2017

SEARCHMETRICS
INDUSTRY
RANKING FACTORS
STUDY
—

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Health Ranking Factors
Data Insights for Performing
on Google

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About
Searchmetrics

We are your pathfinder to content that uniquely matches user intent with the deep learning insights of the Searchmetrics Suite™ and Searchmetrics Content Experience™ platforms. Search has evolved into a data-driven field that requires powerful tools to guide companies through discovery, optimization and measurement of engaging storytelling.

There's only one search and content development platform that owns its data: Searchmetrics, the world's #1 SEO and content performance platform. We don't rely on data from third parties. Our historical database spans five years and contains over 250 billion pieces of information, such as keyword rankings, search terms, social links and backlinks. It includes global, mobile and local data covering organic and paid search, as well as social media. We have the largest global reach of any search platform, crawling the web every day in more than 130 countries.

Searchmetrics monitors and reveals the full business available to you online. We provide our customers with a competitive advantage and help them to identify new business opportunities by exposing the content consumers are engaging with on industry and competitors' sites. Our SEO Visibility Score – trusted by reputable health sources such as The New York Times, Bloomberg and The Guardian – reliably indicates your online presence.

We provide the insights our customers need to deliver results. Searchmetrics guides SEOs and content marketers with suggestions for creating content that improves relevance and boosts conversions. It shows the connection between social media links and overall engagement. And its analytics make clear which content performs the best and how an organization's content performs against its competitors'.

With Marcus Tober, one of the top 10 SEO minds in the world, leading Searchmetrics' product development, we have over 100,000 users worldwide, including respected brands such as T-Mobile, eBay and Siemens. They all depend on Searchmetrics continuing innovations to maximize their online performance.

If you have any questions regarding this whitepaper or the Searchmetrics Suite™ , please do not hesitate to contact us at *www.searchmetrics.com/contact*

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Laura Jendersee Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation *www.hazeldenbettyford.org*

Health
Your Online Guide to a Good Life

Online health advice doesn't just cover allergy cures and a diagnosis of that weird brown spot on your back. There are also masses of resources out there, including fitness videos, tips on how to get pregnant and volumes of material on the latest nutritional crazes. Providers of this information – and the advertising firms that sometimes support them – understand it's a cottage industry for people seeking a long and healthy life. The difficulty is breaking through the clutter.

Key Players in the Online Health Industry:

- **Health Publishers** (e.g. webmd.com, medicinenet.com, draxe.com)
- **Online Shops** (e.g. a1supplements.com, swansonvitamins.com, healthwarehouse.com)
- **Nutrition and Sport** (e.g. foodnetwork.com, myfitnesspal.com, fitwatch.com)
- **Q&A/Discussion Platforms** (e.g. ehealthforum.com, justanswer.com/health, patient.info/forums)
- **General Interest Publishers** (e.g. theatlantic.com/health, health.usnews.com, newsmax.com/health)
- **State and Non-Profit Institutions** (e.g. mayoclinic.org, medlineplus.gov, mentalhealthamerica.net)
- **Health Insurance Providers** (e.g. cigna.com, bcbs.com, aetna.com)

Take a seat – Dr. Google will see you in a moment

Three out of five US adults use the web to search for health information. Of all online resources, "Dr. Google" plays the most significant role. According to a *study conducted by the market research institute Pew Research*, 77% begin their research using a search engine like Google. This underscores the importance for any website offering information or services to rank high in the Google search results.

Search engine marketing is a cost-intensive strategy that frequently only yields short-term success when looking to gain new clients in the health industry. The next online offer is only a click away. For this reason, health industry players need to provide comprehensive, user-orientated content and a perfect user experience – a good, modern search engine optimization.

Health Ranking Factors © Searchmetrics 2017

This report will show why word count, the use of H1 and H2 and structural elements like unordered lists are all important features if a health industry website is looking to rank highly in Google search. Understanding what ranks well is the foundational step in helping your content perform online and in growing revenue in a crowded marketplace against entrenched players and new entrants.

77% of Users Pay a Visit to Dr. Google

77% Search engine

13% Health Publishers

7% Other

2% Wikipedia

1% Social
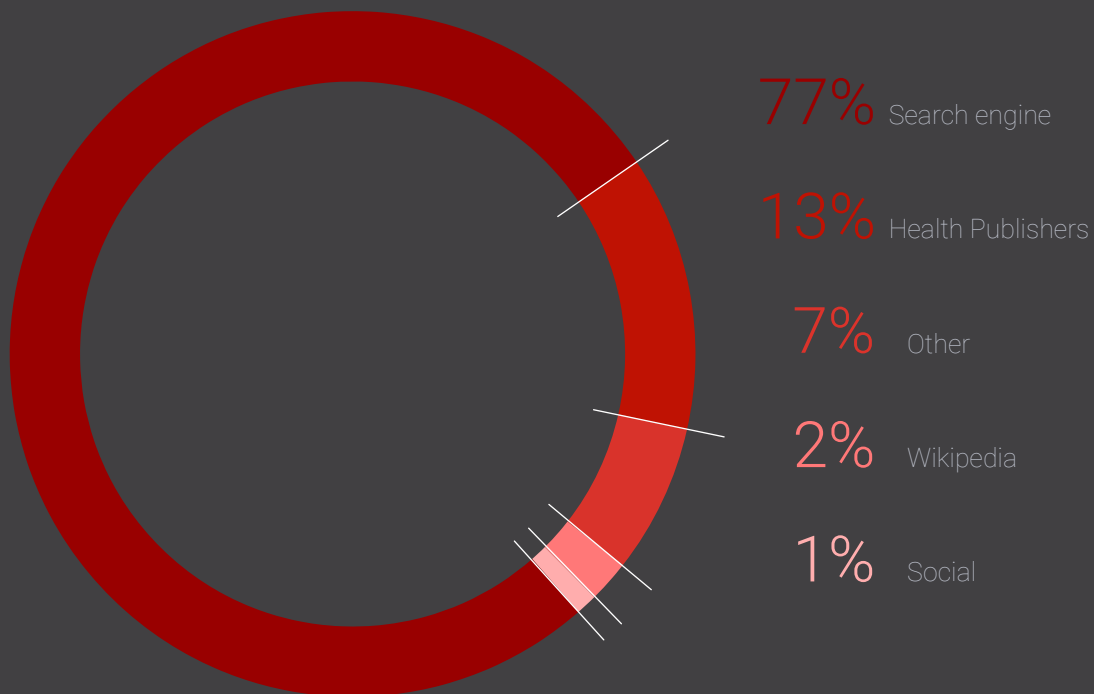
## Know Your Audience – Who is Looking Online for Health Information?

Any website has to know who its audience is, so that it can pitch content that is relevant to this audience. Research carried out by the *US Department of Health and Human Services* examined the educational background of users searching for health information online. They found a striking trend: the higher the level of education, the more likely someone will turn to Dr. Google for information. Whilst only around a third (36%) of people with a high school degree go online for health information, two thirds of those with a four-year college degree do. Knowing your audience is one of the fundamentals of successful online marketing and making sure you craft content that appeals to the people reading it.

About the Study
An Introduction to Ranking Factors

This analysis is one in a series of Searchmetrics' ranking factor whitepapers that focus exclusively on one specific industry. If you've just tuned in, you can get started with our Ranking Factors 101:

What is a Ranking Factor?

Rebooting Ranking Factors
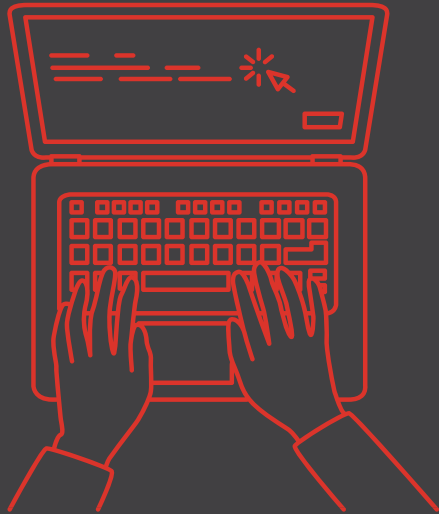
Rebooting Ranking Factors
Google.com

Find out more about general ranking factors

General Ranking Factors as a Benchmark for differing Industry Ranking Factors

For each of our industry studies, the general ranking factors, which were published in a separate whitepaper, serve as a benchmark. Whilst the general ranking factors and rank correlations provide an overview of which elements are generally the most important in terms of search, and how top-ranking landing pages vary regarding these elements, the general factors can no longer be considered equally relevant for all webmasters. Although there is a basic set of factors that can be considered a general requirement for rankings, ranking factors differ from industry to industry, and are therefore not generally applicable for all websites. Content demands based on user intent have simply become too differentiated. For this reason, the general ranking factors act as a comparative benchmark, providing context to the results. By comparing them with the general ranking factors, we can identify the ranking factors for which the health industry has its own set of rules, and where webmasters operating in this industry should focus their attention or at least what they should be aware of.

About the Study
Ranking Factors for the Health Industry

The following 10 search queries are examples of the keywords used for the analysis in this whitepaper. Of course, not all keywords included in the set are equally relevant for all health industry companies. Nevertheless, the use of specifically selected data enables a much more precise analysis of the health industry than would be possible with a generic keyword set.

- bmi calculator
- pneumonia
- kidney stones
- calorie counter
- massage
- spider bites
- pregnancy test
- atkins diet
- lyme disease symptoms
- anger management

Ranking Factors for Industries
Whitepaper & Infographics

Finance

Health

Travel

e-Commerce

Media

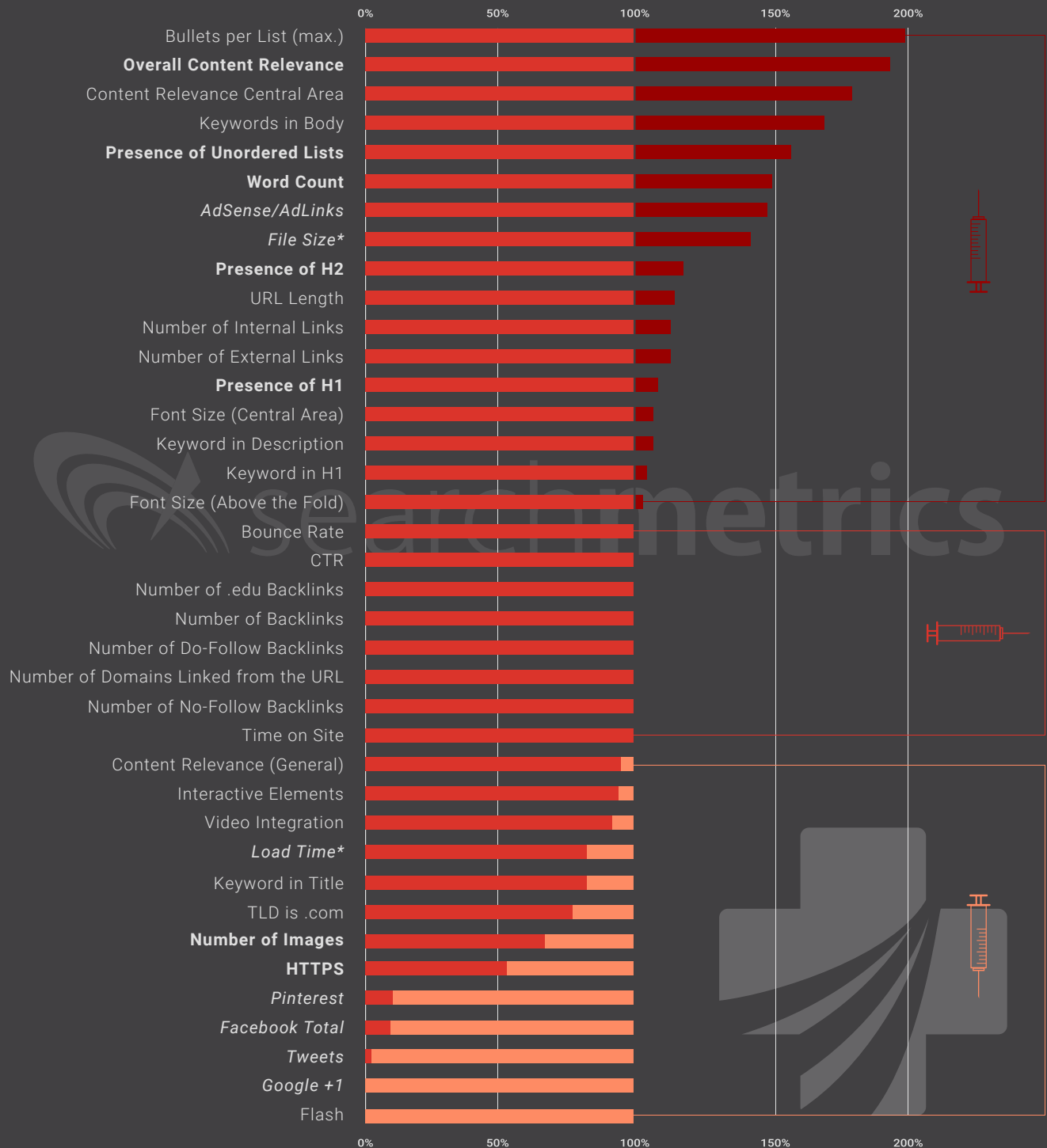## Industry-specific keyword set

To analyze the ranking factors relevant to the health industry, we created an industry-specific keyword set. Whilst the keyword set for the general ranking factors contained search terms related to all topics and fields – and primarily included terms with a high search volume – the results for this industry whitepaper are based on a smaller, more distinct dataset. For this analysis, keywords were only included that are relevant for the health industry, with an overlap of around 6% between the industry keywords and those of the general ranking factors.

The use of a specially determined keyword set is essential because each individual industry – in fact, even each individual search query – has differentiated ranking factors.

Ranking Factors for the Health Industry

Comparison of the Top 10 Average Values with the Benchmark in %

Factor	
Bullets per List (max.)	
Overall Content Relevance	
Content Relevance Central Area	
Keywords in Body	
Presence of Unordered Lists	
Word Count	
AdSense/AdLinks	
File Size*	
Presence of H2	
URL Length	
Number of Internal Links	
Number of External Links	
Presence of H1	
Font Size (Central Area)	
Keyword in Description	
Keyword in H1	
Font Size (Above the Fold)	
Bounce Rate	
CTR	
Number of .edu Backlinks	
Number of Backlinks	
Number of Do-Follow Backlinks	
Number of Domains Linked from the URL	
Number of No-Follow Backlinks	
Time on Site	
Content Relevance (General)	
Interactive Elements	
Video Integration	
Load Time*	
Keyword in Title	
TLD is .com	
Number of Images	
HTTPS	
Pinterest	
Facebook Total	
Tweets	
Google +1	
Flash	

The data is based on a comparison of Google ranking factors for health industry websites with the general ranking factors covering all industries (Searchmetrics Whitepaper December 2016). Download the whole whitepaper at: searchmetrics.com/health2017

*Values inverted, because better optimized pages have smaller file sizes and faster load times

Analysis & Results
The Ranking Factors where Health Stands out from the Crowd
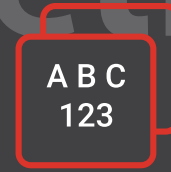
RANKING FACTORS

HTTPS

Number of Images

Overall Content Relevance

Presence of H1/H2

Presence of Unordered Lists

A B C 123

Word Count

**The most interesting factors for health – and some "Fun Facts"**

As ranking factors differ for each industry, it's not always the same factors that are the most interesting. For this reason, we have used our health keyword set to first evaluate all ranking factors that were part of the general benchmark analysis. Based on these results, we have identified some ranking factors that are most interesting for health websites from our perspective.

Moreover, we are looking at some factors that show a significant difference in values and/or trends, when comparing the health results with the benchmark analysis, though these may not necessarily be true ranking factors. These are our "Fun Facts."

Health Ranking Factors © Searchmetrics 2017

HTTPS

Just one in four health industry URLs uses HTTPS encryption – a much lower rate than in our benchmark study.

HTTPS

Health — **Benchmark**

TOP 10: **24%** / 45%   TOP 20: **25%** / 37%   CORRELATION: **0.01** / 0.19
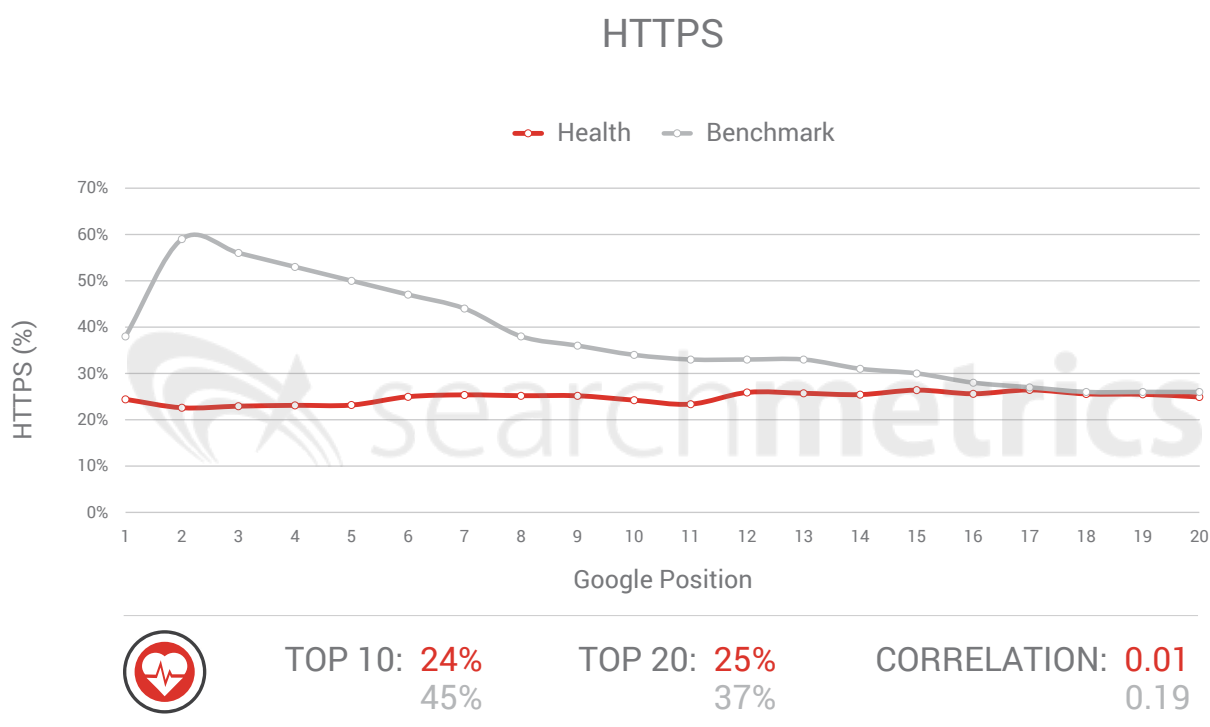
HTTPS

Landing pages that rank highly for health keywords are much less likely to use HTTPS for data transfer. This is of little surprise because few health sites require the user to submit sensitive data like passwords or personal information. Another reason is presumably the advertising-based business model of many health (publisher) websites. When marketers can provide sufficient HTTPS-capable ads, it will be easier for these sites to switch to HTTPS.

TIP: In general, the use of HTTPS can give pages a ranking boost in the Google search results. Particularly given its scarcity in the health industry, a website that does implement encrypted data transfer could give itself a competitive advantage.

Number of
Images

URLs in the health industry use fewer large images than average.

Number of Images

Health ━○━ Benchmark ━○━

TOP 10: **1.0** / 1.6

TOP 20: **1.1** / 1.7

CORRELATION: **-0.01** / 0.09
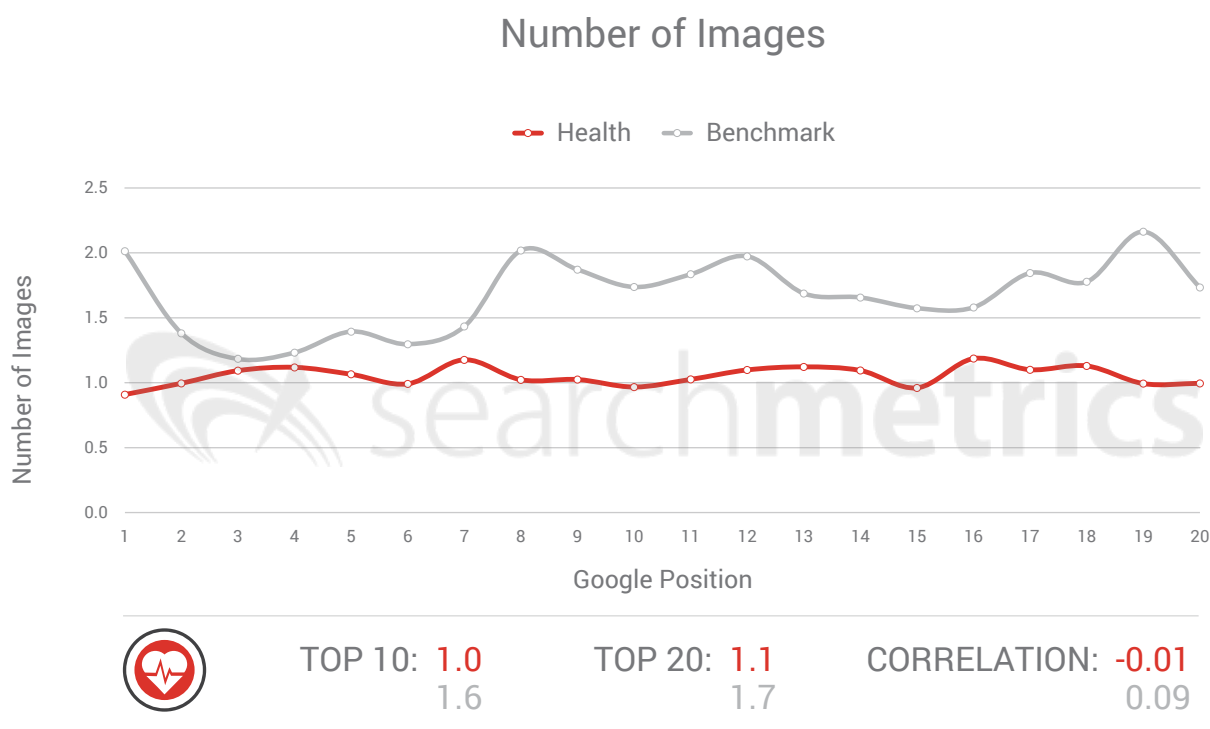
Number of Images

URLs that rank amongst the top search results for health-related topics make less use of large images of at least 200x200 pixels than in other industries. Whilst the benchmark average is 1.6 large images, health URLs in Google's top 10 only have 1.0 images per page.
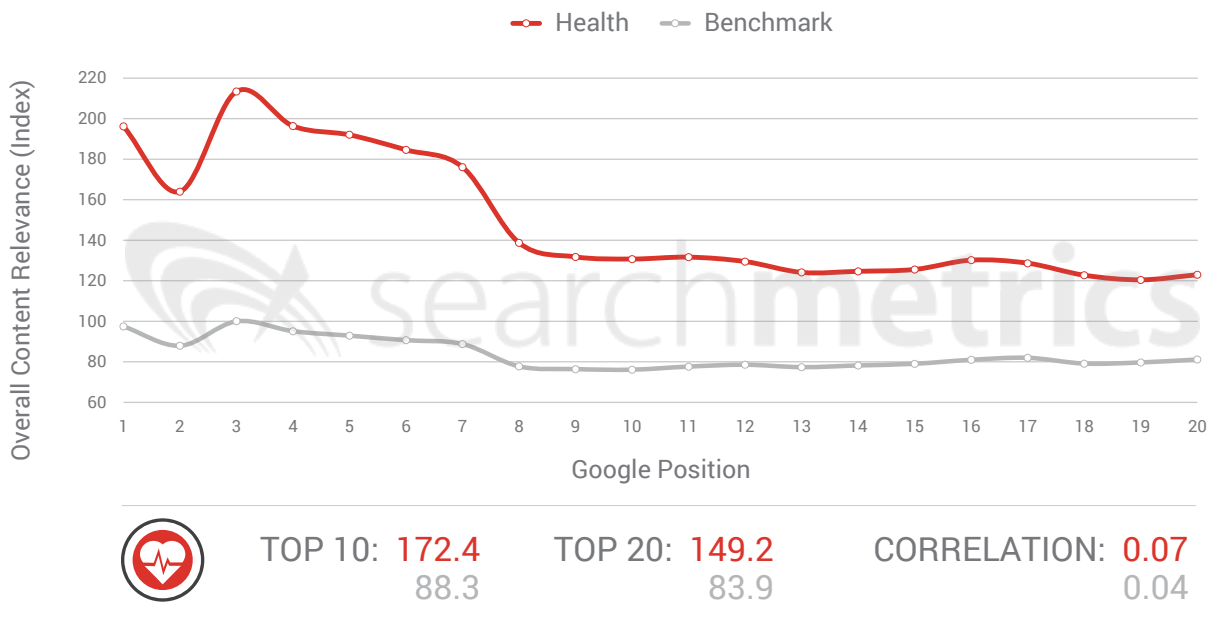
HINT: Even though health pages currently tend not to use many images, a selection of helpful, suitable graphics and/or illustrations can be effective, provided they contribute to serving the user intent and answering users' questions.

Overall
Content Relevance

Content relevance in the health industry is higher than in all other analyzed industries.

Overall Content Relevance

Legend: Health — Benchmark

Y-axis: Overall Content Relevance (Index)
X-axis: Google Position

	Health	Benchmark
TOP 10	172.4	88.3
TOP 20	149.2	83.9
CORRELATION	0.07	0.04

Find out more about Content Relevance

Overall Content Relevance

The content relevance measured for health landing pages is higher than in all other analyzed industries, and higher than the benchmark average. For the general ranking factors, we developed an index, for which the ranking position with the highest content relevance was given a content relevance score of 100. All other results were evaluated and scored in relation to this index.
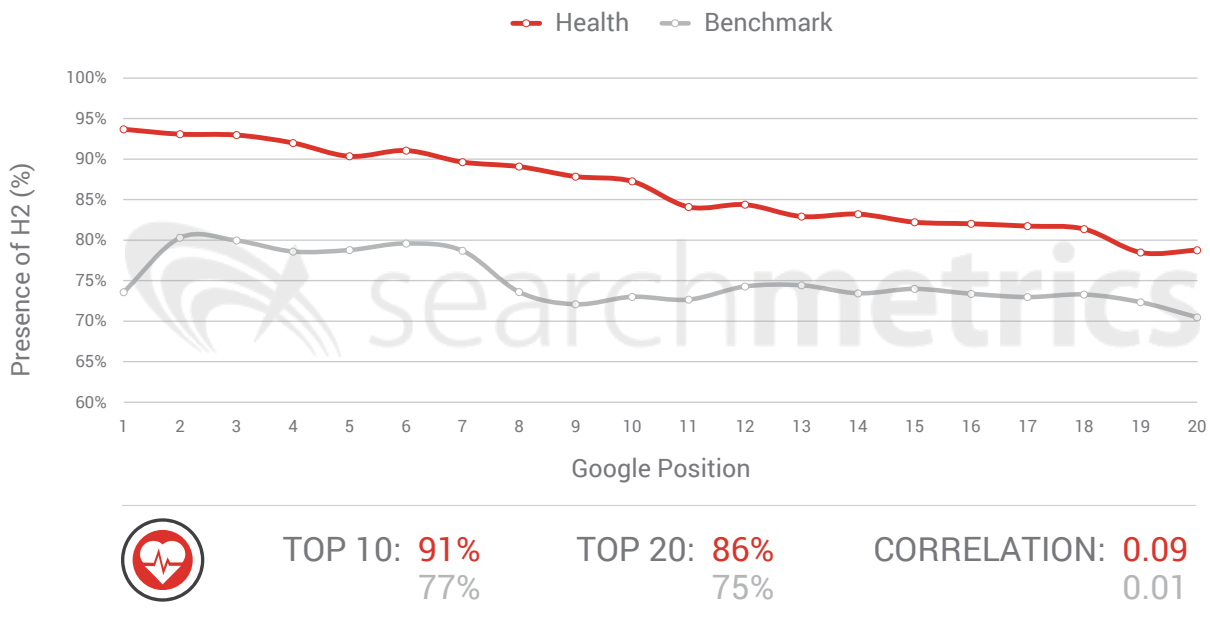
OBSERVATION: People's health is important to them. This means that great care has to be taken when writing about health-related subjects, which often fall into the category, "Your Money or Your Life" (YMYL), meaning that Google pays particular attention to quality when assigning high rankings. When creating landing pages, concentrate on producing holistic content that includes relevant information and covers the topic in the most comprehensive way possible. Remember, users with college degrees are most likely to search for health information - and these are users who are prepared to read. But if the content isn't relevant, they'll look elsewhere.

Health Ranking Factors © Searchmetrics 2017

Presence of
H1/H2

Health industry URLs make much more use of H1 and H2 headings than websites on average, in order to separate page sections in a readable, user-friendly way.

Presence of H2

Health — Benchmark

Presence of H2 (%)

Google Position

TOP 10: **91%**
77%

TOP 20: **86%**
75%

CORRELATION: **0.09**
0.01

Presence of H1/H2

High-ranking URLs in the health industry have a much more frequent rate of H2 (and H1) usage than found in our benchmark analysis. This corresponds to the use of detailed content found in this industry. It is easier for the user to digest information on an illness if it is well structured e.g. in causes, symptoms, preventions and cures.

OUR OBSERVATION: When writing detailed content, it's not just about meeting a word limit. Longer content needs structural elements like H2 headings to guide the reader – and search engines – through the text. Otherwise, the reader can get lost. Content that is well structured with headings also creates an opportunity for a table of contents with anchor links so that the user can jump to the precise piece of information they are looking for.

Presence of
Unordered Lists

Almost 9 in 10 health industry websites make use of unordered lists to structure their content.

Presence of Unordered Lists

● **Health**   ○ **Benchmark**

TOP 10: **88%**
56%

TOP 20: **83%**
55%

CORRELATION: **0.11**
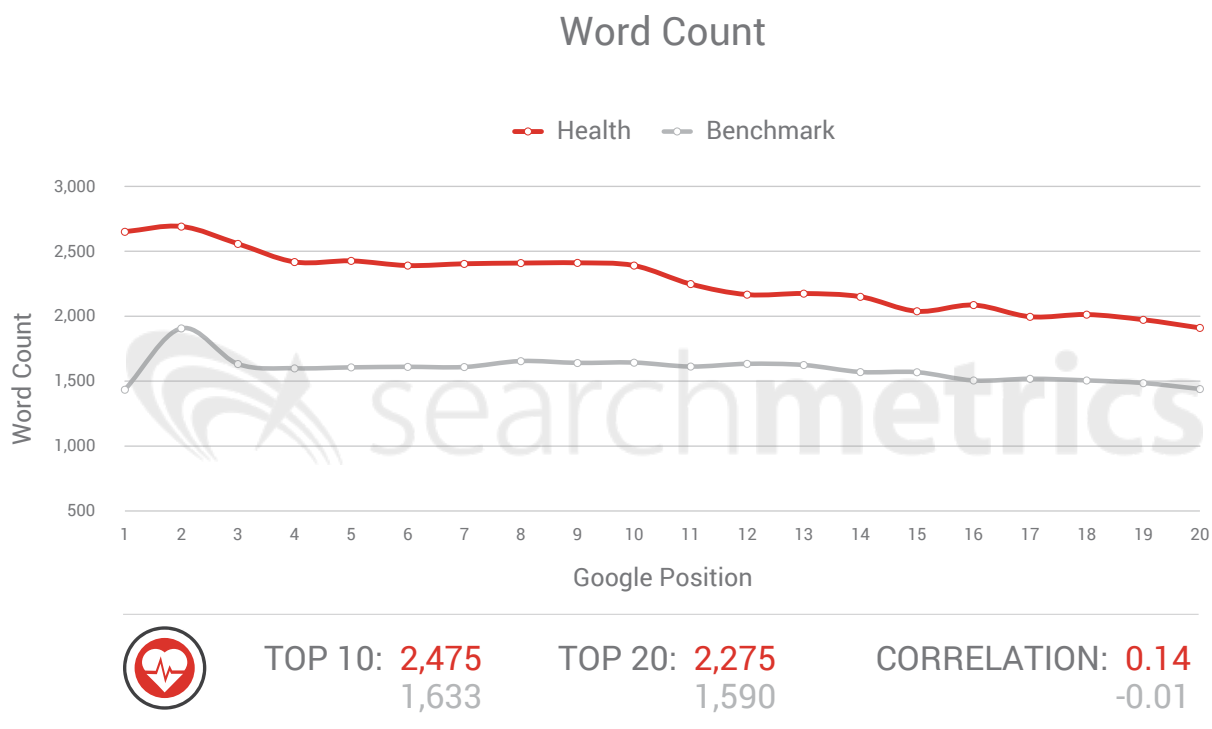0.00
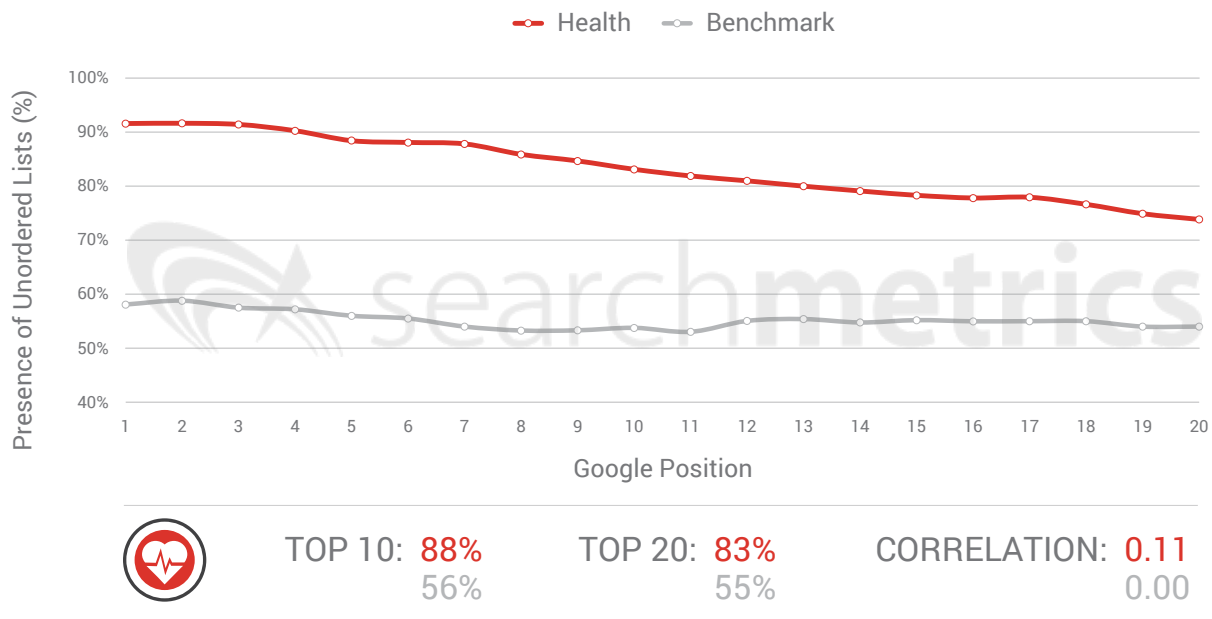
Presence of Unordered Lists

Our analysis of pages ranking for health-related keywords shows that there is a far higher presence of unordered (bullet point) lists than in our benchmark analysis. Some 88%, or nearly 9 out of every 10 health industry pages in Google's top 10, has an unordered list. Across the board, the rate was only 56%. This shows that for health topics, structured content that guides the reader through the text is of much higher importance than in other industries. This also corresponds to the increased presence of other structural elements like H2 headings.

OBSERVATION: When creating content for a health website, it's not enough just to write lots of words. Content has to be easily digestible so that the user can clearly understand the information. This means making use of structural elements like unordered lists, and also HTML tables, ordered lists, and clear headings.

Word
Count

A B C 123

Content on health websites in Google's top 20 is long and holistic, using 43% more words than the benchmark average.

Word Count

Health **Benchmark**

Word Count

Google Position

	TOP 10: **2,475**	TOP 20: **2,275**	CORRELATION: **0.14**
	1,633	1,590	-0.01

Word Count

Landing pages in the health industry that rank in the top 20 of Google's search results use 685 more words than the benchmark average. This is 43% higher. In the top 10, the difference is even clearer, with health pages using 50% more words.

OUR ADVICE: Users searching for health information are prepared to read and in fact expect detailed, valid and relevant information. Try to fulfill the needs of your users as completely as possible. This will help you to move up the rankings and maintain a high position in the search results.
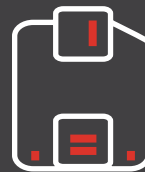
Analysis & Results
The "Fun Facts" we observed for Health

FUN FACTS

AdSense/AdLinks

File Size

Load Time

Social Signals:
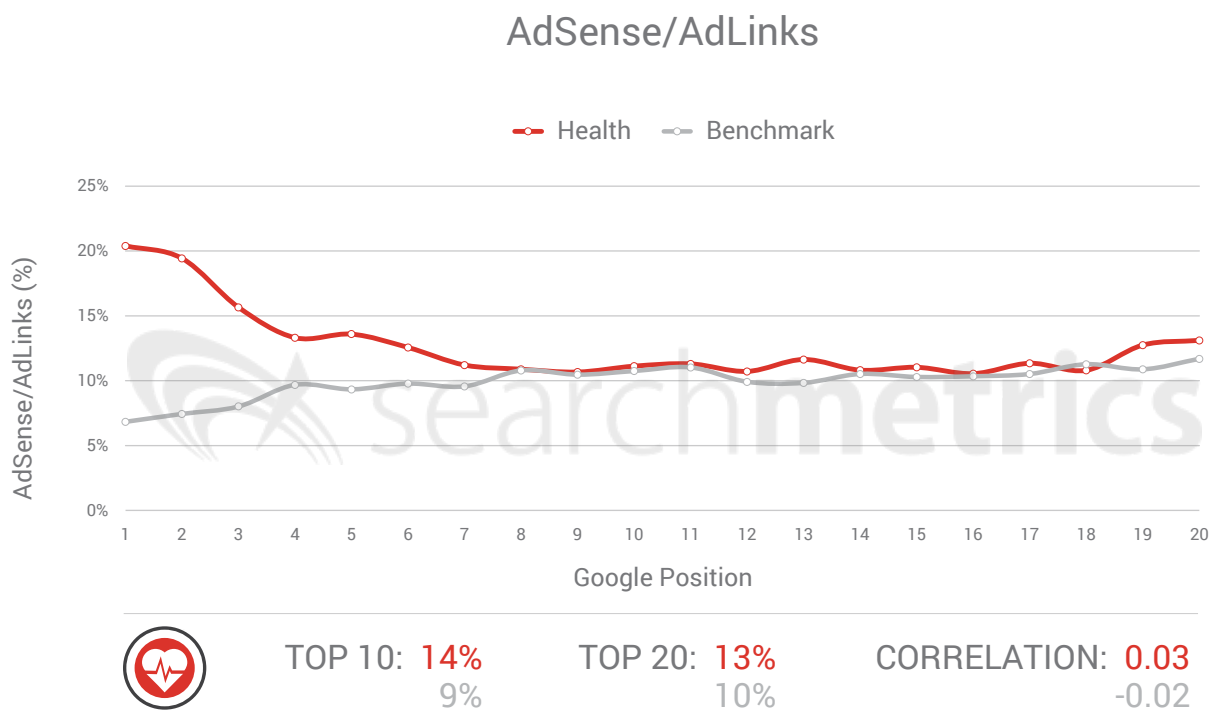Facebook Total,
Tweets, Google+1,
Pinterest

Fun Facts

In this context, "Fun Fact" means that these factors are obviously interpreted as not being decisive for ranking highly in google.com's search results pages, according to our analysis of the online health industry. However, we consider these factors to be worth mentioning because they show a significant difference in values and/or trends, when comparing the health results with the benchmark analysis.

AdSense/
AdLinks

Particularly for pages in Google's top 5, health websites tend to make much more frequent use of AdSense/AdLinks than the overall average.

AdSense/AdLinks

Health   Benchmark

AdSense/AdLinks (%)

Google Position

TOP 10: **14%**
9%

TOP 20: **13%**
10%

CORRELATION: **0.03**
-0.02

AdSense / AdLinks

Google executives have said the use of AdSense is not a ranking factor. However, it is worth noting that, particularly among pages ranking in the top 5 of the Google.com search results, health keywords yield more URLs that make use of AdSense/AdLinks. This is likely due to the fact that many publishers, who rely on advertising for revenue, rank highly for these keywords.

OBSERVATION: Many high-ranking health website make use of AdSense/AdLinks. Therefore, if this is required for your business model, it is unlikely to have a negative impact on rankings.

File
Size

Pages ranking in the top 10 for health keywords have file sizes that are almost a third smaller than top 10 pages in our benchmark analysis.

File Size

TOP 10: **104,937** / 150,302   TOP 20: **100,708** / 139,723   CORRELATION: **0.09** / 0.00
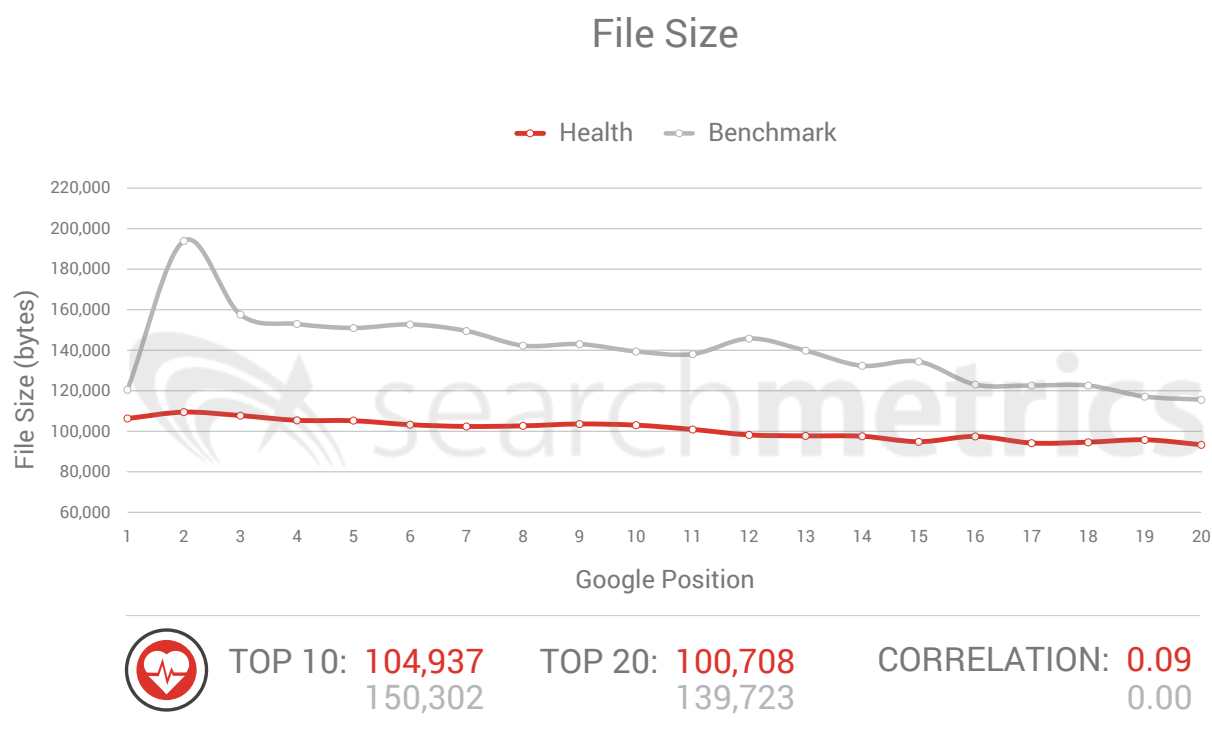
File Size

The HTML documents of high-ranking landing pages in the health industry are almost a third smaller than the overall average measured for all websites, regardless of industry. One contributing factor could be that, though health websites have longer text content, they tend to make less use of large images.

TIP: Keeping the file size of your health URLs down is important – particularly for mobile users. One tip is to make use of tools to compress any large documents.

Load
Time

High-ranking URLs in the health industry load 1.7 seconds more slowly than the benchmark average.

Load Time

Health ——— Benchmark ——

TOP 10: 9.5
         7.8

TOP 20: 9.5
         7.8

CORRELATION: 0.01
              0.00
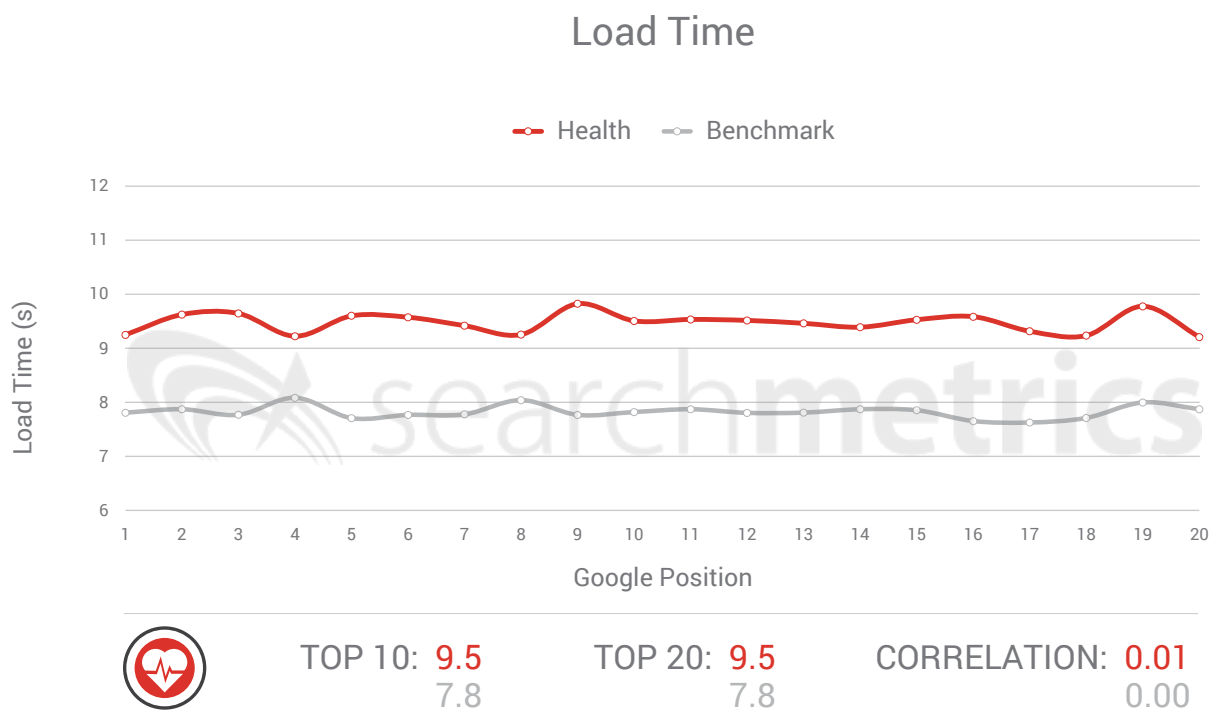
Load Time

The load times of top 10 landing pages in the health industry is an average 9.5 seconds. This average remains steady throughout the top 20, meaning that health URLs load 1.7 seconds more slowly than the average rate in our benchmark. This is perhaps unexpected because the file sizes of health pages are found to be smaller.

OUR ADVICE: Load time is one of Google's elementary ranking factors. By optimizing your health website for quick loading, you are likely to gain a ranking advantage over the competition, particularly on mobile devices, where the average user gives up if a page takes more than 3 seconds to load.

Social
Signals

Compared with the benchmark average, health topics show an extremely low level of social signals.

Facebook Total

— Health   — Benchmark

TOP 10: **535**
5,552

TOP 20: **383**
3,245

CORRELATION: **0.30**
0.20
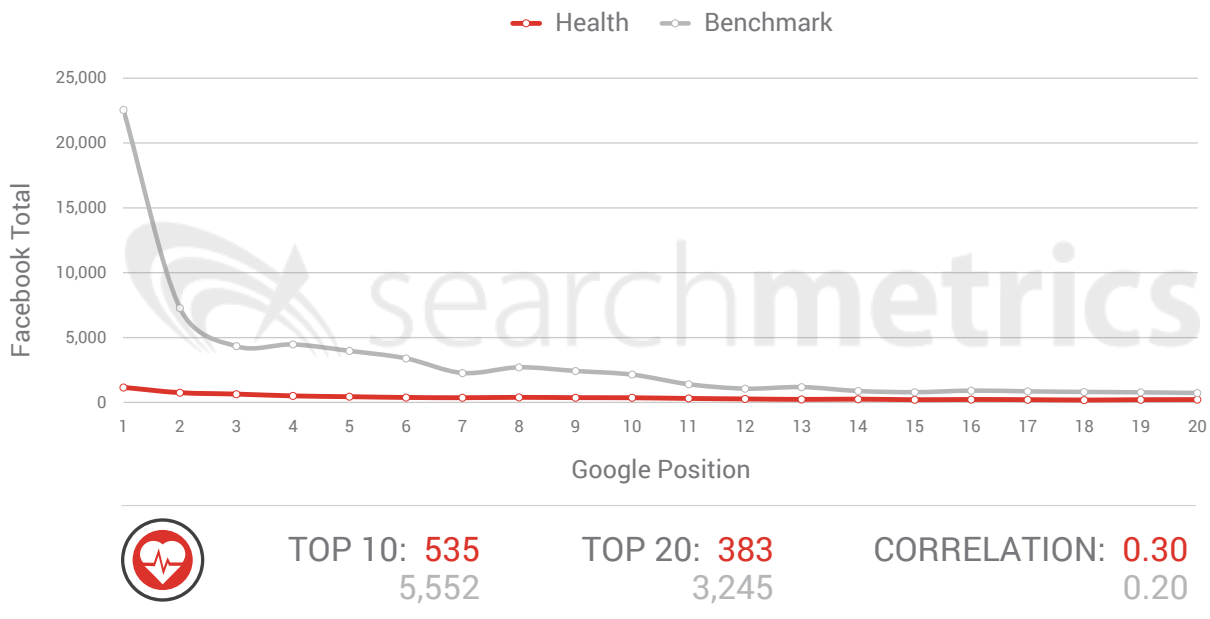
Social Signals

Health topics tend not to be suited to social media. This explains the extremely low level of social signals (Facebook in the graph, but also applicable to Google+, Twitter and Pinterest) displayed by top-ranking health URLs. This is no surprise, considering 77% of users start with a search engine when researching health topics. Information on illnesses is often quite personal and not something people want to share with their Facebook friends. Presumably, if a user does want to pass something on, it will be done more privately, often in a different context.

OUR ADVICE: Invest your budget wisely. Create content that will appeal to search engine users rather than attempting to generate social engagement.

Conclusions

Websites that want to rank highly for health-related keywords have to pay similar attention to user signals like Click-Through Rate and Bounce Rate, as well as ensure a clean technical optimization (particularly on mobile), as in other industries. In addition, there are several factors where the trends in the health industry differ strongly from the average values across all sectors. The main findings are:

RANKING FACTORS

- Just one in four health industry URLs uses HTTPS encryption – a much lower rate than in our benchmark study.

- URLs in the health industry use fewer large images than average.

- Content relevance in the health industry is higher than in all other analyzed industries.

- Health industry URLs make much more use of H1 and H2 headings than websites on average, in order to separate page sections in a readable, user-friendly way.

- Almost 9 in 10 health industry websites make use of unordered lists to structure their content.

- Content on health websites in Google's top 20 is long and holistic, using 43% more words than the benchmark average.

FUN FACTS

- Particularly for pages in Google's top 5, health websites tend to make much more frequent use of AdSense/AdLinks than the overall average.

- Pages ranking in the top 10 for health keywords have file sizes that are almost a third smaller than top 10 pages in our benchmark analysis.

- High-ranking URLs in the health industry load 1.7 seconds more slowly than the benchmark average.

- Compared with the benchmark average, health topics show an extremely low level of social signals.

Health issues are highly sensitive topics, where users need detailed, relevant information they can trust. Users with a higher education background are most likely to search for health information online, and these users are ready to read long, comprehensive texts. They don't want photo albums. But being long isn't enough.

Good use of structural HTML elements and, above all, close relevance to the topic are essential for maintaining a reader's attention and helping them find what they are looking for. And search engines reward content that users find relevant.

Finally, users use Google more than anything else for their health research – so target your resources in the most effective way and maximize your potential for high rankings!

Comparison
Table

The table summarizes the % differences between the top 10 averages for healthpages and the benchmark average values from the general ranking factors.

Ranking Factors	Top 10 Benchmark	Top 10 Health	Comparison (%)	Correlation Benchmark	Correlation Health
Overall Content Relevance (Index)	88.3	172.4	195%	0.04	0.07
Presence of Unordered Lists (Index)	56%	88%	158%	0.00	0.11
Word Count	1,633	2,475	151%	-0.01	0.14
Presence of H2 (%)	77%	91%	118%	0.01	0.09
Presence of H1 (%)	85%	93%	109%	0.10	0.01
Number of Images	1.6	1.0	67%	0.09	-0.01
HTTPS (%)	45%	24%	54%	0.19	0.01

Fun Facts	Top 10 Benchmark	Top 10 Health	Comparison (%)	Correlation Benchmark	Correlation Health
AdSense/AdLinks (%)	9%	14%	150%	-0.02	0.03
File Size (bytes) *	150,302	140,937	143%	0.00	0.09
Load Time (s) *	7.8	9.5	83%	0.00	0.01
Pinterest	153	16	10%	0.19	0.22
Facebook Total	5,552	535	10%	0.20	0.30
Tweets	888	19	2%	0.17	0.26
Google +1	4,026	8	0%	0.17	0.28

*Values inverted, because better optimized pages have smaller file sizes and faster load times.

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If you have any questions regarding this whitepaper or the Searchmetrics Suite™, please do not hesitate to contact us at

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