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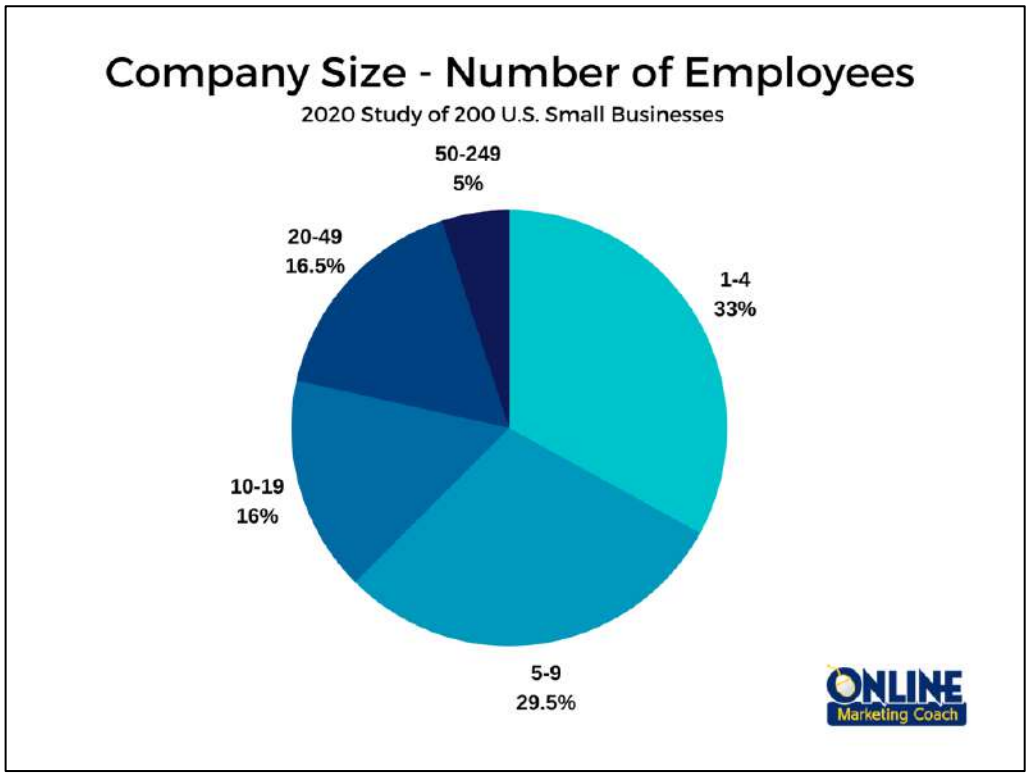
Executive Summary

Small businesses aren't mining search engine optimization (SEO) nearly enough– whether they try to get relevant natural search traffic on their own or with consultants.

For the 2020 study, I looked at a dozen SEO-related indicators ranging from SEO page titles to the use of a call to action (CTA). What does a CTA have to do with SEO? Well, I hope these businesses actually want a search engine visitor to call or connect with them through a form/email.

I evaluated 200 U.S. small business websites (January-April 2020). I had no connection to any of the companies that I selected from ReferenceUSA data for diverse industries. Here is a breakdown of company sizes based on the number of employees:



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Key Findings:

- 77% don't include effective keywords in page content headers.
- 60% don't use keywords in SEO page titles.
- 69% have very low domain authority scores (20 or less on a 1-100 scale).
- 33% have 50 backlinks or less.
- 25% have fewer than 10 pages.
- 73% don't include keywords in many of their page URLs.
- 91% don't feature keywords in image file names.
- 85% don't offer educational content.
- 51% don't have HTTPS secure websites.
- 73% use at least one keyword in their domain names.
- 89% don't effectively use internal links.
- 80% are mobile-friendly.
- 83% use a call to action of some kind.

From the core data, I also evaluated 20 websites to check out their rankings (I ran reports on SEMrush). Most websites were way off the mark. Very few keyword phrases ever made it to the first page of Google. Some weren't even close. Here are a few with some decent rankings and others that aren't too far from the top 10 or at least the top 30 positions.

Exceptional rankings require several SEO best practices to be in place – not just one such as a good content header.

For planning and perspective, monthly search volume matters too. But I'm highlighting rankings because they're a clear indicator of SEO success or failure. Yes, each keyword phrase had corresponding search data ranging from 10 monthly searches on Google to several thousand. I omitted that data because it wasn't the focus (I just wanted to provide a ranking snapshot). For example, I didn't weigh in on any low volume searches. The search volume is relative to whether marketers are fighting for local, regional or national (keywords that aren't geo-specific).

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CabinetParts.com is one of the best websites among the 200. Here is a small snapshot of their Google rankings:

Cabinetry Parts (Pompano Beach, FL)

Keyword	Google
cabinet parts	1
laminate sheets for cabinets	1
soft close hinge insert	1
cabinet drawer inserts	1
cabinet drawer slides	2
pull out hamper cabinet	2
kitchen cabinet parts	3
cabinet hardware hinges	4
cabinet making supplies	4

In the following examples, you'll see some excellent Google rankings. But then the websites fall off and lack the visibility that could drive more Google search engine traffic.

Roofing Company (Fort Myers, FL)

Keyword	Google
marco island commercial roofing	1
marco island roofing	4
roof repair marco island fl	14
roofing contractor fort myers fl	21
roofing companies fort myers	24
roofing companies in fort myers florida	25
cape coral roof repair	29
roof repair in cape coral	31
roof repair fort myers	32
bathroom remodel fort myers	33
roofing contractors fort myers florida	33
commercial roofing fort myers	33
roofing companies cape coral	34

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Car Wash (Merrillville, IN)

Keyword	Google
car detailing merrillville in	1
car wash merrillville indiana	1
hand car wash merrillville in	1
car wash in merrillville	1
auto detailing northwest indiana	6
car wash crown point	15
car detailing valparaiso in	19
car wash valparaiso	29
auto detailing valparaiso in	34

Neuropsychology Clinic (Palo Alto, CA)

Keyword	Google
biofeedback palo alto	3
biofeedback specialist	10
neurofeedback san jose	13
neurofeedback specialist	17
child psychologist palo alto	23

I rarely came across a website with good educational content. I approached the research with a very low bar. If the site had a blog with some recent posts, I gave it credit.

As a whole, small businesses just don't get the value of providing content that establishes trust. The companies talk all day long about what they do and maybe why they're the best. They repeatedly fail to reinforce their expertise. Educational guides? No. Video? No. White papers? Forget it. Infographics? No. Collections of industry research or data? Nothing.

I spot-checked domain ages for these websites. Most of the time, they've been around for many years. They've had plenty of opportunities to add insightful, useful content and they've chosen to skip that part of digital marketing.

Are they getting by without the effort? Sure, they're in business. Are they making money or losing money? It's hard to say. But clearly, they're not taking simple steps to grow through quality content.

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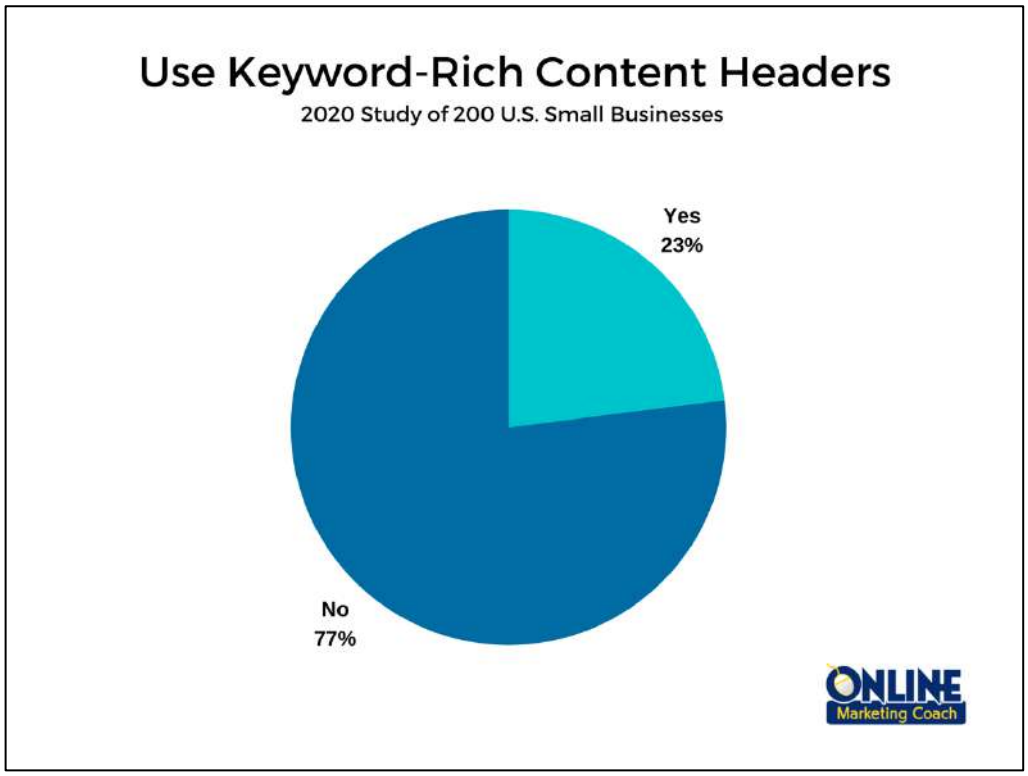
Ready for the details? Let's go deeper.

PAGE CONTENT HEADER

The content header is among the most powerful areas that influence search engine rankings. Usually, small business websites have headers that summarize a product, service or article. But 77% don't have the right keywords that can rank (the words are general or too competitive). Note: I didn't fault websites for using something other than an H1 tag as long the keyword-rich header was text and not an image.



You don't necessarily need to make room for long-tail keyword phrases in headers. A single keyword that may seem broad can actually help support relate keyword phrases based on the content in the balance of the page. In other words, a word in the header can resonate with other text and give websites a fighting chance with some keyword combinations and rankings.

Here are some examples of websites that at least tried to weave in keywords.

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In this example, the main header stretches to a second line (the two lines are a tad close). The structure allows for several keyword possibilities. Hopefully, the company is open to testing out different versions of its headers.

I like how this header clearly states the product and supports it with other words in the secondary header.

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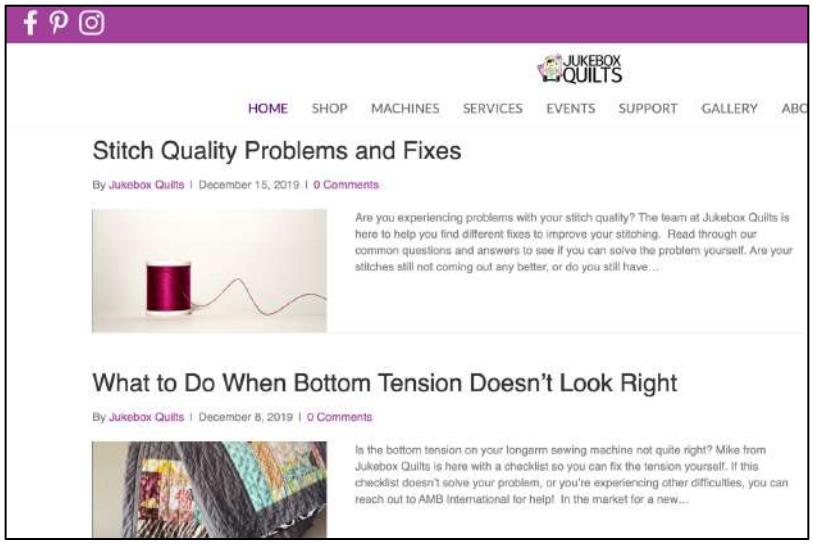
It looks like the next header could be enhanced (the space can handle another word or two):

The article headers for this quilting website have some potential. The first header, “Stitch Quality Problems and Fixes” is clear. But it could it begin with “quilt” as in “Quilt Stitch Quality Problems and Fixes.” Any visitor would likely know it’s about quilt stitching without being so obvious. I would still add “quilt” for SEO and test the effect.



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I like the simplicity of this content header that's supported by the local city and an appropriate subhead.

The website management has the right idea by working in Jacksonville. I would test out "Jacksonville, FL" and "lawyers." You're allowed to tinker with SEO opportunities. Never say: "One and done."

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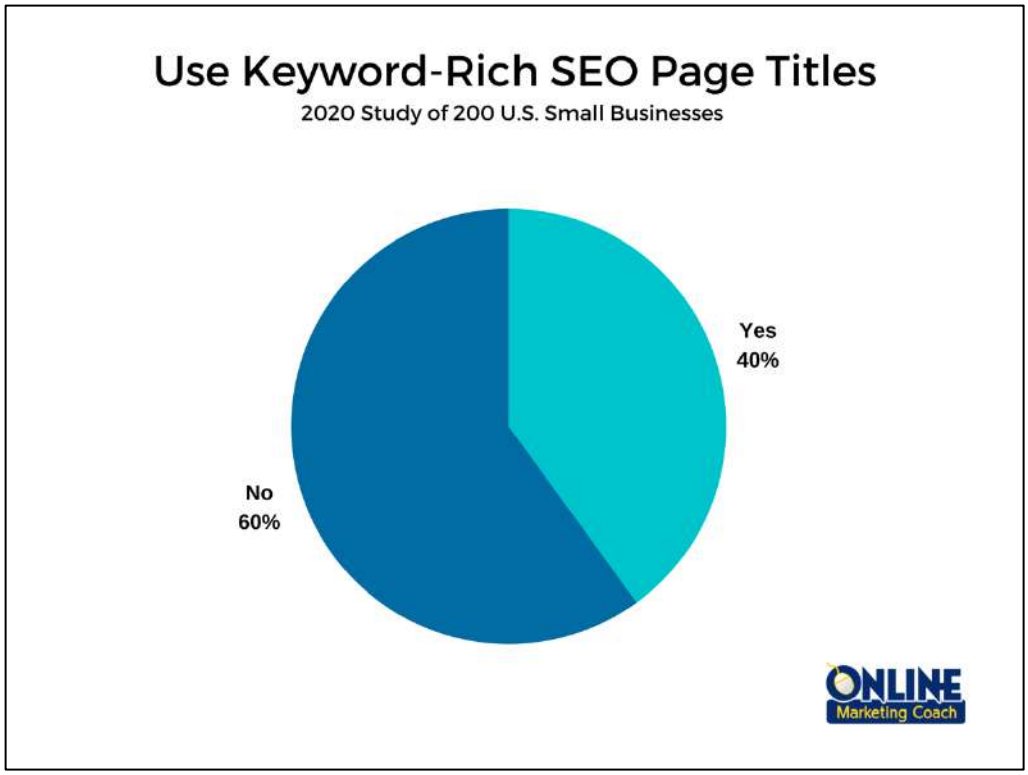
SEO PAGE TITLES

Websites still benefit from proper planning with the SEO page titles. I prefer that label over “page titles” just so they’re not confused with the headers (or headlines). They’re barely visible with websites (except when you hover over a browser tab). They get to shine as links on with search engine results pages (SERPs).

I gave websites credit if it looked like the marketers at least tried, even if the page titles had extra words or the wrong words at the beginning. If the page content header was “Our Products” and the SEO page title was identical, I didn’t consider that keyword-rich (60% lack keywords).



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Here are some examples of the ones that stood out (nice effort, could be better):

SEO Page Title
Jacksonville Florida Personal Injury Attorneys
Jacksonville Anesthesia Error Attorneys | Anesthesia Malpractice
Jacksonville Emergency Room Error Attorneys
Jacksonville Wrongful Death Attorneys
Legal Practice Areas in Jacksonville, St. Augustine, Daytona, Gainesville
Jacksonville Truck Accident Attorneys
Jacksonville Bicycle Accident Attorneys
Car Accident Attorney in Jacksonville | Auto Accident Lawyer
Jacksonville Surgical Error Attorneys | Florida Surgeon Malpractice
Jacksonville Shoulder Dystocia Attorney
Jacksonville Nursing Home Abuse Attorneys

In this example, you can see why it's not always helpful to include the company name. The business name adds keyword redundancy and detracts from the target keyword phrases. Google often dynamically adds company names to search results anyway. A common SEO best practice is to use a catchy headline-style page title. But even the vertical line separator still works (Google honors the keywords in this format). I liked how this company tried to work in some local words.

SEO Page Title
Trade Show Display Rentals Indianapolis & Chicago - Thompson Kerr Displays
Trade Show Exhibits By Type - Thompson Kerr Displays
20' x 20' Trade Show Displays & Exhibits - Thompson Kerr Displays
Budget Trade Show Displays - Thompson Kerr Displays
Trade Show Counters and tablet stands - Thompson Kerr Displays
10 x 20 displays - Thompson Kerr Displays
Trade Show Display Rentals Indianapolis & Chicago - Thompson Kerr Displays
10' x 10' Trade Show Displays and Exhibits - Thompson Kerr Displays
Trade Show Booths | Indianapolis & Chicago | Banner Stands - Thompson Kerr Displays

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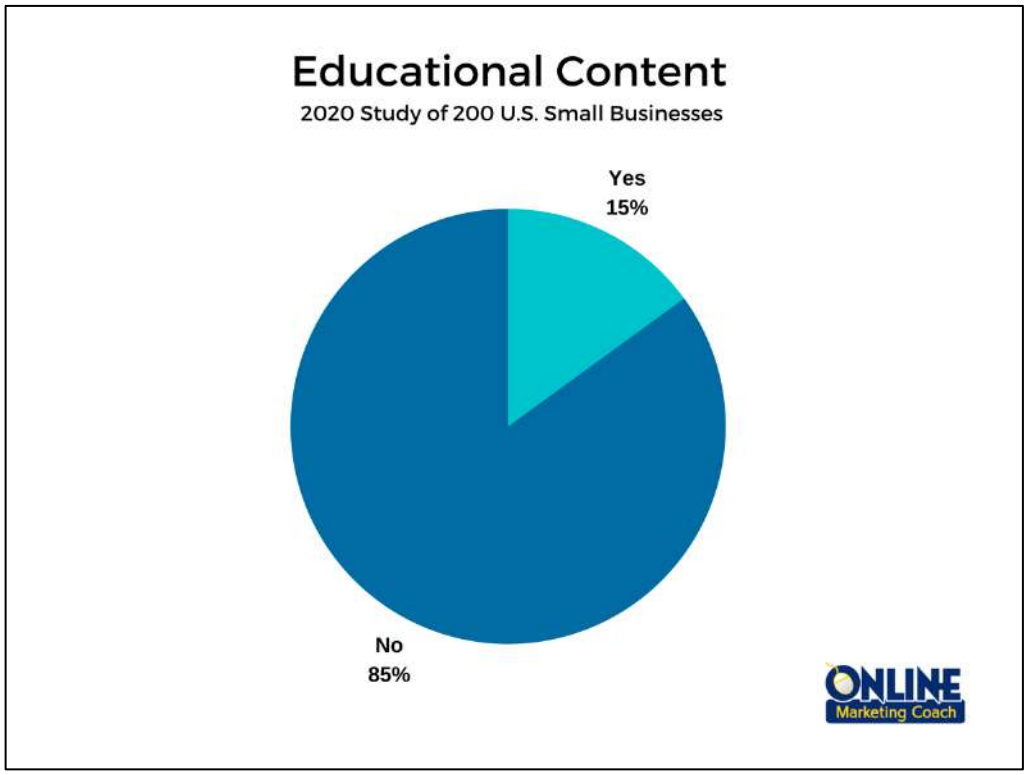
EDUCATIONAL CONTENT

Sure, good content is subjective. I was an extremely generous judge with each evaluation. Mostly, I saw nothing other than brochure websites (85% lack any educational content like eBooks, white papers, infographics, robust FAQs, or articles). Anything extra usually was just a blog – not bad but not enough to leverage content for search engine rankings, natural traffic, leads and sales.



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Even without a how-to guide or video series, websites can offer reasonable content. Guardian Data Destruction has some case studies in addition to a blog.

Abbey Neuropsychology Clinic also has a blog. The headline conveys the topic, but the page design makes it hard for a visitor to get to the main content. Users need to get past the spacious header area and a giant image before seeing the first line.

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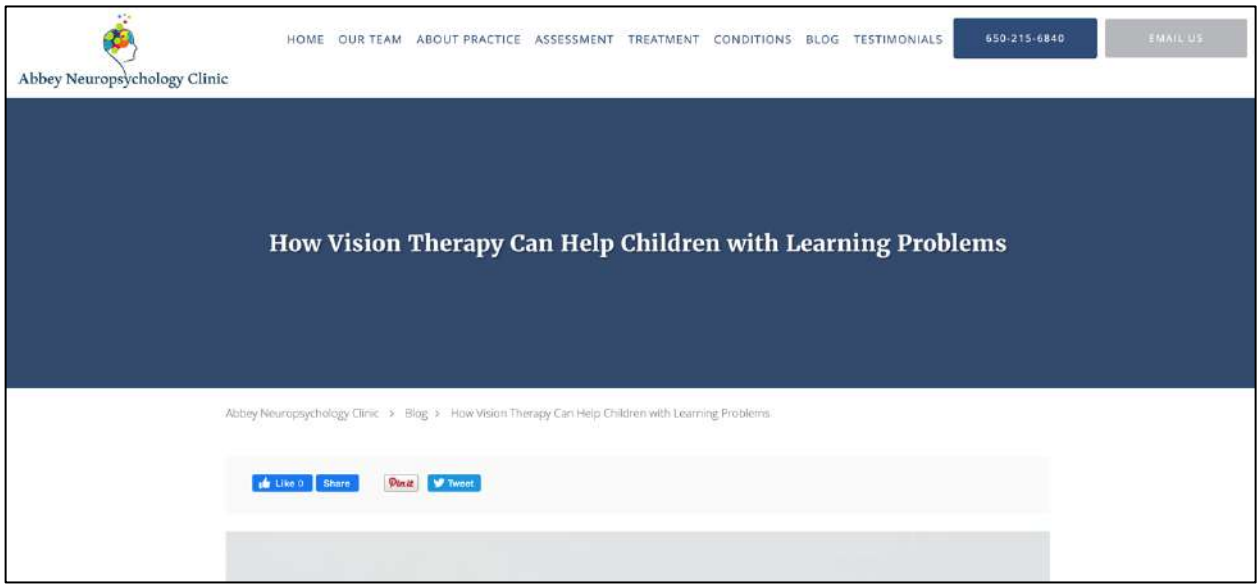

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Jukebox Quilts offers extras like a blog, videos, and a page with useful links to other resources.

DOMAIN AUTHORITY

Many small businesses simply are invisible on search engines because they lack credibility. SEO debates rage about what's most important to rank well on Google and other major search engines. Is it the content? Backlinks? Having been involved with thousands of websites (clients and their competitors), I think domain authority sets the stage. You can have vital SEO pieces in place and fall short.

Moz has an established system for assigning a 1-100 score largely based on the number and quality of backlinks a website has earned. These links influence rankings. For this study, 69% of small business websites had scores of 20 or far less.

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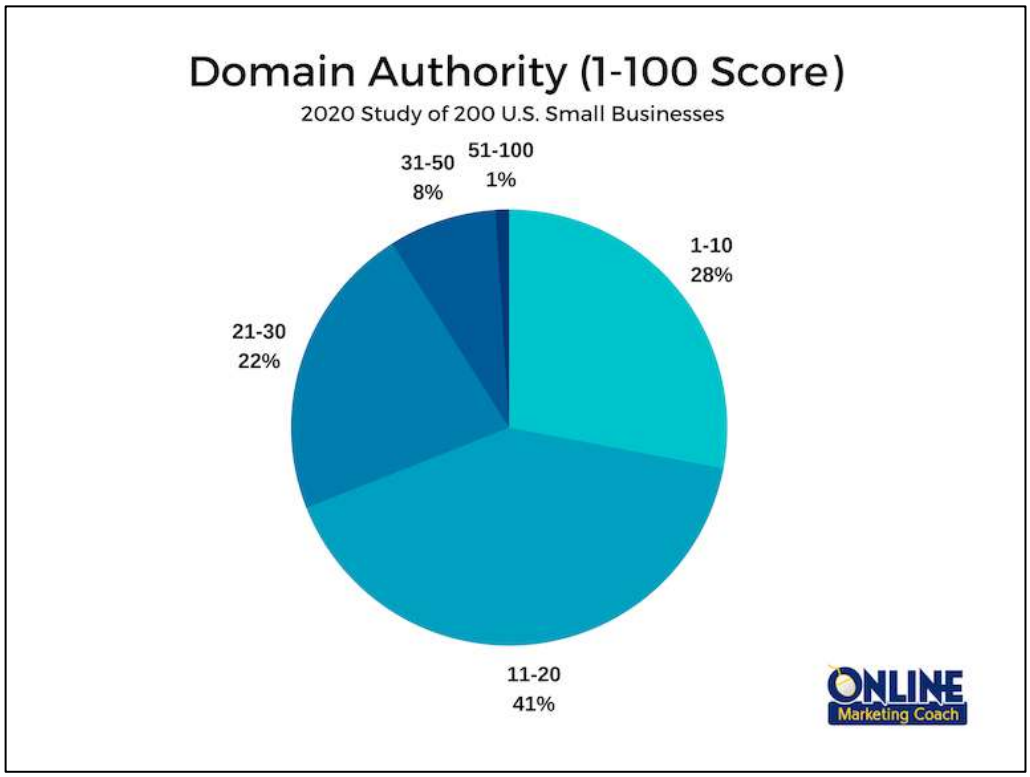

BACKLINKS

For this study, I also used Moz for backlinks data. Backlink totals exceed the number of linking domains. It's not uncommon for a website to link more than once to another website. For example, a website can include links in multiple blog posts, resources, forums, etc.

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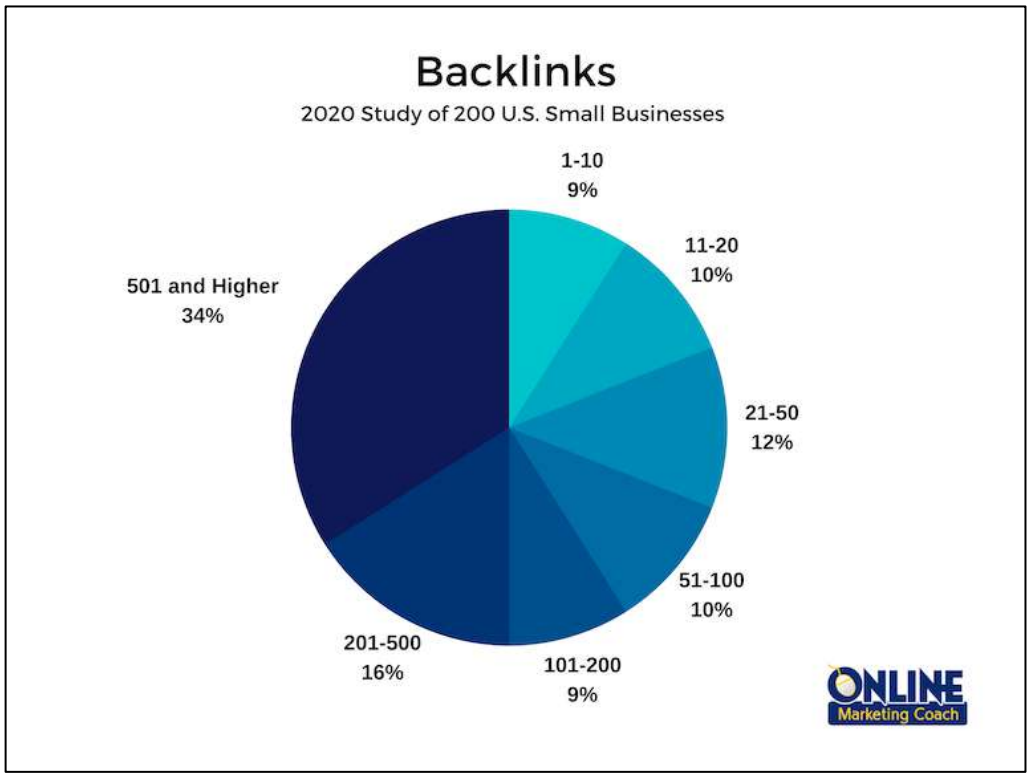

KEYWORDS IN DOMAIN NAMES

Digital marketers don't agree on the value of keywords in domain names. I think they still make a difference for any website regardless of the size of the business. Back in 2012, Google decried exact match domains (EMDs) and deemphasized them with search results. But Google primarily attacked the spammy ones like this make-believe domain name: florida-fl-south-beach-condos-rent-luxury-units-vacation.com.

In the study, 73% of small business websites had at least one keyword in their domain names. Here are some examples:

- Northarlingtonappliancerepairmen.com
- Linkinghandscounseling.com
- Flushingnychiro.com
- Sparklingcityflorist.com
- Baileyscarwash.com
- Notaryservicesofsandiego.com
- Qualitydental1.com
- Acclaimedautoservice.com
- Centurianpestcontrol.com

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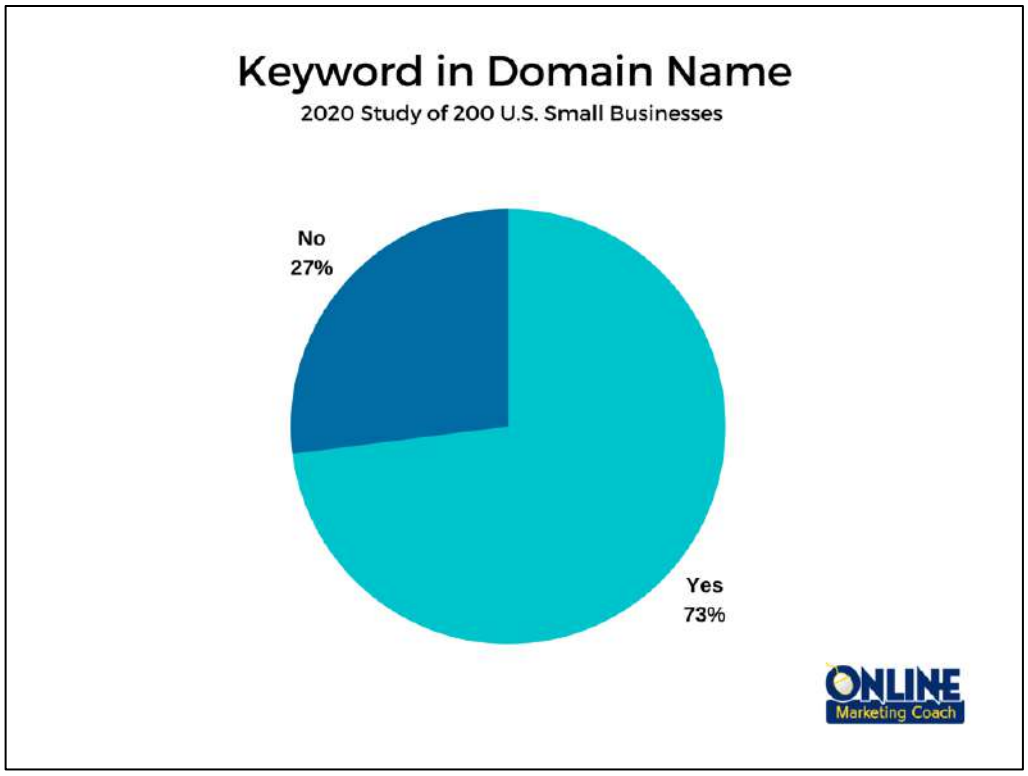
- Tampabayplumbingrepair.com
- Baileybrosusedcars.com
- Floramacarpetdiscount.Com
- Capitalwholesaleelectric.Com
- Chadabbottsigns.Com
- Hitechconcretepumping.Com
- Truxeldental.Com
- Innovative-Glass.Com
- Jaxhairremoval.Com



HTTPS (secure websites)

For several years, Google has encouraged website owners to ensure that they have secure websites so people feel comfortable using them. HTTPS stands for HyperText Transfer Protocol Secure. Does it mean marketers will get a ranking boost? Maybe. It's easy to find examples on the Internet where someone made a change from HTTP to HTTPS and rankings improved. Generally, I'd say the effect is nominal. It's also hard to pinpoint the impact of HTTPS given the volume of algorithm changes that frequently occur at the same time as SEO-related website changes (content additions, internal links, etc.). I included the data in the study because it may be a factor worth noting (51% don't use HTTPS).

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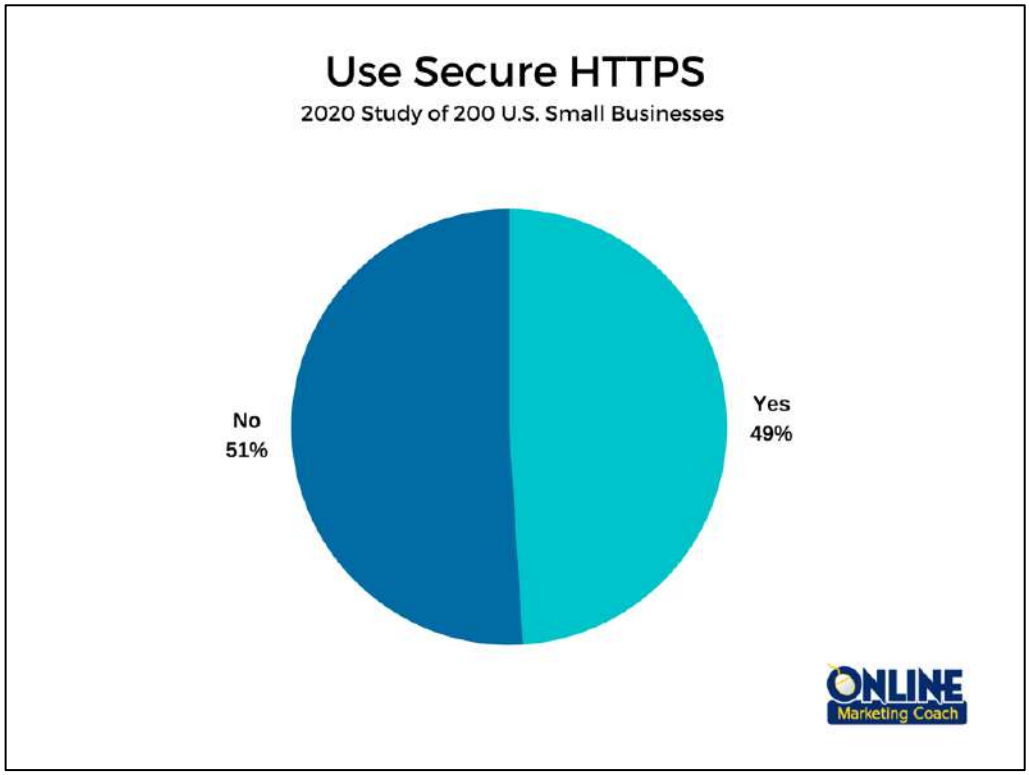
Learn more about HTTPS in this BrightEdge blog post: HTTP vs HTTPS and SEO in 2020.



INDEXED PAGES ON GOOGLE

Rankings can be affected by the number of website pages that Google has discovered. The total can be deceiving. Sometimes Google will come across more than a standard website page like PDFs, Excels, Word documents, PowerPoints and more. Google says it captures information from "hundreds of billions of webpages."

Clearly, more pages increase your odds of ranking for something and driving more natural search engine traffic to your website. Too often, small businesses settle for tiny websites without developing new pages. A third of the 200 websites I analyzed have 20 pages or less based on data that Google releases (25% have 1-10 pages).

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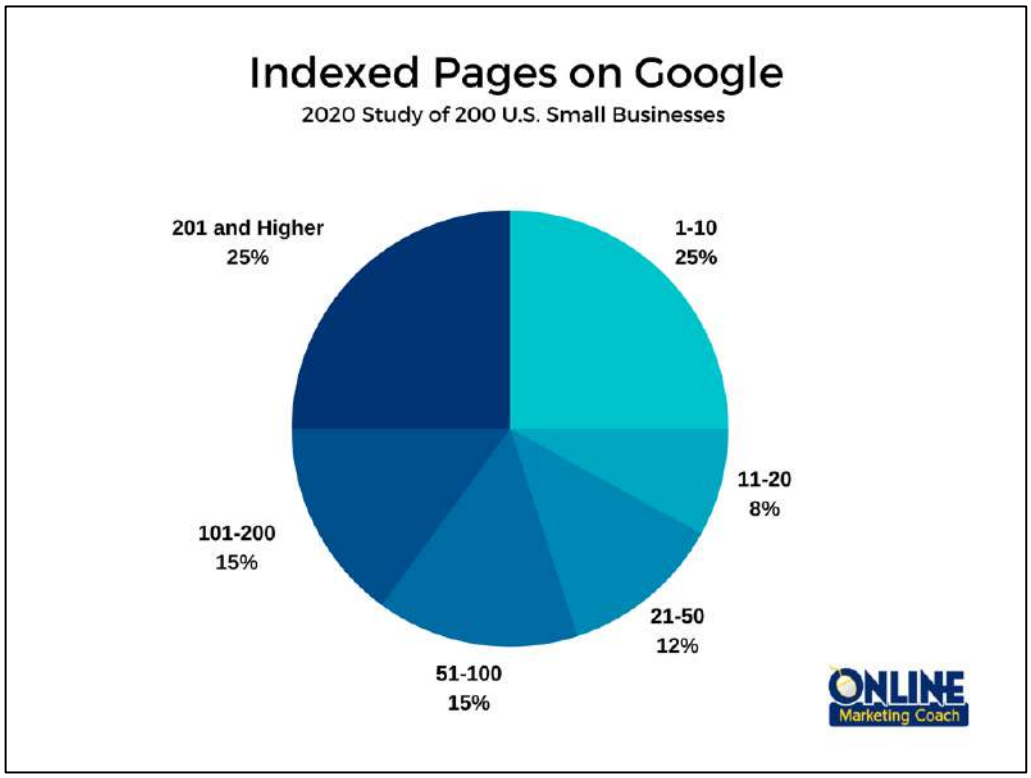

KEYWORDS IN PAGE URLS

The presence of words in page URLs can make a difference with search engine rankings. But it's far less significant than page content headers and SEO page titles. Small businesses simply don't try (73% of their websites lack keywords in many of their URLs).

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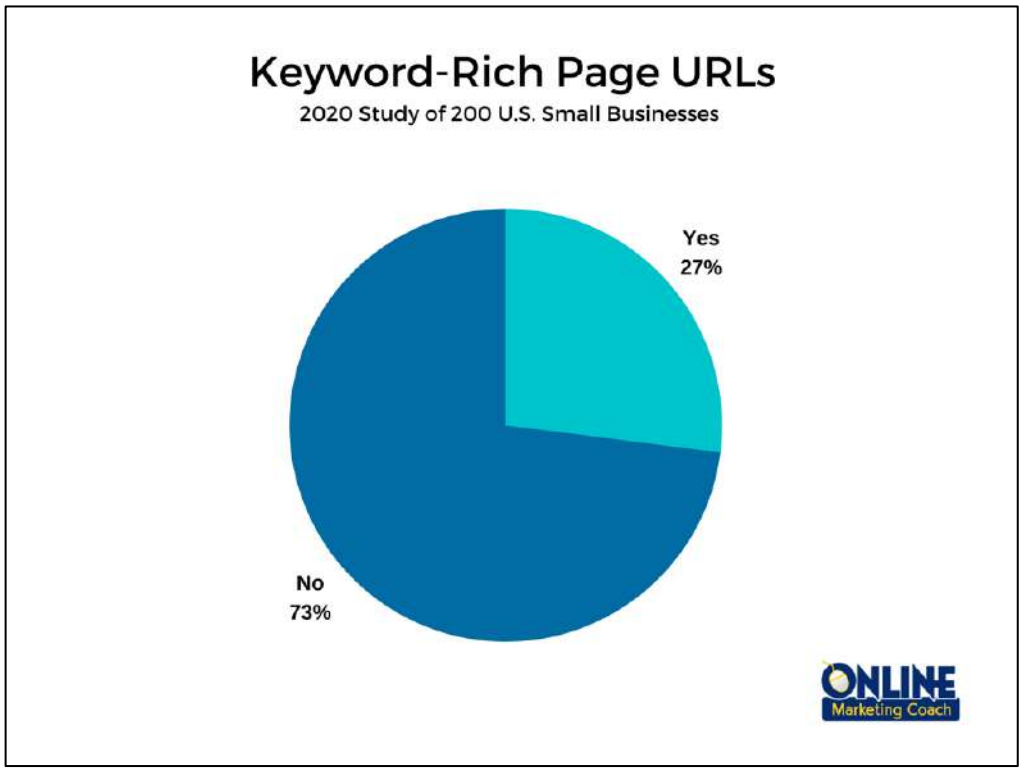

MOBILE-FRIENDLY

Google's switch to mobile-first indexing is really about how websites are indexed – not rankings. But it's a consideration because there could be ranking implications.

For example, websites should load quickly on mobile devices. How long a page takes to appear is a ranking factor. If nothing else, websites should be responsive to please users as well as Google that's laser focused on all things mobile.

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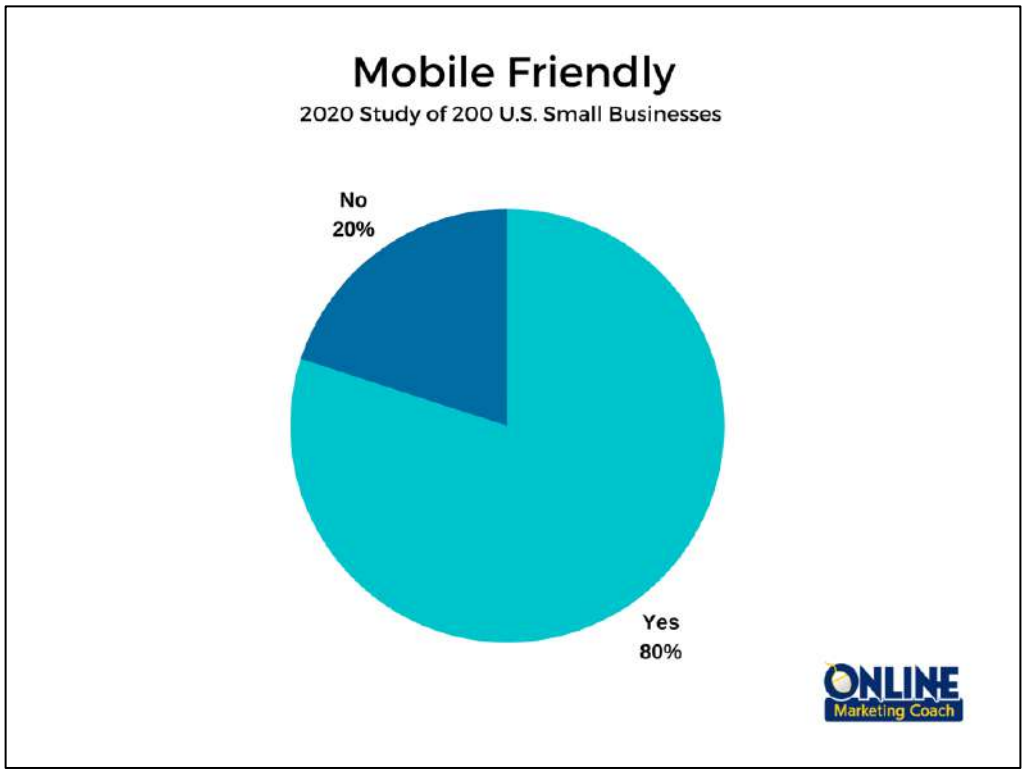

I used the Google Mobile-Friendly Test to assess the 200 websites – and most passed (80%). I think Google is rather generous with its diagnosis of responsive designs. As a result, most small businesses appear to be doing well even if their websites have serious design flaws.

Explore mobile-first indexing and responsive websites with these resources:

How Does Mobile-First Indexing Work, and How Does It Impact SEO? (Moz)

Should You Worry About Your SEO and Google's Mobile-First Index? (Content Marketing Institute)

The Complete Guide to a Mobile-Friendly Website (Quick Sprout)

KEYWORD-RICH IMAGES FILE NAMES

In the world of SEO, image file names are among the least important ranking factors. But why wouldn't you include keywords with dashes when naming images?

Google considers image file names and image alt text. I looked at how the websites handle images because they're low-hanging fruit. Website developers process each image. Why don't they take the

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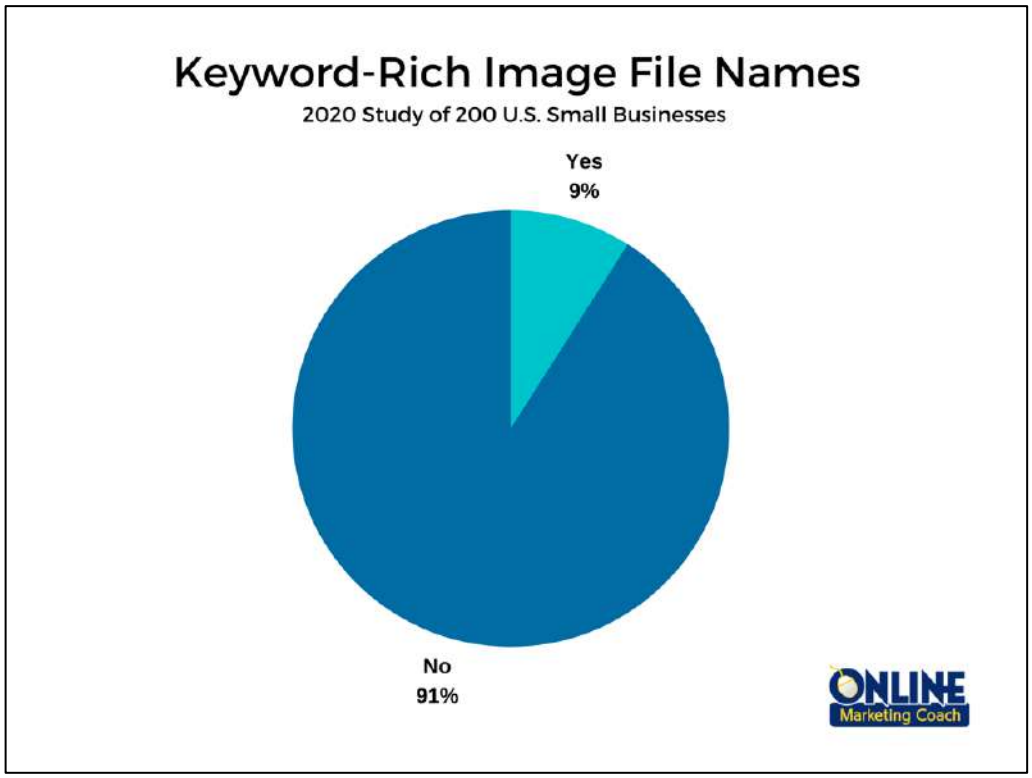
time to bake in some SEO? Most likely, it just never occurs to them. Small business websites are littered with image file names that lack any keywords (91% lack keywords). It's a shame. A few extra seconds per image could have some impact on search engine performance.



INTERNAL LINKS

It's important to have an internal links strategy so Google and other search engines can get a feel for the most important pages on a website. Yet, 89% of small business websites don't make a point to cross-reference key pages with links.

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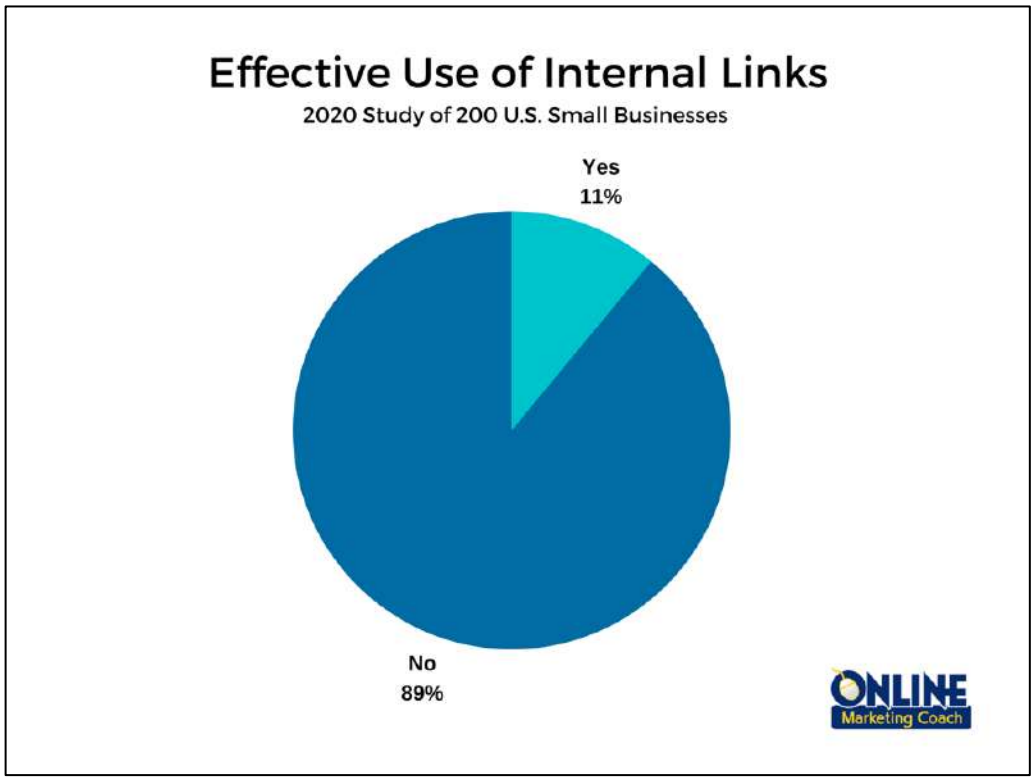
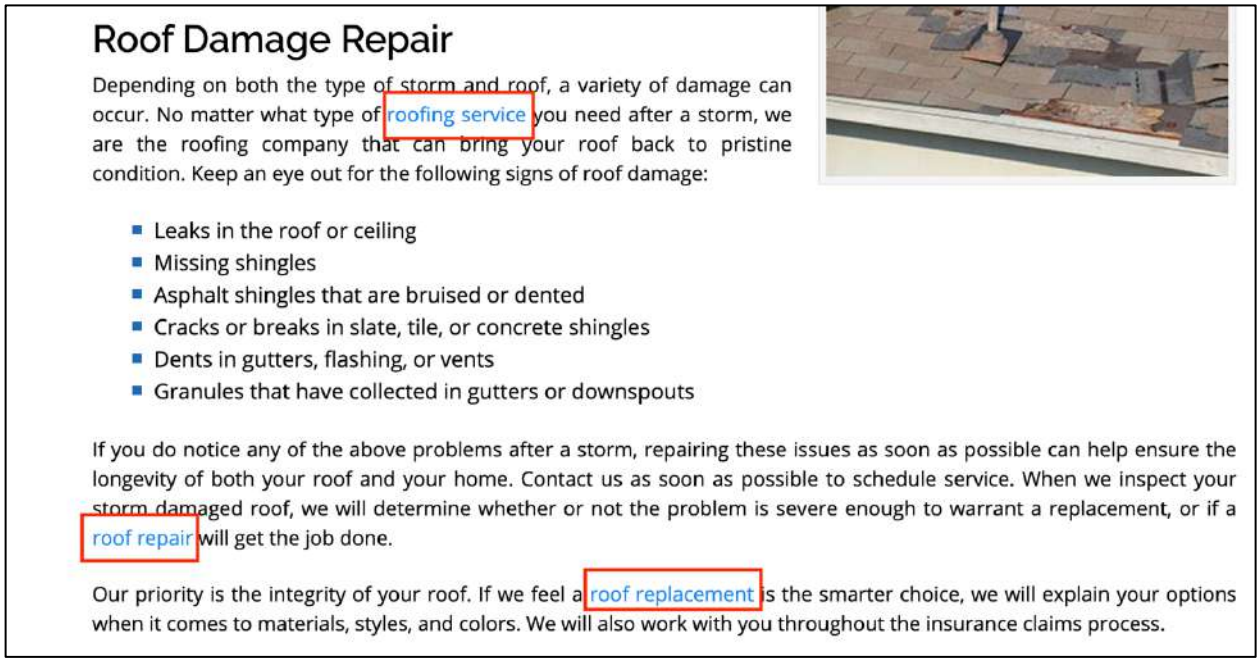


Here is a simple example of how internal links can be handled:



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Some websites support links a combination of visuals and text:

CALL TO ACTION

The CTA evaluation was subjective. I didn't assess their efforts based on quality. I just wanted anything that stood out – even a small phone number at the top of a page.

Too often, websites lack an evident CTA (83% don't have clear CTAs). For example, "Contact Us" is commonly buried in the top navigation – off to the right side with no distinctive color or font size. I applauded the few websites that made any effort for "Contact Us" to catch my attention.

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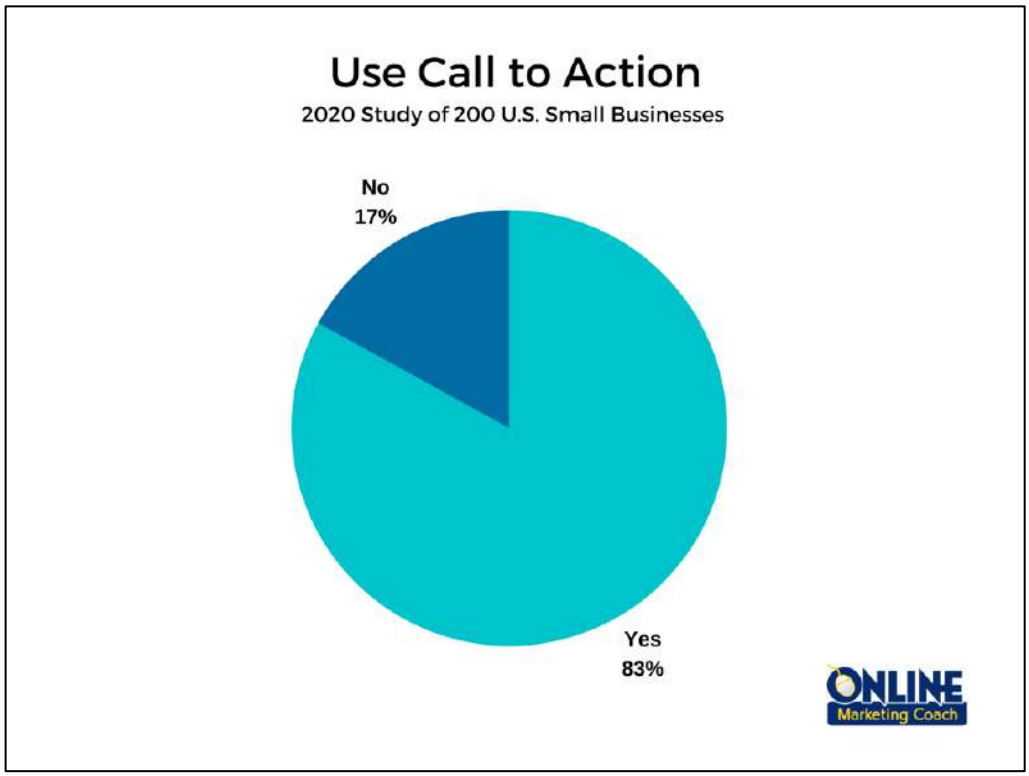
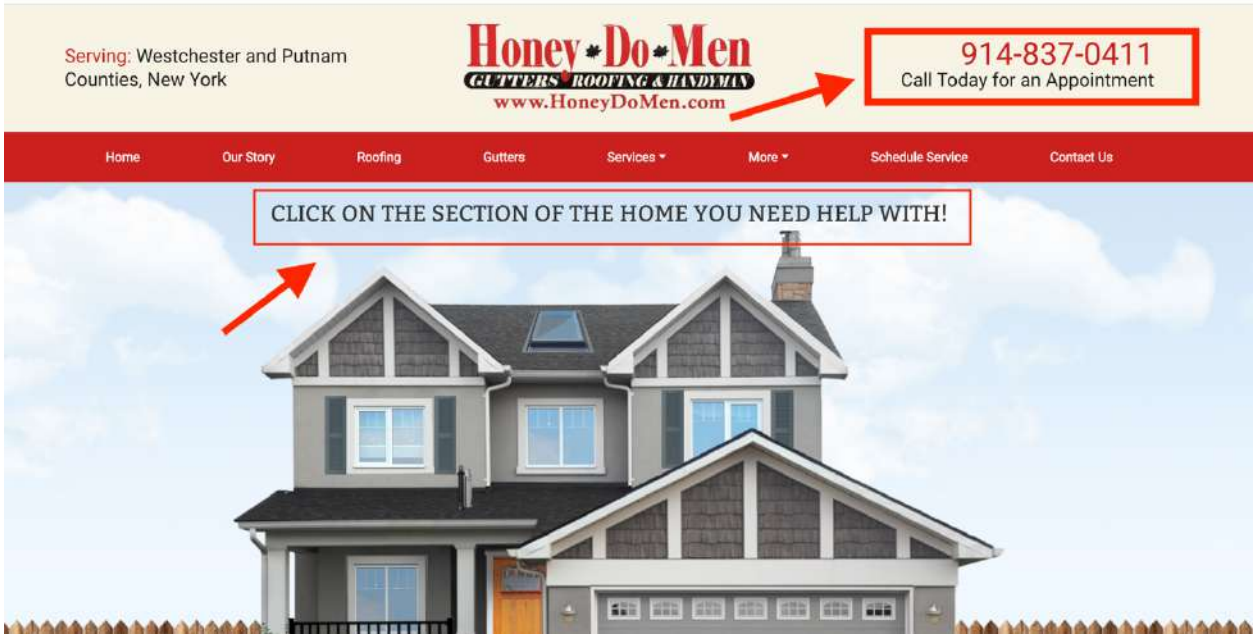


Sometimes phone numbers are extremely tiny – this one isn't bad. The "click on the section" made me want to see more.



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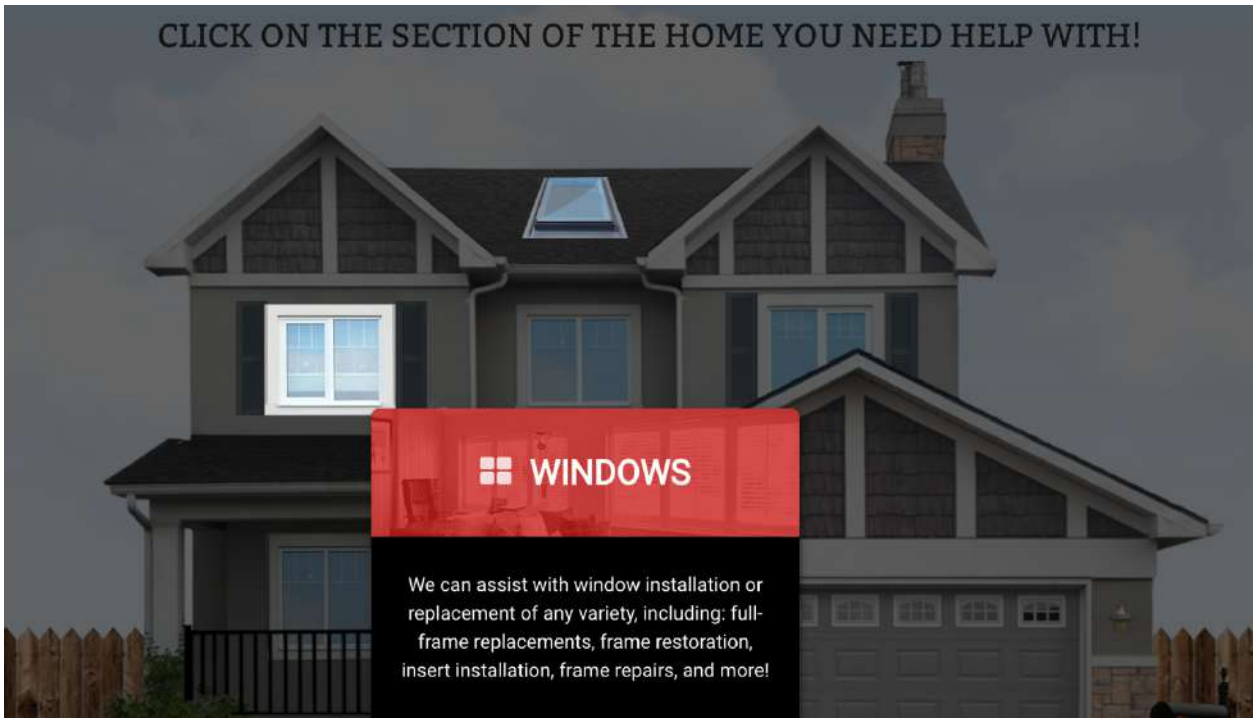

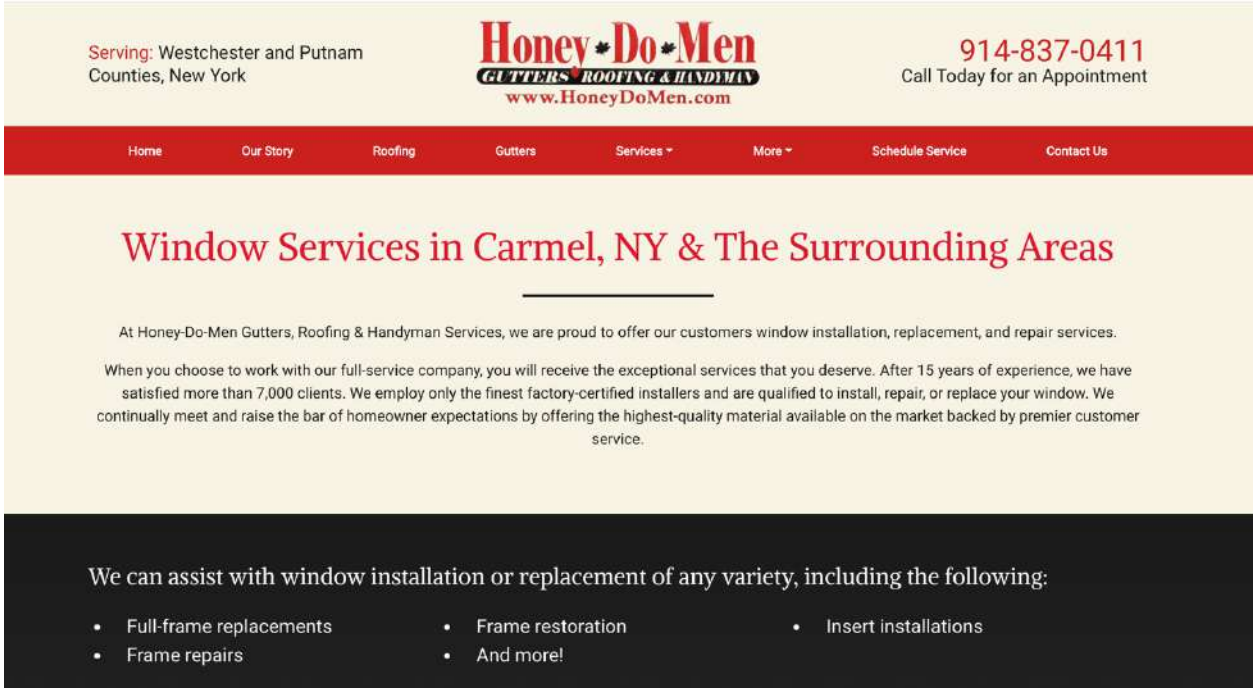

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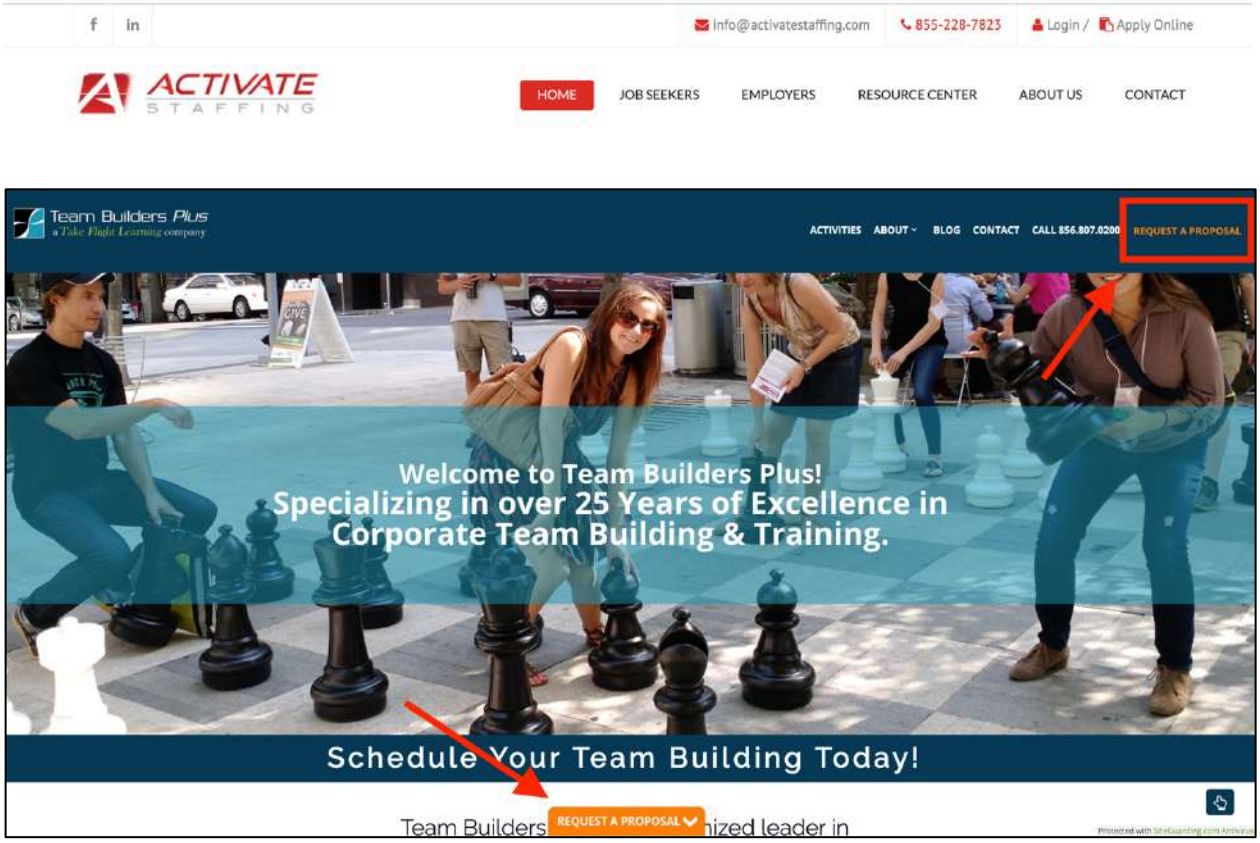
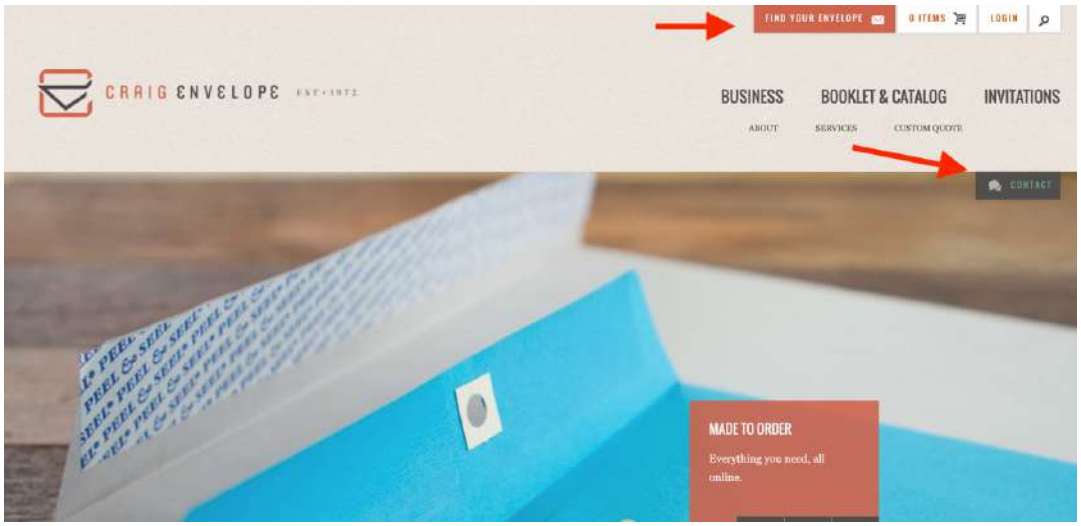
Colors and capitalization (and font selection) can all make a difference. Activate Staffing doesn't give "Contact" special treatment, but the phone number stands out – and there are other CTAs to help visitors connect with the company.



The "Find Your Envelope" CTA worked for me – the position, colors, and icon. I figured a potential customer could comb through available products and options before committing.



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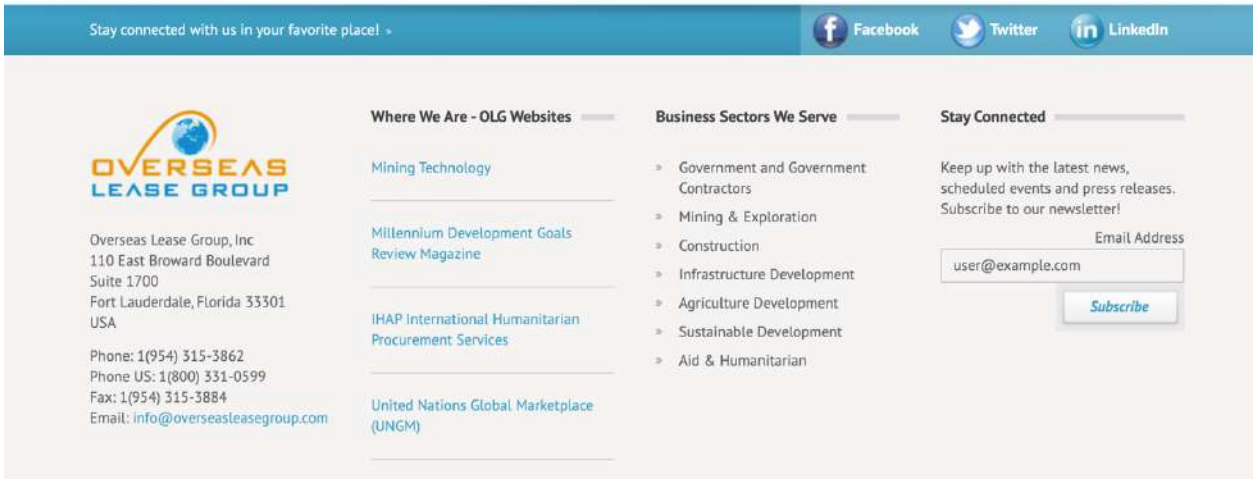
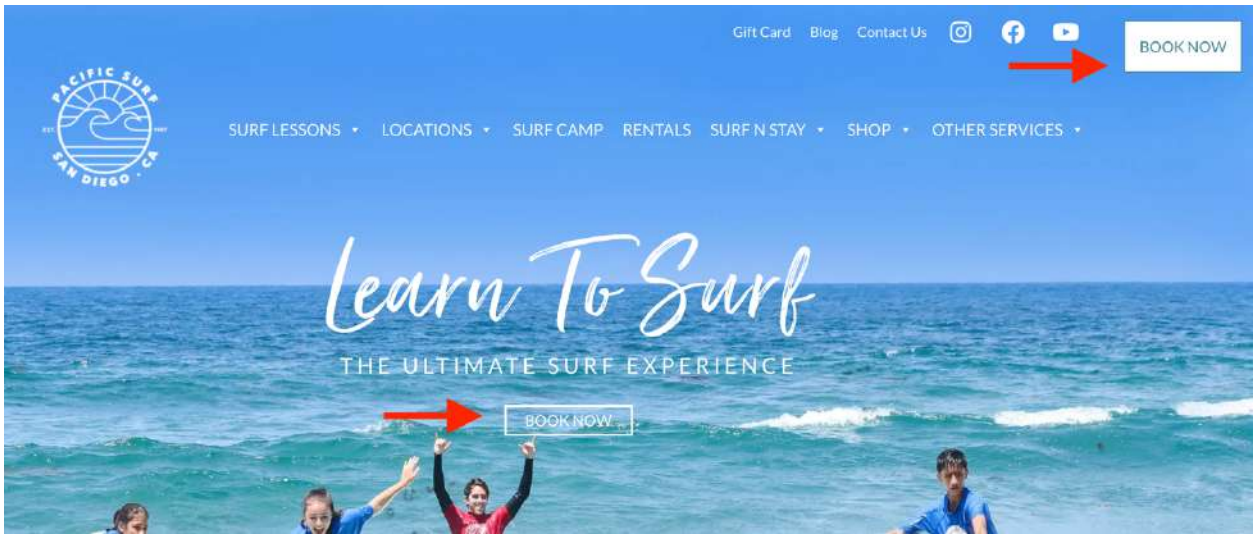
In this example, the CTAs are at the bottom of the page – not ideal. But I marked this website a "yes" because many of the pages aren't too long (meaning the footer stands out), the contact information is easy to see, and the "Stay Connected" option is useful.

Some marketers question having social media icons at the top of the pages. In this example, they're with the bottom section I selected. It's probably best to have them low within the design. Why encourage visitors to leave right away, moments after they arrive?



As faint as they appear, it wasn't tough to see the "Book Now" options with Pacific Surf.



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CONCLUSION

Search engines like Google look at hundreds of variables to determine how a website will rank. But the data clearly shows there are deficiencies with small business websites. I created a similar study in 2012 and small businesses struggled at that point as well. Fortune 100 companies have their own problems. Check out this infographic based on my 2015 SEO study.

If you want to explore ranking factors in more depth, these resources should help:

Google's 200 Ranking Factors: The Complete List (2020) (Backlinko)

Google Ranking Factors 2019: Opinions from 1,500+ Professional SEOs (Sparktoro)

Niche Ranking Factors: Targeted analysis for your Online Market (Searchmetrics)

What challenges do you face with SEO? Let's chat: Call me anytime at **800-490-3350** (Ext. 2)

— Mike Murray (mike@onlinemarketingcoach.com)

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