

## Video 1: Why are topic clusters important?

Hi, I'm Justin with HubSpot Academy.

Content marketing has seen a lot of changes over the past several years. Many of these changes can be attributed to the rapidly evolving search landscape, as well as a shift in the way people search, discover, and consume content online.

All that said, many marketers still experience the same pain points that were common 5 to 10 years ago. "I struggle to measure the return on investment of the content I create." "We know the content we're creating provides value, but we still don't seem to rank high on Google for our target keywords." And, "I've done my keyword research. Now what?"

Let me start by telling you that creating more content in the hopes of having your website show up on Google is not the answer. In fact, adding more content to an outdated existing site architecture can make it harder for Google to find and rank your content. That's not a situation any marketer wants to find themselves in.

The answer to these problems spans way beyond the amount of content your business publishes per week or month; the real problem lies in the way that most content strategies are being developed and organized.

SEO is evolving, and marketers need to adapt.

Today, we live in a digitally informed world, one where there's millions of people searching for content every minute as well as millions of pieces of content being published online every minute. This makes the job of a search engine like Google increasingly difficult to serve you the most relevant, high authoritative content possible. To remain a relevant and helpful search engine, Google released a series of algorithm changes over the past several years.

The first notable update, which really shook things up, was Google's "Hummingbird" algorithm update in 2013. This update focused on parsing out phrases rather than focusing on specific search queries. Many search engine optimizers and content marketers viewed this as an initial shift from a keyword to topic focus.

The next major update happened in 2015—Google's RankBrain algorithm update. RankBrain is Google's machine-learning artificial intelligence system that interprets people's searches to find pages that might not have the exact words they searched for. Google is able to do this by associating past search history with similar themes and pulling together keywords and phrases to provide a better context-driven search engine results page.

For more information on the evolution of SEO, check out the resources section below.

All this change brings opportunity to be found by your ideal audience. That's a key facet to creating successful content in today's online environment. Most forget it's not just about creating content for the search engine. Search engines aren't the ones filling out the forms on your website. Search engines aren't the ones sharing your content on social media. Search engines aren't your customers—humans are.

If you want to create effective content that converts visitors into leads and eventually customers, you need to create a helpful, positive user experience that solves for both the searcher and the search engine, not just one or the other.

Here's how you can solve for both: Create targeted clusters of relevant content that each cover a specific topic in depth. These targeted clusters then need to lead to a centralized hub, known as a pillar page.

A pillar page (also known as a content pillar or power page) is a website page that covers a specific topic in depth and is linked to a cluster of related content.

The topic cluster model, at its very essence, is a way of organizing a site's content pages using a cleaner and more deliberate site architecture. Topic clusters rearrange the architecture to clusters of related content that link to a central pillar page. Each pillar page should provide a comprehensive overview of the topic you're writing about. By linking all internal content within that topic to a pillar page, search engines such as Google can easily scan all the content and understand that there is a semantic relationship between the pages' content. The cluster setup also signals to search engines that there is real breadth and depth in the content, which gives the pillar page more authority on the topic. Algorithms like Google's RankBrain reward this orderly linking with higher search placement.

So whether you're new to creating content or just getting started, consider mapping out the topics your business wants to be known for and build authority around. Then map and organize your site architecture to support it.

## Video 2: How do you create an effective topic cluster

So you're looking to create a topic cluster for your site's content.

First, you need to identify a broad topic that you want to be known for and build authority around. Instead of thinking about specific keywords you want to rank for, focus on terms with high monthly search volume, usually 2–3 words in length.

For example, let's say you're a marketing agency who does inbound marketing for your clients. In this case, "inbound marketing" would be a great example of a broad topic that you might want to be known for and build authority around.

However, actually trying to rank for broad topics like inbound marketing could seem impossible. Not to mention, broad topics like this don't offer context as to what you're specifically talking, making it difficult to solve for searcher intent.

If your goal is to rank for a broad topic like inbound marketing, then you need to be specific as to what you're talking about by bringing context to the equation. Let's say your marketing agency offers a service to build personas for your business. After all, knowing who you're trying to reach is an important facet to a successful inbound marketing strategy. In this case, "inbound marketing personas" would be a great example of bringing context to the broad topic, inbound marketing. The trick to doing this effectively is finding specific terms in support of your broad topic that have adequate search volume to justify the content creation time. This is because you will be creating a pillar page around this specified topic with the intention of getting that page to rank on the first page of search engines like Google. And while I'd love to provide you with a magic monthly search volume number as a baseline to go by, it really will depend on your industry and location.

Here's a pro tip: When doing keyword research, identify a list of keywords you could use to bring context to your broad topic. Keep in mind, the higher the monthly search volume, the more difficult it will be to rank for. On that note, choosing keywords that have lower monthly search volume can still make a big impact on your search engine visibility. You may think that 250 monthly searches for a specific keyword is low, but ranking for a keyword with this monthly search volume can pay off in the long run. That's because the average first-page ranking will also rank well for about a thousand other relevant keywords. Remember, search engines are much smarter nowadays. Their main goal is to solve for searcher intent. Yes, keywords are still important, but if search engines think your content solves for the intent of a search query, even if that search query doesn't have the specific keywords you used to optimize your content, then chances are they'll choose to rank it anyways. That's why it's important to think in terms of topics over keywords.

Once you determine how you intend to rank for a term that's specific to the broad topic you're going to write about, you'll want to identify your topic cluster, which will be made up of relevant subtopics. A subtopic should be strong enough to be published on its own — in the form of something like a blog post or video — but when combined with other like-themed subtopics, it should be relevant to and support the specific topic you're writing about.

In this case, "What are negative marketing personas?," "How do you build a persona?," and "What content does my persona want?" are examples of strong subtopics that provide value on their own, but when put together, support the specific topic "inbound marketing personas."

Here's a pro tip: If you're looking for a place to start when identifying subtopics, consider the questions your audience has around the specific topic you chose to write about. If your audience uses search engines to do research, then chances are they're doing their research in the form of a question. And if you're the one who's offering the answers to their questions, then you're off to a good start with creating an effective topic cluster.

And to complete the topic cluster, and solve for both the searcher and the search engine, connect the pillar page and subtopics together through a series of hyperlinks.

At a minimum, make sure all subtopics link to your pillar page. By linking all relevant subtopics to the pillar page, you're funneling all your traffic to the main resource hub on this topic.

Let's see this in action.

If you performed a Google search for inbound marketing personas, this is what the first-page listing would look like.

At the top, you'll see Google generated a featured snippet, which is the search engine's way of answering your search query without you having to click through to the page. In this case, Google chose to feature a snippet about what an inbound marketing persona is — information that's pulled from a comprehensive resource published by an inbound marketing agency called SmartBug Media.

Below the featured snippet, you'll see SmartBug also claims the number one listing for "inbound marketing personas" with the same resource, "The Ultimate Guide to Inbound Marketing Personas."

In a world of trying to build authority and awareness for a broad topic that's relevant to your business, this is what you're striving for: the featured snippet as well as the number one listing for a term that's aligned with your broad topic.

Let's say you're a company looking to create your business's personas, so you click the link in the search result to learn more. You're taken to this page:

Near the top, you're greeted with a video as well as an overview of what you're going to learn. Below that is a form to access a guide with a bonus template to use for applying what you learn to your business. But let's say you're not sure you're ready to give your information just yet in exchange for the offer. Maybe you need more information to make sure that this offer is right for you.

SmartBug understands this might be the case, which is why they offer the majority of the content in the guide on the actual pillar page. This way, visitors can check out the content first to make sure it's what they're looking for.

And for people who do find value in SmartBug's content and want access to the downloadable guide and bonus getting started template, SmartBug makes it easy to access it by offering a sticky form at the top of the page that follows visitors as they scroll. This way they're being helpful without disrupting the visitor's experience.

One last thing before moving on, SmartBug includes helpful links throughout their pillar page. These links connect to other websites as well as content on their site, including subtopics a part of their topic cluster. For example, notice how this hyperlink, "getting the answers to some basic questions," connects to a blog post on SmartBug's site. This way the visitor can continue consuming content around this topic. And at the top of the blog post, there's a link that takes you back to the pillar page.

Something important to note: Not every subtopic you have will be referenced on your pillar page (and that's okay). That's because you may have dozens, even hundreds, of subtopics that make up your topic clusters. Instead, you can strategically link to relevant subtopics throughout your pillar page when it makes sense and when it provides value to the website visitor. Just make sure all important subtopics connect to the pillar page. Remember, keep the user experience and the story you're trying to tell in mind.

So that's how this page solved for the searcher by offering a positive user experience, but how did this page solve for search engines in terms of traffic and visibility?

In the first 3 months after publishing their pillar page and linking their topic cluster together, SmartBug's pillar page received over 4,800 views and 1,000 downloads.

With results like this, SmartBug started to rethink their overall content strategy and structure of their website. Remember, search engines want to connect people with the best content possible based on their intent. Focusing on user experience is a strong and sustainable way to search engine optimize your content.

### **Video 3: Examples of commonly used pillar page types**

Let's cover three of the most widely used pillar page formats, starting with the resource pillar page.

The resource pillar page focuses on internal and external links. The goal of this pillar page is to be a helpful resource in connecting the reader with the most relevant sources on a broad topic (even if it means sending people off your site).

Let's take a look at the pillar page Colgate, an oral hygiene company, created on "gum disease."

This resource pillar page is composed of multiple sections that are specific to their broad topic, gum disease, like "gum disease prevention" or "gum disease signs and symptoms." Notice how this section offers an overview of the specific topic using a bullet point list. Additionally, there's a list of helpful links that connect the reader with various, like-themed resources to continue reading like "common warning signs of gingivitis." When clicked, Colgate takes you to one of their helpful blog articles that explains this subtopic in depth.

Here's a pro tip: If you have a lot of subtopics related to your broad topic, let's say over 75, then consider only promoting your top-performing subtopics on your resource pillar page. Colgate's resource pillar page on gum disease links to fewer than 60 Colgate resources related to gum disease. However, they have over 2,400 pieces of content related to gum disease published on their site.

Remember, keep the user's experience in mind. Too much information might be overwhelming. And if users are overwhelmed, then chances are they'll leave your site.

Now, let's say you want to create a resource pillar page that's made up of the best resources that exist on the subject, not just what your brand has to offer.

Let's see an example of this in action from Help Scout, a customer service software company, with their resource pillar on the broad topic "customer acquisition."

This resource pillar page is made up of multiple sections related to customer acquisition, like search engine optimization, conversion rate optimization, and content marketing. Notice how each section offers a short blurb on the broad topic, a list of specific topics that bring value to the broad topic, like "content marketing tools," and a list of links to resources the learner might want to check out. For example, Help Scout includes a link to BuzzSumo, a research and monitor tool, which sends the visitor off their website.

Generally, you wouldn't want to send people away from your website, but this approach is solving for the visitor, not your business.

The biggest advantage of a pillar page format like this is you have the opportunity to generate inbound links from sources you include on the page. This page has hundreds of inbound links pointing to it, most of which are sources mentioned on the page.

Here's a pro tip: If you decide to create a resource pillar page like this, then you'll want to develop an outreach plan to let the sources you include on the page know it exists. Letting others know that you're linking to their content could lead to that source linking back to your page if they find value in promoting it to their audience, further expanding your topic cluster's authority.

Next up, which is the most commonly used pillar page type, the 10x content pillar page.

The goal of this type of pillar page is similar to the resource pillar page: to provide a comprehensive overview of a specific topic. But the 10x pillar page is generally made up of your owned media. Owned media is content you own and can control, like social media channels, your website, and so on. The format of this page is similar to that of an ungated ebook or a guide. Ungated means the content is not gated behind a form.

Ungating educational content in the awareness stage solves for both the search engine and the website visitor, not one or the other. It solves for search engines because they're able to recognize the clustering of like-themed content pointing to a comprehensive website page or blog post. It solves for your website visitors because it gives them the opportunity to view your content before deciding to commit to downloading it.

The trick is making the 10x content pillar page a conversion-focused asset by packaging the page's content into a downloadable resource.

You may be asking yourself, "why would someone share their email address just to view the same content in a downloadable format?"

Well, HubSpot did a study, and we found that 90% of website visitors prefer to read lengthy content in the form of a PDF as opposed to a website page. But this preference is not limited to HubSpot's content. It's human nature to want to take something with you if you find value in it.

Think of it this way: Let's say you go to a bookstore looking for a new book. You'd probably wander up and down the aisles, flipping through pages of various books until you find one that meets your needs. Once you find a book you enjoy, you'll probably go to the checkout counter and buy it to take it with you, as opposed to staying in the bookstore hour after hour and day after day, reading this piece of content.

This is the experience you're trying to replicate, but it can only be done if your content provides value to the reader. We've reached this age where everyone seems to have an ebook or guide, but the quality of that content is a different story. Sure, you may be getting leads, but what if people don't find value in your content? They most likely won't continue building a relationship with you. So that lead you captured won't be as valuable as you think.

In contrast, the people who can view your content before downloading it and who then choose to fill out your form will be more qualified because they're willingly giving you their information even though they've already seen part or most of what your content has to offer.

For example, take a look at this 10x content pillar page on email outreach created by Mailshake, a helpful email outreach tool.

This 10x content pillar page covers a comprehensive approach to email outreach with sectioned content.

Let's say you wanted to learn more about what an effective outreach email looks like. Click section 3 at the top of this page, "examples of good (and great) outreach emails and what we can learn from them," and the link will direct you to that specific section on the page to learn more about it.

Let's assume this is the content you're looking for, and you stay on Mailshake's website for more than 20 seconds to read it. In this case, Mailshake generates a pop-up form and offers the content as a packaged downloadable resource. This way, you can take the content with you and consume it on your own time.

How well is this page performing? Well, in less than one year, this page has been viewed over 43,000 times, shared on social media 398 times, attracted 372 inbound links, acquired 5,321 email opt-ins, and acquired 402 customers.

Now those are some serious results for a piece of content that's less than a year old.

And lastly, we have the product or service pillar page. This type is best used when creating pillar pages for products or services your business offers.

With this type of pillar page, the aim is not necessarily quantity and breadth of content. You probably don't need to write a long overview about how your dentist office performs root canals or your legal practice litigates divorce. But the content should be informative and clear.

A good example is Vital's page on their PPC Management Services. As a digital marketing agency, their prospects regularly ask them about their team's PPC capabilities. This page does a great job at describing what type of services they offer, what's included in monthly management, their step-by-step approach, their step-by-step account setup process, and a little bit about their pricing. It's descriptive but not overly so. And not only is it optimized well for search, it's clearly written for an audience who's looking for paid media services.

Lastly, and something important to note, this pillar page type is best suited for the decision stage — notice the decision stage offering to get in touch with sales to get a PPC management proposal.

One more thing: A pillar page can either be a page on your website or a blog post on your blog. It depends on how you organize your overall site structure.

HubSpot uses our blog for educational pillar pages that span the awareness and consideration stages. For example, let's say you wanted to learn more about the topic, "customer feedback." HubSpot offers a 10x content pillar page on our blog that teaches people the specific topic, "customer feedback strategy."

Now if you're someone who's looking to implement a customer feedback strategy for your business, then we offer a product pillar page for our customer feedback software. This pillar page is a page on our website that's organized under our product offerings.

There's not a right or wrong way to go about this. But whatever way you choose to organize and map your site architecture, stick to it. Your audience as well as search engines will appreciate it.

These 3 types of pillar pages are by no means exclusive or fixed. Feel free to take elements from each type and build something custom. But hopefully they give you enough guidance to create something truly amazing.

#### **Video 4: How do you create an effective pillar page?**

Let's cover how a company called Etuma created their business' first 10x content pillar page. Etuma is a company that helps businesses transform unstructured text data into decision-making information.

Before diving in, keep in mind there's more than one way to create an effective topic cluster and pillar page. For example, if bandwidth is not an issue for you and your team, then you can create your pillar page in as little as a week. However, if your business is strapped for time, then you may need to create a plan to construct your pillar page over time. That's exactly what Etuma did. Let's review a 7-step process Etuma used to create their first topic cluster and pillar page with limited resources.

First, identify a specific topic you want to be known for and rank for online.

Here's how Etuma did this.

To start, Etuma performed research on keywords their primary persona, Customer Experience Manager Maggie, might use when looking for information online. They identified the broad topic "text analysis" and decided this would be a helpful starting point.

Next, Etuma brought focus to their broad topic by being specific as to what Maggie might be looking for when doing research. They know Maggie is trying to make sense of a lot of text data and is actively looking for step-by-step guidance with possible solutions or tools she can recommend to her team. Keeping this in mind, Etuma decided to focus their pillar page around the specific topic, "text analysis guide." This way Etuma can provide a comprehensive overview to becoming a text analysis expert as well as a list of solutions and tools to consider, including their text analysis tool.

Here's a pro tip: If you're going to take the time to create content that educates your audience, make sure it connects to, and supports, at least one of your products or services. If it doesn't, ask why you're creating it in the first place.

Second, identify your topic cluster.

You may already have content created in support of the topic you're intending to rank for. Instead of re-inventing the wheel, identify current owned media that's relevant to the specific topic you're planning to write about.

In this case, Etuma already had 4 pages of text analysis-themed blog content and a series of YouTube videos.

And while having existing content is great, don't sell your business short.. Brainstorm a list of as many subtopics as possible that bring value to your topic that have yet to be published.

Once Etuma made a comprehensive list of subtopics, they narrowed it down to 6 of the strongest subtopics to repurpose and expand upon to create their pillar page. Remember, you can continue growing and improving the authority of your topic cluster and experience of your pillar page over time, so having a list of subtopics already identified will make that process easier. That comprehensive list you made is the content gift that keeps on giving.

Third, create blog posts for needed subtopics.

Etuma needed content for their subtopic "text analysis categorization systems," so they created a blog post titled "How to Create a Customer Feedback Taxonomy."

Once Etuma created this article, they had a blog post for each one of their 6 subtopics.

Fourth, repurpose your subtopic content into a downloadable content offer.

I recommend you create the content offer before the pillar page. This way, you can include a form on your pillar page as soon as it's published to start generating leads immediately.

Once you have all the content you need to create your pillar page, repurpose and expand the subtopic content into a downloadable content offer. And repurpose doesn't mean copy and paste. Etuma used the content from their blog post as inspiration and repackaged it to bring new value and meaning as a downloadable content offer. Remember, the goal here is to use the content you already have to put together a helpful story for the reader, which explains the topic in depth.

Fifth, deconstruct your downloadable content offer into a 10x content pillar page.

Etuma took the same content offered in their guide and formatted it to fit on a website page.

You may have heard the phrase "content is king." Matt Cutts, formerly with Google, coined this phrase many years ago. However, design is sometimes forgotten, even though it's just as important as the content. You want people to have a positive experience when they're reading your content.

Think about it: If you walked into a restaurant with fantastic food but a poor design—dark, cramped, noisy, cluttered—would you stay? No way! Design is just as important as what you offer—whether that be food or site content.

To make sure your 10x content pillar page provides a positive experience, check out these 13 layout tips outlined on Etuma's example.

Let's review each layout tip in more detail.

Starting at the top-left of the example, with tips one, two, and three: Apply consistent on-page SEO best practices, referencing the specific topic you're intending to rank for in your page title, URL, and H1 tag.

Moving down to tip 4, include conversion-focused landing page elements. Really, this is what a standard landing page looks like: text to the left with bullet points to describe the offer's value, an image of the offer's cover in the middle, and a form to fill out and access the offer to the right.

Insert the form directly on the 10x content pillar page. Doing so reduces the amount of conversion actions a reader needs to take to download the resource. That being said, if you're more comfortable with a dedicated landing page with a form to access the offer, insert a call-to-action that links to it on the pillar page to send readers there.

Moving down to tip 5, add an anchor-linked table of contents below the conversion point with the line "Click the link to go directly to a specific section." An anchor link is a web link that allows users to jump to a specific point on a website page. This makes it easier for people to navigate your content and see what it has to offer.

Additionally, adding an anchor-linked table of contents near the top of the page helps Google understand what this page is about and what it has to offer in a condensed fashion. This is a great way to optimize your page's content for Google's featured snippet.

Moving up to the top-right of the example and layout tip 6, you'll notice there's website navigation. The goal of this page is to create a positive experience for the visitor, not force them to convert as a landing page would.

Moving on to tip 7, use relevant images throughout the page, with the specific topic referenced in the alt text. This optimizes the images used on the page for image search results.

Moving down to tips 8 and 9, use H2 tags for sub-headers and H3 tags for list items. A proper HTML structure provides a clean user experience and makes it simpler to update the page. Not to mention, taking time to do this the right way is another opportunity for your website to be chosen as the listical featured snippet.

Moving down to tips 10 and 11, use relevant internal and external links to dig deeper into resources. That's right: external. External links validate your claims. Just use them strategically, like to support a claim or data point you need to reinforce. If you don't want to drive people off your site, then consider having the links that point to external websites open in a new window.

Moving down to tip 12, reference the keyword of your specific topic throughout the page. But don't just repeat the exact phrase — search engines are smart enough to understand synonyms of what you're talking about.

And lastly, tip 13, have a back-to-top button. This way, when people click a section they want to learn more about, they can easily jump back to the top. People probably won't read your entire page, but they may find one section interesting enough and want to download it and take it with them. You want to make this process as easy as possible for the visitor. Forgetting this step would require the reader to scroll endlessly, or it might feel like it, which could lead to frustration, which could lead to them leaving your page and going elsewhere.

Here's a pro tip: If you want to make it easy for people to access your packaged downloadable content offer, then consider inserting a pop-up form on your pillar page.

The average top-performing pop-up forms convert at 9.28%, with some instances as high as 50.2%. To put that into perspective, if you get even 150 visitors per day to your site, you'd have 418 sign-ups in a month.

Moving on to step 6, link your relevant owned media to your 10x content pillar page.

Once you complete your 10x pillar page, you need to hyperlink your subtopics to it, forming your topic cluster.

The goal here is to connect all owned media that's relevant to the pillar page using a hyperlink. The more content associated with your topic cluster and pillar page, the better.

And don't just add any old link text. Take the time to update the anchor text to something descriptive to let the visitor know where they're going.

Etuma linked over 20 relevant pieces of content to their 10x content pillar page. And you'll notice they took the time to create descriptive anchor text to let the searcher and search engine know where they're going.

And 7, create a conversion path for people to access your 10x content pillar page.

The goal here is to let people know this content is available. If you don't, you run the risk of a large portion of your website visitors never finding it. Forgetting this step would be similar to building a new addition on your house without a door. No matter how great that room is, no one would be able to get in, so what's the point?

Consider calling out your pillar page in the top navigation through a 1- or 2-click process: 1 click if you offer it directly in the dropdown menu, 2 clicks if you have a resources page with multiple assets to organize and call out.

Etuma calls out their 10x content pillar page as a one-click option in their Resources tab.

Another place to consider is the top of the home page with a call-to-action, with an image and descriptive supplemental text.

This doesn't mean it always needs to stay here on this page. You can promote the pillar page for a limited time, possibly for 2 weeks or a month, to support its publishing launch.

And there you have it: 7 steps to creating an effective 10x content pillar page for your business.

Etuma has been creating content consistently for years, but this 7-step process helped them make more sense of how to create, grow, and connect content effectively.

But how well is it performing?

After 2 months, their VP of Marketing and Sales said, "We are receiving about 4 times the leads (if you measure by quality) compared to before the text analysis pillar page."

And why do you think Etuma's quality of leads went up? Because their content provides so much value that interested visitors are willing to give up their information to take a packaged download with them.

If you're looking for a place to start with creating topic clusters and pillar pages, consider deconstructing your existing awareness- or consideration-stage offers into 10x content pillar pages. For example, in an effort to solve for website visitors as well as search engine web crawlers, I deconstructed a do-it-yourself truck camper guide I created for my alternative lifestyle website into a 10x content pillar page.

The result? In 4 months, our non-paid, organic traffic coming from search engines increased 329%.

Remember, if you have something valuable to say to your audience and the world, don't keep it gated behind a form. Get it out there for all to see. Just make sure to package it in a way that makes it easy for people to take with them and enjoy elsewhere.

## Video 5: How to optimize and grow your pillar pages over time

Your pillar page should always be under construction. You might need to make updates to keep it relevant or add new, fresh content to keep it performing at a high level. You need to maintain it. Otherwise, you're leaving yourself vulnerable for someone else to come in and outperform you — it happens all the time.

Let's check out a company that's taken the time to grow their topic clusters and pillar pages into the backbone of their content strategy. That company is Townsend Security. They're a full-service data security provider.

Townsend started 2016 with a positive lift in organic, non-paid visits coming from search engines due to their content efforts. They worked hard in 2015 with regular blogging, webinars, podcasts, white papers, and ebooks. The result: Their traffic held steady in 2015, and in the first quarter of 2016, they had a 27% rise in organic search visitors.

But all that changed in the second quarter of 2016. Competition for their narrow band of keywords increased as new competitors entered the marketplace, and their larger rivals outspent them on online marketing. After a record high in March and April, they saw a 38% decrease in organic search visitors during the next 3 months (with a 28% decrease in one month alone). Their hard work from the previous year evaporated. While they fought back and did recoup some of that traffic, they still struggled to regain their high ground in the organic section of the search engine results page.

In late September of 2016, Townsend's HubSpot Inbound Consultant, Erin Sliney, introduced them to the concept of creating a pillar page and supporting it with a relevant topic cluster. They took this advice and ran with it. The Townsend team's goal was to become thought leaders on "encryption key management." And that's exactly what they did.

During the editing process, Townsend wrote 20 social media updates and scheduled them to be published to their Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn accounts once the pillar page published. They mixed their publishing dates with their regularly scheduled updates during the following 8 weeks. Coupled with an email campaign promoting the pillar page to their active lead community, they were able to get the word out to those already familiar with them.

To reach the wider community who might not yet know them, Townsend inserted links to their pillar page by thoughtfully answering questions on Quora, adding insights to other websites by visiting their blog and commenting on relevant blog posts, and contributing thought leadership guest blog posts on other websites that shared a similar audience.

And lastly, since Townsend had been blogging on encryption key management for years, it was easy for them to identify a topic cluster through a few dozen subtopic blog posts that were contextually similar. They could place internal links with descriptive anchor text on these posts pointing back to their pillar page. The links enhanced the reader's

experience, since they were providing additional, relevant content for them to binge (as well as being a clear signal for search engines to understand what the pillar page was all about).

This is how Townsend created and promoted their initial 10x content pillar page. But how did they continue growing it to become the authoritative source on encryption key management?

Let's review 3 ways to improve the on-page experience of your pillar pages based on learnings from Townsend's encryption key management pillar page.

To start, offer various forms of media per section for the reader to engage with.

First, Townsend created graphics and optimized them for Google search results. To take it a step further, Townsend turned their images into interactive infographics with pop-up text using HTML5, which search engines can also read.

Next, Townsend repurposed various data points into infographic-like images.

And lastly, Townsend repurposed content on the page into a short descriptive video, providing a quick overview of encryption key management. The video led to a 20% increase in average time on page.

Second, Sprinkle in relevant content offers that progress your buyer personas through their buyer's journey

Townsend offered additional content offers throughout the page based on relevancy, like an ebook and a whitepaper.

This is an effective way to guide your visitors through the buyer's journey — showing them what other content you have to offer when it makes sense.

Nowadays, people love to binge content. Platforms like Netflix promote this by releasing full seasons of a show at once. People want content now, and as much of it as they can consume until they're ready to make a decision, whatever that may be. The best thing you can do is find a way to keep people coming back to your content. Continue to either educate or entertain them (or both). If you don't, someone else will.

Now back to Townsend. 10 months after first publishing and promoting their 10x content pillar page, Townsend's organic search engine traffic increased over 150%.

10 months after first publishing their 10x content pillar page and continually promoting it, Townsend's non-paid, organic search engine traffic increased over 150%.

On top of that, 63% of people who visited the encryption key management pillar page decided to download the content and take it with them.

What about visibility on search engines? In August 2017, Townsend's 10x content pillar page claimed the number one position on Google for "encryption key management," the specific topic they intended to rank for on Google. And it's remained at the #1 position for close to 2 years.

Something else interesting to note, Townsend has built so much authority to their pillar page over the past few years that they're actually ranking at the third position on Google and claim the image featured snippet for their broad topic,

“encryption key.” No surprise here, as Townsend is constantly looking for ways to improve and optimize their pillar page to keep it performing at a high level. Remember, if Google deems your content as a relevant, authoritative resource, then chances are your average first-page ranking will also rank well for about a thousand other relevant keywords, even ones that are more broad with higher monthly search volume.

And third, Insert a heatmap on your pillar page to better understand performance and optimization next steps.

Townsend’s pillar page offers a lot of valuable content with multiple conversion actions. And because they want to ensure their visitors are receiving the best content experience possible, they used a heatmap to see the engagement patterns on the page using Hotjar.

Hotjar offers a fast and visual way to understand your user’s on-page website experience.

After placing a Hotjar heatmap on their pillar page, Townsend learned that people who visit the page are more interested in learning about what encryption key management is before downloading the content as a packaged resource. Here’s a screenshot of Townsend’s heatmap at the top of their pillar page. Notice how all the engagement is happening around the call-to-action.

But once visitors start clicking around to learn more about encryption key management, they’re more interested and willing to give their information in exchange for a packaged download of the content. Interestingly enough, the call-to-action for the guide three-quarters of the way down the page led to the most conversions.

This information helped Townsend understand which sections people found the most value in that lead to conversions. It also showed them that people prefer to peruse through their content before giving their email address to download it and take it with them — another effective data point to support Townsend’s choice to ungate their content and offer it as a packaged download.

This experiment sparked a lot of interest at Townsend. News traveled up to the CEO, who was so delighted by their results that he decided to create Townsend’s next pillar page for the specific topic “SQL server encryption.” Townsend created this page using the same template and learnings from their first pillar page. There’s information about what this page is about at the top of the page, followed by an anchor-linked table of contents, a call-to-action to access a packaged download of the page’s content, as well as a relevant short video.

Currently, this pillar page ranks at the fifth position on Google and claims the featured snippet. And just like Townsend’s encryption key management pillar page, they know if they constantly look for ways to improve and optimize this pillar page, they’re giving themselves the best chance at claiming the #1 position for the specific topic, “SQL server encryption.” And once they achieve that, chances are this page will also rank well for about a thousand other relevant keywords. It’s an on-going cycle, one that can be repeated.