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SuperFastBusiness Presents

# Counterintuitive SEO Experiments Tune-Up Series - Part 1

Some SEO experiments, their surprising results,  
and how you can use them to your advantage

# Counterintuitive SEO Experiments Tune-Up Series – Part 1

by *SuperFastBusiness*



**James Reynolds**

**James S.:** James Schramko here. Welcome back to SuperFastBusiness.com. Today is a very special series we're doing, especially relating to SEO. Even more so because it's a counterintuitive SEO tune-up series, it's a three-part series, and I'd like to welcome my guest for these three shows, James Reynolds.

**James R.:** Hey James! How are you doing?

**James S.:** Doing great. Now, your name is probably familiar to many of our listeners because you have been involved in certainly the SuperFastBusiness community for many years. Of course recently, you acquired **SEOPartner**,

which is the search engine optimization business that I started, and you became a very active client in. What's that saying, you liked it so much, you bought it.

**James R.:** [laughs] Pretty much, yeah. Yeah, we've become a very large customer for SEOPartner and was getting fantastic results for us, and it just made sense as the next evolution of my business to bring that supply source in house to service more of our own customers and to reach some new ones. So it's been a really nice progression for the business and a good match for everyone.

**James S.:** Right. So you've got a few different ways that people deal with you. Of course your main business name is [Veravo](#). You've got a podcast out there as well, called Traffic Jam. You have your agency facing SEO business, is it OK to mention?

**James R.:** Yeah, absolutely, yeah.

**James S.:** Yup, that's [SEOSherpa.com](#). And of course, you now own SEOPartner.com, which is predominantly dealing with agencies who deal with end users. Through that department, we always had a very strong research and development focus, with a full time team looking for the next thing, looking for signals in the market, running tests and experiments and keeping an eye on the news. Anyone visiting SEOPartner.com would see the blog gets updated daily with the latest findings from all around the industry.

I think what made you very successful with the SEO was keeping an eye on things out there and having a finger on the pulse. So this series is about some of the select tests that you found that had surprising results. You first talked about this at the SuperFastBusiness Live event in Sydney. You then had a very content-heavy blogpost prepared for SEOSherpa.com, and we'll link to that in the show notes to [SEOSherpa.com/seo-experiments](#), where you detailed 16 experiments.

What we thought we'd do today, over the next few series, we'll just cherry pick some of the most surprising results and go a little bit deeper in them and prescribe some action steps.

So, if you're interested in SEO, and if you have a website, you probably should be, even if you don't think you are, then you'll find this quite interesting, and you might have some things to go and check and to do to get better search

results from your own website. So, are we ready to lock in?

**James R.**: We're ready to lock in. Let's do this.

**James S.**: OK. So for part one, we're going to be covering three things. I'll just announce what they are. We're going to be looking at, does click-through rate affect rankings? We're going to be finding out if Mobilegeddon had a big impact. And we'll see if Google is displaying more rich answers in the search results. That's what we're doing in part one.

Just to highlight what's coming up in part two, we'll be looking at exact match anchor text and see if it harms rankings. We'll be seeing if text surrounding a link impacts search rankings. And we'll have a look at press release links and see if they help rankings.

And then finally in part three, we're going to have a look at the dark, evil side of SEO, the negative SEO, and if it actually works at all. We'll also check on outbound links to see if you lose your page rank and your rankings, and we'll be seeing if links have an effect even after they are removed. This will be very exciting.

So first up James, does click-through rate affect rankings?



**James R.**: Well, this was a hotly contested topic in the field of SEO for some time, a lot of people are saying that it did, many more saying that it didn't. It's an interesting topic to discuss because of course Google with Google Adwords do look at click-through rates quite heavily. It gives them very good context on whether an ad is relevant to a user or whether it's not, and they do, then rewards advertisers with relevant ads and high click-through rates with higher rankings.

But in SEO, which is always been really about links and content, there wasn't really that many people that thought it was a rank-influencing factor. That was until some dude from Google let something slip. It often happens, just gives a tiny hint away, and some inquisitive SEOs then go and explore it.

So this is what happened in this particular case. Some information got leaked from Google. And then Rand Fishkin, he calls himself the Wizard of Moz, the CEO of Moz.com, decided to put this to the test with a few relatively basic test set ups. But hopefully, those tests would actually shine a spotlight on actually how click-through rate does affect ranking.

So what he basically did was set up a website, got it ranking for a particular keyword term. And then what he did was go to Twitter and announce to his Twitter followers to go and conduct a search on Google.com for a particular search term and then click on the result for his website. All happening in a very short time span. Effectively then, sending a whole bunch of clicks through the SERPs for that particular result in a very, very short time frame.

James, what do you think happened when that occurred?

**James S.:** Well, you know, you're putting me on the spot here, but if I would guess, because it's AdWords who have put such an emphasis on click-through rate, I mean it's such a prime indicator of relevancy, I would have thought that it should help a website if it's being clicked on more every time it's shown. Why wouldn't they use the same algorithm?

**James R.:** Yeah, absolutely. And that's what really happened in these particular tests. Prior to the testing, the first test that ran, I think the site was in position seven and within the space of a couple of hours, it shot right up to number one spot in the search results. And then the second test he run, pretty similar, it started off in number 10 position I believe, and then within a space of a couple of hours, with all this increased click volume, the site went up to number one position. So it was pretty categoric, at least in Rand's case. That said, there have also been some tests that have been run that had nowhere near such categoric changes in search ranking. So there is still a little bit of debate about this and perhaps if you want to, we can get into discussing why Rand's results may have been affected versus other ones, which were not affected so much.

**James S.:** Well from an overview, I think firstly, when people say the word test, often there's different types of tests. There's effective tests and then there's

ones that are not useful at all, which is probably the majority of the tests that people are running, where they're biased, or tainted, or they're not set up in a way that would lend themselves to getting a good result. You have to be very careful about the environment when you're setting up a test.



I will probably be happy to accept just based on my own findings that it's worth putting in the extra effort to make your page titles and descriptions click worthy.

**James R.:** Yup. Absolutely. I think regardless of whether this test is a categoric result that really does determine that CTR is a ranking factor, this is absolutely something you should be focusing on anyway because the end goal isn't ranking, the end goal should be increased relevant traffic through to your site and having a well-crafted search snippet with a really nice title, a really nice description that's going to encourage users to click on your result versus your competitors should always be something you're doing anyway. If it has the added benefit that it also increases your ranking because your click-through rate goes up then that's absolutely a positive thing. So we should be spending our time there for sure.



**James S.:** And from a background point of view, it's probably worth noting firstly, the search engines, especially Google, don't publish their algorithm. That's why there's a lot of voodoo around what works and what doesn't. It's not black and white like many other things. You can't just look it up. Secondly, they employ really, really smart engineers who are tuning the machine on a daily basis. I think it gets updated more than once a day, right? It's like constantly being updated. It's not like they just release it and then give people a few years to go and reverse engineer it. It's a moving target.

So it's worth noting this. We always steer towards what does Google want? They want people to get a relevant result and to have their search query match up with the perfect answer. If that's the case, then having the click-through rate high would have to be a good thing for you as a website owner.

So what's the action step for this point?

### An action step

**James R.:** Action step is totally optimizing your page titles and descriptions to encourage more clicks on your result. There's a few things to probably note here. One is, if you're targeting a specific keyword for a page, then that should absolutely be present in your page title and description because if someone does that search and then sees the keyword reflected in the snippet for your site that is shown to the mini search results, that will tell them that your result is relevant, which is absolutely a primary signal that will affect click-through rate and that will encourage people to click on your result over the next.

But of course you want to go a bit further than just putting a keyword in there. You want to try and craft an advertising message, if you like, with your search

snippet. Make something that's interesting and compelling, maybe demonstrate your unique selling point for your website or for the page of content and really just encourage people to click on your result over the next one.

Also, it's something I should probably just throw in here, there's been, very recently, in fact, I think within the last week or so, at time of recording this, a change in the length of page titles that are shown in the search results, so until very recently, Google was showing around 55 to 65 characters within a 500-pixel width, and the desktop search results, they just increased that by 100 pixels, up to 600 pixels wide. So now you've got the ability to just include a bit more in your title. It's really probably around 75 characters now. So you should use all of that space to really craft something that's interesting and compelling to searchers within the search engine.

**James S.:** Right. So you could put something like, "Which toothpaste do three out of four doctors prefer?"

**James R.:** Yeah. And that's fantastic. Anything with numbers in is really good. If you want to go a little bit further adding things like brackets in there to make elements of the text stand out, etc., really everything that you were doing crafting a compelling headline for a piece of copy should be tactics that you look to implement within your page titles and descriptions for SERPs.

**James S.:** Great. So we go and check your page titles and your descriptions. If you don't know how to do that, that's OK. Just find someone to help you. You could contact the team at [SEOPartner.com](#). They'll give you a hand.

Let's move on to the next one.

Did Mobilegeddon have a big impact? Firstly James, what's Mobilegeddon?

**James R.:** Haha. Yeah, we got some geek language here.

**James S.:** Yeah. You better break it down.

**Mobilegeddon and its impact**



## Did **Mobilegeddon** Have a **Big Impact?**

**James R.**: Yeah. Mobilegeddon was the name given to the big update that Google did around April last year, 2015. It was publicly announced by Google as a big change to their algorithm. What they were looking to do was weight very heavily the performance of websites as they relate to mobile searches. So essentially, if a site wasn't mobile-friendly, they would demote it in the search results. If it is mobile-friendly and has a good experience on a mobile device, then they would increase its ranking within the search results.

As more people move to mobile, we can tell that this is something that's extremely important to look at. So the test here was run by Eric Enge and the team at Stone Temple Consulting. And essentially what they did is just took a snapchat of a whole set of queries, around 15,000 queries before the Mobilegeddon update and then they took a snapchat again of the same set of queries after the Mobilegeddon update. And they scanned the top 10 results and looked to see what changes had occurred.

Now the kind of voice in the SEO world when Mobilegeddon happened was that not much at all was affected. No one really noticed the significant impact on the display of the search results. A little bit of movement up and down, but nothing major and certainly not the extent that people were expecting. So Stone Temple's results were good to look at to actually gauge what was happening. What they found was that of the non-mobile websites, around 19% gained ranking but 46% lost ranking. So essentially, there was around a 20%, 25% loss in ranking for non-mobile sites. For mobile-friendly sites, around 30% gained and 25% lost ranking. So there was about a 5% increase in ranking.

In the SEO world, that's pretty significant movements and certainly does tell us that for the first rollout of Mobilegeddon, Google really were taking this into account and heavily moving sites based on their performance within the

mobile search results.

**James S.:** Right, so again, as a business owner who's now moved a lot of business to the mobile, in the way that I consume and operate on the internet, it just makes sense, doesn't it? It makes sense to have your website work well on a mobile phone because I think we are moving that way. So what's the action step?

## Action step

**James R.:** Well first action step should be to go and check your site to see whether it is mobile-friendly and compliant with what Google see as being mobile-friendly. So you can do that just by doing a Google search for the Google mobile-friendly test, and you just plug your URL into that, and Google will shoot out an answer and tell you whether it's optimized for mobile or it's not. If it's not, then you'll get a whole set of actions steps from Google to implement, which you should pass on to your web developer or whoever controls your site and get it fixed up immediately. There should be no waiting on this one. It's so, so important, especially because Google have just publicly rolled out the sort of second addition, if you like, of Mobilegeddon, which we expect to have far greater impact than the first rollout, and now it really is like a major, major ranking signal. So this sort of stuff needs to be acted on pretty quickly.

**James S.:** Perfect. And our last one for this part, is Google displaying more rich answers in search results? Firstly, we better explain what is a rich answer.



## What is a rich answer?

**James R.:** Yeah. So rich answers are those results that we are experiencing a

little bit more recently, where Google are actually showing the answer to your query within the search result itself. So quite often, if you are to type in a question such as, "How high is the Empire State Building?" for example, Google will show you the answer actually within the search result itself without you having to click through to another website to find the information. It has a little sort of callout box with a photograph sometimes and the answer. Sometimes, it will be a carousel of results. Sometimes, it will be listings. There's more than 20 or so different rich answer displays. But essentially, what it is, is showing the answer in the search results to the user so they don't have to click through to a website to find the information that they need.

**James S.:** OK. So I just tested that. How high is the Sydney Harbor Bridge, and it tells me it's 141 meters. It also tells me how high the Opera House is, and Sydney Tower and the Golden Gate Bridge.

So what does this actually mean for website owners, and how can we use this knowledge to our advantage?

## How rich answers can help you

**James R.:** Well first of all, I think we have to start understanding that SEO and the search results as a whole are very different now to what they used to be. In the past, it was all about 10 blue links on a page and trying to achieve number one position within those 10 blue links so you got the most traffic. But not all of the traffic now is moving away from the search results. You can be appearing in all different fashions at all different times. So you have to think much more laterally now about how you approach search engine optimization as we call it.

If you want to take advantage, let's say if this one particular example, like question types of queries, one thing that you can do on your website is actually just start to answer questions in a very simple and straightforward manner. If you do that, then you have a very strong chance of actually having your website have the answer displayed within those rich snippet results.

So there's actually in the post that I produced at SEOSherpa.com, there's an example of a website owner that did that and they created a post that answered the question, "What is an RPF?" All they did was put a very simple, basic answer to the question. They added more information to the post to give it more context and more depth. They shared it on social media. They sent a few links to it and within a matter of a few days, Google had then

started to show their answer within the search results with an additional link through to get more information within that rich snippet.

And that in itself is far more powerful than a number one ranking because you're being positioned way at the top of the search results in everyone's eye line, and you're going to get all the visibility and all the traffic when that happens. They saw a massive increase in click-through rate to their website even though the answer was actually displayed within the search results in front of people, which was kind of interesting.

**James S.:** Nice. So basically you can use question-based content.

**James R.:** Yeah, question-based content is fantastic. But I think you just want to generally think more laterally as a whole towards SEO. I mean another example of rich answers are those knowledge panels, which you see on the right-hand side of the search results, especially present for like local search results, and if you search for a particular brand name, you'll see there the company displayed on the right with an image, you'll see a map location for them, you'll see their opening times. And then beneath that, you'll also see such things as, users also searched for X, Y and Z Company.

So that's a fantastic thing to be focusing on. If you were just always clued into ranking for no particular keywords rather than building a brand and strong presence online, you're not going to show up in those places. So you just have to think more now about when and where people could be finding you and gaining visibility for those things when that happens.

**James S.:** Yup. And I can see they put things like Google reviews. It would be important if you're a small business owner or a local business owner to have people reviewing you if you could, wouldn't it?

**James R.:** Yeah, absolutely. Reviews are something that Google weights quite a lot within the local search results. So these are all great examples. That's another one. Maps, listings. You should make sure you claim your Google My Business page, fill out your information on it, make sure your Google maps listing is accurate and the pin's in the right place. These are all things that you need to think about now over just having relevant content on your website and getting links to it. You need to think much more holistically about your general presence online.

**James S.:** And it seems like documents like PDFs quite often come up as quite

an authority piece of content.

**James R.:** Yeah. Yeah, we found that. PDF document gets indexed really well. So all these things are great to have in play.

## Quick recap

**James S.:** Right. So just a recap on this part, one of the three-part series, we've talked about does click through rate affect rankings. We feel it probably does. Did Mobilegeddon have a big impact? Seems like it did, and it's definitely worth doing regardless, and James Reynolds said it's quite urgent. And is Google displaying more rich answers in the search results? It would appear they are, but it's more importantly, let your business start showing there by harnessing some of the tips that James mentioned in this episode, how to get a more authority listing. You can own that top box if you go about it with the right approach.

That was a lot of fun. You want to know more about SEO? Head over to [SEOPartner.com](#) and ask the team to check out your website. If you pay them – \$20?

**James R.:** It's \$20, yeah.

**James S.:** They'll tell you if you're in good shape or not because they know what to look for and they'll make recommendations on what you can do about it.

In part two, which is coming up next, we're going to be looking at a couple more counterintuitive SEO theories and see if they work or if they don't work based on some test results. I'm looking forward to that James. I'll see you on that episode.

**James R.:** See you on the next one.



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