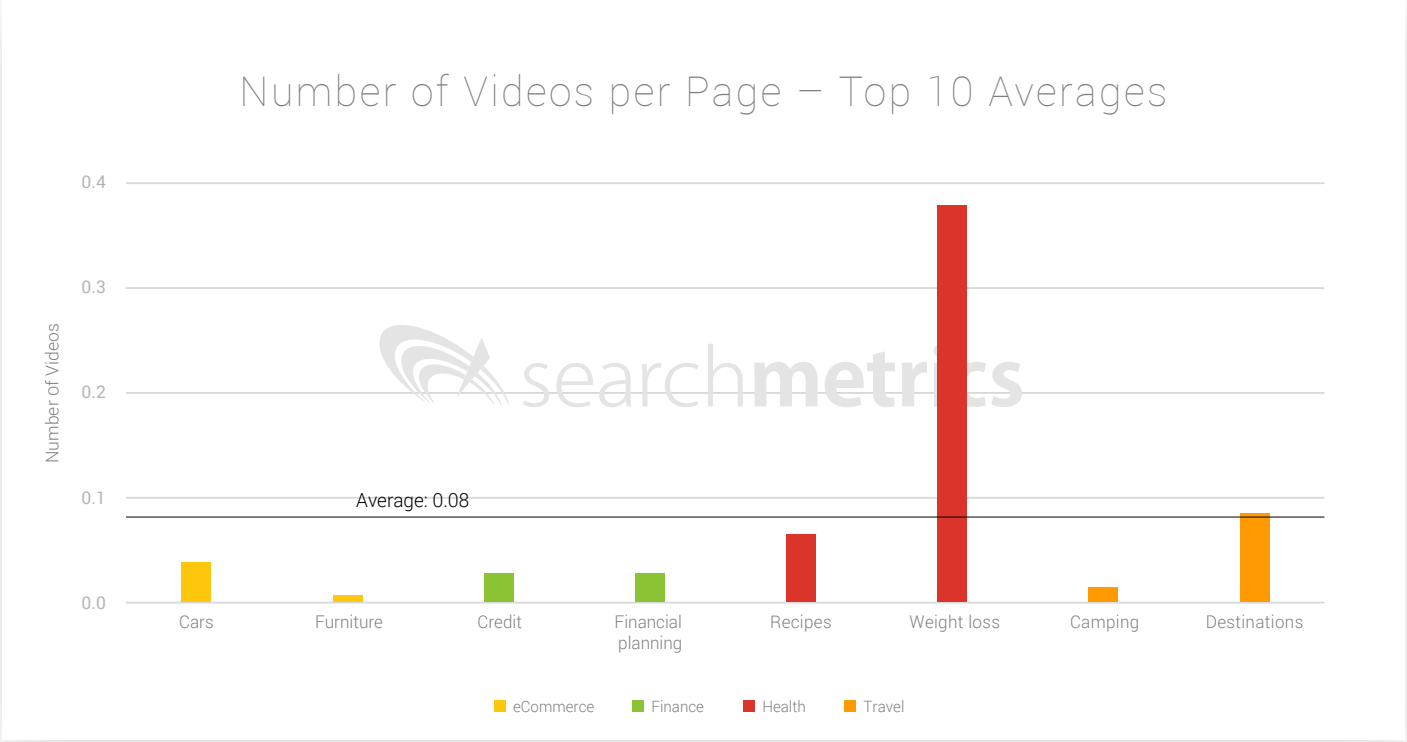
Another benefit of using image content, provided it is well-optimized for searches that are well served by visuals, is that appearing in Google's image search vertical can be a lucrative additional source of traffic.

Content: Videos

Definition

The number of videos included in the page content. The videos are counted for each URL, yielding an average number of videos per page in each niche.

Results



Analysis

Whilst Google has made steps in 2018 to provide users with videos for an increased range of queries, showing video carousels in the SERP for an increased proportion of queries, the data shows us that video content is neither required, nor necessarily desirable, for the majority pages to achieve high rankings in the organic search results.

On the other hand, there are niches, such as weight loss, in which Google rewards significantly more providers of video content with first-page rankings. It is vital that you understand the nature of the content users are looking for when searching in your niche.

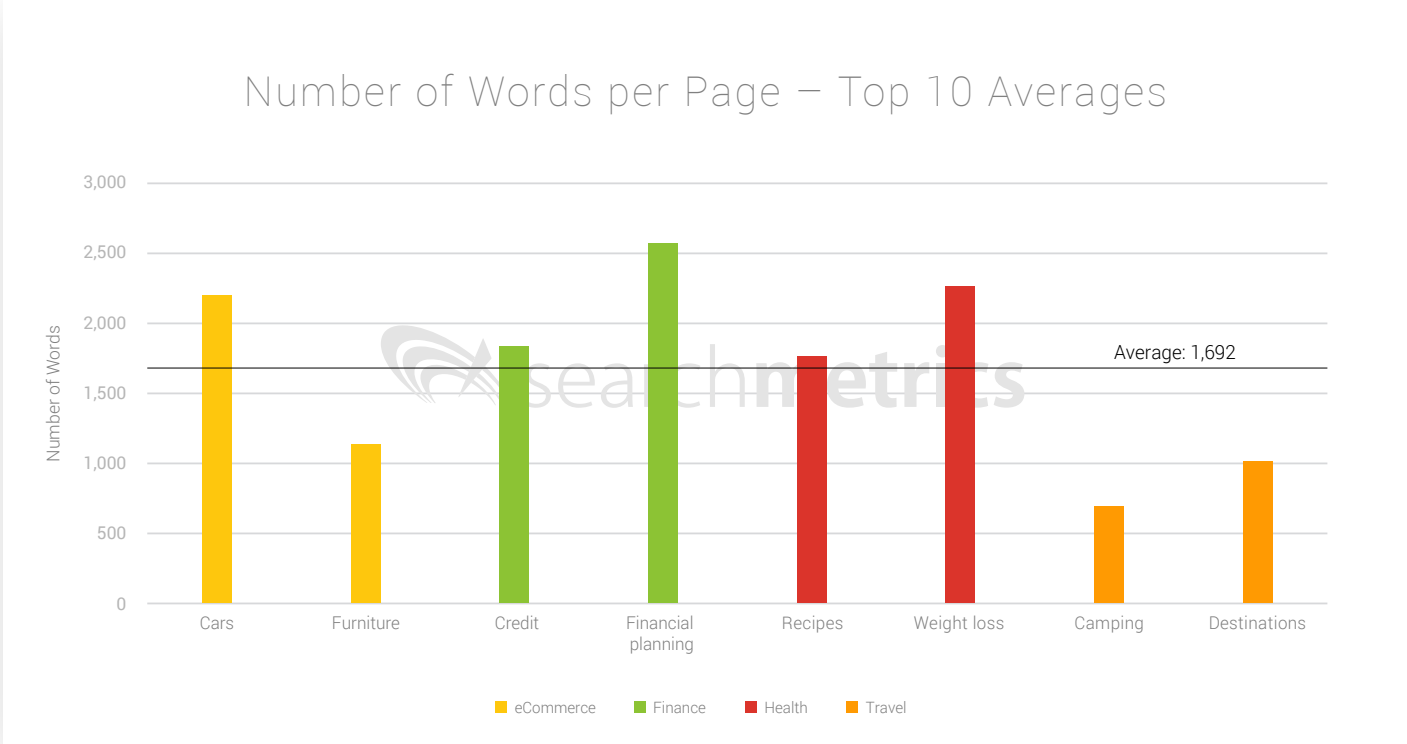
SEARCHMETRICS UNIVERSAL SEARCH STUDY

Content: Word Count

Definition

The number of words included in the page content. The words are counted for each URL, yielding an average number of words per page in each niche.

Results



Analysis

The word counts of top 10 pages in different niches show less variation than other factors, suggesting that text content of a not insignificant length is considered by Google's algorithm to be relevant for a wide range of search queries.

However, word counts do differ from niche to niche. There are many reasons why having long texts could help satisfy the user intent – the page could provide a detailed explanation of many issues around a complex topic, another page could include product descriptions, another could have detailed instructions of a fitness routine. Find out more about content optimization in the Searchmetrics Content Experience.

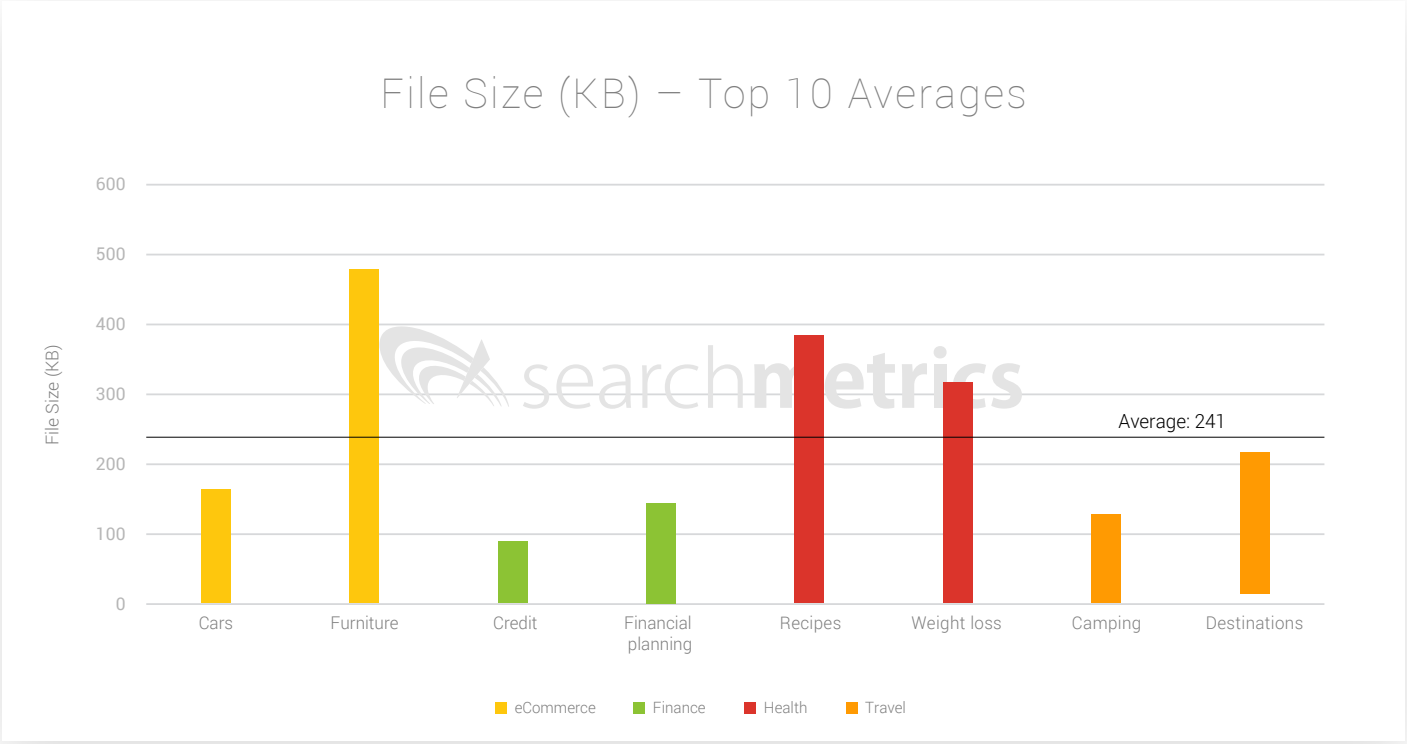
REQUEST A DEMO

Technical: File Size

Definition

Measures the size of the HTML in kilobytes (kB). The file size is measured for each URL, yielding an average file size in kilobytes for each niche.

Results



Analysis

File sizes vary enormously across niches, with top 10 furniture pages coming in at over five times the size of top 10 credit pages. It could be that many furniture pages contain lots of images, as users prefer rich content over a fast experience. This is not true for the credit niche, where users place more emphasis on speed than visuals.

Ignoring the size of your site is sloppy implementation that will create a negative reaction from both users and search engine crawlers. Reducing file size helps increase your site speed. With speed now officially a ranking factor (on mobile), Searchmetrics analyzed the relationship between load time and Google rankings.

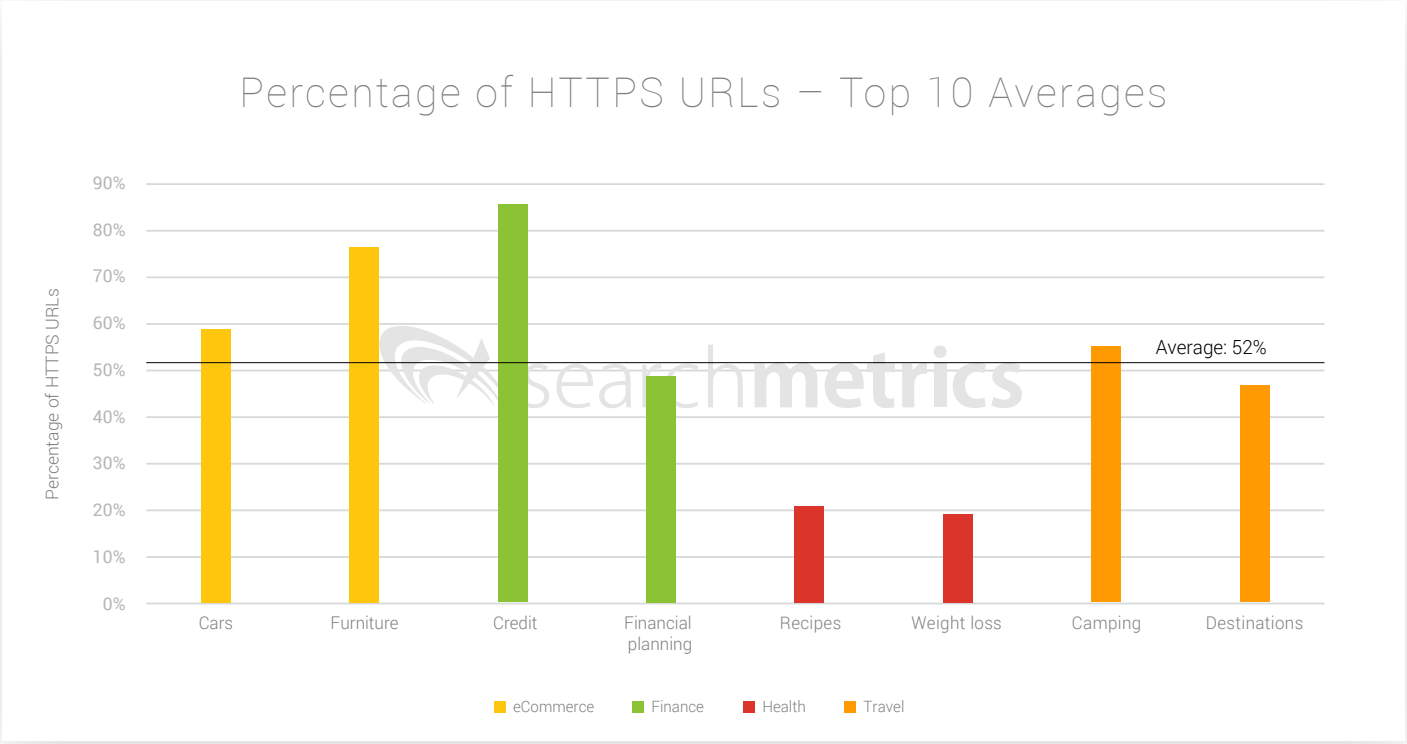
MOBILE SPEED STUDY

Technical: HTTPS

Definition

Whether a URL uses HTTPS for encrypted data transfer. Each URL returns a binary yes/no result, yielding a percentage of HTTPS pages in each niche.

Results



Analysis

The implementation of HTTPS has clear advantages regarding trust, with browsers displaying warnings to users for pages that fail to encrypt the data transfer on their pages. Most critically, any page that requires users to enter personal data – e.g. to make a product purchase or request an online credit check – should always ensure that this *data is managed securely*.

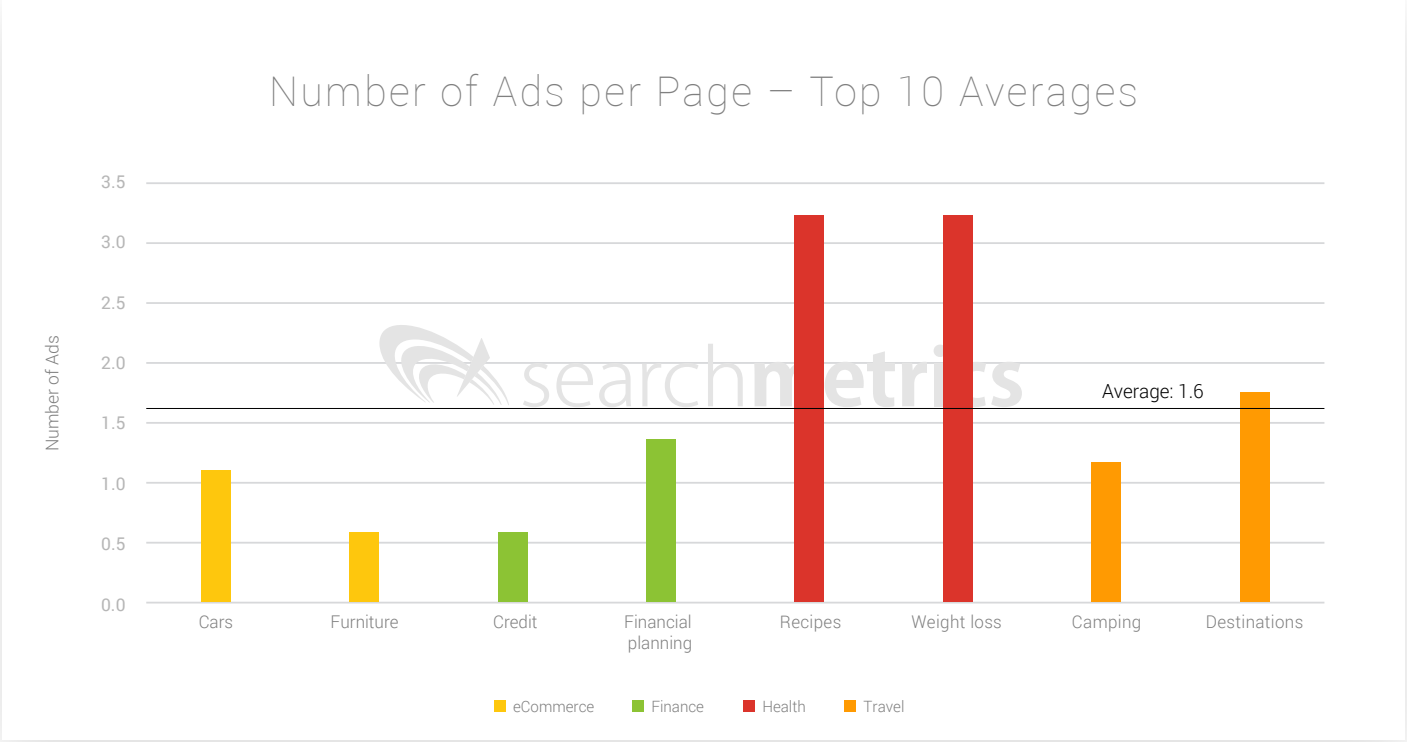
Looking at the results, Google demonstrably takes this into account– whilst HTTPS may be a ranking signal in general, sites in advertising-reliant niches are not being penalized, with the top 10 dominated by non-secure HTTP pages. This example underlines the importance of making the trade-offs that are relevant to your particular niche, and not simply following generic online trends.

User Experience: Ads

Definition

The total number of ads found on the page. The ads are counted on all URLs, yielding an average number of ads per page in each niche.

Results



Analysis

The data on the number of on-page ads gives us insight into the business models of different niches. For any website hoping to compete in its niche, understanding how successful sites generate revenue is vital for ensuring that your own strategy stands a chance of being effective.

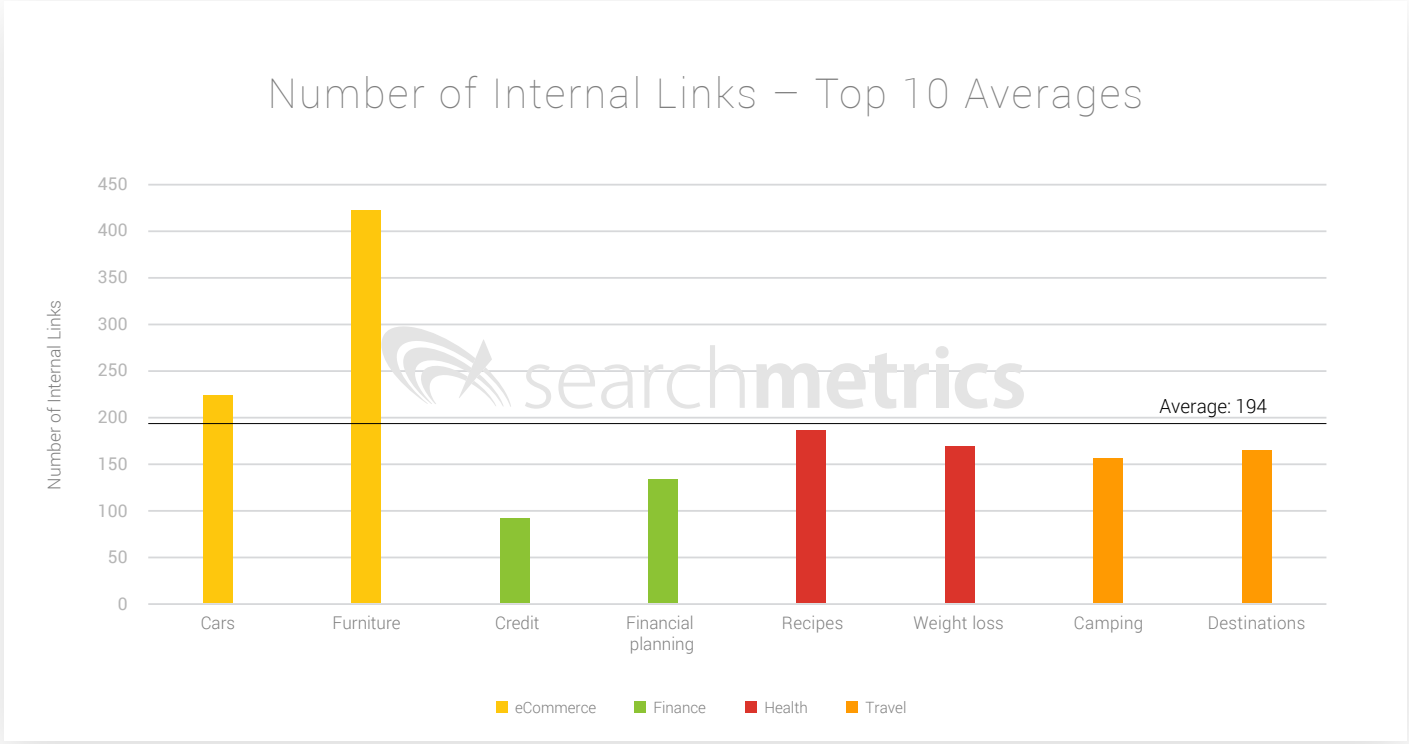
As for other factors, we see considerable variation between the niches analyzed, with pages ranking in the top 10 for searches relating to recipes and weight loss having over three ads on average, whereas the mean rate for credit and furniture pages is under 0.6.

User Experience: Internal Links

Definition

The number of links to other URLs on the same domain. The internal links are counted for each URL, yielding an average number of internal links per page in each niche.

Results



Analysis

The two niches that can be classed as belonging to the eCommerce industry, furniture and cars, have far and away the most internal links. High-ranking furniture pages, in particular, have over twice the average number of links leading users to other URLs on the same domain.

In any niche, the logic of the internal linking structure, not just the raw number of links – e.g. use of directories and (a limited number of) clear hub pages – will also make it easier for *search engine crawlers* like the GoogleBot to navigate their way around the site and increase the likelihood that your content is correctly parsed, evaluated and indexed.

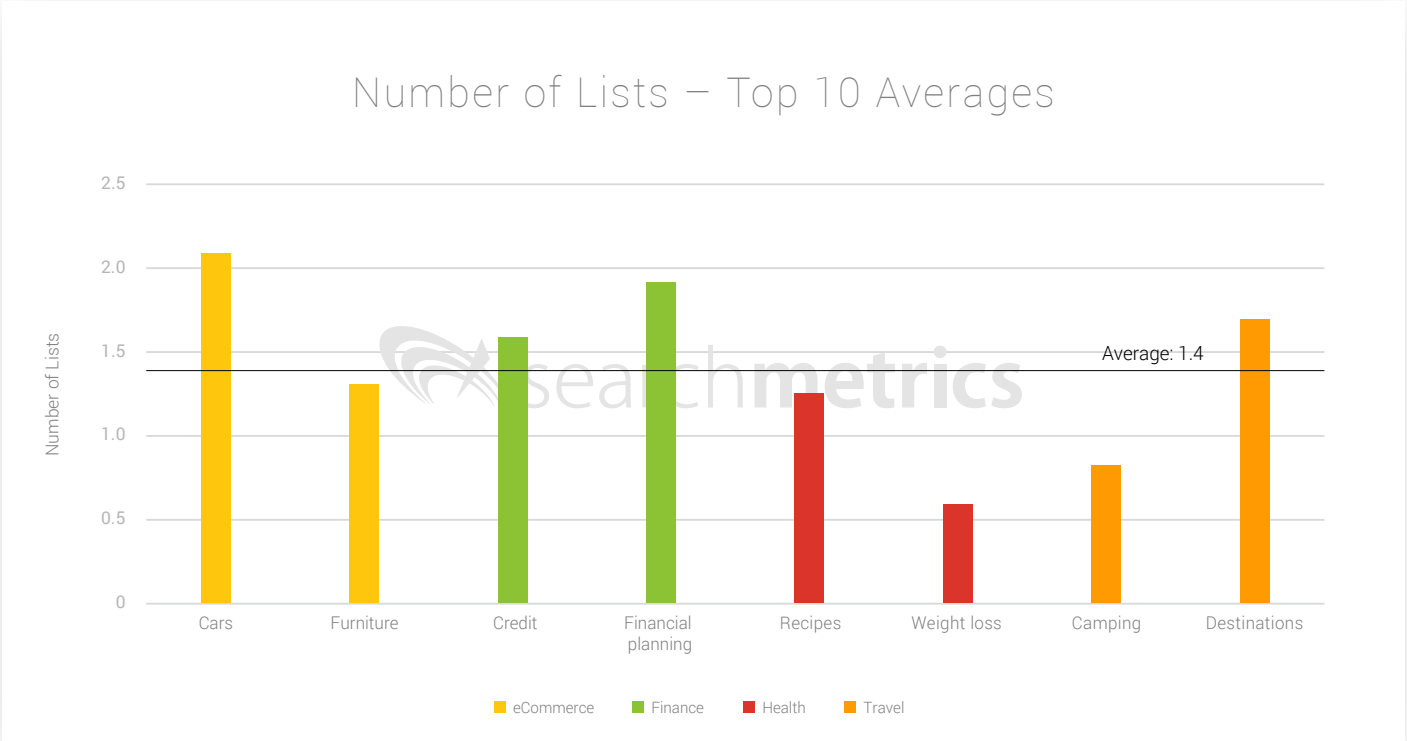
FIND OUT MORE ABOUT SITE OPTIMIZATION

User Experience: Lists

Definition

The number of HTML lists (both ordered <ol> and unordered <ul>) in the page content. The lists are counted for each URL, yielding an average number of lists per page in each niche.

Results



Analysis

Depending on the niche, there are various applications for structured content elements like lists. For cars, it may be product specifications, for financial planning, it could be dos and don'ts to consider when looking at mortgages. For destinations, it could be lists of attractions or recommendations of things to do in a city. In all cases, lists should not be included for the sake of it, but they are a good way of enhancing the user experience by making content easier to digest.

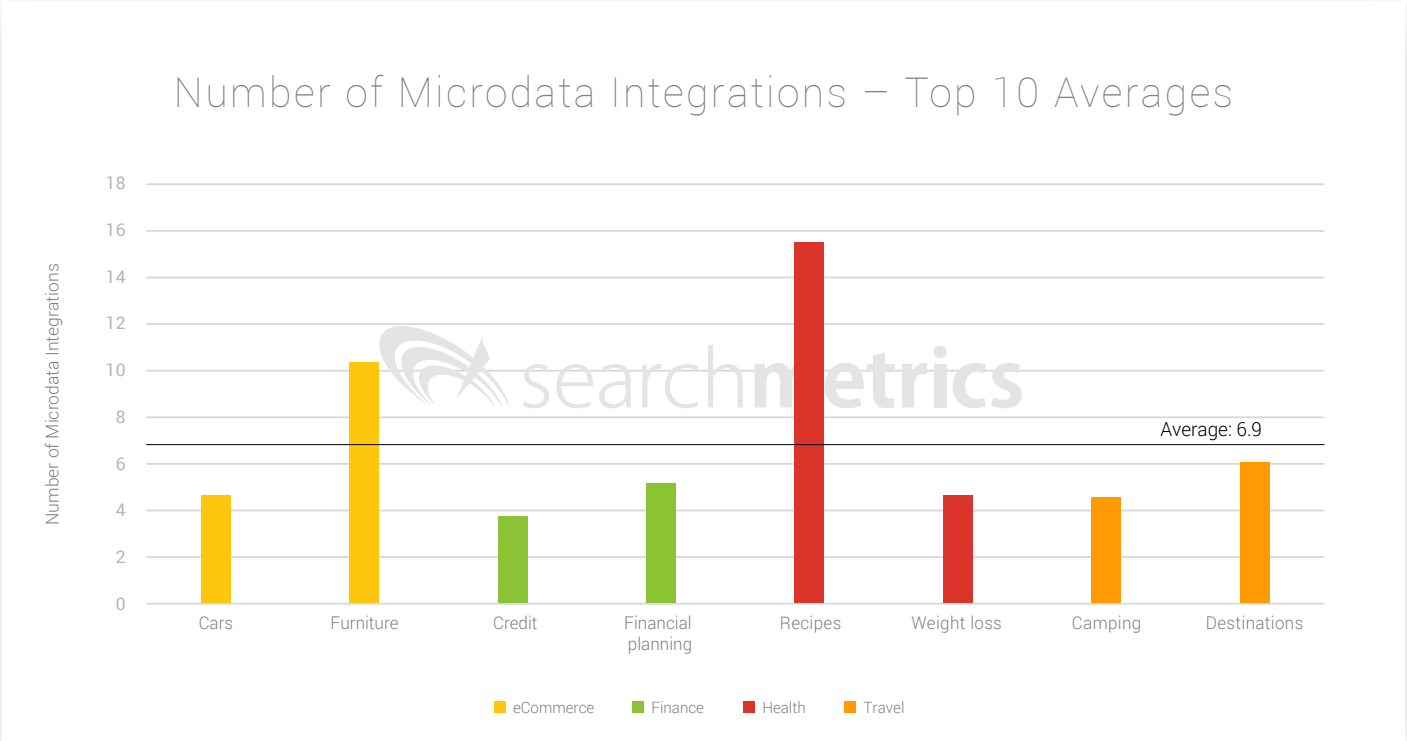
For search engines, HTML elements like lists and tables are highly crawlable. In particular, *Featured Snippets appearing on "position zero"* above the organic search results are often taken from lists that provide a relevant answer to a user question.

User Experience: Microdata

Definition

The number of schema.org microdata integrations used per page. The microdata integrations are counted for each URL, yielding an average number of microdata integrations per page in each niche.

Results



Analysis

The inclusion of microdata integrations is a way of telling Google what kind of data your page contains. This can improve your page's appearance in the SERPs, as microdata integrations are often included in a *Rich Snippet* in the Google search results, which can have a positive impact on your page's click-through rate.

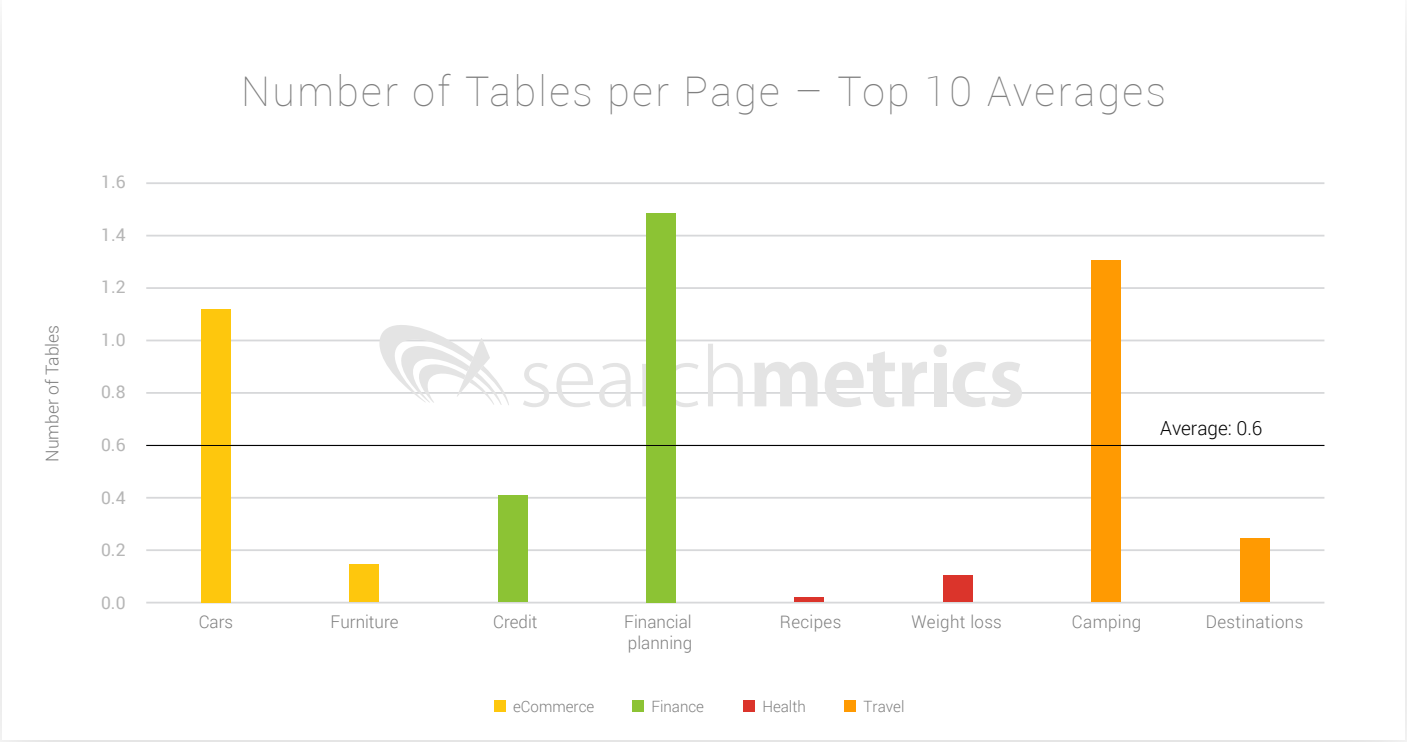
For recipes, top-ranking results often include microdata for specifications like Cooktime, Calories and RecipeIngredient. Common microdata for furniture sites includes Product, Offer or Review. Understanding how microdata is used by the competitors in your niche can help avoid the over-enthusiastic use of non-relevant integrations, which could be viewed by Google as an attempt to manipulate the search results, and could even lead to ranking penalties.

User Experience: Tables

Definition

The number of HTML tables <table> in the page content. The tables are counted for each URL, yielding an average number of tables per page in each niche.

Results



Analysis

Tables are a form of structured content that can help to display information more clearly. HTML tables are used less frequently than ordered or unordered lists. However, they are used much more in some niches than in others, with the top 10 cars, financial planning and camping pages using at least one list on average.

Tables are appropriate for certain types of information, like a comparison between specific products – e.g. two cars, a list of mortgage rates or an overview of the facilities at different campsites. A further advantage of tables is that they can be chosen by Google for prominent display as Featured Snippets, provided they include relevant information that answers users' questions.

FIND OUT MORE ABOUT FEATURED SNIPPET OPTIMIZATION

Conclusions

This analysis of eight online niches is designed not only to reveal the differences between successful websites operating in these eight areas, but to demonstrate that any website needs to know what is relevant to its niche – and to work out how high-ranking pages in its field of competition are satisfying the user intent.

Clearly, the data presented in this paper can be used as a guide for websites active in one of the eight fields (or a related one), but you will only really be successful in any field if you have the data that really matters for you.

Beyond the specifics of the precise data, the results presented in this paper demonstrate the following core principles about website optimization.

Content



Correctly choosing which content to display on a URL, and the form it should be in, is one of the most fundamental factors determining the success and failure of websites. When making decisions regarding the length of texts and/or the inclusion of rich content like images or videos, there is no one-size-fits-all approach.

There is no golden ratio between content types and the trade-off "words vs. images vs. videos" isn't a zero-sum game. In niches like weight loss, high-performing pages have more holistic content, including words, images and videos, whereas niches like financial planning demand a primary focus on relevant text content.

Technical



A slick technical optimization is a plus for any website. However, much of developing your online presence is about setting priorities. Lowering file size to speed up your page is great in theory, but if this means displaying less valuable, relevant content, then you may be cutting corners in the wrong places.

Similarly with HTTPS: Depending on the purpose of your page and the user interactions offered, secure data encryption may be essential. For others, switching

to HTTPS could be a disaster if it means jeopardizing your revenues due to loss of conversion or ads.

User Experience



As search engines like Google become more adept at assessing what contributes to a positive or negative user experience, it becomes more important that websites pay adequate attention to this aspect of site optimization. There are some user experience issues – such as interstitials – that Google has confirmed as inherently negative and in contravention of its Quality Rater Guidelines.

Knowing precisely what makes a positive experience is much more subtle and varies depending on your niche. Analyzing your specific search landscape to see how successful pages leverage microdata, structured content elements and internal links is a first step to finding the right balance for your page.

The next steps are testing, testing and testing, which remains at the heart of effective search engine optimization.

If you think your own search engine optimization efforts need a change of approach or an injection of data, then why not consider the Searchmetrics Suite™? You can arrange a free software demo with one of our consultants and see if you can find the insights you're missing.

Take a look and see if you can increase the relevance of your domain and improve your Google rankings, whatever your niche!

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