

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Search Engine Marketing (SEM)

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Abstract

In today's digital economy, visibility within search engines has become a critical determinant of online retail success. Search Engine Marketing (SEM) serves as an overarching concept that encompasses both paid and organic strategies designed to achieve these objectives. This chapter explores SEM within an analytical and practical framework, focusing on its two primary components: Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Paid Search Advertising (PPC). While SEO represents a long-term, technically oriented process aimed at improving a website's organic ranking on Search Engine Results Pages (SERPs), PPC refers to a paid approach in which businesses bid on specific keywords to gain instant visibility and targeted traffic. An effective online retail strategy requires holistic integration of both approaches. On one hand, organic tactics such as keyword research, on-page optimization, technical SEO, and high-quality content development strengthen a website's relevance and authority. On the other hand, performance-driven advertising campaigns, measured through key indicators like Cost Per Click (CPC) and Cost Per Acquisition (CPA), ensure immediate visibility and measurable returns. To maximize Return on Investment (ROI), it is essential to continuously monitor, analyze, and refine both organic and paid initiatives. Tools such as Google Analytics and Semrush allow marketers to assess conversion rates and advertising performance metrics in real time, enabling data-informed decisions and ongoing optimization. Ultimately, this chapter provides evidence-based insights and actionable guidance for retailers seeking to enhance their digital marketing efficiency and achieve sustainable growth in increasingly competitive online markets.

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1. Introduction

In the modern marketing landscape, search engines have become the primary starting point for millions of people worldwide seeking information, recommendations, or products to purchase. Most online experiences begin with a search engine, demonstrating that search engines act as a massive digital billboard for brands. Within this context, Search Engine Marketing (SEM) represents a comprehensive discipline that defines the process of enhancing the visibility and traffic of a website, its products, and its services through search engines. SEM constitutes an integrated strategy that includes both paid search advertising and Search Engine Optimization (SEO) — the latter focusing on improving rankings within organic search results (Goodwin, 2018; Sachdev, 2024).

The critical importance of SEM and SEO for online retail lies in the high intent demonstrated by users conducting searches. Typically, users perform queries with immediate needs or motivations such as “I want to know,” “I want to go,” “I want to do,” or “I want to buy” (Goodwin, 2018). At these key moments, ensuring that a retailer’s content or products appear on the first page of search results — particularly within the top five listings — holds the potential to drive an immense volume of traffic to the site. Conversely, engagement drops sharply as users scroll down or move to the second page of results. Consequently, visibility on the Search Engine Results Page (SERP) exerts a direct influence on online retail traffic and, ultimately, on sales performance (Magenta Associates, 2022).

SEM combines the long-term sustainability of organic SEO with the short-term precision and immediacy of paid search advertising. SEO, also known as organic or natural optimization, involves improving websites by understanding and applying search engine algorithms, Google alone is known to use more than 200 ranking factors, and does not charge per click. In contrast, paid search advertising (the PPC component of SEM) follows a model in which advertisers pay only when their ads are clicked, allowing them to achieve rapid prominence in search results (Kingsnorth, 2022; Grayson, 2022).

A notable example is Macy’s, where investments in SEO were shown to increase in-store purchases sixfold, demonstrating the transformative impact of online visibility on offline sales. This finding also highlights the growing prevalence of hybrid shopping behaviors in the digital era, such as webrooming where customers research products online via mobile devices before purchasing them in nearby physical stores (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2017).

This chapter explores the strategic and technical dimensions of SEM within the context of online retail. It begins by examining the foundations of keyword research and on-page optimization, emphasizing how intent-based targeting enhances visibility and user engagement. Subsequent sections analyze paid search, display, and performance advertising models, highlighting how data-driven bidding and AI-powered automation reshape marketing efficiency. The chapter further discusses key performance indicators, analytics tools, and A/B testing practices used to measure and refine SEO/SEM effectiveness. Finally, it presents emerging trends, ethical data practices, and strategic recommendations for retailers aiming to build sustainable, user-centric, and AI-enhanced marketing ecosystems in 2025 and beyond.

2. Keyword Research and On-Page Optimization-The Technical and Content Dimensions of SEO

In the digital retail environment of 2025, SEO represents both a technical discipline and a strategic marketing lever that integrates with content marketing, user experience (UX), and data analytics. The evolution of Google's SGE has further blurred the boundaries between traditional SEO and AI-driven content optimization. For online retailers, ranking on the first page of search results is often equivalent to increased revenue potential, as more than 90% of users rarely proceed beyond the first page of Google results.

SEO refers to the practice of enhancing a website's technical foundation, content, and external authority (backlinks) to achieve higher rankings in organic search results. SEO is essential for online retail, as most users click on organic results, and achieving higher rankings significantly strengthens brand credibility. SEO strategies are generally divided into two main categories: On-Page Optimization and Off-Page Optimization.

The interplay between these two categories determines the holistic performance of a digital brand. While On-Page Optimization focuses on what marketers can directly control—such as content, HTML elements, and UX—Off-Page Optimization builds external signals of trust and authority. Successful e-commerce brands like *Amazon* or *Temu* combine both dimensions through continuous A/B testing, UX improvements, and link-building collaborations with niche influencers (McKenzie, 2025).

Fundamentals of Keyword Research and Intent-Based Targeting

Keyword research has become increasingly data-driven, combining search analytics, behavioral insights, and predictive algorithms. Artificial

intelligence tools such as *ChatGPT*, *Google Gemini*, and *Semrush Keyword Intent API* are now capable of predicting not only what users search for but also why they search. For example, a surge in queries like “eco-friendly sneakers for daily use” signals a trend in sustainable consumer behavior, guiding online retailers to adjust their product descriptions and blog topics accordingly.

Keyword research forms the foundation of any SEO strategy. This process involves identifying and analyzing the actual search terms and phrases that potential customers use when looking for relevant products or services. Keywords can be head terms, which are short and broad, or long-tail keywords, which are longer, more specific, and generally yield higher conversion potential (Moz, 2020; Sachdev, 2024)

In e-commerce, keyword research often extends into category-level and product-level optimization. For example, while “wireless headphones” is a general keyword, adding transactional intent such as “buy noise-cancelling wireless headphones online” aligns better with consumer purchase stages. This approach, known as intent layering, helps marketers capture users who are closer to conversion.

According to 2025 SEM trends, intent-driven “panic searches” such as “emergency AC repair near me” have generated substantial increases in service inquiries (George, 2025). When selecting keywords, marketers should consider not only search volume but also user intent and conversion probability. Search intent typically falls into three categories: navigational (searching for a specific site), informational (seeking knowledge), and transactional (looking to make a purchase) (Grayson, 2022). For retail, transactional queries like “best deals on MacBook Pro” tend to lead to higher conversion rates, making relevance between keyword and product offering essential. Tools such as Google Keyword Planner, Semrush, and Moz Keyword Explorer help marketers determine which keywords to target (Svoboda, 2021; Sachdev, 2024)

Practical keyword examples from the retail sector include “*affordable minimalist sneakers*”, “*best vegan skincare brands*”, and “*local boutique near Kadıköy*”. Each of these reveals a different intent—price sensitivity, ethical preference, and location-based discovery—which marketers can match with landing pages, blog content, and local SEO campaigns. Advanced analytics now allow segmentation of keyword portfolios according to device, region, and time of day to enhance personalization.

On-Page Optimization

On-Page SEO is no longer limited to text-based elements. The integration of video content, interactive elements, and voice-search-friendly formatting has transformed how search engines evaluate pages. The inclusion of **structured data** also allows retailers to display rich results—such as product ratings, prices, and FAQs—directly in SERPs, improving click-through rates and user trust.

On-page SEO covers the aspects of a webpage that are under full control of the marketer — ensuring that search engines can easily crawl, index, and interpret the content (Moz, 2020).

A critical aspect of modern On-Page SEO is **user intent alignment** assuring that every keyword-driven page matches the informational, commercial, or transactional expectation of the visitor. For instance, an e-commerce brand selling skincare products might publish “how-to” guides (informational) alongside purchase pages (transactional), ensuring broad topical coverage and audience retention.

Content Quality and Structure

Content quality has become one of Google’s most heavily weighted ranking factors under the “Helpful Content” update. This shift prioritizes user satisfaction signals over keyword repetition. For example, brands that produce in-depth tutorials, FAQs, and visual explainers tend to perform better because they answer complete user questions in a single visit.

As search engine algorithms evolve, simply sprinkling keywords across text is no longer effective. Instead, the focus must shift to creating valuable, engaging, and readable content for users. High-quality content should be original, updated, accurate, and grammatically sound. While typical web pages perform well with 250–350 words, longer, information-rich texts tend to rank higher because they are perceived as more authoritative. Although keyword density is no longer a core ranking factor, highlighting target terms in titles, headings, and bold text reinforces thematic relevance (Moz, 2021; Stokes, 2019).

An example from *Nike’s online store* illustrates this well: blog posts on “how to choose the right running shoes” are not direct product pages, yet they attract organic traffic through valuable educational content. This content-first strategy builds trust, which later converts into sales. Moreover, maintaining a consistent publishing schedule signals freshness—another ranking advantage.

Meta Tags and Headings

Effective meta and heading strategies go beyond SEO optimization—they serve as the first impression of a webpage in search results. Titles and headings function as micro-advertisements, shaping user perception and influencing click behavior. A/B testing different title variations, such as “Best Coffee Machines” versus “Top-Rated Coffee Machines for Home Use,” can reveal measurable differences in click-through rates (CTR), allowing marketers to refine their messaging strategies based on data-driven insights.

As search engines interpret both textual and structural cues, HTML elements such as meta and heading tags play a crucial role in determining a page’s relevance and hierarchy. These elements collectively define how search crawlers understand the content’s context and importance.

Title Tag: Appears on browser tabs and search engine results pages (SERPs) and remains one of the strongest ranking factors. The primary keyword should appear near the beginning of the title, which must remain unique and concise—preferably under 70 characters (Veglis & Giomelakis, 2021).

Meta Description Tag: Functions as a short snippet summarizing the page content within SERPs. Although it does not directly influence rankings, an engaging and informative description significantly affects click-through rates. Meta descriptions should remain under 200 characters and clearly reflect the page’s unique value proposition (Veglis & Giomelakis, 2021).

Heading Tags (H1, H2, H3): Define the structural hierarchy of on-page content. The H1 tag should contain the main keyword and convey the central topic of the page, while H2 and H3 tags organize supporting sections and subtopics (Svoboda, 2021). A consistent and logical heading structure improves both user readability and crawler comprehension.

For instance, a well-optimized e-commerce product page may employ the following hierarchy:

H1: Organic Cotton T-Shirts – Sustainable Fashion

H2: Why Choose Organic Cotton?

H3: Customer Reviews and Care Instructions

This systematic structure ensures clarity, supports semantic organization, and strengthens the overall topical relevance of the webpage for both users and search engines.

URL Structure and Media Optimization

Modern SEO extends to *image SEO* and *media compression technologies*. Optimizing video metadata (titles, descriptions, transcripts) improves visibility across Google and YouTube ecosystems. For instance, a travel agency using optimized image alt text like “summer holiday in Antalya coast” gains exposure in both search and image discovery.

URLs should be concise, descriptive, and keyword rich. With the rise of visual search, optimizing media is increasingly important. Alt Tags describe images to search engines and screen readers, improving accessibility and indexability. File names should be descriptive, and images compressed to enhance load speed as slow pages negatively affect both rankings and UX (Sachdev, 2024; Camarena, 2025; Moz, 2020)

Technical SEO and Off-Page Optimization

Technical SEO ensures that all marketing and content efforts actually reach their intended audience. Even the best content fails to rank if crawlers encounter bottlenecks, indexing issues, or JavaScript-rendering delays. For retailers managing thousands of SKUs, crawl budget optimization—deciding which pages should be prioritized by bots—becomes a vital element of SEO management.

Technical SEO focuses on backend improvements that ensure a website is easily accessible and interpretable by search crawlers. This includes structured URLs, canonical tags, XML sitemaps, mobile responsiveness, and fast site speed. Mobile optimization has become a critical ranking factor, as responsive design enhances usability. Tools like Google PageSpeed Insights are essential for identifying performance bottlenecks (Google, 2023; BlindspotAdvisors, 2022; Sachdev, 2024).

Additionally, mobile optimization extends to *voice search adaptation*. With more users using assistants like Siri and Google Assistant, retailers are optimizing for conversational phrases such as “Where can I buy organic shampoo near me?” These long-tail spoken queries are shaping the future of local SEO.

Off-Page SEO, on the other hand, encompasses all activities that enhance a website’s authority, relevance, and trust outside its own domain. The cornerstone of this process is link building—acquiring backlinks from reputable and contextually relevant websites. Google’s founders established early on that the number and quality of inbound links are key indicators of relevance—a principle still central to ranking algorithms. Backlinks transmit “link juice,” which strengthens domain authority. Off-page SEO

also involves social media marketing, digital PR, and user-generated content such as reviews and testimonials (Stokes, 2019; Goodwin, 2018; Chaffey & Smith, 2013; Moz, 2020).

For example, when a Turkish brand like *Dimes* collaborates with lifestyle bloggers or garners organic reviews on Google Business Profile, these off-page signals collectively enhance visibility. Likewise, viral campaigns and influencer mentions on platforms like Instagram or TikTok function as modern backlink equivalents, strengthening the overall trust flow to the main website (mc

3. Paid Search, Display, and Performance Advertising

The paid component of SEM offers retailers an avenue for instant visibility compared to the longer timeframes required by organic SEO. Paid media serves as the digital counterpart to traditional advertising, requiring the purchase of ad space. The most common forms include SEM, Display Ads, Paid Social Media Promotions, and Sponsored Content (Magenta Associates, 2022).

Paid advertising not only enhances short-term brand exposure but also supports data collection for audience segmentation and remarketing. In 2025, the integration between Google Ads and first-party data platforms has allowed retailers to create hyper-personalized ad experiences. For example, an online fashion brand can display dynamic ads showing previously viewed products or items left in a customer's cart, substantially increasing conversion likelihood.

Paid Search Advertising (PPC) and Google Ads

Paid search, often called Pay-Per-Click (PPC) advertising, operates on a model where advertisers pay only when users click on their ads. Google dominates both online search and advertising revenue, with nearly two-thirds of its income coming from ads displayed on its platforms (Grayson, 2022; Saylor.org, 2022).

Platforms such as Google Ads operate on an auction-based system determining ad visibility. Ad position is influenced by factors such as bid amount and Quality Score, which measures keyword relevance to ad copy and landing page content (Sachdev, 2024). Ads with high Quality Scores achieve better rankings at lower costs. Each ad comprises three core elements: a keyword list, ad text, and a landing page, which must align closely with user intent (Stokes, 2019; Digivizer, 2022).

A practical example can be seen in the retail electronics sector: when a user searches for “buy iPhone 15 Pro online,” Google Ads may display targeted PPC results from Apple’s official store, Amazon, and regional resellers. The winning ad usually combines a competitive bid with high relevance and a seamless landing page experience. Furthermore, **ad extensions** (e.g., sitelinks, location, and call extensions) enhance ad visibility, improving click-through rates and conversion potential.

Budgeting and Bidding Strategies

Effective budgeting and bidding lie at the core of every successful SEM campaign. Budgeting determines how much a company is willing to invest across various channels and objectives—such as brand awareness, website traffic, or conversions—while bidding strategies decide how efficiently those funds are used to secure impressions and clicks. A well-structured approach typically allocates budgets by campaign type, seasonality, and customer lifetime value, ensuring that spending aligns with business priorities.

Cost Per Click (CPC): Used to drive traffic; advertisers set a maximum amount they are willing to pay per click (Sachdev, 2024).

Cost Per Mille (CPM/vCPM): Measures impressions and is typically used in brand awareness campaigns (Magenta Associates, 2022; Grayson, 2022).

Cost Per Acquisition (CPA): Focused on conversions—advertisers pay only when a specific action (e.g., purchase, sign-up) occurs (Magenta Associates, 2022; Sachdev, 2024).

Google now provides Smart Bidding and Performance Max Campaigns, leveraging machine learning to improve conversions and optimize budgets. Reports indicate that Performance Max campaigns increased conversions by 18% in 2025, making them a cornerstone of SEM strategies (George, 2025; Digivizer, 2022).

Smart Bidding has fundamentally changed budget allocation in digital campaigns by allowing **real-time bid adjustments** based on device, time, and audience segment. For instance, a travel agency can set higher bids during weekend searches when booking intent peaks. Similarly, **Performance Max** uses AI to distribute ads across Google Search, YouTube, Maps, and Gmail automatically, ensuring full-funnel coverage without manual optimization. Retailers now use **cross-channel attribution models** to calculate the true ROI of these campaigns.

Display and Programmatic Advertising

Display advertising includes banners, skyscrapers, buttons, videos, and rich media formats Google controls both the largest text and display ad networks, reinforcing its dominance. Display ads are generally sold on a CPM basis and used to build brand awareness rather than immediate conversions. Targeting is based on demographics, interests, and behavior, maximizing ROI (Saylor.org, 2022).

Remarketing (Retargeting) further boosts ad effectiveness by showing ads to users who previously visited but didn't convert, reminding them across the Google Display Network (Chaffey & Smith, 2013; Sachdev, 2024). This tactic effectively increases conversion rates by re-engaging high-intent users.

Recent developments in programmatic advertising have revolutionized display campaigns by automating real-time bidding across multiple ad exchanges. This system uses algorithms to match ads with the most relevant audience at the right time and price. For example, a Turkish cosmetics brand can use programmatic DSPs (Demand Side Platforms) to target female users aged 18–30 who recently searched for “cruelty-free skincare.” This level of precision improves cost efficiency and message personalization. Additionally, the integration of dynamic creative optimization (DCO) allows visuals and messages to adapt based on audience data—boosting engagement rates and recall.

4. Measuring and Improving SEO/SEM Effectiveness

Measurement is critical in digital marketing because “what gets measured can be improved”. To assess the effectiveness of SEO and SEM strategies, marketers must rely on Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and analytics tools (Kingsnorth, 2022; Sachdev, 2024).

In modern marketing ecosystems, measurement is no longer limited to simple clicks or impressions. Marketers now integrate **multi-touch attribution models** to understand how users interact across channels before converting. For example, a customer might first see a display ad, then click a paid search result, and finally complete a purchase through a remarketing campaign. Accurately assigning value to each of these touchpoints ensures smarter investment decisions and more realistic ROI assessments.

Key Performance Metrics

Evaluating SEO and SEM performance requires a multidimensional approach that combines both quantitative and qualitative indicators. Key Performance Metrics (KPIs) allow marketers to assess not only visibility

and traffic but also the efficiency of resource allocation and the quality of user engagement. In competitive online retail environments, analyzing these metrics holistically helps identify which campaigns deliver sustainable returns versus those generating only short-term spikes in performance.

Impressions: How often an ad or organic result appears in search results (Sachdev, 2024).

Click-Through Rate (CTR): Percentage of users who clicked after viewing an ad or result — a key indicator of relevance (Grayson, 2022).

Conversion Rate: Percentage of visitors completing a desired action such as a purchase or registration (Sachdev, 2024).

CPA and CPC: Reflect acquisition cost and average click cost respectively, essential for budgeting efficiency (Magenta Associates, 2022).

Return on Ad Spend (ROAS): Measures revenue per advertising dollar; a 5:1 ratio is considered strong (Digivizer, 2022; Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2017).

Time on Site and Bounce Rate: User engagement metrics indicating relevance and content quality (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2017).

In addition to these quantitative indicators, **qualitative insights** such as user satisfaction surveys, heatmaps, and session recordings provide deeper understanding of campaign performance. For instance, if CTRs are high but conversion rates remain low, this may suggest poor landing page design or misaligned ad messaging—insights that are crucial for refining SEM strategy.

Analytics and Optimization Tools

Google Analytics (GA4): Tracks visitor behavior, conversion goals, and bounce rates, offering insights on organic and paid traffic (Moz, 2021; Sachdev, 2024).

Google Search Console: Reports on impressions, clicks, and CTR for organic queries, helping refine keyword strategies (Odom, 2015).

Semrush, Moz, and Ahrefs: Third-party platforms for competitive analysis, backlink audits, and technical SEO monitoring (Kingsnorth, 2022).

Advanced marketers often integrate **GA4** with **Google Ads Data Hub** and **BigQuery** to conduct deeper cross-platform analysis. This enables granular evaluation of customer journeys, ad view frequency, and conversion paths. Similarly, **heatmap tools** like Hotjar or CrazyEgg help visualize where users click or abandon a page, providing qualitative feedback to complement quantitative KPIs.

Continuous Improvement and A/B Testing

Both SEO and SEM require constant testing and adaptation (Moz, 2021; Grayson, 2022). A/B testing ad copies, bid strategies, and landing pages is essential to improve performance. Maintaining profitability requires ensuring that marketing costs never exceed revenue gains (Sachdev, 2024).

Continuous improvement in SEM also involves **conversion rate optimization (CRO)** the process of refining landing pages, forms, and CTAs to increase user actions. For instance, a color change in a “Buy Now” button or a simplified checkout process can boost conversion rates by double digits. Furthermore, **machine learning algorithms** in Google Ads now automatically conduct A/B tests on headlines and descriptions, identifying high-performing variations without manual input.

5. Conclusion

SEO and SEM will remain the cornerstones of online retail strategies, yet the digital landscape continues to evolve rapidly. The convergence of search and AI technologies signals a future where the boundaries between paid and organic marketing continue to blur. As voice search, visual search, and conversational interfaces dominate, search marketing will rely increasingly on contextual intelligence rather than keyword precision. Retailers that integrate predictive analytics into their SEO/SEM workflows will gain a competitive advantage through faster adaptation to market signals and real-time intent shifts.

Artificial intelligence now powers smarter targeting and optimization. Google’s Performance Max and Smart Bidding campaigns exemplify this AI-driven evolution. SEO is shifting toward understanding user intent and delivering high-quality, relevant content rather than algorithm manipulation. As zero-click searches rise, marketers should focus more on brand search volume trends and direct traffic growth than on perfect attribution (WebFx, 2025).

With third-party cookies being phased out by late 2025 and stricter data privacy laws emerging, marketers are adopting privacy-first analytics approaches. Over 90% of consumers prefer brands that demonstrate transparent data practices, underlining the importance of ethical standards (George, 2025). New holistic metrics such as Return on Marketing Objectives (ROMO) are gaining traction by measuring brand impact alongside sales.

For online retailers, success in the evolving digital marketplace depends on developing an integrated and adaptive SEM strategy. SEO and SEM

should be treated as parts of a unified ecosystem, where insights from organic performance continuously inform paid campaigns and vice versa. Marketers should focus on understanding user intent by prioritizing transactional and localized keywords, such as “near me” or “best deals,” to drive meaningful conversions. Building fast, mobile-optimized websites remain essential, as seamless UX directly influences both engagement and rankings. Beyond traditional performance metrics, retailers must adopt a holistic measurement approach—tracking not only clicks and rankings but also long-term indicators such as Customer Lifetime Value and Return on Ad Spend. Finally, ethical and transparent use of artificial intelligence will be critical; leveraging AI responsibly while keeping user trust and experience at the core will define sustainable success in the next phase of online retail competition.

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