

Everything You Need To Know To Develop Your International SEO Strategy

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INTRODUCTION

Expanding into foreign markets used to be a costly affair, but thanks to globalisation and the internet, almost anyone can now operate nearly anywhere in the world for a much more reasonable cost. Whether you're a small to medium sized enterprise or a large organisation, you have the chance to take your business global.

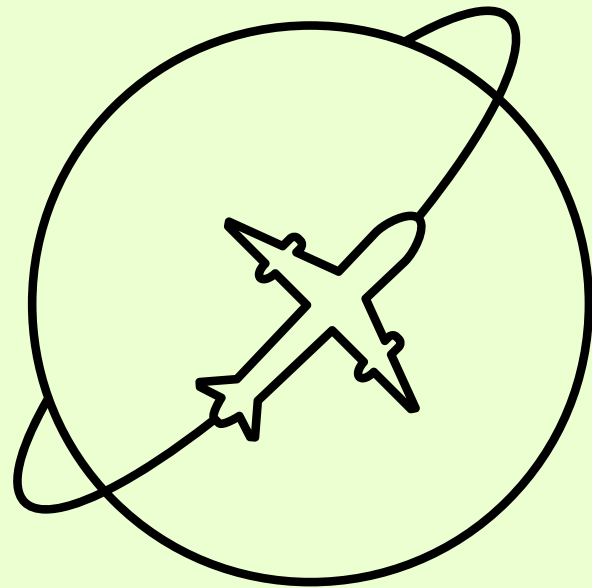
And there's good reason to as well. Despite being the most commonly studied language, only 17% of the world speak English and of that 17% only 26% speak English as their first language. So, there's big opportunities both in terms of reaching out to users who don't speak English at all, but also creating a better user experience for those who don't speak English as their first language.



But the question is how to take your current site, and get it in front of users in foreign markets? That's where international SEO comes in. You may already have an SEO strategy at home, but you shouldn't assume the same tactics will work in other countries. From different languages and cultural nuances to entirely different search engines, there's a lot of SEO best practices that differ from country to country.

With this guide we'll help you become aware of those key differences and the main factors you should consider when developing your international SEO strategy.

WHAT IS INTERNATIONAL SEO?



International SEO is a sector of marketing that involves optimising your presence in the search engine result pages (SERPs) in different countries. It includes multiple on-page and off-page elements with the aim being to make it as easy as possible for search engines to understand what language and country you are targeting.

For example, consider you're an online homeware company in the UK and you want to reach out into other European markets. You might opt for Germany, which has the highest GDP in Europe. If so, you'll want to ensure that both your German and UK customers are sent to the right pages with the right information, language, currency, shipping costs etc. To do that, you will need to make it clear to Google (and other search engines) what pages are for what users.

International SEO can be complicated and if you don't have a specialised agency helping you it will involve the collaboration of multiple departments. Your SEO team will need to develop the overriding strategy, your content team will need to modify or create new content and your developers will need to be on hand to implement HTML and site architecture changes. You may even need to consider bringing in local experts to give their insights and transcreation services (more on that later).

You need to coordinate all of these elements from the offset to ensure success in your new market, whilst protecting your brand and website at home. On-going monitoring and adaptation are crucial but if you develop a thought through international SEO strategy that follows best practices from the start, you'll be setting yourself up for long-term success.



WHY IS INTERNATIONAL SEO IMPORTANT?

Developing an international SEO strategy is important if you want to expand your global reach whilst protecting and maintaining your website at home. Doing it right will allow for happy customers, improved traffic, conversions and revenue; doing it wrong will result in customer confusion, traffic loss or dilution and stagnant, or even damaged conversions and revenue.

You may be wondering, does every business need an international SEO strategy? The answer is no. If you're a local florist, vet or baker for example, and you have no interest or need to start operating in other markets, then a local SEO strategy will work just fine for you instead.

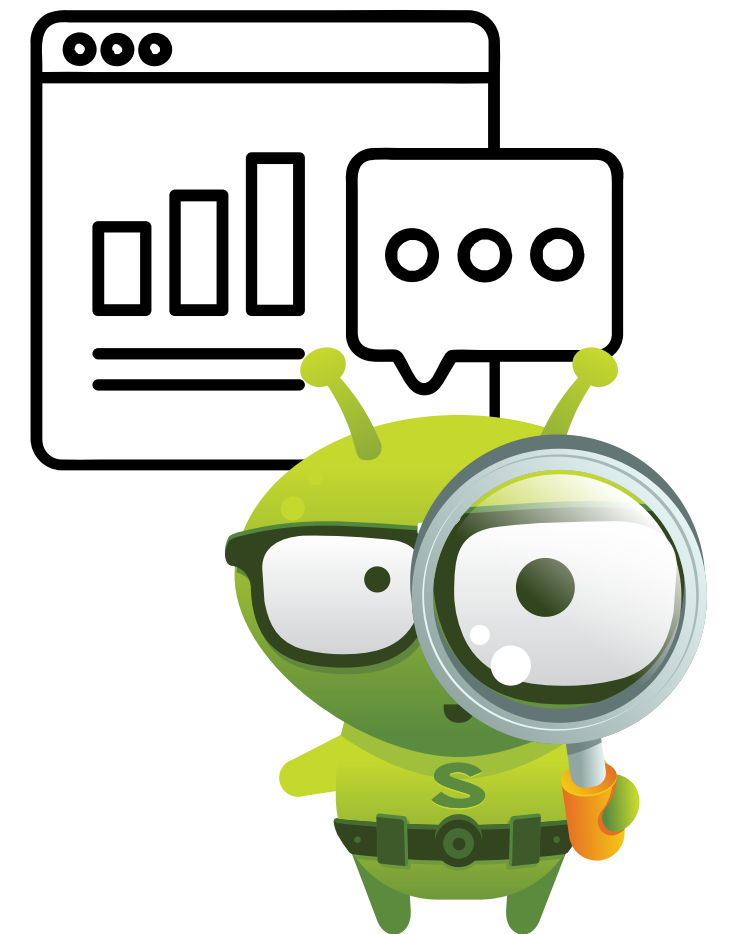
However, if you are planning to serve more than one country or more than one language, then international SEO is crucial to your success. Google alone has more than 1.2 trillion worldwide searches each year, meaning there's a lot of competition, but equally a lot of chance for success. Play along with Google's and other search engines' algorithms and you can tap into those masses of global searches.

MARKET RESEARCH

Before you decide if internationalisation is the right path for you, it's crucial that you understand the new market you want to break out into. Without an in-depth knowledge you cannot accurately set goals and KPIs, nor allocate budgets accordingly.

Areas of market research you should consider when you're developing your international SEO strategy are:

- ✓ **Brand awareness** – what awareness do people have of your brand, will you need to start from scratch or are there some early blocks you can build on?
- ✓ **The competitor landscape** – you will have new local suppliers to compete with whenever you expand into a new market
- ✓ **Competitor analysis** – once you've identified your competitors, analyse the strengths and weaknesses of their marketing activities
- ✓ **Consumer insights** – it's useful for you to understand user trends, shopping behaviours, seasonality and more. For example, think about how many different mother's days and father's days there are globally throughout the year



INTERNATIONAL SEARCH ENGINES

One thing you may discover during your market research is the different search engines out there. Accounting for 83% of the global search market in 2022, Google is the most prominent search engine used internationally by far, particularly in the Western world. However, there are some smaller search engines that are worth considering if you're targeting other countries such as South Korea, China and more.




BING



Let's start with the search engine that you're most likely to have already heard of, Bing. Whilst it only accounts for roughly **2.47%** of the global market share, which seems meagre in comparison to Google, this still makes it the second biggest search engine worldwide. It also means that it gets more than 1 billion visits each month, so tapping into some of those visits definitely wouldn't be a waste of time.

With that being said, the market most likely to give you the biggest return on investment (ROI) for Bing is the US, as the search engine has a market share of just under **39%** for console users there. So, if you're developing an international SEO strategy that targets the US, it's worthwhile knowing the key ranking factors for Bing.





BAIDU

Google is currently banned in China, so if you're looking to develop an international strategy that targets the country, you'll need to consider another search engine. With 73% of the market share, Baidu is the obvious choice.



However, the search engine can only index .cn domains with simplified Chinese copy so you'll need to work with a Chinese SEO and copywriting specialist, or an agency with access to partners in the region.



NAVER

If you're targeting South Korea, Naver is definitely a search engine that you will want to consider.

One of the main reasons it has been so successful is that like Baidu, it is designed around its native language (Korean) and is therefore able to understand the complexities of the language better than Google's AI programmes, so again you will need to work with a specialist.



50%



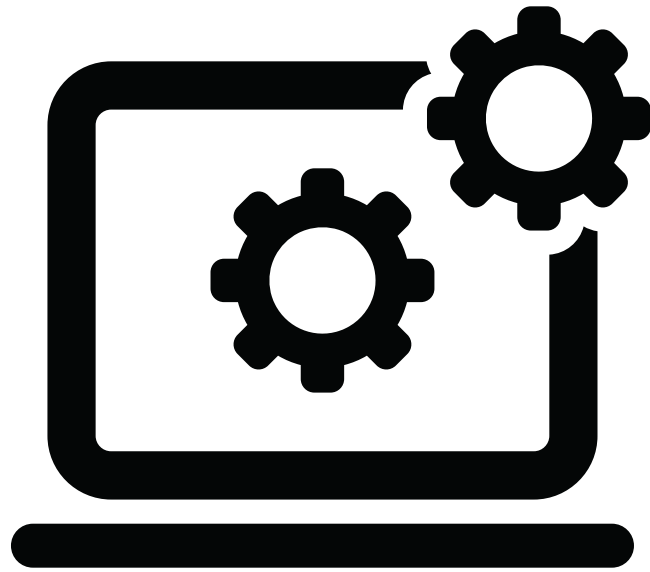
35%



YANDEX

Yandex is the 8th most popular search engine in the world, most commonly used in Russia but it is also worthwhile considering if you are targeting Belarus, Kazakhstan or Turkey. The search engine is very region specific, and results can vary across all 4 countries and also regions within them so be sure to set up your geo-targeting correctly.

TECHNICAL SEO



Technical SEO refers to elements that help search engines to better crawl, index and therefore rank your site.

International technical SEO comes with its own specific considerations.



INTERNATIONAL DOMAIN STRUCTURES

The way you should structure your site and domain will depend on which languages and regions you want to target. Your site could be multilingual, multi-regional or both. For example, if you're a Canadian site who also wants to target the US you might have 2 different regional sites, but you may also want to make your Canadian site multilingual – English and French. There are various options, with different pros and cons, for all cases.

If you want to target multiple languages your options are:

Subdomains	en.example.com, fr.example.com
Subfolders	example.com/en/, example.com/fr/
URL parameters	example.com/?lang=en, example.com/?lang=fr

However, to go again to our original example where you want to structure your site by both country and language you can take the following hybrid approaches:

Subfolders	example.com/en-ca/, example.com/fr-ca/
Subdomains and ccTDLs	en.example.ca, fr.example.ca

Or maybe you only want to target specific countries. This may be preferential if, for example, you're an ecommerce site and your stock, shipping options, prices etc vary from country to country. In this case your options are:

Subdomains	us.example.com, ca.example.com
Subfolders	example.com/us/, example.com/ca/
Country code top level domains (ccTDLs)	example.us, example.ca (This is what you will need to target China)

GEO TARGETING AND DUPLICATE CONTENT

The problem then, particularly if you are targeting different countries but with the same language, is that the different versions of your site may have very similar, if not near identical content on them. This can lead to a loss in rankings as Google penalises duplicate content.

Asides from re-writing your content, which you may want to consider anyway for cultural differences (more on that later), you can implement hreflang tags to indicate which language and/ or country each page is for.

If you're wondering what hreflang tags are, they're snippets of code which tell Google which version of your content is intended for which user. These can be implemented at page level in the source code, specified in XML Sitemaps or set in HTTP headers.

Going back to our previous example, you would have to implement various hreflang tags depending on the site and target user to tell the search engine that an alternative version of the content exists in the link provided. For example:

An alternative English language page targeted at the US
`<link rel="alternate" href="http://example.com/en-us/" hreflang="en-us"/>`

An alternative English language page targeted at Canada
`<link rel="alternate" href="http://example.com/en-ca/" hreflang="en-ca"/>`

An alternative French language page targeted at Canada
`<link rel="alternate" href="http://example.com/fr-ca/" hreflang="fr-ca"/>`

ON PAGE OPTIMISATION AND CONTENT

Once you've implemented your international technical SEO strategy, you can start to focus on what the user will actually see on your site.

CC

You should develop a unique strategy for each language and/ or country that you want to target as asides from the obvious language differences, you'll need to provide accurate information in case your services or products differ from region to region. On top of that, each group of users will have different needs and you'll want to do everything you can to provide that value for them.



TRANSLATION VS TRANSCREATION

If you're targeting different languages it goes without saying that you will need to get your content translated, and not just by using Google translate or other tools which are typically full of clunky inaccuracies. That's why we will always recommend transcreation over translation. The differences between the 2 are:

Translation

The literal word for word transcription of your copy in one language to another

Transcreation

Goes beyond direct translation to capture the full nuance of a language and cultural differences, context and idioms necessary to provide a more accurate translation and better user experience

There are various elements that make transcreation a better option overall, including:



Cultural backgrounds

Different countries have different cultures. You want to make sure your content reflects these differences and considers everything from the differences in everyday life to the political, religious, financial backdrop and more.

Search intent

For example, “tortilla” in Spain is typically a dish made out of eggs and potatoes but in Latin America a “tortilla” is a wrap. Both speak the same language, but the meaning of the word is completely different. This can be applied to words but also to different cultural norms, interests, pastimes and so on.

Context

The different interests and why certain products or services are important can vary depending on the region and can impact how you might want to market them. For example, the target user for robotic vacuums in the US or UK are generally considered to be of a more tech-forward, affluent millennial. However, in Japan the market is much more open as they are used to having technology in their home at early stages, and a robotic vacuum cleaner is seen as more of an everyday item.

Tone of voice and branding

You want your content to reflect who you are as brand and convey your tone of voice, just as you do in the native version of your site. If you opt for simple translation over transcreation, it won't account for different idioms, slang or colloquialisms which will help to make your copy sound more natural.

KEYWORD RESEARCH

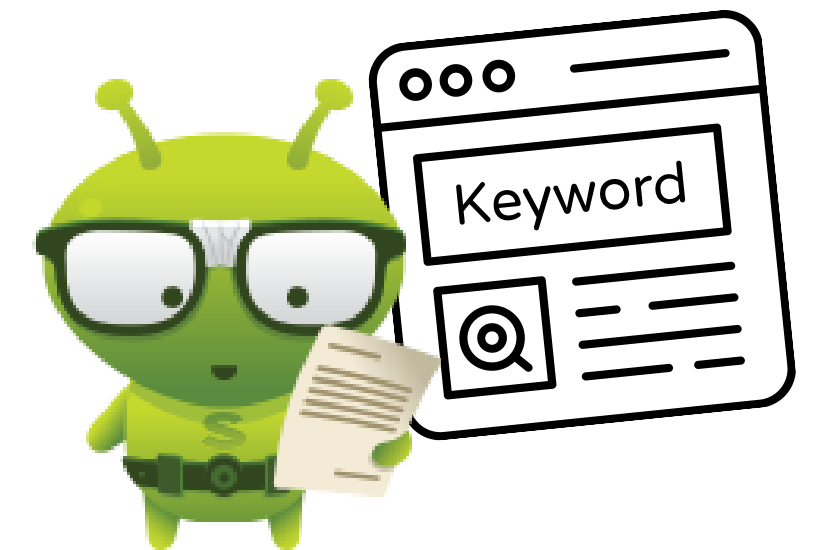
No SEO strategy would be complete without keyword research. Keyword research is the process of finding out what keywords/ search queries users are searching for in your target market and then selecting the phrases that are most relevant to your content and present the biggest opportunity for you to rank for. Ultimately, it should form the basis of all the content users will see on your site.

If you're developing an SEO strategy for a different language it may be more obvious that you will need different keyword research than what you have for your native site. However, just in case you are in any doubt, remember that a direct translation of keywords used in your native site to your new language site might not be correct. Not only might the literal translation not make any sense or appear stuffed unnaturally into your copy, but the search volumes might differ massively and there could be other alternatives or synonyms that present a much bigger opportunity.

Likewise, if you're doing keyword research for a site that is in a new country but with the same language as your native site, not only might the search volumes be different, but the meaning could be misinterpreted. Take our "tortilla" example from before, or the word "purse" – a user in the US will be searching for a handbag but a user in the UK will be searching for something that goes in a handbag e.g. a wallet traditionally designed for women.

Once you have your keyword research and you've deciphered the search intent, you can use this to optimise the on-page elements of your site, including:

- Metadata
- Header tags
- Body copy
- Anchor text for links
- Alt tags
- URL names



INTERNATIONAL CONTENT STRATEGY

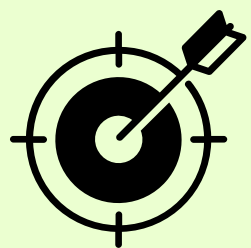


Once you've optimised your site, you can then refer back to your keyword research to develop an on-going localised content strategy. From blogs, videos, podcast, whitepapers and more, developing a bespoke content strategy will help to improve your international SEO strategy for lots of reasons, including:

- filling in any gaps that couldn't be addressed via your product or service pages
- helping to keep your site regularly updated
- providing additional valuable touch points for the user in their buyer's journey
- helping you to engage with users on subjects that matter to them
- giving you valuable content that can be repurposed for social media

Much like all the advice so far, each country should have its own content strategy as far as possible because unfortunately there's just no way that the same content will receive the same reception, rankings, traffic and conversions in different countries.

Working with an international SEO expert, with access to local SEO specialists and transcreators will help you to come up with the best strategy for your target region or country. They can help you use your keyword research and keep on top of local trends, topics, discussions and calendar dates to help you to secure the most ROI.



MONITORING AND REPORTING

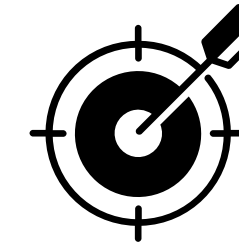


As with all marketing, it's important to continuously monitor and report on your progress – and international SEO is no different. It's important to look at your metrics both locally and globally – you may want to set global goals and KPIs, but it's also important to set unique metrics for each market.

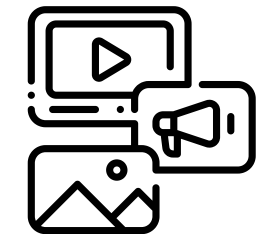
For example, if you're already well established at home, your site may be able to harness the advantage of the hard-earned domain authority and brand awareness that you've garnered over the years. However, if you're breaking out into a new market you may not be able to rely on this. While you may be able to leverage some of that existing domain authority if you've went down the subdomain or sub folder route, you are still going to come up against the barrier of brand awareness. Therefore, setting realistic targets for each country is crucial in order to avoid setting yourself up for failure.



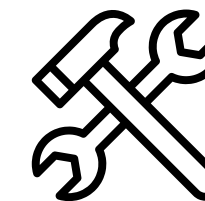
Links



Target group



Content



Tech SEO



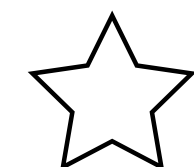
Performance measurement



Copywriting



Search



Ranking

ANALYTICS

To monitor your SEO progress, you'll need to get familiar with Analytics tools. Google Analytics is the most commonly known platform and whilst it can be used to monitor key metrics such as traffic and conversions in almost any country, if you're operating in a country with an alternative favoured search engine then you might want to explore their analytics tools as well.

Based on the search engines we discussed before, here are their equivalent Analytics tools:

Baidu 统计

NAVER Analytics

Yandex Metrika

Bing doesn't have an Analytics platform yet per say, but you can use Bing Webmaster Tools to gain other interesting insights.

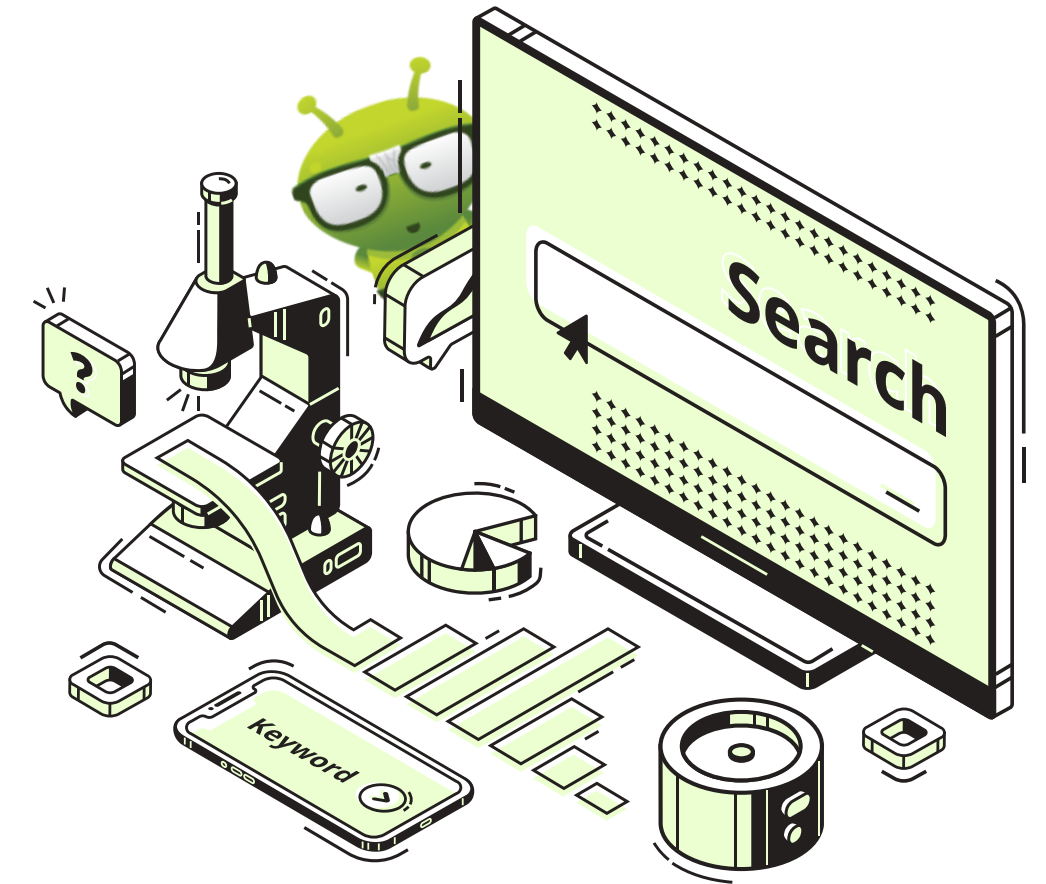


INTERNATIONAL RANKINGS

One of the key ways to monitor progress of your international SEO strategy is to monitor your keyword rankings on a monthly basis, so that you can observe how your position in the search results changes over time. You will want to do this separately for each market.

There are 2 ways you can monitor this. Firstly, are your keyword rankings overall. This can easily be found in tools such as Google Analytics (if it's linked with the Google Search Console) or the Google Search Console directly. However, it's inevitable that you will rank for keywords that aren't valuable to you, either because they don't drive qualified traffic to your site and/or because they don't accurately reflect your content.

That's why we also recommend that you monitor the rankings for the keywords that you have selected from your keyword research. These are the keyphrases that you have decided are relevant to your brand and your content, and you have used them to optimise your site. Monitoring these keywords is a crucial way of checking the progress of your localised on-page strategy, observing what works and what doesn't work and tweaking accordingly over time. Here you might find SEO tools such as Ahrefs or SEMrush helpful.



ON-GOING TECHNICAL MONITORING

As technical SEO is a key part of any SEO strategy, especially international SEO, you should also monitor your technical health on a monthly basis.

Here you can use free tools such as Google Search Console,



or paid SEO tools such as Screaming Frog or Ahrefs



Some of the key details you should be looking for to keep your site in check are:

Hreflang tag health

Indexability

Broken links

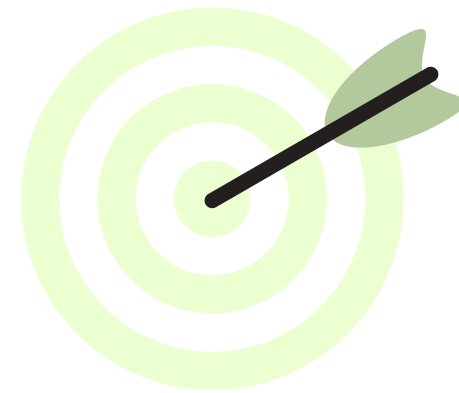
Broken images

Page experience factors

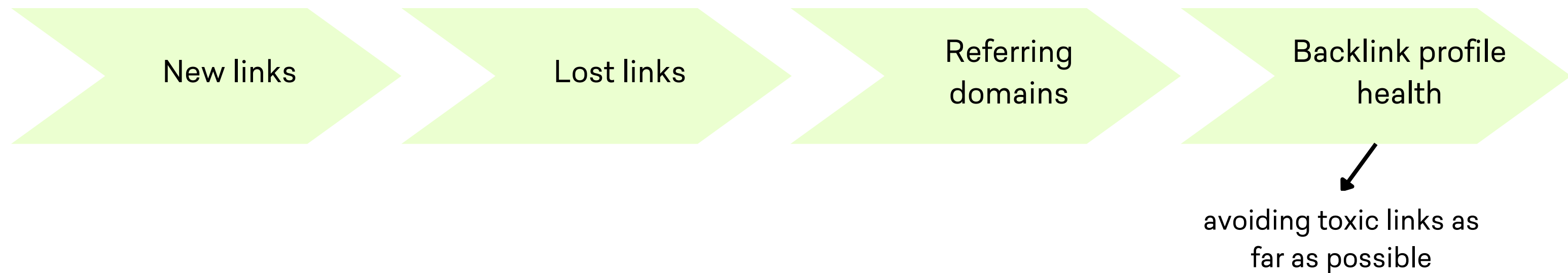
such as Core Web Vitals,
page load speed &
mobile friendliness

ON-GOING LINK BUILDING

Last but not least, you should also routinely check your backlink profile. Links remain a key ranking factor for most search engines, with each one counting as a mini vote for your site. The more votes you get, the more likely the search engine is to view your site as valuable and rank it higher up the search engine – particularly if the backlinks come from sites in your target markets.



Over time you can build bespoke link building strategies for each of your target countries. Key figures that you might want to report on are:



CONCLUSION

And that should be everything you need to start building your international SEO strategy. The most important thing to remember is that each region, country and language is unique and if you want to succeed on the same level as you have in your home country, then you need to give your new market the same attention and dedication.



THANK YOU FOR READING



If you would like more help with your global strategy, we are an award-winning agency with over 20 years of experience in international SEO, working across the globe with digital marketing specialists and native speakers in over 35 languages! So, get in touch with us today and find out how we can help you cross borders and achieve your international goals.

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