



GOOGLE'S

FEATURED SNIPPETS

in the Context of Strategic Content Marketing

Kristina Sam-Martin

Google's Featured Snippets

in the Context of Strategic Content Marketing

by Kristina Sam-Martin
May 2020
Vienna, Austria

Abstract

This e-book deals with featured snippets on Google's search engine results pages (SERP) - a SERP feature that displays excerpts of website content above the list of 'traditional' search results. Although featured snippets are an area of growing interest in the field of search engine optimization (SEO), their strategic significance for content marketing has not received much attention as of yet. This e-book fills the gap by examining the relevance and impact of featured snippets on the elaboration, implementation and evaluation of content marketing strategies. This is done against the backdrop of a thorough account of the emergence and mechanisms behind Google's featured snippet algorithm. Furthermore, the e-book establishes a number of ranking factors that go beyond basic SEO measures which content marketers, and all digital publishers, should be aware of.

Keywords:

Search engine optimization, featured snippets, content marketing

Copyright © 2020 Kristina Sam-Martin. All rights reserved.

kristina@sam-martin.at

Preface

The e-book “Google’s Featured Snippets in the Context of Strategic Content Marketing” is an adaptation of my master’s thesis with the same title. The publication benefits from the same academic research standards and quality, but is more focused on the practice-oriented sections. By publishing this edited e-book, I intend to help digital marketers to better understand Google’s featured snippets, how to harness their potential and how to deal with the challenges they entail.

I would like to thank my thesis supervisors Nicola Oudejans and Florian Hieß, as well as the expert interviewees for their invaluable input and encouragements to publish this research more widely. Making their wealth of knowledge available more widely motivated me to transform my master’s thesis into a practice-oriented e-book.

I hope that the insights contained in this publication will help digital marketers to develop a strategic approach to featured snippets and take them into account in their marketing efforts.

Kristina Sam-Martin,
Vienna, July 2020

Contents

1. INTRODUCTION.....	5
1.1 Research questions.....	6
1.2 Sources of information.....	6
1.3 What to expect.....	8
2. WHAT ARE FEATURED SNIPPETS?.....	9
2.1 Defining featured snippets.....	9
2.2 Types of featured snippets.....	10
2.3 In brief - chapter 2.....	14
3. THE EMERGENCE OF FEATURED SNIPPETS.....	16
3.1 Google’s roll-out of featured snippets 2014-2019.....	16
3.3 Google’s featured snippet strategy.....	19
3.4 In brief - chapter 3.....	21
4. THE CREATION AND BEHAVIOR OF FEATURED SNIPPETS.....	23
4.1 How Google builds featured snippets.....	23
4.2 Prevalence of featured snippets.....	29
4.3 Impact on the click-through rate.....	37
4.4 In brief - chapter 4.....	39
5. FEATURED SNIPPET RANKING FACTORS.....	41
5.1 The overall competitiveness in organic search.....	41
5.2 High-quality content and authority.....	43
5.3 Content structure and HTML formatting.....	45
5.4 Text length and phrasing.....	47
5.5 Structured data markup.....	49
5.6 Images.....	50
5.7 Content freshness.....	51
5.8 In brief - chapter 5.....	51

6. FEATURED SNIPPETS & STRATEGIC CONTENT MARKETING	53
6.1 Relevance of featured snippets for content marketing	53
6.2 Strategy development	56
6.3 Strategy implementation	61
6.4 Measuring and evaluating performance	69
6.5 In brief - chapter 6	71
7. CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK	74
8. REFERENCES	81
8.1 Books, journals, and theses	81
8.2 Online sources	82
9. ABBREVIATIONS	90

1. Introduction

More and more often, Google's search engine result pages (SERPs) include answers instead of just links to answers. Nowadays, SERPs do not simply consist of ten organic search results anymore. So-called "blended search results" are more and more frequent (Marketing Accountability Standards Board 2019a). Paid search results, as well as numerous additional features such as images, videos, maps news or facts from Google's knowledge graph have been added to the SERPs over time. So-called featured snippets, which are displayed above the list of 'regular' search results, are part of this development. Google (2019c) defines featured snippets as a way to "[...] help provide quick answers to questions by drawing attention to programmatically generated snippets from websites that our algorithms deem relevant to the specific question being asked." In doing so, featured snippets are fundamentally different from knowledge graph results, as they draw on content housed on external websites instead of Google's own resources.

The introduction of featured snippets in 2014 did not go unnoticed in the world of search engine optimization (SEO). Especially the question of how to optimize website content to achieve featured snippets has received attention by large SEO companies in recent years. Nevertheless, featured snippets remain a niche topic that has so far not received much attention from a wider strategic perspective. In particular the strategic implications for digital marketing - especially content marketing - have not yet been thoroughly researched. This e-book therefore explores and analyzes the implications of featured snippets for search engine optimization and strategic content marketing.

Arguably, featured snippets are relevant for all digital publishers and businesses using content marketing and SEO techniques to reach their target group with high-quality content. Indeed, with a market share of 53 percent, organic search is still the dominant source of trackable web traffic (Carter 2020). Although, in practice, the importance of organic traffic as acquisition channel varies from company to company, organic search remains an important factor for successful content marketing. Thus, with a rising share of featured snippets on the SERP, it seems timely to explore their strategic implications.

The aim of this e-book is therefore to go beyond a simple SEO guide and investigate strategic questions that arise in the context of featured snippets. Not only search engine optimization measures but also strategic considerations regarding content marketing are being explored. The

analysis focused particularly on a step-by-step discussion of the potential role of featured snippets in content marketing strategies. This e-book also set out to shed light on the wider strategic significance of featured snippets in the context of related developments such as voice search. Indeed, featured snippets are a SERP feature that is closely intertwined with the rise of voice search and voice answers. Already in 2016, 20 percent of all search queries were voice search, and 40.7 percent of these answers were drawn from featured snippets (Dean 2018).

In short, the e-book targets a niche topic which has largely been overlooked and underestimated from a marketing perspective, in order to explore its current and future strategic significance.

1.1 Research questions

The e-book aims to provide answers to two major questions:

- Which search engine optimization measures should be applied to achieve featured snippets in Google search?
- What are the strategic implications of featured snippets for content marketing?

In doing so, this publication addresses mainly practitioners working in the field of digital marketing, and particularly those who specialize in the areas of search engine optimization and content marketing.

1.2 Sources of information

Research for this book¹ builds on two major sources of information: studies focusing on featured snippets and expert interviews with SEO and content marketing experts.

In recent years, a number of studies by major providers of SEO tools examined featured snippets. SEMrush, Ahrefs MOZ and others conducted large-scale quantitative studies. These studies focused mainly on creating a better understanding of the steps needed to achieve featured snippets on Google's search engine results pages.

¹ Research was initially conducted by the author in the process of writing the master's thesis "Google's Featured Snippets in the Context of Strategic Content Marketing" (Sam-Martin 2020).

The study with the largest sample as of yet was conducted in 2017 by A.J. Ghergich in cooperation with SEMrush (Ghergich 2017). The study was based on a sample of 80 million keywords and 6.9 million featured snippets. The same year, another major study was conducted by Ahrefs (Soulo 2017). This study looked at a sample of 2 million keywords and included a broad set of queries. A more recent example is a study carried out by MOZ in cooperation with STAT, which took a more selective sampling approach by focusing on 1,000,000 highly competitive keywords in the United States on mobile (Muller 2019a). The results of these studies, as well as a number of additional small-scale studies, will be examined and critically discussed in the following chapters.

While these studies provide valuable insights, research on the wider strategic impact of featured snippets remains scarce. In order to fill this gap, expert interviews were carried out to collect additional information. The interviews allowed to cover areas that had not yet been covered by available studies.

The following expert interviews were carried out:

- **Interview 1:** Mordy Oberstein, Chief Marketing Officer at the SEO software provider RankRanger - 1 December 2019.

M. Oberstein has conducted various quantitative experiments to study the behavior of featured snippets and has published these results in several articles. As Chief Marketing Officer of a company that provides SEO software solutions, he is not only an SEO expert but also aware of marketing challenges that may arise in the context of featured snippets.

- **Interview 2:** Gerrit Grunert, Content Marketing Expert at Crispy Content - 6 December 2019.

G. Grunert is the author of “Methodisches Content Marketing” (2019) which is a practice-oriented handbook for strategic and business-oriented content marketing. He is also the founder and managing director of Crispy Content, one of Germany’s leading content marketing agencies, as well as a guest lecturer at Steinbeis School of Management and Innovation.

- **Interview 3:** Irene Michl, Content Strategist - 9 December 2019.

I. Michl has contributed to the renowned content marketing book “Think Content” (Löffler 2019) and works as a freelance content strategist as well as author and lecturer. She is an affiliated lecturer at the Content Strategy

master's program at the University of Applied Science Joanneum, Graz (Austria).

- **Interview 4:** Britney Muller, Senior SEO Scientist at SEO software provider MOZ - 11 December 2019.

B. Muller works as SEO expert at MOZ, a leading provider of SEO software solutions. She has published a number of articles about featured snippets and machine learning and regularly shares her expertise at speaking engagements and webinars.

The interviews will be referred to in semi-anonymized format, for instance by using the code "I1, 4" to refer to the fourth paragraph of interview 1.

1.3 What to expect

This e-book starts out in chapter two by defining featured snippets and providing an overview of the different types that may be encountered on the SERPs. Chapter three sets the stage by providing a historical overview of the emergence of featured snippets. This chapter also explores their strategic significance from Google's point of view in order to highlight the current and future significance of featured snippets. Chapter four gathers available information about the featured snippet algorithm and, consequently, how featured snippets 'behave' on the SERP. The chapter also reveals their significant impact on the on-SERP click-through rate. Chapter five deals with the question of how to optimize websites for featured snippets and establishes several factors that should be considered. Finally, chapter six draws the bridge between featured snippets and strategic content marketing. It explores whether and how featured snippets should be taken into account in the elaboration, implementation and evaluation of content marketing strategies. The final chapter sums up the insights contained in this e-book and draws practice-oriented conclusions.

2. What are featured snippets?

Featured snippets are one of several display features that Google may show in its search engine results pages (SERP). They are part of Google's Universal Search Results that appear in addition to 'traditional' organic results, such as image results (MOZ 2020c). Featured snippet boxes show website content directly on Google's SERPs.

In the past, featured snippets have also been referred to as quick answers, instant answers, answer boxes or rich answers. This chapter will explore how featured snippets can be defined and what different types of featured snippets there are. This knowledge is important in order to distinguish featured snippets from other SERP features, such as enhancements, rich results, knowledge panel entries, OneBox results and Discover features on Android devices (Google 2019b).

However, before entering into a more detailed discussion of the characteristics of featured snippets, it is important to note that this e-book deals with featured snippets shown on Google Search only. Bing and other search engines also display featured snippets, but due to their marginal role in the global search engine market this publication focuses exclusively on Google's featured snippets.

2.1 Defining featured snippets

Currently, there is no universally agreed-upon definition of the term featured snippet. Indeed, almost all definitions seem to omit one aspect or the other which makes a critical discussion of different attempts to define featured snippets inevitable.

Acknowledged SEO expert B. Dean defines featured snippets as follows:

"Featured Snippets are short selections of text appearing at the top of Google's search results that are designed to answer a searcher's query. The content that appears inside of a Featured Snippet is automatically pulled from web pages in Google's index. Common types of Featured Snippets include definitions, tables, steps and lists" (Dean 2020).

This definition is almost complete but fails to mention that featured snippets also show the source's page title and URL. Furthermore, featured snippets may also be videos now, not only text.

Search Engine Watch provides a very comprehensive definition which manages to succinctly highlight the key elements of a featured snippet, but fails to highlight the fact that summaries in featured snippets are programmatically generated: “A featured snippet is a summary of an answer to a user's query, which is displayed on top of Google search results. It's extracted from a webpage, and includes the page's title and URL” (Litsa 2016).

Google does not provide an official definition of what a featured snippet is, but describes their characteristics in several of their publications:

“Featured snippets help provide quick answers to questions by drawing attention to programmatically generated snippets from websites that our algorithms deem relevant to the specific question being asked. All Featured snippets include a snippet of information quoted from a third-party website, plus a link to the page, the page title and URL” (Google 2019c). In addition, addressing website owners, Google explains featured snippets as follows: “When a user asks a question in Google Search, we might show a search result extracted from your site in a special featured snippet block at the top of the search results page” (Google 2019b). Google also describes featured snippets as “[...] special boxes where the format of regular listings is reversed, showing the descriptive snippet first” (Google 2019a). In another instance, Google explains featured snippets simply as “[...] a feature in Search that highlights pages that our systems determine are most likely to have the information you're looking for” (Nayak 2019a).

Based on the sources cited above, featured snippets can be best defined as follows:

A featured snippet may be displayed on top of Google's search results. It is a concise, automatically generated summary that is extracted from a web page. As opposed to 'regular' search results, a featured snippet shows the summary content first, which is followed by the source's page title and URL. In addition to text and images, featured snippets may also contain videos that are launched at a specific timestamp.

2.2 Types of featured snippets

There are four main types of featured snippets that may be displayed on the SERPs, depending on the search query and the structure of the content on the source website: paragraphs, lists, tables, and videos. These different

types of featured snippets allow Google to serve its answers in the format best suited for the content and intent of the user (Wakefield 2019, 328).

Paragraph snippets are the most commonly encountered type of featured snippet. In 2016, a study based on a large-scale sample of 10 million keywords in the United States found a share of 53.2 percent of paragraph snippets, 35.5 percent of list snippets and 11.5 percent of table snippets which made up the smallest share (Zhao 2016). A more recent study (Muller 2019a) which focused on 1,000,000 highly competitive keywords in the United States on mobile found that, overall, half of all featured snippets were paragraphs (50.53 percent), followed by list snippets (36.87 percent) and table snippets (9.12 percent). Video snippets (1.74 percent) and accordion snippets (1.75 percent) are currently niche phenomena.

In addition, featured snippets are often combined with other SERP features, such as the 'People Also Ask' (PAA) panel, a map preview or pay-per-click ads. Yet another study by PerficientDigital (Enge 2019), which was based on 1,400,000 mobile queries, found also a very similar distribution.²

However, the results of the aforementioned studies must be interpreted with caution. As Enge (2019) points out, the distribution varies significantly depending on the thematic niche.

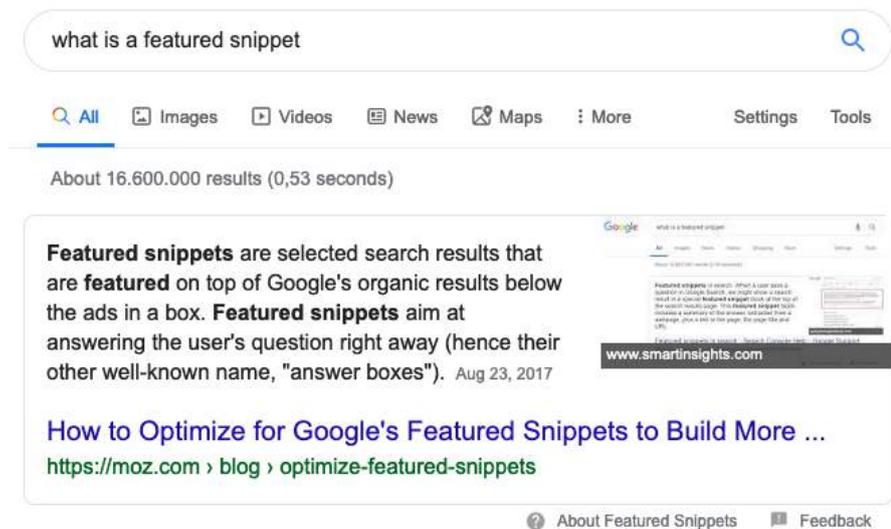
It is important to highlight that the design and structure of featured snippets are different from 'regular' meta descriptions that are part of 'regular' organic search results. The characteristics of the four main types of featured snippets will be introduced below.

2.2.1 Paragraph snippets

Paragraph snippets feature a paragraph of text which has been extracted from a website. Very often, but not always, the paragraph is illustrated by an image which the algorithm may grab from the same source website as the paragraph, or any other website pertaining to the search query. Since 2019, Google may also draw on pdf documents as a source of paragraph for featured snippets (Southern 2019).

² Paragraph snippets: 50.8%, List snippets: 27.2%, Table snippets: 2.9%, Other types: 19.1% (Enge 2019).

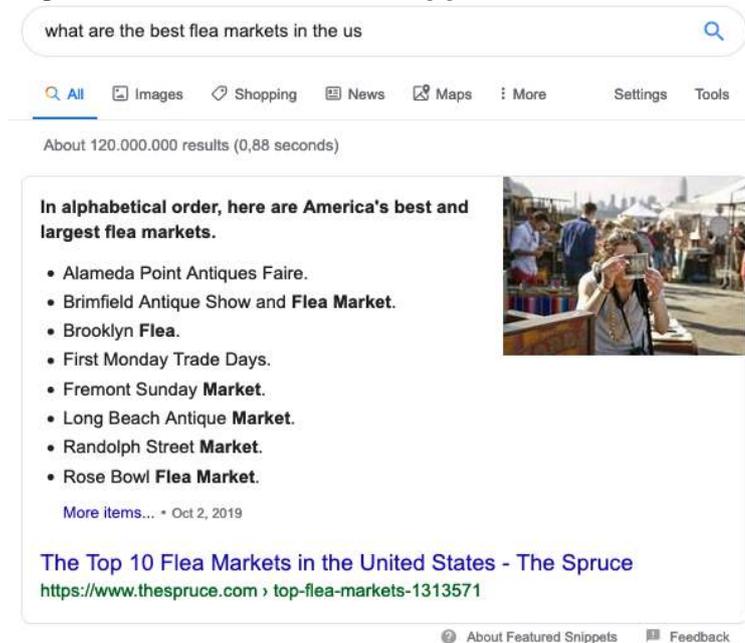
Figure 1: Paragraph snippet for query “What is a featured snippet”³



2.2.2 List snippets

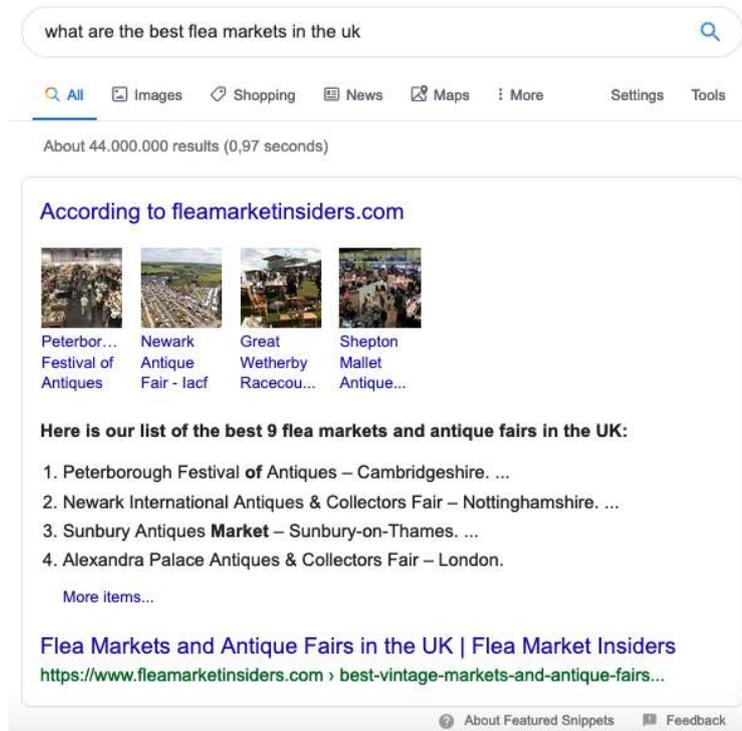
List snippets can either be displayed as unordered or ordered lists. Often, list snippets are illustrated by several images - one for each list item. However, in some cases, only one image is used to illustrate the content. Typically, this happens when the source website only features one photo for the entire list.

Figure 2: Unordered list snippet with one featured image



³ All screenshots dated 24 October 2019, unless otherwise indicated.

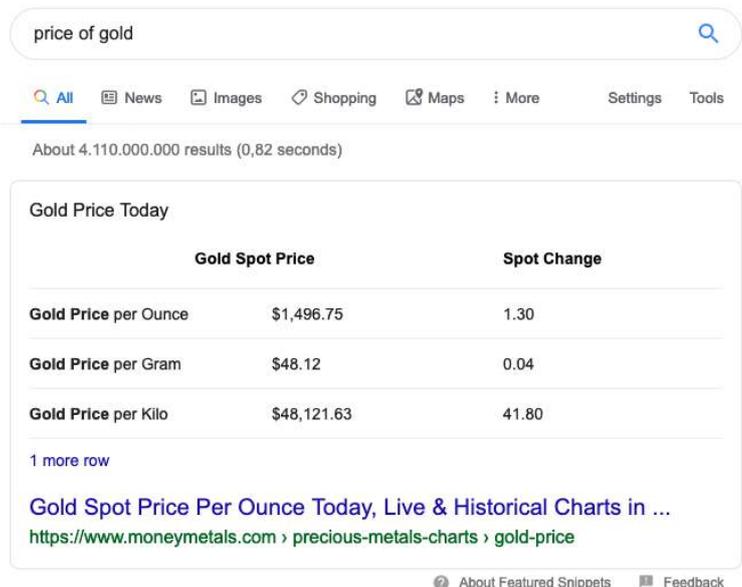
Figure 3: Ordered list snippet with several featured images



The content on the source website is often already structured as a list. If not, Google may also decide to only pull specific information from that website, such as the titles of subsections, in order to create a list of items on this basis.

2.2.3 Table snippets

Figure 4: Table snippet for query “price of gold”

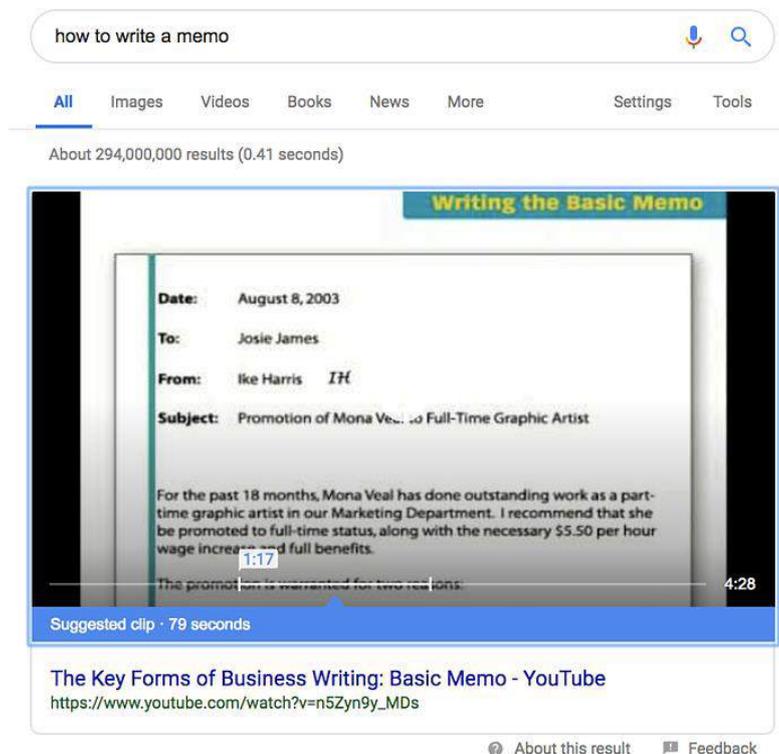


In some cases, Google may also display the search result as a table. This happens mainly for queries which have some kind of comparison element to them, such as the evolution of something over time. Another condition is the format of the source content, which must be presented in a table as well.

2.2.4 Video snippets

In 2017 Google added video snippets as a format of featured snippets. When Google considers that a video responds best to the query, it embeds a video directly in the search results as a featured video snippet. When launched, the video does not necessarily start from the beginning, but rather directly at the section which is relevant to the search query (Sullivan 2018). The timestamps of the video are relevant in this case.

Figure 5: Featured video snippet (Screenshot source: Frost 2018)



2.3 In brief - chapter 2

The chapter discussed different attempts to define featured snippets and suggests the following definition:

A featured snippet may be displayed on top of Google's search results. It is a concise, automatically generated summary that is extracted from a web page. As opposed to 'regular' search results, a

featured snippet shows the summary content first, which is followed by the source's page title and URL. In addition to text and images, featured snippets may also contain videos that are launched at a specific timestamp.

Furthermore, the chapter provided an overview of the main types of featured snippets: paragraph, list, table and video snippets. Although these types are currently the most common, Google continuously tests and adds new variations.

3. The emergence of featured snippets

When Google first started operating in 1998, the search engine result pages (SERPs) contained ten organic results - or 'regular' results, as one may call them. Since then, the SERPs have fundamentally changed. They do not anymore simply consist of ten "plain blue links" (Google 2019b). Gradually, Google has tested and added new features to its SERPs, with the aim to make the results more engaging and useful for the searcher, as Google states (ibid.). In fact, so-called "blended search results" which integrate different search features, are more and more frequent (Marketing Accountability Standards Board 2019a).

In January 2014, Google first introduced featured snippets (Sullivan 2018), at the time also known as answer boxes or rich answers. Understanding the gradual emergence of featured snippets provides the basis for predicting the direction in which Google's search features might develop in the future and how marketing professionals may be able to prepare. In addition to providing a historical overview, the chapter also explores Google's reasoning and strategy behind the introduction of featured snippets.

3.1 Google's roll-out of featured snippets 2014-2019

2014

Google started to roll out and test featured snippets in 2014 (Sullivan 2018). At the time, featured snippets were still commonly referred to as 'quick answers' or 'answer boxes'. Already a year before, Google started to test featured snippets but did not yet visibly distinguish these featured search results from answers coming directly from Google's knowledge graph (Smarty 2018). In 2014, SEO specialists started to look more closely at the shortcomings (Shure 2014) but also the potential of this new SERP feature.

2015

In 2015, some of the shortcomings of featured snippets which were caused by flaws in Google's algorithm were addressed by RankBrain, which is Google's first artificial intelligence method which helps Google's systems to better understand the meaning of words in a search query and in web content (Schwartz 2019). Google's algorithm became able to learn and see the meaning behind each query instead of dealing with the keyword strings (Smarty 2018). This was an important precondition for understanding queries that are phrased like questions and thus closer to

natural human language. The RankBrain method is therefore closely linked to the rise of featured snippets, as they are a way to display answers to questions.

2016

In 2016, Google started to distinguish more clearly between featured snippets as we know them today and answer boxes that draw on information contained in Google's knowledge graph (Smarty 2018). As of 2016, the term 'featured snippet' has been officially applied to refer to this SERP feature. The main difference between featured snippets and information displayed in Google's answer boxes is the source of the information. While featured snippets show information extracted from websites, knowledge graph information is sourced from Google's own databases. Since Google has no control over the quality of content hosted on websites, the quality determinants used by their algorithms are of the utmost importance when choosing websites as sources for featured snippets. In 2016, Google was criticized for showing misogynistic statements and spreading fake news in featured snippets. According to Google, these mistakes happened because the algorithm did not weigh the authoritativeness of results strongly enough for rare and fringe queries (Sullivan 2018). Nevertheless, the accuracy of the search results in featured snippets was already rated very high, with a 97.4 percent accuracy rate, according to a study by Stone Temple (*ibid.*). It is important to note, however, that this figure also includes knowledge graph information and related SERP features. It is likely that the accuracy of featured snippets alone would have been not rated as well, since Google has more control over the information displayed in the knowledge graph and, thus, a higher level of accuracy can be assumed.

2017 - 2018

Since the first introduction of featured snippets, their visual appearance has remained rather stable, with three distinct types: paragraph snippets, list snippets and table snippets (see section 2.2). In 2017, Google further expanded featured snippets by adding additional elements. Since then, some queries return featured snippets with more than one image illustrating the result and oftentimes a related question feature, more commonly known as 'people also search' panel is displayed directly below the snippet (Galvez 2017). In late 2017, Google also added video snippets as a new format of featured snippets.

2017 also marks the year in which featured snippets started to attract more and more the interest of SEO specialists, with articles and major

studies being published such as Ahrefs' study of 2 million featured snippets (Soulo 2017).

Google itself also announced that they were working hard on further improving the quality of featured snippets, especially in light of their usefulness for mobile and voice-only searches (Sullivan 2018). Besides low-quality source content another issue was - and continues to be - the relevance of the answer shown by a featured snippet. In some cases, the snippet may show accurate information that is nevertheless irrelevant to the query because it gives the response to another question. This is caused by the incorrect interpretation of the meaning of the search query by the algorithm (Sullivan 2018).

Google started experimenting with multi-faceted featured snippets in early 2018 in order to provide better answers to multi-faceted search queries. These snippets provide instant answers to different aspects of a search query. They aim to better address both multi-intent queries (i.e. both informational and transactional) and to cover a broader set of nuanced queries, for instance relating to guidance-seeking queries (Moxley 2018).

2019 - January 2020

In October 2019, a major update to Google's artificial intelligence RankBrain was launched under the name of BERT, which stands for Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers. Google applies BERT to determine ranking positions and also to featured snippets in order to improve their capacity to help users find useful information (Nayak 2019).

In addition, an algorithm update in autumn 2019 targeted content freshness. The algorithm now tries to improve Google's "[...] understanding of what information remains useful over time and what becomes out-of-date more quickly. This is particularly helpful for featured snippets [...] For queries where fresh information is important, our systems will try to find the most useful and up-to-date featured snippets" (Nayak 2019a).

Another noteworthy development is the recent introduction of a new source format for featured snippets. Since early 2019, Google's algorithm may also draw on content contained in a pdf document and show an excerpt directly on the SERP (Southern 2019).

In January 2020, another significant and unexpected change occurred. On 22 January 2020 Google decided to end the practice of duplicating the

source web page shown in the featured snippets in the list of 'regular' organic search results below (Nguyen 2020). Until then, featured snippets had sometimes been considered 'position zero' by SEO and marketing professionals. This expression developed because featured snippets used to be stacked above the 'regular' ranking positions, before being repeated in the list of the ten 'regular' results (Wakefield 2019).

3.3 Google's featured snippet strategy

Featured snippets are part of a general trend towards Google enabling users to explore information directly on the SERP instead of navigating to a website (Oberstein 2019c). The evolution of the SERP in general and featured snippets in particular seem to be Google's response to users' changing expectations of how they want to access and consume content. Nowadays, users increasingly expect instant gratification (Wakefield 2019, 327). As SEO and marketing expert M. Oberstein highlights, this trend is a consequence of the overall evolution of how we consume content:

"I think people forget how malleable content is. More than anything else, content has evolved so much over the past hundred years. [W]e're losing sight of the fact that it was once really novel to have access to anything you ever wanted. [...] It's not a novelty anymore. That's old news as it is going on for almost over a decade at this point. What I think the novelty in content is, is the accessibility of it, where I no longer have to go to a website, I can just get it immediately from the search engine. That's the novelty that the user is seeking from content, not the access. Access has been granted for years. It's the idea that I can get really easy access to top-level content, without doing anything. [...] I don't need to click through to a website. It's not effective at this point. It's annoying for me to click through a website" (I1, 15).

In fact, already in 2014 Google highlighted their intention to provide answers directly on the SERP as much as possible:

"We used to show just ten blue links in our results. You had to click through to different websites to get your answers, which took time. Now we are increasingly able to provide direct answers -- even if you're speaking your question using Voice Search -- which makes it quicker, easier and more natural to find what you're looking for" (Google Inc. 2014).

Google wants to provide better answers and decrease friction, so the overall experience becomes more convenient (I4, 2). However, increasing

usability by making information accessible more quickly seems to be only part of the reasons why Google pushes featured snippets. Another element seems to be to establish their authority. As M. Oberstein puts it: “By offering content like that, Google ends up being, ‘Here's the answer, we're trustworthy, we're authoritative, keep coming back to us.’” (I1, 15).

Featured snippets are but one of several SERP features that serve information directly on the SERP (I1, 7). Their particularity is that they are tailored to answering questions - both in writing and spoken word. In fact, featured snippets are crucial in Google’s strategy for search as they play an important role in the context of voice search and voice answers. According to Google’s public liaison officer for search, Google displays featured snippets in search “[...] when we believe this format will help people more easily discover what they’re seeking, both from the description and when they click on the link to read the page itself. It’s especially helpful for those on mobile or searching by voice” (Sullivan 2018).

The emergence of featured snippets is tightly linked to the increasing use of voice search and the use of digital assistants which are capable of replying to queries with voice answers. SEO expert and content marketer T. Barish is of the opinion that “[t]he overriding motivation behind Google’s development of Featured Snippets may be the centrality the company sees in voice search on both computers and smartphones as well as the potentially massive market for home assistants” (Barish 2017).

Indeed, a study by SEMrush found that 70 percent of all answers returned from voice searches occupied a SERP feature and among those SERP features 60 percent were featured snippets (Andrienko 2019). In this context, it is important to further distinguish between voice searches that yield a voice answer and those that do not. While voice search as such does not change the marketing landscape much, voice answers do have disruptive potential, according to SEO specialist R. Fishkin (2019c).

Based on a sample of 1,000 search queries that displayed featured snippets, a study by MOZ investigated how often these voice searches are actually responded to with a voice answer (Meyers 2017). 71 percent of the searches yielded voice answers, but this percentage was strongly dependent on the type of snippet, as the data showed. In fact, paragraph snippets returned voice answers 87 percent of the time, list snippets just under 50 percent of the time and table snippets roughly a third of the time (Meyers 2017). The logical consequence is that “[i]n voice environments, Google will not generally be able to show more than one result when the search result is spoken in reply to a user’s voice query. As a result, they

need to have the absolute best answer with that first result as often as they possibly can” (Enge 2019). This puts Google under increasing pressure to provide the best possible result for the query and user intent. At the same time, it also puts pressure on SEO experts and content marketers because competition increases. “The value of position two or any other first page ranking disappears when your customer is using a voice assistant, and as usage grows, marketers must dominate [featured snippets] to maintain relevance” (Wakefield 2019, 329).

All in all, the introduction of featured snippets is part of Google’s efforts to remain the dominant point of access to information on the web, be it by increasing usability of their SERPs or by preparing the ground for the rising importance of voice answers. In addition, there is a third aspect, which relates to the fact that Google is a profit-oriented company. Although featured snippets may not directly be a ‘for-profit SERP feature’ per se, as is the case with its flight and hotel related SERP features (Oberstein 2019e), increasing profits is part of Google’s strategic objectives. As SEO expert N. Stevens puts it, “Google is a public company with shareholders. Their job, strictly speaking, isn’t to serve user intent, but to sell ads with rising cost-per-click. At the end of the day, Google wants to keep people on the SERP until they click an ad and to attain users by offering good results. They’re always trying to optimize for these two things which makes sense” (Oberstein 2019d). In addition, the fact that their machine learning capacities are already sufficiently advanced to extract content for featured snippets may also enable them to develop their own products by directly providing their own results for particular things in the future (I4, 7).

Based on the above-mentioned elements it seems appropriate to conclude this section with a quote by T. Barish about the strategic importance of featured snippets: “Featured Snippets are far more than just a direct answer to save searchers another click into one of the organic search results. They are part of a much bigger plan that Google envisions for the evolution of search in the years to come” (Barish 2017).

3.4 In brief - chapter 3

A thorough literature review allowed to compile a detailed timeline of the emergence of featured snippets from their first appearance in 2014 until January 2020. Based on scattered sources in various SEO publications, the timeline is a comprehensive account of the emergence and gradual changes Google has implemented in the context of this SERP feature. It highlights

Google's iterative and incremental approach to introducing new SERP features over time.

Against the backdrop of their emergence, the chapter also explored the strategic significance of featured snippets from Google's perspective. Empirical research allowed to fill gaps in existing literature as to Google's underlying motivation to show featured snippets.⁴ While Google's official justification is to increase user-friendliness of the SERP, further research present a more complex picture. Aspects such as the natural evolution of how content is consumed, as well as questions of competitiveness and profitability likely play a role. Featured snippets are also tightly linked to the rise of voice search and, in particular, voice answers.

⁴ Research was initially conducted by the author in the process of writing the master's thesis "Google's Featured Snippets in the Context of Strategic Content Marketing" (Sam-Martin 2020).

4. The creation and behavior of featured snippets

There are few confirmed facts about how Google's featured snippet algorithm functions, as Google only provides scarce and very general information. In order to find out more about the inner workings of this algorithm, search engine optimization (SEO) companies have conducted several studies to scrutinize featured snippets. This chapter provides an overview of insights gained by these studies and examines the role of machine learning for the creation of featured snippets. It looks at the prevalence and behavior of featured snippets and explores their impact on organic search. This knowledge will serve as a fundamental basis for interpreting the ranking factors and content marketing strategies that will be discussed in the following chapters.

4.1 How Google builds featured snippets

In order to better understand how to optimize for featured snippets it is essential to understand how Google creates them. The following sections therefore examine what is publicly known about how Google builds featured snippets. In fact, featured snippets are not simply extracted from the page that Google's 'regular' ranking algorithm lists first. They are produced by a separate algorithm which relies heavily on machine learning and trumps the 'regular' ranking position. Furthermore, Google's machine learning capacities enable it to shorten and reassemble content in order to improve user experience. As a consequence, it is relevant to explore the current lengths of featured snippets on the SERP. Finally, this section also examines the volatility of featured snippets which is central for subsequent strategic SEO and marketing considerations.

4.1.1 The featured snippet algorithm and machine learning

When asked about featured snippets, Google's Webmaster Trends Analyst G. Illyes explained that the search engine result pages should be understood as an auction place and that the ranking on these pages was determined by algorithmic bids for the available locations. According to him, the same was true for featured snippets, except that Google uses a different algorithm to determine the content for featured snippet locations (Indig 2019). According to Illyes, featured snippets relate to the query more than a normal snippet, as Google tries to "[...] pick passages that are more complete" (Indig 2019). In other words, "[t]he core thing that Google is using featured snippets to accomplish is to find the one definitive answer

to a user's question. [...] Google is looking for that one answer that satisfies the largest possible percentage of users" (Enge 2019). This can be challenging, as queries are often incomplete and do not always explicitly reveal the searcher's intent from the outset. Google's public liaison officer for search describes the challenges as follows:

"Featured snippets will never be absolutely perfect, just as search results overall will never be absolutely perfect. On a typical day, 15 percent of the queries we process have never been asked before. That's just one of the challenges along with sifting through trillions of pages of information across the web to try and help people make sense of the world" (Sullivan 2018).

Google itself does not reveal much additional information about the algorithm that creates featured snippets. Consequently, even among experts there is little certainty about the details of its mechanisms (I1, 65; I2, 2; I4, 22). It is widely known, however, that machine learning and natural language processing (NLP) play a significant role in the creation of featured snippets (I1, 37). They play a role both in the interpretation of search queries and in the way source content is presented.

Google's latest advancement in this area is called BERT, which is short for Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers. Google uses BERT to determine overall ranking positions and applies it also to featured snippets. The aim, as Google states, is to improve their capacity to help users find useful information: "In fact, when it comes to ranking results, BERT will help Search better understand one in 10 searches in the U.S. in English [...]. Particularly for longer, more conversational queries, or searches where prepositions like "for" and "to" matter a lot to the meaning, Search will be able to understand the context of the words in your query" (Nayak 2019b). Furthermore, BERT is expected to improve the functioning of featured snippets also in other search languages which already display featured snippets. According to Google, there have been significant improvements in languages like Korean, Hindi and Portuguese (Nayak 2019b). A practical example of the use of machine learning for the correct interpretation of search results are refinement bubbles which Google sometimes shows below a featured snippet. They are supposed to enable the searcher to access information which corresponds exactly to their intent more quickly than before (I1, 69).

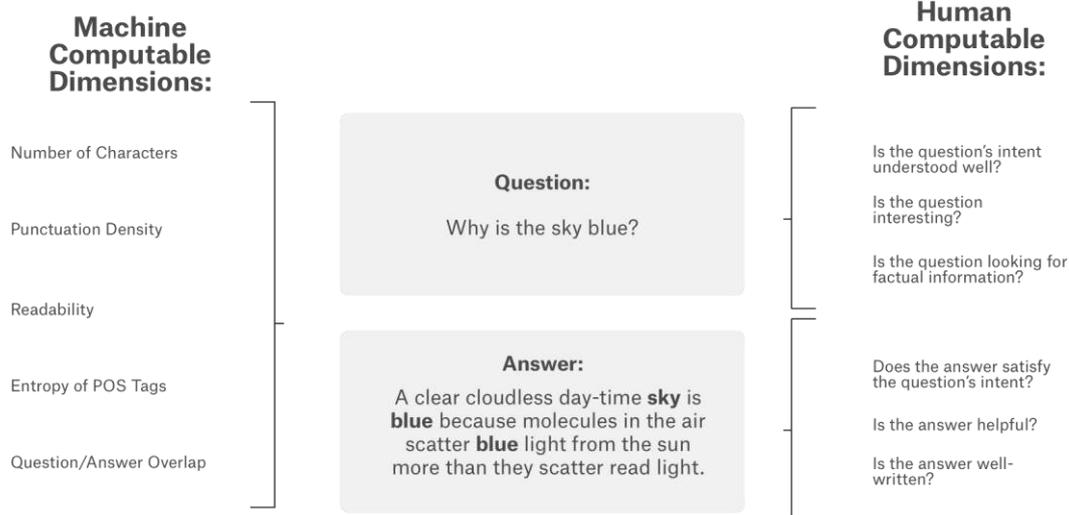
Furthermore, it is well known that Google uses machine learning in order to 'reconstruct' website content in order to build a concise piece of information to be displayed in the featured snippet (Indig 2019). Google

can locate and extract relevant content even if the page has not been optimized for featured snippets or lacks structured data (Barish 2017). In fact, Google uses machine learning to work through a piece of content and string together a set of sentences that serves a relevant answer within the featured snippet (Oberstein 2018a). As a consequence, featured snippets do not always represent website content the same way it is presented on the actual source website.

This is particularly relevant for list snippets and table snippets which are often shortened summaries of the original content found on the source website. In the case of list snippets, for instance, the algorithm may display a list based on the subsection headings of the article, although the actual article may also contain paragraphs of text for each list item as displayed in Google's featured snippet. Data on the length of featured snippets shows that Google's sentence-compression capacities have evolved significantly in recent years. Regarding table and list featured snippets, data shows that "Google has gotten better at stripping these Featured Snippets of unneeded and unrelated content [...]" (Oberstein 2019c).

Indeed, Google invests continuously in improving its NLP and machine learning capacities (I4, 18). "They are looking at all of these very specific unique facets of language to have richer contextual understanding around what might be appropriate to provide a searcher and what might not" (I4, 4). In 2019, Google Research launched a crowdsourcing competition with the aim to "[...] build predictive algorithms for different subjective aspects of question-answering" (Google 2020). Although the results are intended to "[...] inform the way future intelligent Q&A systems will get built [...]" the description of the assignment reveals noteworthy facts about Google's current understanding of AI-driven question-answering. Google states that "Computers are really good at answering questions with single, verifiable answers. But humans are often still better at answering questions about opinions, recommendations, or personal experiences" (ibid.). The illustration below (figure 6) shows what Google can already take into account already relatively well based on its existing algorithms in comparison with human computable dimensions that Google still struggles with.

Figure 6: Comparison of machine and human computable dimensions in question-answering (Illustration source: Google 2020)



Although there is no official statement, it is logical to deduce that, currently, Google's featured snippet algorithm already takes into account the dimensions they deem machine computable.

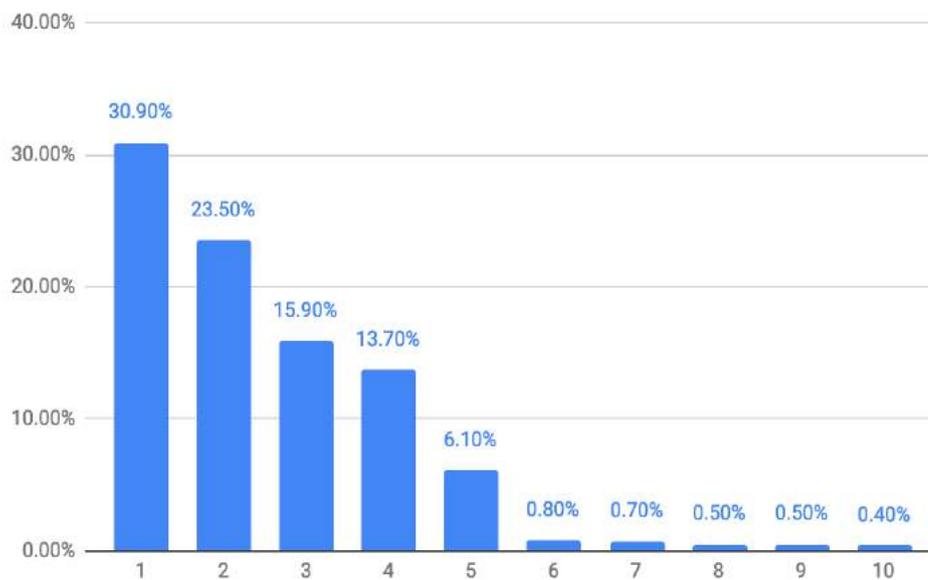
4.1.2 Ranking positions of featured snippet sources

It is important to highlight that featured snippets are not by default produced based on the first 'regular' organic result. In fact, until recently, the same webpage that was chosen as a source for the featured snippet was also included in the 'regular' organic listings below the featured snippet, on the first page of the SERPs. Google ended this practice without previous notice on 22 January 2020. As a consequence, Google now considers a featured snippet as the first organic result, followed by a list of nine 'regular' organic results. Of course, this applies only to queries which return a featured snippet, which is not the case for all queries. It is also interesting to know that in some cases, the source website for a featured snippet is now repeated as first result of the second page of the SERP (Nguyen 2020).

Before Google stopped duplicating the source pages of featured snippets on the first page of the SERP, several studies had examined the average 'regular' ranking position of featured snippet sources. Experiments run by SEO experts indicated that if a snippet was pulled from a ranking position lower than three it may mean that Google is still testing which source performs best (Muller 2019b). A likely reason for this is on-SERP data which indicated Google that the featured content does not provide the answer which serves the searcher's intent (I4, 24). Furthermore, the duplication of sources enabled studies to determine which ranking position was

necessary to 'win' a featured snippet. According to a study conducted by Ahrefs (Soulo 2017) about half of the search results picked up in featured snippets ranked at position one or two of the 'regular' SERPs and, when looking at position one to four of the SERP, even 84 percent of featured snippets stemmed from those positions.

Figure 7: The SERP position of websites picked up in featured snippets (Source: Soulo 2017)



An earlier study conducted by SEMrush in 2016 found a very similar distribution based on a smaller dataset. Furthermore, a study by RankRanger found that the data varies according to the sector. In the medical and biotech niche featured snippets are more often pulled from the top position (44 percent) than for instance in the travel sector where only roughly 25 percent of featured snippets were ranking in the first 'regular' position (Oberstein 2018a).

These studies prove that an excellent ranking, based on widely known SEO ranking factors, is a precondition to be in contention for a featured snippet. It seems that the featured snippet algorithm itself also looks at additional factors than the algorithms determining the 'regular' ranking positions or, rather, weighs them differently. Examining these differences provides insights that can be put into practice when optimizing content for featured snippets.

4.1.3 Lengths of featured snippets

Several studies have examined the lengths of featured snippets, including a recent study by RankRanger which looked at the evolution over

time (Oberstein 2019c). Table 1 further below combines this data with an earlier study conducted by SEMrush (Ghergich 2017).

The study conducted by RankRanger indicates that Google improved its capability to produce succinct and complete featured snippets by filtering out bloated content and providing more comprehensive answers. The small-scale study looked at a sample of 150 featured snippets and found that paragraph snippets in 2019 were 5 percent shorter than they were in the period of 2016 to September 2018. “Google is reducing the number of characters in paragraph Featured Snippets because it is better at dispensing information that directly aligns to the query. Shorter here means a more targeted and more complete answer” (Oberstein 2019c). With regard to list snippets the study found that they are now 9 percent longer than before. It seems that this may be the case because Google wants to serve users what they need directly on the SERP (Oberstein 2019c). In some cases, people may want to be served a very brief answer and in others they may be looking for a more detailed result which leads to the longer list featured snippets (Oberstein 2019d).

Table 1: Average volume of featured snippets according to SEMrush (Ghergich 2017) and RankRanger (Oberstein 2019c)⁵

	Length	2017	2016 to 2018/09	2019/09
Paragraph snippets	Avg.	272 char. 46 words	283 char.	269 char.
	Max.	370 char. 84 words	n/a	n/a
List snippets	Avg.	8.1 words/item 5.5 items	289 char.	315 char.
	Max.	57 words/item 8 items	n/a	n/a
Table snippets	Avg.	3.4 columns 5.6 rows	n/a	n/a
	Max.	4 columns 7 rows	n/a	n/a
Video snippets	Avg.	n/a	n/a	n/a

⁵ 2017 data from Ghergich (2017), 2016 and 2019 data from Oberstein (2019c).

4.1.4 Volatility of featured snippets

For some queries, a high level of fluctuation in search rankings for featured snippets can be observed (Oberstein 2019a). Google's Webmaster Trends Analyst G. Illyes explains this phenomenon as follows: When the algorithmic 'bid' for a position in the SERP is very close to that of another website, the results may constantly appear and disappear. According to him, in this case small details, such as running a site on https, can provide the competitive edge needed to outrank competing websites (Indig 2019).

Furthermore, the level of churn within featured snippets may also be interpreted as an indicator that Google is still in the middle of a dynamic testing process (Enge 2019). Google seems to be heavily investing in improving the accuracy of featured snippets, likely because of their importance for voice environments where only one result is returned as a spoken reply (ibid.).

A study conducted by SEO firm RankRanger found that, on average, Google oscillates between two URLs (Uniform Resource Locator) for one featured snippet spot within a 30-day period (Oberstein 2019a). The study looked at a sample of 350 keywords that consistently produced featured snippets during the research period of 90 days. The number of swaps between the URLs slightly varies depending on the type of query: "The dataset overall showed that Google swaps URLs within Featured Snippets 2.2 times each month. However, the figure was 13 percent lower when looking at the Featured Snippets associated with how to keywords" (Oberstein 2019a). In addition, a 2017 study by Ahrefs, which looked at a four-month period, found similar results. The study was based on a sample of 10,000 of the most popular keywords with featured snippets in the United States. 53 percent of featured snippets showed no URL change, 28 percent of featured snippets showed one URL change in four months and 11 percent twice. The differences of the two study outcomes may be due to the sampling methodologies. A comparison of the results leads to the hypothesis that featured snippets shown for popular keywords may be more stable than featured snippets for rare long-tail queries.

4.2 Prevalence of featured snippets

Several quantitative studies have looked at the prevalence of featured snippets on the SERPs in order to search for patterns. Indeed, the share of featured snippets on the SERPs varies depending on the segment one looks at. Depending on which thematic niche, level of keyword competitiveness, language, or device the sample focuses on, the share of featured snippets

varies. For instance, “[c]ase studies based on keywords with a higher average monthly search volume will return a higher percentage of Featured Snippets. In addition, if the keywords in a study are predominantly from certain niches, that affects the resulting frequency figures because among the niches there is a wide variance” (Barish 2017).

The following sections explore the prevalence of featured snippets on the SERPs according to the language and geographic region, thematic niche, and types of keywords.

4.2.1 Share of featured snippets by region and niche

At the time of writing⁶, the overall share of featured snippets on Google’s SERPs in the United States fluctuated somewhere between 13 percent and 27 percent, depending on the methodology. Mozcast, which tracks Google’s search features continuously, indicates that the share of featured snippets on the SERPs in the United States currently fluctuates around 15 percent (MOZ 2020b)⁷.

However, when looking at a larger sample which focused specifically on highly competitive keywords, the share of featured snippets noticeably increases. According to a recent study by Moz and Stat⁸, currently 23.9 percent of the SERPs on mobile devices show featured snippets for highly competitive keywords. This is an increase of 165.6 percent from 2016, when featured snippets only made up nine percent within the same keyword sample (Muller 2019a).

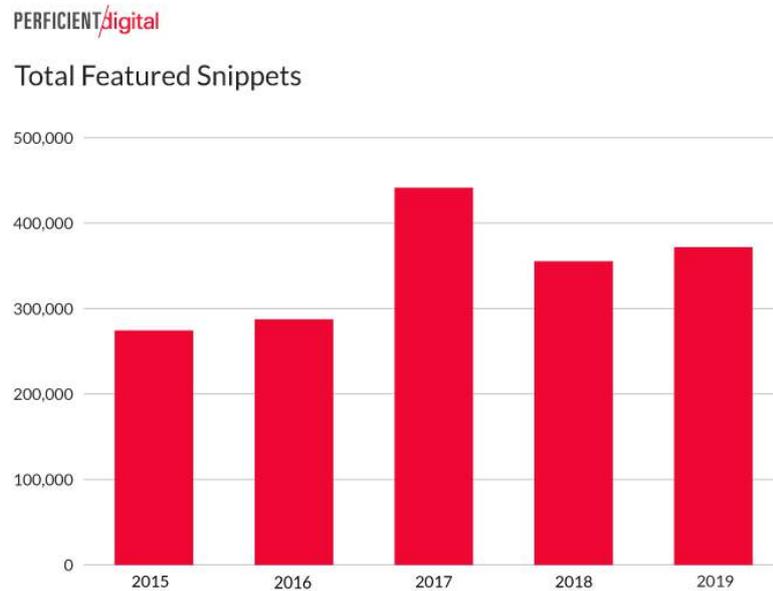
According to a different study by PerficientDigital, which was based on sample of 1,400,000 keywords on mobile SERPs in the United States, around 27 percent of the keywords in the sample returned a featured snippet in autumn 2019 (Enge 2019). Compared to 2016, this study showed a less dramatic increase: Data shows a visible peak in 2017, followed by a drop in 2018 and slight increase in 2019, but not yet a return to 2017 levels (see figure 8).

⁶ Autumn 2019 until February 2020.

⁷ Data as at November 2019, based on Mozcast’s sample of 10,000 SERPs in the United States with queries of a variety of lengths and search volumes.

⁸ The study examined 1,000,000 highly competitive keywords with high CPC and tested them on a mobile browser for the market Irvine, California, USA on Google.com in English.

Figure 8: Number of mobile SERP showing featured snippets out of a sample of 1,400,000 keywords (Source: Perficient Digital - Enge 2019)



Furthermore, SEMrush offers a free tool which provides insights into the share of featured snippets in different thematic niches and countries as well as devices. According to SEMrush sensor, the largest share of featured snippets is currently shown on Google Search in the United States and other anglophone countries. Google Search in other languages shows much lower shares of featured snippets (SEMrush 2020). This is likely explained by the fact that Google generally rolls out new features in anglophone markets first. In addition, Google’s machine learning and natural language processing capacities, which are fundamental to the creation of featured snippets, are the most advanced in English.

Table: Share of featured snippets by country and device, as of 27 January 2020 (Source: SEMrush 2020)

Country	Featured snippets on desktop SERP	Featured snippets on mobile SERP
United States	13.84%	11.91%
Germany	6.13%	3.57%
Spain	3.93%	2.89%

Furthermore, even within the same geographic region a look at a random sample of different thematic niches also reveals significant differences.

The data below shows the share of featured snippets on the desktop SERPs in the United States according to SEMrush Sensor (ibid.):

Science: 36.08%

Health: 19.06%

Arts & entertainment: 4.03%

Travel: 15.46%

Overall, recent years have seen a rise in featured snippets on the SERP (I1, 27), but also an impressive rise of the ‘related questions’ SERP feature, which is known as the ‘People Also Ask’ (PAA) panel (Muller 2019a). The PAA panel is closely related to featured snippets. In fact, 93.8 percent of featured snippets for highly competitive keywords are shown alongside a PAA box (Muller 2019a). According to SEMrush Sensor (SEMrush 2020), the ‘People Also Ask’ feature is currently shown on roughly 34 percent of desktop SERP in the United States. Mozcast even indicates that 87 percent of searches in their sample of 10,000 queries in the United States return ‘People Also Ask’ panels (Moz 2020b). B. Muller describes the intertwined relationship of these two SERP features as follows: “When it comes to predicting the future of PAAs, well, we don't have a crystal ball yet, but featured snippets continue to look more and more like PAA boxes with their new-ish accordion format. Is it possible Google will merge them into a single feature someday? It's hard to say, but as SEOs, our best bet is to maintain flexibility [...]” (Muller 2019b). Together, both search features already occupy a large share of the SERP and will likely continue to grow (I4, 12). Nevertheless, SEO experts predict that featured snippets will never be shown on all SERPs because they do not seem to be the best solution for all types of queries (I4, 4). An example are medical queries for which it might be harmful to serve featured snippets as answers (I4, 4).

4.2.2 Share of featured snippets by device

Although Google states that featured snippets are a feature that is particularly tailored to voice and mobile queries (Sullivan 2018), the current prevalence of featured snippets is not in line with this claim. In fact, a study by PerficientDigital found that featured snippets are currently more prevalent on desktop devices than mobile devices (Enge 2019). The study examined a sample of 1.4 million mobile SERPs. In order to compare those with desktop results, they took a random sample of 185,075 queries from their test and ran them with a desktop user agent. The result was that by a margin of 11 percent featured snippets are currently more common on desktop than on mobile (ibid.). Although currently the share of featured snippets on mobile is slightly lower than on desktop, it should also be

highlighted that featured snippets do occupy more space in mobile search results and attract a lot of attention as they push ‘regular’ results below the fold (SEMrush 2017). Thus, one may argue that featured snippets have an even bigger impact on the dynamics on mobile SERP than on desktop SERP.

Furthermore, a study by RankRanger revealed that even in cases where featured snippets are shown on both devices the source URL is not the same in 10 percent of these cases (I1, 63). There is no conclusive evidence as to why this is the case, although it may relate to the mobile friendliness of the sources.

Unfortunately, the differences of featured snippets on desktop versus mobile devices have not yet been thoroughly researched. Data is scarce although featured snippets are without a doubt relevant for both types of devices. More research and knowledge about Google’s featured snippet algorithm are needed to understand what causes these differences and how users interact with featured snippets on different devices.

4.2.3 Search queries triggering featured snippets

Several studies have examined what types of queries are most likely to return featured snippets. Before looking into these specific queries, the importance of the overall user intent must be highlighted. Google itself defines several user intents in its Quality Rater Guidelines (2019d):

- **Know queries**, often referred to as informational search queries;
- **‘Do’ queries**, including transactional queries;
- **Website queries**, to visit a specific website;
- **Visit-in-person queries**, to look for a specific business or category of business places (Google 2019d).

Following this classification, featured snippets are triggered mainly by ‘know queries’, which are more commonly referred to as informational queries, whereas according to experts’ observations featured snippets for transactional queries are less likely (I1, 33). Indeed, featured snippets are considered to be a SERP feature that is particularly tailored to respond to informational or research-intent queries (Smith 2019a). Among those, ‘how to’ queries are of particular importance as they align “[...] to the most essential nature of what the Featured Snippet intends to achieve” (Oberstein 2019b). Furthermore, ‘best’ queries often produce list snippets. Often, the term is either employed to find the best product or service and is therefore a transactional and product-oriented query or it might also be

an informational query, such as “best places to retire in the world” (Oberstein 2019a). Nevertheless, transactional queries may also return featured snippets, particularly in a grey area with a mix of informational and transactional intent. SEO expert I. Smith (2019b) illustrates this with the example of a search phrase such as “how old to rent a car” which might return a featured snippet that should be targeted by car rental companies.

In this context, it is important to highlight that not only the content but also its format must be aligned to user intent. When a user expects to see a how-to video rather than a written explanation then this is what Google is likely going to show as featured snippet instead of text (Muller 2019a).

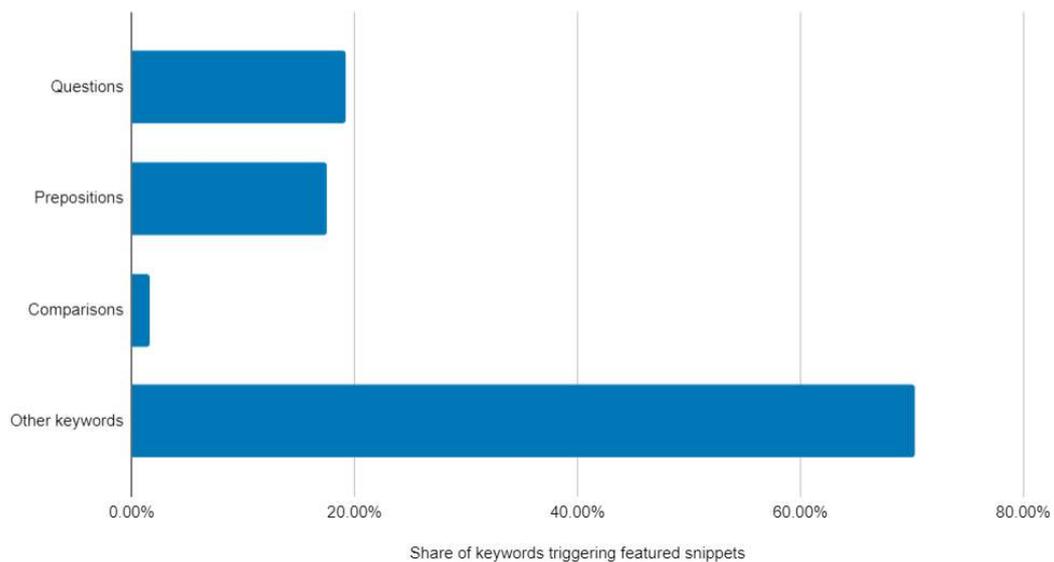
Several studies have examined the types of keywords that are most likely to return featured snippets. As the aforementioned study by MOZ and Stat has shown, a set of highly competitive keywords with an elevated cost-per-click and high search volume tend to show a particularly high share of featured snippets (Muller 2019a). Nevertheless, overall, long-tail queries are known to return the largest number of featured snippets. Based on a sample of 100,000 keywords, a 2016 study by SEMrush found that the average length of a keyword phrase which returned a featured snippet was six (Zhao 2016). This data is also supported by a major study done by Ahrefs in 2017 (Soulo 2017) which looked at a sample of 2 million keywords that included a broad set of queries. The study found that “[...] the majority of featured snippets are triggered by long-tail keywords” (Soulo 2017). Indeed, 54 percent of the analyzed featured snippets were triggered by keywords with a search volume of only up to 50 monthly searches, and 31.5 percent of the analyzed featured snippets were triggered by keywords with a search volume of only 50 to 100 monthly searches.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that although Google claims that featured snippets “[...] are especially likely to appear for searches that are phrased in the form of a question” (Google 2019e), the results of Ahrefs’ study put this claim into perspective (see figure 9 below). In fact, the study found that among all keywords that trigger featured snippets, the ‘other keywords’ category actually made up the largest share (70.3 percent) and questions (using interrogative pronouns) accounted only for 19.2 percent (Soulo 2017).⁹ However, it is important to point out that a question is inherent to all search queries - the major difference lies in the phrasing.

⁹ Questions: 19.2%, prepositions: 17.5%, comparisons: 1.6%, other keywords: 70.3%.

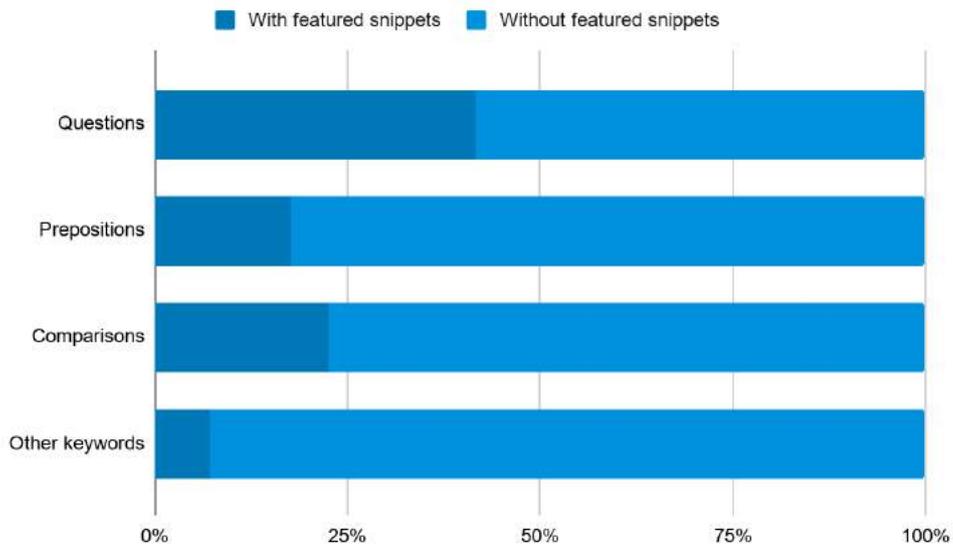
“Virtually all queries are questions, but some are implicit questions, not explicit ones” (Fishkin 2019a).

Figure 9: Share of keyword groups triggering featured snippets in the keyword sample (Source: Soulo 2017)



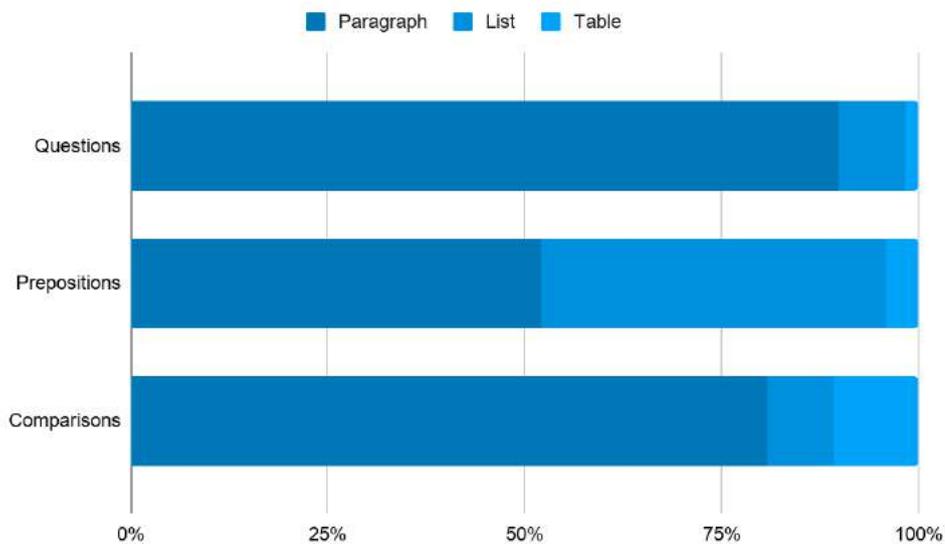
Another major study was conducted by A.J. Ghergich and SEMrush in 2017 (see figure 10 below). It is the study with the largest sample as of yet, as it was based on 80 million keywords and 6.9 million featured snippets (Ghergich 2017). Within this dataset, the study selected and analyzed four distinct segments: search queries consisting of questions, prepositions, comparisons, and ‘other’ keywords. When looking at each segment separately, the data showed that featured snippets were particularly prevalent within the following keyword groups: questions (41.59 percent), comparisons (22.67 percent) and prepositions (17.72 percent - for, like, to, with, without). The ‘other keywords’ group only returned a share of 7.18 percent of featured snippets. Although this result may seem contradictory compared to the aforementioned study by Ahrefs, correct interpretations show that the results align with each other. In absolute figures, as Ahrefs concluded, featured snippets are most frequently found in the ‘other keywords’ category. This is most likely due to the fact that the ‘other keywords’ group is disproportionately larger than any of the other defined groups of keywords. Therefore, even a small share of featured snippets within this group will surpass the number of featured snippets in the other groups when looking at absolute figures. Indeed, the shares of featured snippets that can be discerned within each segment provide interesting insights into the ‘logic’ behind queries returning featured snippets.

Figure 10: Share of featured snippets in each keyword group (Source: Ghergich 2017)



Furthermore, SEMrush’s study (Ghergich 2017) also looked into the relationship between the type of keyword and the type of featured snippet that is displayed (see figure 11). Overall, paragraph snippets are the most prevalent type of featured snippet for all types of queries. However, list snippets also make up a significant share, particularly for queries containing prepositions, such as ‘how to’-queries. Table featured snippets are not as frequently encountered, presumably due to the low number of source websites containing tables. Video snippets were not analyzed as they did not yet exist in 2017, when the study was conducted.

Figure 11: Types of featured snippet by keyword group (Source: Ghergich 2017)



Another method to gain insights into the nature of queries triggering featured snippets is to analyze the occurrence of certain words, as done in the recent study by Moz and Stat (Muller 2019a). The study also looked at so-called ‘triggers’ which are words that frequently return featured snippets.

Table 2: The most common trigger words per type of featured snippet (Source: Muller 2019a)

Paragraph snippet triggers	List snippet triggers	Table snippet triggers
does, cost, difference, much, between, description, deductible, can, what, average, is, deduction	best, improve, workouts, types, bays, brands, starting, exercises, recipe, promote, apps, symptoms	rates, fixed, salary, conjugation, accounts, sizes, purchases, prices, highest, interest, dimensions, electricity

In addition, when analyzing the start words of search queries, the study found “are, can, do, does, how, is, should, why, will” to be the most common for featured snippet queries. Among those, ‘how’ stood out as the word triggering the largest share of list snippets (Muller 2019a).

To conclude, it is important to note that the above-mentioned studies only refer to anglophone searches. To the knowledge of the author, there is currently no data available on other languages. In any case, marketers should keep in mind that only search queries which require an answer that is broader than what Google can deliver directly via its knowledge graph are eligible to display featured snippets (Fishkin 2019a).

4.3 Impact on the click-through rate

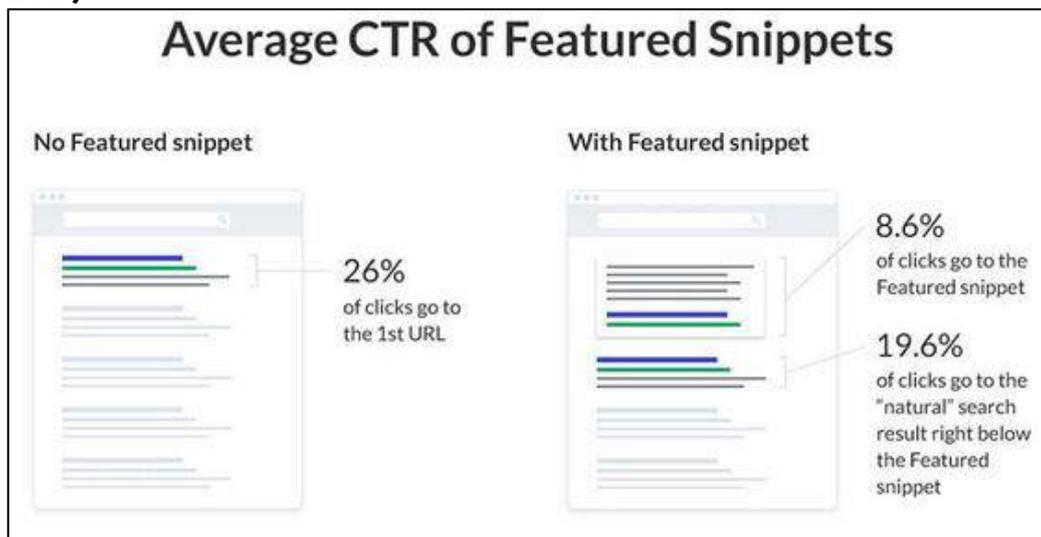
Featured snippets are part of the overall trend towards zero-click searches. According to a study by Sparktoro, 50.33 percent of Google searches do not result in a click-through to a website anymore (Fishkin 2019b).¹⁰ Featured snippets are part of this trend as they are designed to “[...] give the searcher an instant answer to their question so they wouldn’t have to click” (Soulo 2017). In 2018, Google addressed these concerns with the following statement:

¹⁰ Data from June 2019, based on over 40 million browser-based searches on desktop and mobile devices in the United States.

“When we introduced featured snippets in January 2014, there were some concerns that they might cause publishers to lose traffic. What if someone learns all they need to know from the snippet and doesn’t visit the source site? It quickly became clear that featured snippets do indeed drive traffic. That’s why publishers share tips on how to increase the chances of becoming one, because they recognize being featured in this way is a traffic driver” (Sullivan 2018).

Google’s statement only reveals part of the truth as it is a proven fact that featured snippets and other search features impact click-through dynamics in complex ways and not just increase traffic, as Google portrays it. Whereas in 2014 a number one result on Google’s SERPs would attract about 31 percent of clicks, the average click-through rate (CTR) of the first position had dropped to 19.30 percent by 2019 due to Google’s introduction of various SERP features (Johnson 2019). In 2017, Ahrefs’ large-scale study looked specifically at the impact on the CTR that may be caused by featured snippets (see figure 12). While in 2017 the first-ranking organic result on a ‘regular’ SERP without featured snippet would get 26 percent of clicks it would only get 19.6 percent of clicks on a SERP with a preceding featured snippet. According to the study, the featured snippet attracted on average 8.6 percent of clicks. Furthermore, although zero-click searches were not specifically examined, the study author T. Soulo pointed out that featured snippets did seem to reduce the overall number of clicks (Soulo 2017).

Figure 12: Average CTR of featured snippets in 2017 (Source: Soulo 2017)



Unfortunately, more recent data is not available, but given Google’s advances regarding the quality of featured snippets as well as overall SERP CTR data one can deduce that the ‘regular’ first result below a featured

snippet receives an even smaller share of clicks nowadays and that the share of no-click searches for SERPs with featured snippets have increased (Oberstein 2019c). When looking forward, it is likely that the share of zero-click searches will continue to grow, but only to a certain degree since the SERPs are not built for displaying in-depth content (I1, 17; I2, 22). As a consequence, Google remains limited to showing snippets, so users will have to continue to click through if there is a need for in-depth information (I3, 50).

Google itself does not publish any click-through data on featured snippets. However, in the context of their lobbying activities regarding the European Union's copyright directive Google released the results of a study which examined the effects of a minimalist SERP display for news results. In their experiment, the search results only showed URLs, very short fragments of headlines and no preview images. Google summed up the results of the test as follows:

“All versions of the experiment resulted in substantial traffic loss to news publishers. Even a moderate version of the experiment (where we showed the publication title, URL, and video thumbnails) led to a 45 percent reduction in traffic to news publishers. Our experiment demonstrated that many users turned instead to non-news sites, social media platforms, and online video sites—another unintended consequence of legislation that aims to support high-quality journalism. Searches on Google even increased as users sought alternate ways to find information” (Walker 2019).

Although their data focuses on Google news results, it is likely that similar dynamics apply to featured snippets. In fact, this statement highlights that Google competes with other platforms such as social media which offer visually rich results. Serving information to users directly on the SERP increases Google's competitiveness with these platforms. Google's data shows that the less information is featured directly on the SERPs the less engaging they become.

4.4 In brief - chapter 4

Google is known to reveal as little information as possible about the functioning of its algorithms and their featured snippet algorithm is no exception. In short, all Google publicly shares is the fact that featured snippets are created by a separate algorithm which relies heavily on machine learning. The important role of machine learning and, in

particular, natural language processing, has also been confirmed and emphasized by the experts interviewed for this work. Their knowledge on the subject, together with insights from studies by major providers of SEO software, allowed an in-depth examination of how Google builds featured snippets. This also included a discussion of their 'behavior' on the SERPs: featured snippets are often not drawn from the 'regular' first ranking position, they are particularly concise and, for the most part, relatively stable.

A compilation of recent studies and data showed that the prevalence of featured snippets on the SERPs varies strongly depending on the region and thematic niche, the device, and the types of keywords. Finally, the impact of featured snippets on click-through dynamics was explored.

Indeed, studies have proven that featured snippets have a direct impact on the click-through-rate towards websites. As a matter of fact, featured snippets do significantly increase the competition for clicks, as they attract a sizeable share of traffic, mainly reducing the traffic attracted by the first 'regular' result. At the same time, further research has confirmed that there is a rising share of zero-click searches to which featured snippets contribute.

As Google strives to provide more answers directly on the SERPs, users increasingly consume information there, instead of clicking through to a website. The chapter therefore demonstrated the relevance and importance of knowing about the creation and dynamics of featured snippets for content marketing professionals.

5. Featured snippet ranking factors

Since featured snippets first emerged, search engine optimization (SEO) companies have been looking into the question of how to optimize websites for featured snippets. A number of quantitative studies and experiments have shown that there are indeed certain good practices that can provide a competitive advantage when it comes to winning featured snippets.

Based on these studies and experts' experiences, this chapter provides an overview of ranking factors that seem to influence the likelihood of winning featured snippets.

Seven ranking factors will be discussed:

1. The overall competitiveness in organic search;
2. High-quality content and authority;
3. Content structure and HTML formatting;
4. Text length and phrasing;
5. Structured data markup;
6. Images;
7. Content freshness.

5.1 The overall competitiveness in organic search

Google's search algorithm reportedly takes into account over 200 ranking factors to determine the order of results to be displayed on the search engine results pages (SERPs) (Löfler 2019, 340). In search engine optimization, winning featured snippets is currently not considered as a must-have by SEO experts and content marketers. Featured snippets are considered as something that should be tackled once the website has been optimized according to fundamental SEO good practices and is highly competitive.

It would go too far to recap the essential SEO measures every website should implement. A quick reminder by SEO firm MOZ shows the hierarchy of fundamental measures that should be taken when optimizing a website (see figure 13). In their pyramid model, crawl accessibility is considered most essential to rankings, whereas rich snippet markup is located at the tip of the pyramid, as a useful measure to improve competitiveness.

Figure 13: MOZ' SEO fundamentals pyramid (Illustration: MOZ 2020a)



While all of these steps are important to achieve excellent ranking positions, SEMrush's voice search study provides insights into factors that may be particularly relevant in the context of featured snippets, which are the source of the majority of voice search results. The study identified the following general ranking factors that may positively influence the likelihood of winning featured snippets:

- **High page score and trust score of backlinks**, as well as backlink anchors and keywords within a title matching the query;
- **Page speed** that is faster than average;
- **Well-linked pages**, both internally and externally (Andrienko 2019).

Once these basics are covered, more specific optimization measures as outlined in the following sections come to the fore.

Indeed, SEO experts widely agree that the optimization process for featured snippets should start by optimizing pages that already have a top ranking. The chances of winning a featured snippet quickly are much higher if the website has already proven its competitiveness for a given query (I4, 13; Enge 2019). Although focusing on pages already ranking on the first page of the SERPs is often recommended, pages that have made it into the top five rankings should be particularly prioritized (Meyers 2016).

If there are no or not enough existing top five rankings, focusing on top ten rankings remains an alternative (Enge 2019; Ghergich 2017).

5.2 High-quality content and authority

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, Google does not publish detailed information on how to rank in a featured snippet box. The company has, however, established a set of minimum quality standards publishers must comply with in order to be eligible for featured snippets:

Featured snippet content **must not be sexually explicit, hateful, violent, dangerous, and harmful, or lack consensus on public interest topics** (Google 2019e).

Beyond these minimum requirements, experts stress that source content must be of excellent quality and provide value to the user. In general, Google looks for expertise, authoritativeness and trustworthiness when establishing organic search results (Haynes 2019). This is not limited to featured snippet content, as it is part of Google's overall Search Quality Rater Guidelines. In 2018, Google announced an improvement to these guidelines with the aim of helping their systems to better identify when results are prone to low-quality content, in which case Google may opt not to show a featured snippet at all (Sullivan 2018).

Indeed, the principle of putting high-quality, valuable content at the center of SEO and content marketing efforts is not specific to optimization for featured snippets. Content marketing expert S. Jefferson reminds readers, "What does Google love? Google loves the content that answers the questions people are asking. So, focus on providing just that" (Jefferson/Tanton 2015, 112). This is particularly true for featured snippets since they are a display feature that is particularly tailored to answering questions. In this context, it is vital that content marketers choose their topics wisely:

On the one hand, content must go beyond publicly available information and facts such as sports scores or weather information, because nowadays Google can easily provide such information from its own knowledge graph (I1, 17; I2, 39; I3, 44).

On the other hand, even information that goes beyond the scope of Google's knowledge graph does not always attract clicks anymore, as shown in section 4.3. It is therefore essential that marketers incite clicks by

providing content that is so well-phrased it still attracts users' attention and targets a question that requires an in-depth answer which cannot be provided within the limits of a short snippet (I1, 15; I2, 40; I3; 44). When taking sports as an example, then websites should focus on attracting clicks by providing in-depth sports analysis rather than just sports scores (I1, 25). Furthermore, besides the thematic orientation and quality of a specific piece of content, empirical research showed that the quality and orientation of the overall website it is embedded in also plays a vital role.¹¹ SEO expert M. Oberstein urges publishers to "[...] think about it more holistically, then Google is going to trust you. You have to write about a topic and be known as a source. And the only way to do that is to write about it from multiple perspectives, multiple instances on the same topic" (I1, 29). This piece of advice is even more essential against the background of voice search: "On the actual traditional SERP, so even if Google gives me a featured snippet, I could still look at the other options if I'm not happy with that. But in voice search, whatever I get is the one 'true' answer - and that's it" (I1, 23). The consequence being that the importance of winning the featured snippet increases.

Regarding the overall orientation of the website, data shows that informational sites own a large share of featured snippets (Muller 2019a). B. Muller attributes this to their authority and credibility: "They have got backlinks, references as experts and factual information. It's a bit tougher for a brand, especially a lesser-known brand, to compete with some of that. It's just really hard. But what we see brands being a little bit stronger with, is owning featured snippets with their brand. [...] And so, that's where you sort of look at this authority aspect of it is 'Who is really credible to answer this?' and I think that's exactly what Google is trying to figure out" (I4, 26). An often-cited indicator for authoritativeness is the backlink profile. However, as a study by Ahrefs showed, "[i]n the vast majority of cases, the backlink metrics of a 'featured' URL seem to be on par with the rest of the pages in SERP" (Soulo 2017). What seems to be useful, however, is when the keyword is included in backlink anchors, as a study that focused on voice-search results showed (Andrienko 2019).

¹¹ Research was initially conducted by the author in the process of writing the master's thesis "Google's Featured Snippets in the Context of Strategic Content Marketing" (Sam-Martin 2020).

5.3 Content structure and HTML formatting

The use of meaningful Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) formatting that goes along with a logical and clear content structure is without a doubt among the most important ranking factors for featured snippets. They help both the user and Google to understand content more easily.

Marketing and SEO expert P.J. Meyers (2019) recommends the inverted pyramid model as a writing method that can help craft content with featured snippets in mind. The inverted pyramid is a model borrowed from journalism and is often recommended to content creators who write for the web. When following this structure, the essential information is featured at the top of the article, in-depth information is in the main body and the bottom includes additional information that is 'nice to have' (Löffler 2019, 473f).

In addition, a good practice that has worked for a number of websites that offer in-depth articles is to provide a summary of key information at the top or bottom of the page (I4, 16). For in-depth articles, it could be considered whether a concise summary should be included. Although this should be assessed case-by-case, SEO experts have reported that this measure sometimes leads to success. Oftentimes such a summary is referred to as tl;dr which stands for 'too long; didn't read' (Muller 2019a).

It is also recommended to use introductory phrases or headings that are descriptive and add context (Baxter 2016). Experiments have shown that it can help to place the query and the answer adjacent to each other (Barish 2017). Also, simple phrases or keywords such as 'here's how', 'quick takeaways' or 'summary' may help Google understand what follows (Muller 2019a).

Furthermore, correct and clear HTML formatting of the text is the most important way of structuring content on a page and is essential to increasing the likelihood of getting picked up as a featured snippet. In addition, there is a correlation between content formatting and the type of featured snippets. Depending on the format of the featured snippet, the careful use of HTML markup for elements such as subtitles, lists or phrases may help to highlight crucial information to the user and Google's featured snippet algorithm (Spencer 2018). How can HTML be used for each type of featured snippet?

The most obvious example are **table snippets**. Queries that return a table snippet require the source content to be formatted as a table. The formatting

and structure of content that Google chooses to generate paragraph or list snippets is more diverse. While there are no quantitative studies examining potential patterns regarding the formatting of source content for paragraph and table snippets, small-scale optimization experiments indicate certain trends.

Paragraph snippets are often won by content with succinct paragraphs (Smarty 2017). Oftentimes, the content for paragraph snippets is a `<p>` formatted paragraph, taken from a larger piece of content such as a blog article. What seems to contribute to featured snippets is also to have the query that triggers the snippet in a subheading, which is immediately followed by a succinct paragraph providing the answer. As little as removing the heading tag from such an introductory phrase can sometimes be enough to lose a featured snippet to a competitor (Muller 2019a). However, also other content formats may win featured paragraph snippets. For instance, the written content associated with a video may be picked up as a featured snippet without showing the associated video in the SERP, as is the case with many descriptions of YouTube videos. Even before the introduction of video snippets, YouTube was #7 in the list of domains 'owning' the most featured snippets (Soulo 2017).

List snippets are known to be primarily based on content provided as ordered or unordered lists with `` or `` HTML tags. In addition, Google's featured snippet algorithm also composes its 'own' lists very frequently. These are often compiled from the subheadings of an article that uses `<H2>` or `<H3>` heading tags. This happens frequently with so-called 'listicle articles' which consist of a `<H1>` title, an introductory paragraph, and then an `<H2>` subheading for each list item, which is followed by a succinct paragraph of information and an image. Often, list snippets are also based on web pages with an `<H2>` formatted title and `<H3>` sub-titles which become the list items of the featured snippet. However, sometimes Google also sources lists from unexpected places such as the image descriptions of such listicle articles or just pulls out bolded sections of a page (Oberstein 2019d). In some cases, Google also produces featured snippets from subscription and paywalled content that is only accessible by logged in users of the respective page.

As a consequence, it is essential to write clearly structured pieces of content in the format which is most likely to be picked up by the featured snippet. This content structure should be enhanced by the most fitting HTML formatting and any HTML formatting mistakes should be corrected. Even small HTML formatting mistakes, such as using `` formatting for

an ordered list but then repeating the step number in the text leads to bloated content which is not competitive (Baxter 2016).

5.4 Text length and phrasing

Featured snippets offer concise summaries of website content at varying length and in different formats. In fact, SEO experts “[...] see Google very specifically seeking those very perfect short sound-bites - very concise, summarized information about a particular topic” (I4, 14). Therefore, several quantitative studies have examined the average character count of the most common forms of featured snippets: paragraph, list, and table featured snippets.¹² SEO experts widely agree that the length and phrasing of the source content do influence its likelihood to be picked up as a featured snippet. When it comes to translating this knowledge into practice, however, positions differ.

Three different strategic approaches can be discerned among SEO and marketing experts, which recommend to:

1. align content to the average length of featured snippets;
2. focus on providing the most value to the target group;
3. provide content that is slightly longer than the content displayed in featured snippet boxes.

Whether or not online content should be deliberately aligned to word length recommendations in order to win featured snippets is contested among SEO experts. While it is easily possible to calculate the average length of featured snippets on the SERP, the ‘right’ length for online content is not so easily determined. SEO and marketing experts counter that value for the customer should be primordial (I2, 18; I3,20).

Another frequently encountered recommendation is to provide content that is slightly longer than a regular snippet shown by Google, in order to increase click-through rates by giving away only part of the answer on the SERPs. The theory is that this would force Google to truncate the information and incite more users to click through. Ghergich (2017)

¹² With regard to video snippets, there is no quantitative data available yet that would look into questions such as featured video length and length of the suggested video clip after the timestamp or the share of videos that start at a specific timestamp other than the video’s start.

suggests, for instance, to provide more than eight list items or making each list item slightly longer than average. In light of more recent insights, however, this recommendation seems out of date. In fact, Google's machine learning capacities are already advanced enough to produce solid syntheses based on longer pieces of source content. In addition, it only seems logical that Google would prefer to be served content that fits the featured snippets boxes from the outset. Indeed, experiments have shown that in some cases, a change as little as adding one additional word or even just adding a second period may lead to losing a featured snippet to a competitor (Muller 2019a).

Content marketers generally recommend to first and foremost write content with the customer in mind, while also considering basic SEO principles (I2, 18; I3, 12). Rather than targeting a specific length, content creators should keep in mind how to create valuable content for their target group and serve the search engine's goals at the same time. Given the advancements of Google's algorithm, both approaches converge more and more (I3, 20). In fact, research by marketing consultancy firm PerficientDigital (Enge 2019) has shown that featured snippets are often taken from articles that are very comprehensive as a whole. Enge argues, "We've seen it suggested that 100 words is the max you should use for featured snippet-seeking content. Yes, there is a limit to how many characters Google will show in the SERPs, but this has no bearing on how long your overall piece of content should be" (Enge 2019). In fact, the overall article should address the topic as comprehensively as possible without including off-topic information (Spencer 2018).

Keeping in mind the average length of featured snippets in a given niche may be useful during the writing process but should not mislead content producers to publish incomplete pieces or articles that are fractionated into small pieces of content (I2, 18). However, experiments have proven that content for featured snippets must be particularly straightforward and concise in order to be accessible and easy to understand - so easy that a crawler wants to produce it into a featured snippet (I4, 16). Therefore, experts recommend testing and fine-tuning existing content specifically for featured snippets. Otherwise, content producers may be letting opportunities slip away. B. Muller is of the opinion that "[...] it's almost foolish, at this point, to provide really great content that could potentially rank for very competitive featured snippets, but you are just not fine-tuning it enough [...]" (I4, 14).

In fact, Google needs succinct content for featured snippets to ensure good user experience, not least because of their importance for voice search.

The success of voice search, in particular, relies on the availability of short and clear voice answers. SEMrush's study on voice search found that text complexity of a voice answer should rank around 8 on the Flesch Kincaid Grade and therefore be simple and understandable to the average user (Andrienko 2019). Another practice-oriented way of determining the optimum length and phrasing of featured snippet content is to read it out loud (Muller 2019b). If it is unclear or takes too long to listen to, it is not optimized.

5.5 Structured data markup

Whether or not schema.org - a popular structured data markup system - is a ranking factor for featured snippets has been a point of contention among SEO experts. Initially a Google representative mentioned structured data markup as a way to get featured snippets in an interview. Soon after, however, this statement was revoked (Schwartz 2015). Google says that structured data "[...] is no guarantee that the page will appear with that designated feature; structured data only enables a feature to be displayed. Google tries to display the most appropriate and engaging results to a user [...]" (Google 2019b).

Indeed, evidence from at least two different studies supports this statement. A 2016 study by Stat showed that 15.7 percent of featured snippet URLs used schema.org markup as opposed to 19.6 percent of URLs without featured snippets. However, as the study authors pointed out, Wikipedia, which accounts for a large share of featured snippets, was not using schema.org, which may have skewed the results (Soulo 2017). A more recent study by PerficientDigital still did not find evidence that schema.org is required to help get a featured snippet (Enge 2019).

To what degree schema.org is critical for earning featured snippets is uncertain, but it certainly is important to get rich snippets and it does help Google to recognize entities and their relationships, which is particularly crucial in the context of featured snippets. It seems that the significance of schema.org should not be overstated with regard to featured snippets, particularly as Google's machine learning capacities advance (I1, 57). However, as one interviewee pointed out, "The actual question is not, 'should I use schema.org to get featured snippets?' The question should be, 'Should I use schema.org?' and the answer is yes!" (I1, 57). Although Google does not rely on structured data to pull out website content into a featured snippet it is convenient for them to rely on structured data markup because it saves bandwidth and therefore cuts their costs (I1, 57).

Google itself offers several data markup options in relation to featured snippets, notably the `<nosnippet>` tag which prevents Google from using website content as featured snippets. In autumn 2019 Google also released additional markup tags which gives website owners the option to set parameters for the content Google uses in its featured snippets (Muller 2019a):

“max-snippet:[number]” - specifies a maximum text-length in characters of a snippet.

“max-video-preview:[number]” - specifies a maximum duration in seconds of an animated video preview.

“max-image-preview:[setting]” - specifies a maximum size of image preview to be shown for images on this page, using either “none”, “standard” or “large”.

It seems unlikely, however, that publishers will be able to use these markup options to positively influence the likelihood to have their content picked up in featured snippets. These markup options are, in fact, a response to a copyright infringement lawsuit Google was involved in regarding their Google news service in France (I1, 43). Indeed, structured data helps Google tremendously to pull out website content in order to integrate this content directly into their SERPs. Especially in the first years after featured snippets had been introduced, digital publishers argued that they would prefer not to be featured, so internet users would consume content on their websites only. Recently it seems the mood has shifted, as publishers are more and more aware that this would imply losing traffic to competitors who embrace the changes of Google’s SERPs.

5.6 Images

Paragraph and list featured snippets often contain a featured image to illustrate the search result. In case of paragraph featured snippets there is generally one featured image shown. In case of list snippets there might be several images - one for each list item. Therefore, providing pictures in the right format and with the appropriate alt-information is an important detail when optimizing written content for featured snippets. A study by SEMrush showed that the ideal aspect ratio for featured images is 4:3 and image size in pixels is 600w x 425h (Ghergich 2017).

However, even if content from a particular URL is picked up in a featured snippet, there is no guarantee that the featured image is sourced

from the same page. In fact, “[t]he majority of images that show up in featured snippet boxes (or to be more accurate, the webpage those images live on) do not rank organically within the first ten pages of organic search results for the featured snippet query” (Muller 2019b).

5.7 Content freshness

In 2019, Google announced that their featured snippet algorithm would take into account content freshness more strongly.

“As part of our ongoing efforts to make Search work better for you, a new algorithm update improves our systems’ understanding of what information remains useful over time and what becomes out-of-date more quickly. This is particularly helpful for featured snippets, a feature in Search that highlights pages that our systems determine are most likely to have the information you’re looking for. For queries where fresh information is important, our systems will try to find the most useful and up-to-date featured snippets” (Nayak 2019a).

Content that remains useful over time - also known as evergreen content - may still be useful to users years after its initial publication. Other types of content, such as news reports, may only be of relevance for a short period of time. Although evergreen content remains relevant for a longer period of time, content producers should nevertheless work on maintaining it up to date and republishing it from time to time (I1, 31).

5.8 In brief - chapter 5

Research has shown that featured snippets are considered an advanced SEO topic which is generally only tackled once all other SEO challenges have been mastered. Indeed, only highly competitive websites have the chance to win featured snippets, which implies that technical SEO has been already covered.

There are seven factors for featured snippet success that everybody who publishes web content should be aware of.

1. The overall competitiveness in organic search,
2. High-quality content and authority,
3. Content structure and HTML formatting,
4. Text length and phrasing,
5. Structured data markup,
6. Images,
7. Content freshness.

Optimizing for featured snippets is mainly a question of presenting content in a way that can be easily understood by Google's algorithms and, if necessary, shortened based on its natural language processing capabilities. One of the most important factors is to provide high-quality content and to establish the overall website as an authority in the given niche. In addition, if content for featured snippets follows a certain structure and formatting, the likelihood of being pulled into a featured snippet increases. Unfortunately, there are no studies examining the source content of featured snippets, therefore empirical research has been instrumental in confirming recommendations by SEO publications.¹³ There are, however, studies which looked into the lengths of snippets which led to the conclusion that the text elements destined to be picked up by a featured snippet must be particularly concise. A much-debated question picked up by this chapter is the importance of using structured data. Empirical research allowed to confirm reports that, in fact, structured data is not a decisive factor although, due to its general usefulness, it is recommended. Finally, the chapter also examined the role of images for featured snippets as well as content freshness, which Google recently announced to have a greater impact on featured snippets.

While the identified factors are likely by no means exhaustive, the chapter allowed to give an account of important aspects that should be taken into account when writing content for queries that return featured snippets.

¹³ Research was initially conducted by the author in the process of writing the master's thesis "Google's Featured Snippets in the Context of Strategic Content Marketing" (Sam-Martin 2020).

6. Featured snippets and strategic content marketing

The development, implementation and evaluation of content marketing strategies is a well-researched process, with numerous academic and practice-oriented publications addressing it. Although content marketing literature generally considers SEO as a highly relevant technique and distribution channel, featured snippets and SERP features in general have received little attention yet. Indeed, search engine optimization and content marketing are closely intertwined disciplines - to a point that they are even considered “symbiotic” (Löffler 2014, 337), as “[v]aluable content is the basis of all effective search engine optimization” (Jefferson/Tanton 2015, 102). This chapter therefore draws the bridge between content marketing and featured snippets by exploring their significance in the development, implementation, and evaluation of content marketing strategies.

The section on strategy development explores under which circumstances featured snippets should be considered in the strategy development process and what impact they may have on strategy development.

The following sections on strategy implementation and evaluation are based on the assumption that the strategy at hand found organic search, including featured snippets, to be a relevant distribution channel. These sections therefore explore how to implement and evaluate a content marketing strategy that focuses particularly on winning featured snippets.

Before discussing these three stages, the first section of this chapter examines the overall relevance of featured snippets from the point of view of content marketing experts.

6.1 Relevance of featured snippets for content marketing

Empirical research indicates that ‘pure’ content marketers and strategists consider featured snippets to be primarily an SEO topic.¹⁴ As such, it should be dealt with by SEO specialists rather than by content

¹⁴ Research was initially conducted by the author in the process of writing the master’s thesis “Google’s Featured Snippets in the Context of Strategic Content Marketing” (Sam-Martin 2020).

marketers or content producers (I2, 54 / I3, 4). Such was the case with the content strategy experts interviewed in the framework of this research process who highlighted that their customers had never requested they place specific attention on gaining featured snippets. In fact, they stated that SEO in general was not the primary distribution channel their customers made use of, as they were primarily major B2B companies as well as small- to medium enterprises, respectively (I2, 54 / I3, 22). While the small businesses reportedly lacked awareness of SEO in general, the search volumes of topics relevant to the large B2B companies were too low as to particularly focus on organic search as a channel.

Given the small sample of interviewees, it would certainly be an overgeneralization to state that content marketers in general currently have little awareness about featured snippets. Nevertheless, it seems appropriate to deduce that a specific demand for featured snippet optimization as part of content marketing strategies currently seems to be low. If there is awareness, it tends to sit in SEO agencies and among marketing professionals with SEO background (I2, 54). Based on the interviews with experts working in the German-speaking market, it can be concluded that businesses seem to have little awareness about featured snippets, which are considered a niche-topic (I3, 36). The situation seems to be similar regarding English-speaking countries (I4, 30), although featured snippets may already be more relevant there due to the larger share of featured snippets on the SERPs (see section 4.2.1). Nevertheless, C. Wakefield (2019, 329) argues that most websites which rank in featured snippet boxes have not spent much time and energy optimizing their content to maintain their position, which may open up opportunities for SEO-savvy content marketers.

Whether or not featured snippets are a relevant factor that should be taken into account while elaborating content marketing strategies largely depends on whether organic search as a whole has been identified as an appropriate distribution channel (I3, 4). Many businesses carry out basic search engine optimization (SEO) when producing marketing content, but do not conduct detailed SEO-oriented analysis or optimization, which is either omitted or delegated to specialized SEO agencies (I2, 54; I3, 12ff). Other businesses, especially those practicing 'pure' inbound marketing, rely almost solely on organic acquisition, and therefore SEO still is a major strategic pillar of their content marketing efforts (Jacobsen 2019). However, even in those cases, content marketers sometimes consider optimizing for featured snippets a desirable enhancement rather than an integral part of their fundamental strategic considerations (I3, 32).

Based on the empirical research that forms the basis of this e-book, it seems that content marketers currently tend to view featured snippets overwhelmingly as opportunities rather than threats.¹⁵ Indeed, owning a featured snippet has the potential to place a brand very visibly on the SERPs which increases the likelihood of attracting clicks (I3, 16). Content marketing literature also highlights the potential of SERP features as additional opportunities to be featured in organic search rankings (Ansari 2017, 211). Inversely, the risk of zero-click searches is seen as a minor threat if prospects are attracted in the appropriate phase of the customer journey. In this view, qualified visitors would click on the featured snippet to learn more, because their information needs could not be met by the limited content displayed in a featured snippet (I3, 50-52). Furthermore, content marketers also see advantages from a business point of view: More challenging ranking requirements demand more advanced content marketing skills and therefore content marketing agencies may be able to charge more for their services (I2, 2). Indeed, in the context of featured snippets not only the content itself but also its format must be strategically planned (ibid.).

In contrast, SEO experts who have researched featured snippets extensively expressed more cautious opinions when asked about featured snippets' impact on organic search. Generally, they tended to see it both as opportunities and threats (I1, 13; I4, 12). Nevertheless, although featured snippets increase the share of zero-click searches it is not an alternative to leave featured snippets to competitors as the share of featured snippets on the SERPs will likely increase (I4, 12).

As 'regular' organic search results are often not even displayed above-the-fold anymore (Dorfman 2015), this should raise strategic questions for content marketers who apply organic search as a major distribution channel. Arguably, considering SERP features such as featured snippets should be part of the basic strategic considerations of content marketers who rely on organic search, as suggested in SEO literature (Erlhofer 2019, 158). In some cases, content marketers may find that optimizing content specifically for featured snippets will give them a competitive advantage on the SERP. In other cases, they might find that relevant queries return a large share of highly competitive featured snippets which they are unable

¹⁵ Research was initially conducted by the author in the process of writing the master's thesis "Google's Featured Snippets in the Context of Strategic Content Marketing" (Sam-Martin 2020).

to 'conquer' and which, consequently, may call into question the relevance of organic search as a whole for a particular content marketing strategy.

In the end, however, only high-quality content will prevail, as SEO and marketing expert E. Enge writes:

“Regardless of how the concept of featured snippets evolves over time, the value of creating the best possible content will endure. For us, that means a continual and ongoing effort to improve our content, update it, monitor how it does, and come back to it and improve it again” (Enge 2019).

6.2 Strategy development

What place should featured snippets occupy in a comprehensive content marketing strategy, if any? This question has been rarely asked, as featured snippets have been mainly examined from an SEO perspective up until now. Desk research showed that current content marketing publications, such as books and journals, briefly mention featured snippets or similar SERP features without conducting a comprehensive analysis of their strategic impact on strategy development, implementation, and evaluation.

However, given the rising share of featured snippets on the SERP (see section 4.2.1), their strategic significance in the area of content marketing must be assessed. Therefore, this section will explore whether and how featured snippets should be taken into account in this process. Content marketing literature proposes various frameworks that may guide the necessary analyses during the strategy development process (see Ansari 2017). The most important steps and frameworks, roughly based on a content marketing handbook by S. Ansari (2017), will be discussed with a view to the potential role of featured snippets in the strategy development process, before moving on to the stages of strategy implementation and evaluation.

6.2.1 Objective setting

One of the first steps of the development of a content marketing strategy is to define strategic objectives, which should align with the overall business goals. In case of a content marketing strategy, these may be acquiring new customers or positioning a brand. In most cases, this stage of strategy development will not yet require paying specific attention to featured snippets. Winning featured snippets will rarely be a major goal of a content marketing strategy as it would lead to a very narrow strategy (I1, 75). Featured snippets enter into play once relevant distribution channels

are being selected and organic search has been deemed an appropriate channel (I3, 4).

6.2.2 Market analysis

Conducting a market analysis is a crucial step in the development of a content marketing strategy as it provides important insights into the competition. In fact, the number of potential competitors that are relevant in the framework of a content marketing strategy may be much larger than the number of direct competitors offering a similar product or service. Competition, in this case, means competition for authority on a subject and may include all kinds of online publishers (Ansari 2017, 39).

If organic search is deemed an appropriate distribution channel, the analysis of competitors on relevant SERPs provides an indication of the competition relatively quickly, but it is not only limited to other publishers anymore. Nowadays, even Google itself and its SERP features have to be considered competitors in their own right, as they “[...] have become a mighty and formidable SERP competitor” (Oberstein 2018b). This highlights the importance of taking into account featured snippets when doing market research, provided that organic search has been selected as a relevant channel (I3, 4).

A first indication of whether featured snippets may be of strategic relevance is provided by generic data on the given niche, as provided by SEO tools (see section 4.2.1). They track the overall share of featured snippets in several thematic and geographic areas which can vary significantly.

In areas where featured snippets occupy a significant share of the SERPs, content marketers should be aware of the changed click-through dynamics and specific optimization requirements they entail. In these cases, SEO experts recommend a detailed competitive analysis once a broad list of relevant keywords has been identified, which will be discussed in section 6.3.2.

6.2.3 Target audience

Collecting and analyzing information about the target audience is the next step in content marketing strategy development. Collecting existing demographic data and conducting a persona analysis is important at this stage (Ansari 2017, 42f). While the outcome of the audience analysis will most likely not make direct reference to featured snippets, it nevertheless

prepares the ground for further strategic decision-making in which featured snippets may play a role.

Audience analysis may provide valuable information to assess the weight organic search should be assigned to as a distribution channel in the content strategy. In addition, knowing one's audience is also crucial to understand which questions they are asking, which is especially important in a keyword strategy that specifically takes into account featured snippets (Wakefield 2017, 330).

Furthermore, knowing which device the target audience uses gives an indication about the importance of optimizing for featured snippets and is relevant for return on investment considerations. Although currently the share of featured snippets on mobile is slightly lower than on desktop, featured snippets do occupy more space in mobile search results and attract a lot of attention (SEMrush 2017).

In addition, the use of voice search, which varies according to the demographic profile of a person, should be taken into account more and more in future, as usage grows. C. Wakefield argues that marketers must dominate featured snippets to remain relevant in this context (Wakefield 2019, 329).

6.2.4 Distribution channels

Content marketing strategies usually build on a mix of paid, owned and earned media as distribution channels. Classic earned media would be social media engagement or public relations, whereas website content would be strictly considered owned media. Nowadays, however, the line between these categories becomes increasingly blurred. Website content may be transformed into a new type of earned media on Google's SERPs, automatically generated by the artificial intelligence of Google's algorithm (I2, 24; I3, 38). While owned media is characterized by being fully under the control of the business publishing the content in question, earned media - such as featured snippets - are outside the direct control of marketers.

Whether or not organic search is a relevant distribution channel for marketing content depends strongly on the type of target audience and also varies according to the stages of the customer journey (I2, 54), as well as according to the type of content that will be distributed. Organic search is well-suited for long tail and evergreen content, but more forward-looking topics are usually better supported by social media techniques because people do not proactively search for them (Linn 2014).

Content marketing strategies should, therefore, use a mix of different distribution channels. “Marketers today find it increasingly necessary to invest in multiple channels to avoid risk, as efficacy typically waxes and wanes between channels and platforms” (Lieb/Szymanski 2017, 7). Focusing solely on organic search or even just featured snippets is not a recommended strategy (I1, 75).

However, selecting channels for marketing content should not divert attention from deeper strategic considerations. “Rather than strategizing around channel targeting, focus on the behaviours and the needs your customers have during each phase of their journey. [...] Content marketing asks, ‘When will the message deliver the most value?’” (Lieb/Szymanski 2017, 12).

6.2.5 Customer journey analysis

A strategic customer journey analysis is one of the most powerful analytic models to develop a customer-centric content marketing strategy. It is a useful analytic instrument to determine which distribution channels are best suited to reach the target audience with the most relevant content at each stage of their customer journey (Grunert 2019, 32) and it can also serve as a useful tool to determine a keyword strategy (Ansari 2019, 179).

Based on a three-step model of the customer journey (Grunert 2019, 29ff), featured snippets may play a different role in each stage, provided that organic search is one of the distribution channels (I3, 30):

Awareness phase:

Prospective clients have identified a problem to which they need a solution and conduct research to further specify the problem (Grunert 2019, 32). In this phase, featured snippets may appear as answers to the general questions a prospective client may ask. However, this is also the phase in which a prospect may still be satisfied with the snippet information and does not need to click through to the website because the search for information is still superficial (I3, 44). In conclusion, owning featured snippets which appear in the awareness stage may potentially be a brand-win, but generating clicks on featured snippets is not crucial yet at this stage, as the searcher is not yet a qualified lead (Meyers 2019). As long as the brand owns the featured snippet, changed click-through dynamics (see section 4.3) have little to no negative effect at this stage. However, if a competitor owns the snippet and the brand’s own page ranks further below

it will be more difficult to attract searchers' attention than for a query without a SERP feature.

Consideration phase:

The prospect evaluates solutions to the problem he/she has previously identified. The prospect deepens his/her research for a solution and should become a lead towards the end of this phase by signing up to an email newsletter, sending a request via a contact form or other actions. In most cases, generating leads via organic search requires the prospect to click-through to the website. Featured snippets may now attract a significant number of clicks as prospects look for more in-depth information. This is possibly the phase of the customer journey in which featured snippets are of the greatest relevance, as their very nature is about providing the best answers to someone's problem and drawing them closer with remarkable content (Jefferson/Tanton 2015, 204). The question-answer dynamic of featured snippets is therefore well-adapted to this phase. This is also the phase in which a brand should establish its trustworthiness and authority (Grunert 2019, 33) and owning the featured snippets may help to do so.

Decision phase:

The prospects look for specific products or services to address their problem and may compare different solutions. Featured snippets that are formatted as tables may be particularly relevant in this phase, as well as list snippets which may provide an overview of different solutions. Whether these featured snippet formats are more frequent in this stage than other featured snippet formats would require further research and most likely strongly depends on the given sector. Overall, however, other SERP features, such as Google Shopping or Google My Business, may be shown more frequently for queries in this stage of the customer journey than featured snippets as they are better tailored to the searcher's intent in that stage.

6.2.6 Content audit

Except for startup businesses, the audit of existing content is a crucial step in the development of a content marketing strategy. Ansari (2017, 65) distinguishes two phases: drawing up an inventory and rating existing content, for instance by carrying out an analysis which looks at strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT analysis).

Although not always expressly mentioned in content marketing literature, it is only logical to pay attention to SERP features, including featured snippets, in this process if the business in question attracts a

sizeable amount of organic traffic (Erlhofer 2019, 158). A content audit may reveal that further action with regard to featured snippets is necessary. This aligns with recommendations by SEO experts who generally suggest starting by optimizing existing content for featured snippets rather than creating new content (Muller 2019b). To do so, it is helpful to use an SEO tool to determine the share of featured snippets for strategically relevant queries, what share might already be owned by the website, and how to deal with content that ranks on page one of the SERP but does not own the featured snippet (Muller 2019a). This information can be used to determine whether featured snippets play an important strategic role for the business in question. Furthermore, the information can be used as a starting point to improve existing content in the strategy implementation phase.

6.3 Strategy implementation

The implementation of a content marketing strategy requires thorough planning and the coordination of all involved stakeholders at all stages. This stage will be discussed based on the assumption that the underlying content marketing strategy defined organic search and featured snippets as a worthwhile focus.

The following sections examine mainly the process of content planning, with particular focus on keyword research, as well as the production of written content. This focus was chosen based on prior desk research which suggested that featured snippets potentially play the most significant role during these steps.

6.3.1 Content planning and keyword research

Content marketing expert M. Löffler (2019, 95) suggests a three-step model to structure the content planning process:

Step 1: Content collection: Collecting content ideas, complementary to themes previously identified in an audit.

Step 2: Content filtering: Only ideas and topics that align well with the business goals remain on the list and remaining topics are being prioritized.

Step 3: Content consolidation: The outcomes of the previous phase are documented and operationalized (Löffler 2019, 95f).

In SEO-driven content marketing strategies, featured snippets may enter into consideration at each of the three above-mentioned phases. Step one and two of this model deserve a detailed discussion with regard to the potential role of featured snippets:

Step 1: Collecting topics and keywords

While pure keyword research based on an SEO tool is not recommended for successful content marketing, it is nevertheless crucial to identify terms that are meaningful to customers and prospects (Linn 2014). A broad list of relevant keywords should be the basis of this analysis, which should be informed by marketing considerations and analytic models such as a customer journey analysis, rather than just focusing on lists automatically suggested by SEO tools (Ansari 2017, 181). Most SEO tools will also provide information about Google's SERP display features.

There are numerous tools and recommendations on how to draw up a keyword list. When it comes to a strategy that focuses particularly on featured snippets, it is important to be aware of the specific patterns that can be discerned regarding keywords triggering featured snippets. For instance, as discussed in section 4.2.3, the majority of featured snippets are triggered by long-tail keywords.

In this context, content marketer C. Wakefield is of the opinion that “[...] current keyword research tools fail when it comes to the long tail, and brands cannot ignore the long tail and win at the answer box” (Wakefield 2019, 331). She argues that keyword research should be intertwined with audience research which, together, would form a major pillar of a successful featured snippet strategy. In her understanding, audience research is a deepened and extended way to carry out keyword research. It should look at questions the audience really asks and combine the results with the output of an SEO tool and suggestions by Google's ‘People Also Ask’ search feature. SEO experts support this view. E. Enge (2019) and B. Muller (2019a) suggest focusing on commonly asked user questions as a starting point for a featured snippet strategy. I. Smith suggests doing this by “[...] working with customer service teams to find problems we can solve on our pages, collecting on-site feedback and complaints, and looking to Knowledge Panel and PAA Box results for inspiration” (Smith 2019a). She highlights that this is not only a way to discover new content possibilities that could trigger featured snippets, but also a good strategy for creating useful content in general.

However, not all keyword strings must be explicit questions. Implicit questions may also trigger featured snippets if their intent is informational (Smarty 2017). Since it is impossible to deliberately target all long-tail queries that could possibly lead to a piece of content, it is recommended to “[...] stick to writing detailed in-depth articles that fill all possible blank spots that people might have [...]” (Soulo 2017) to increase chances of

winning featured snippets. What is crucial in this context, is to develop content that is broader and goes more into depth than what Google can deliver directly via its knowledge graph (Fishkin 2019a).

Step 2: Filtering and selecting topics and keywords

The resulting list should now contain a sizeable number of questions, keywords and phrases and must be narrowed down (Wakefield 2019, 332). To do so, the potential and efficiency of the related keywords must be assessed.

In this process, the following aspects deserve particular attention:

- search volume;
- alignment with the customer journey and searcher's intent;
- comprehensiveness and coherence;
- competition.

Each of these aspects will be discussed below:

>>Search volume:

One way to start the process of narrowing down a keyword list is by filtering out infrequently asked questions (Enge 2019). Indeed, longer-tail question-based queries that may return featured snippets sometimes have very low monthly search volumes. Nevertheless, one could also decide to optimize for a large number of low-difficulty featured snippets with low search volume, instead of targeting featured snippets attracting higher search volumes which oftentimes means facing more competition. In order to make this decision, a probability and payoff analysis is recommended (Oberstein 2019d).

>> Alignment with the customer journey and searcher's intent:

It is essential to choose those keywords that have the potential to convert well because they align best with the customer journey and the business goals (Muller 2019b). A customer journey analysis also serves as a useful model for creating clusters of relevant keywords for each stage (Ansari 2019, 179). In this context, the searcher's intent must be taken into account as well.

>> Comprehensiveness and coherence:

In addition, there should be a certain coherence when it comes to the topics covered by the chosen keywords. SEO experts' experience has shown that Google tends to pick websites for featured snippets that have covered the same topic holistically, from multiple angles, and established

themselves as trusted sources (I1, 29). “Providing enhanced and relevant content around the subject gives further use to your visitor, but also proves to Google that you are a strong source of knowledge on the topic as a whole” (Smith 2019a). In this context, it is recommended to expand content to address other closely related user questions (Enge 2019).

>> Competition for keywords:

Analyzing the competition is a crucial step to be able to assess the efficiency and potential return on investment of the collected keywords. Featured snippets have a proven impact on the click-through rate (see section 4.3) and should, therefore, be examined closely during a competitive analysis. Furthermore, Google itself also increasingly competes with publishers on the SERP. It is therefore essential that the selected keywords go beyond what Google can deliver via its knowledge graph, which is currently mainly restricted to public knowledge (Barish 2017).

Due to its highly relevant nature, the recommended steps of a competitive analysis for a featured snippet-focused strategy will be discussed in-depth in the following section.

6.3.2 Competitive analysis with featured snippet focus

In the implementation phase of a content marketing strategy, a competitive analysis is a useful method to examine the competition. Such an analysis helps to choose which topics or keywords to focus on, in order to ensure an adequate return on investment of the marketing measures. This is particularly important for a content marketing strategy in which featured snippets play a significant role. In fact, SEO experts agree that analyzing the competition is an essential step towards winning featured snippets (I4, 28).

It has even been argued that featured snippets may be a way to beat more powerful competitors in organic search rankings who may hold a featured snippet but have not taken any deliberate steps to win or secure them (Willson 2017). In this view, featured snippets offer an opportunity to jump from a ranking position such as number five on the SERP directly into a featured snippet “[...] by just matching the question better” (Smith 2016).

However, a recent study has shown that Google mainly oscillates between just two URL options for any given featured snippet, which may indicate that moving into a preexisting featured snippet is harder than many SEO experts may have thought (Oberstein 2019a). This underlines

the importance of an in-depth analysis to determine the probability of being able to win a featured snippet from a competitor.

Several aspects require attention when conducting a competitive analysis with a focus on featured snippets:

- a) The potential of the website to compete for the featured snippet,
- b) The competition which may own the featured snippet,
- c) The volatility of the featured snippet,
- d) Return on investment considerations.

Each of these aspects will be discussed below:

a) The potential of the website to compete for the featured snippet:

The content audit during strategy development may already have helped to identify the prevalence of featured snippets in the relevant niche or regarding specific keywords and which competitors own them. Indeed, as outlined in chapter five, the capacity to beat the competition for a given query even in ‘regular’ rankings is one of the most fundamental ranking factors to win featured snippets. In addition, the overall orientation of the website may also influence the likelihood of beating the competition. Data suggests that informational websites tend to dominate featured snippets. Nevertheless, brands and e-commerce sites are still able to compete if they address the customer’s question well (Muller 2019b). In this context, clear product descriptions and sections summarizing frequently asked questions are recommended by SEO experts (Zhao 2016).

b) The competition which may own the featured snippet:

A detailed look at the competition in the featured snippet, but also the rest of the results on page one of the SERP, is necessary to be able to assess whether it is worth investing resources into creating or updating content for certain queries (I4, 28). Several aspects indicate strong competition:

- The site is a known authority in the given niche, or the content aligns particularly well to the query (I1, 29);
- The content of the featured snippet is concise and clear, without unnecessary filler words, and actually answers the query (Muller 2019b; I1, 13);
- The content is comprehensive for someone looking for additional information and includes visual elements (Muller 2019b);
- The overall website provides additional answers around the topic (Muller 2019b);
- It is well adapted to be delivered as a voice answer (Muller 2019b).

c) The volatility of the featured snippet: An analysis of the featured snippet over a 30-day period may show that Google oscillates between two sources for the same snippet. If one source proves to be rather well established - i.e. shown 75 percent of the time - it might be difficult to outperform this established URL (I1, 71). Again, the overall orientation of the website should be factored in, as data shows that URLs for transactional queries are more volatile as Google moves URLs in and out of the featured snippet more often (Oberstein 2019a).

d) Return on investment considerations: The above-mentioned indicators should enable an informed assessment of the likelihood to win a featured snippet. This should then be taken into account in the strategic selection of keywords, based on the evaluation of a likely return on investment. If the analysis concludes that the likelihood to take over a featured snippet is low, then it must be decided whether the available resources should be redirected to target other topics. Featured snippets significantly reduce click-through rates for lower-ranking positions and this situation may aggravate in the long term with the rise of voice search (Wakefield 2019, 329). However, even if it is unlikely to win the featured snippet for a given query there may be additional factors that may make it worthwhile to pursue a certain topic or query nevertheless. The following factors should be taken into account in these considerations:

- The strategic relevance of the query and related piece of content in the context of the overall content strategy;
- The search volume, since a small percentage of click-through traffic for a high-volume query may still lead to a significant amount of traffic in absolute figures (I1, 81);
- Producing the content primarily for other relevant distribution channels, such as social media, in line with the content strategy.

6.3.3 Content production: outlines and structure

The aforementioned steps have led to a list of topics and/or keywords that should be targeted as part of the overall content marketing strategy. Some topics may be covered by updating existing content, others will require the creation of entirely new content.

This section addresses recommendations for producing or updating content for queries known to trigger featured snippets. Indeed, when creating content for featured snippets, SEO experts recommend starting out with existing content that has already acquired a top ranking (see section 5.1).

Several aspects were identified which should be taken into account before and during the actual content production process, including:

- a) conducting an in-depth analysis of the current featured snippet;
- b) aspects to cover in a content outline;
- c) recommendations for the writing process.

Each of these three aspects will be discussed below:

a) In-depth analysis of the current featured snippet:

Before actually starting the writing process, the analysis of the competition must be deepened specifically for the relevant keyword(s). An in-depth analysis of all results ranking on page one of the SERPs must be carried out which should go beyond just looking at the page currently owning the featured snippet (Muller 2019b).

At the content level, this analysis should consider whether there are common themes among these results, what topics they cover and how these could be covered better by providing added value to the searcher (Muller 2019b). According to SEO expert N. Stevens, the guiding question in this process should be “[W]hat can I do that’s similar and what can I do to differentiate [...]” in order to then make a hypothesis on the snippet and searcher’s intent and do something similar but slightly different” (Oberstein 2019d).

According to SEO expert B. Muller (2019b) the nature of the query and the searcher’s intent must be considered early on in this analysis. Knowing what kind of content users are looking for and which medium is the most adequate to provide it to them without friction is crucial while crafting content.

In addition, the format of the current snippet must be identified. If there is no snippet yet, the right format to use is the one that is most valuable to the users. Oftentimes, the analysis of featured snippets in the given niche will also reveal a predominant format. Whereas paragraph snippets are generally the most common, other formats may dominate a particular niche (Enge 2019).

What is more, the strengths and weaknesses of the page and overall website currently owning the featured snippet must be analyzed in more depth if this has not yet happened previously. To do so, the quality criteria mentioned in the previous section on competitive analysis should be considered.

Furthermore, an existing snippet should also be examined from a more technical point of view. According to B. Muller (2019b) questions to ask in this context are: What part of the website is Google pulling the content from? What is the markup of the source content?

At the end of the analysis, it should be clear which content structure and markup should be used and from what angle the topic should be approached in order to address the searcher's intent and provide added value.

b) Aspects to cover in a content outline

As a next step, a production template should be created which will guide the work of the content creator. The template is essentially an outline that should reflect all relevant information and requirements based on the strategic decisions made in previous phases (Grunert 2019, 224). The aspects that should be addressed by such outlines vary depending on the business. Many content marketers work with outlines based on spreadsheets which clearly determine the structure of the article even when there is no conscious intention of targeting featured snippets (I2, 42).

The advantage of such outlines is that they help to observe one of the most important rules when writing for featured snippets: producing content with a clear structure and format (see section 5.3). Content producers must be cautious, however, to avoid cutting the article into small fractions which may work as standalone snippets but not as a continuous and coherent long-form piece of content (I4, 18).

With regard to optimization for featured snippets, specifically, the following aspects could be reflected in such a template:

- The question(s) to be addressed by the article;
- The snippet format to be targeted (paragraph, list, table; video);
- The desired structure of the article and HTML markup;
- The desired length of paragraphs or list items;
- The tone of voice (Spencer 2018; Enge 2019; Ghergich 2017; I2, 42).

c) Recommendations for the writing process

Overall, SEO experts and content marketers agree that successful content is content that is valuable to the user. Therefore, general recommendations on how to write useful online content do apply also when writing for featured snippets. There are, however, certain particularities that content producers should be aware of when specifically targeting featured snippets. These aspects have been identified and discussed in chapter five

on featured snippet ranking factors. Experiments have shown that oftentimes even small tweaks can have a significant impact on the likelihood to win featured snippets (Muller 2019a).

6.4 Measuring and evaluating performance

Once a content marketing strategy has been set up and implemented, it is good practice to measure its performance. Although this is widely known, practice often falls short at this stage of strategic content marketing: “While content marketing is pervasive, most organizations’ ability to effectively measure their efforts fall significantly behind their ability to publish content on every screen” (Lieb/Szymanski 2017, 165).

Choosing the right key performance indicators is essential for meaningful performance evaluation. With regard to featured snippets, specifically, several approaches to measuring strategic success have been proposed. Their potential and limitations will be discussed in the following sections.

6.4.1 Ranking position

Although featured snippets have often been referred to as position zero, neither Google Search Console nor Google Analytics offer information about the number of featured snippets a website ‘owns’ (Muller 2019c). While it is possible to track success in moving up the organic SERPs to a better ranking position, Google’s tools do not provide the same information for featured snippets. Indeed, a website either owns or does not own a featured snippet and there is no telling how far off it may be from winning it over from a competitor (I2, 32).

However, nowadays most professional SEO tools provide data on the number of featured snippets a website owns (I4, 28). Based on the capabilities of these tools and a given set of strategically relevant queries, a relevant metric could, therefore, be the share of featured snippets owned by the website in question. In addition, some tools also provide the option to track featured snippets over time (I1, 71), which may provide insights into a website’s capability to keep featured snippets. E. Enge (2019) highlights that it is important to be aware that one “[...] can get featured snippets and then lose them. That means that your content was good enough for Google to test it, but not good enough to keep it” (Enge 2019).

Indeed, from a strategic marketing perspective, it is important to evaluate the performance of content that has been optimized for featured

snippets over time. It may be a cost-efficient strategy to first optimize only a small number of pages specifically for featured snippets in order to be able to evaluate and decide on the future strategy regarding featured snippets on this basis (I3, 40).

6.4.2 Click-through and conversion rates

With regard to measuring the success of online content, the click-through rate is one of the most commonly used key performance indicators (KPI). As demonstrated in section 4.3, featured snippets can significantly influence click-through patterns, as a percentage of people who viewed the snippet may not click through to the website if their information needs have been already satisfied by the snippet. Unfortunately, Google does not provide any data about the number of times a snippet has been read on the SERP or the number of times Google assistant answers a query by returning a snippet (Muller 2019c).

However, the click-through rate has its limits, as it only measures the quantity of traffic and not its quality. From a marketing perspective, a small amount of qualified traffic is worth more than a large number of unqualified visitors who may also have a negative effect on the bounce rate and drive up server costs. Since the click-through rate is not a metric that goes very much into depth, content marketers often prefer to track conversions, which may take place after a click-through (I3, 40). A conversion may be a sale, but a lead generation may be defined as the desired conversion, too. In the case of a sale, the potential impact of featured snippets on an increase in revenue should be analyzed (Wakefield 2019, 334).

6.4.3 Brand awareness

As website content is increasingly consumed directly on the SERPs, SEO experts are looking for new approaches to measure its success. With regard to featured snippets, specifically, one hypothesis is that they have the potential to increase brand awareness even without a click-through (Smith 2019a; Oberstein 2019c; Muller 2019a). Indeed, a featured snippet places website content very prominently in front of users, which may lead to it being perceived as an authority on the given topic (I2, 38). In addition, it helps to control the messaging and does not leave the field to competitors (Muller 2019a). Arguably, this effect may make it worthwhile even going after certain zero-click queries (Oberstein 2019e). There is, however, no reliable data about featured snippets' actual impact on branding. Some experts doubt whether users actually perceive the source website when

they view the content of a featured snippet without clicking through (I3, 48). In any case, generally, more than one contact with a brand is necessary for a brand to stick in a potential customer's memory (ibid.).

6.4.4 Return on investment (ROI)

Ultimately, measuring the success of a content strategy should enable content marketers to calculate the return on investment (ROI) and evaluate the strategy. Expressed in percent, the ROI is calculated by dividing the net return on investment by the cost of investment. As demonstrated in previous sections, featured snippets may have a number of consequences on the ROI.

Featured snippets may increase the ROI if website content is picked up by them. Inversely, a website which is not highly competitive in organic search may want to carefully consider how many resources should be put into producing content for thematic areas with a high share of featured snippets.

In addition, C. Wakefield argues that featured snippets may also help to reduce costs which also has a positive impact on the ROI: "Ultimately, what marketing leaders want to see is a return on investment, either through revenue or a reduction in costs. [...] For example, if your business gets many calls to customer service about how to install a product and the content marketing team responds by creating a how-to page with step-by-step instructions, the team will want to track the reduction of calls to the call centre as part of their success metrics" (Wakefield 2019, 335).

Evaluating the content marketing strategy is the last step and learning from its successes and failures as well as integrating these learnings into future strategies closes the cycle.

6.5 In brief - chapter 6

Empirical research suggests that content marketing specialists tend to consider featured snippets predominantly as an SEO topic.¹⁶ Nevertheless, content marketers see featured snippets as an opportunity in the framework of SEO-driven content marketing strategies. In their view,

¹⁶ Research was initially conducted by the author in the process of writing the master's thesis "Google's Featured Snippets in the Context of Strategic Content Marketing" (Sam-Martin 2020).

featured snippets may increase the visibility of marketing content as well as the demand for advanced content strategy. Literature research showed that standard content marketing literature does not deal with featured snippets in detail, although SERP features are sometimes briefly evoked. Nevertheless, content marketing strategies that rely heavily on organic search as a distribution channel should take featured snippets into account. For this reason, the main steps of strategy development were assessed in this chapter according to the role featured snippets may play in it.

When it comes to objective-setting, experts advise not to focus exclusively on featured snippets as the resulting strategy would be too narrow. Nevertheless, their impact should be taken into account in strategic considerations. When defining the target audience, knowledge about them may provide insights regarding the overall attention featured snippets should receive in the strategy, since their prevalence varies strongly according to factors such as the device or geographic region, as shown in chapter four. In the strategy development phase, expert interviewees identified the customer journey analysis as one of the most fundamental analytic models which may also serve to determine the importance that should be assigned to featured snippets. A discussion of each stage of the customer journey with featured snippets in mind showed that the dynamics differ in each stage of the journey.

The next step, strategy implementation, was analyzed assuming that the strategy at hand aimed also at winning featured snippets, among other objectives. Content planning is a major element in this stage which – in the context of featured snippets – is similar to keyword planning. Nevertheless, literature research showed that keyword research for featured snippets should be carried out with a particular focus on long-tail keywords and questions. Both empirical research and interviews also emphasized the importance of a thorough competitive analysis to sift through and narrow down a keyword list in order to invest resources strategically.

Regarding the step of content production, empirical research confirmed the advantages that the use of content outlines may procure. With regard to featured snippets, these outlines should particularly focus on clarifying the best structure and formatting to win featured snippets. In addition, the content producer should be aware of all other ranking factors, as outlined in chapter five.

Finally, the last step in the content marketing cycle is performance measurement and evaluation. Empirical research confirmed that the click-through rate alone is not a meaningful metric. Expert interviewees

suggested to place greater focus on conversion rates. With regard to brand awareness as an indicator of success, experts were reticent as to whether featured snippets would have a positive impact on brand awareness without a click-through to the website. In conclusion, both empirical insights and literature point to the fact that featured snippets may have a significant impact on the return on investment of a content marketing strategy.

7. Conclusions and outlook

Featured snippets are a SERP feature with particular strategic importance for Google. It is a format that is destined not only to increase usability, but also to enable digital assistants to deliver more accurate voice answers. For these reasons, Google has invested heavily into the development of this SERP feature since it was introduced in 2014. In addition to paragraph, table and list snippets, Google now also shows video snippets, which are rather rare, and variations of the aforementioned formats, such as multi-faceted snippets. Most recently, in January 2020, Google also ended the practice of duplicating the source web page of the featured snippet in the list of 'traditional' results below the featured snippet. As a consequence, ranking position one may now be a featured snippet, whereas previously it was often considered 'position zero', stacked above the 'classic' results. **These developments back the hypothesis that the share of featured snippets or similar SERP features might expand further in the future.** Nevertheless, it should be noted that featured snippets are not adapted to all kinds of queries and SEO experts deem it unlikely that there would be a featured snippet for every query someday.

Although Google does not share much information about how featured snippets are created, experts agree that machine learning and natural language processing play a crucial role in the functioning of the featured snippet algorithm. Indeed, Google's natural language processing capacities enable Google to better understand queries and produce featured snippets based on excerpts of the source content. As a matter of fact, **featured snippets are often shortened or reassembled versions of the source content** on the website which are produced automatically by Google's systems.

A look at the prevalence of featured snippets on Google's SERPs showed that they are currently much more common in anglophone countries. The actual share of featured snippets on the SERPs in the United States currently ranges from 13 percent to 27 percent, depending on the sampling methodology (see section 4.2.1). Despite this variance, **the overall trend shows an increase in the share of featured snippets over time.** Furthermore, the related questions SERP feature, commonly known as 'People Also Ask' panel, is a similar feature which is now present in roughly 34 to 87 percent of the SERP – again, depending on the sampling methodology (see section 4.2.1). The share of featured snippets also varies widely according to the thematic niche and the types of keywords used.

Regarding the types of search queries which trigger featured snippets, research for this e-book allowed to verify Google's statements according to which featured snippets were particularly tailored to questions and queries on mobile devices. In fact, the share of featured snippets on mobile search is currently still 11 percent lower than on desktop devices (Enge 2019). Furthermore, queries which use interrogative pronouns do in fact not account for the largest share of featured snippets. **Nevertheless, all queries that trigger featured snippets at least imply a question and a large share of these queries are long-tail keywords.**

One of the most important findings relates to the impact of featured snippets on the SERP click-through rate. In fact, in 2017 a study showed that featured snippets attracted 8.6 percent of clicks and **decreased the share of clicks on the 'traditional' ranking positions** (Soulo 2017). Given Google's recent advancements regarding the quality of featured snippets, it can be assumed that this share has further increased. At the same time, the overall share of zero-click searches on the SERPs also increased to 50.33 percent, and featured snippets contribute to this trend (Fishkin 2019b). This stands in contrast to Google's statements which claim that featured snippets do drive clicks (Sullivan 2018). The analyses in this e-book allowed to put these results into context by examining the meaning of these changed dynamics for organic search marketing.

The above-mentioned findings prepared the ground for examining and answering the main research questions that were addressed:

Research question 1: Which search engine optimization measures should be applied to achieve featured snippets in Google search?

This e-book suggests seven ranking factors that content marketers should be aware of when targeting featured snippets:

- **Overall competitiveness in organic search:** In order to be in contention for featured snippets, a website must be highly competitive on the SERP, and the SEO basics must be covered. Thus, experts recommend starting optimization efforts for featured snippets by tweaking existing content that already ranks on the first page of the SERPs and, ideally, among the first five results (see section 5.1).
- **High quality content and authority:** Google looks for expertise, authoritativeness and trustworthiness when establishing organic search results (Haynes 2019). Furthermore, content marketers

should focus on providing in-depth content such as analyses and publish several pieces on different aspects of the same topic. Experts have also observed that, due to their authority, informational sites sometimes seem to have an advantage over brand websites (see section 5.2).

- **Content structure and HTML formatting:** It is arguably one of the most important factors to offer content which is structured logically and supported by HTML formatting that highlights this structure. The HTML formatting should also be aligned to the type of snippet Google might already show for a given query. Table snippets require content to be formatted as a table, whereas paragraph snippets are often pulled from articles with particularly concise paragraphs. List snippets are primarily based on content that is structured as a list with `` or `` HTML tags. In addition, Google's featured snippet algorithm is also capable of composing its 'own' lists, for instance by drawing on the `<H2>` formatted subheadings of an article (see section 5.3).
- **Text length and phrasing:** The length and phrasing of the source content do influence its likelihood to be picked up as a featured snippet. In fact, Google requires particularly succinct content for featured snippets. On the one hand, this is the case because Google wants to provide answers on the SERPs as much as possible, albeit limited space. On the other hand, featured snippets are a SERP feature that is highly relevant in the context of voice search, which relies on short answers. Nevertheless, instead of average word length, content marketers should focus on providing added value to the target audience when producing content (see section 5.4).
- **Structured data markup:** Structured data, such as schema.org, is not an obligatory precondition to win a featured snippet. Nevertheless, it helps Google to better understand the content on a website and therefore experts recommend its use, regardless of its potential benefits for winning featured snippets (see section 5.5).
- **Images:** Featured snippets are often illustrated with images. Providing high-quality images in the right format – with an aspect ratio of 4:3 – may help to attract clicks from featured snippets even when the website does not own the written content displayed in the featured snippet box (see section 5.6).

- **Content freshness:** For queries where the freshness of content is relevant, Google's featured snippet algorithm picks the most relevant and up-to-date content (see section 5.7).

This list is based on the compilation of existing studies and articles, as well as insights gained from empirical research. In all likelihood the list is not exhaustive, but it does reflect the state of the art on the topic of featured snippets. Indeed, off-page SEO and technical SEO have not been discussed in detail by this publication, as is the case with other works on the topic. In fact, both areas should be considered fundamental preconditions to winning featured snippets and, thus, have been subsumed under factor one which focuses on the importance of running a highly competitive website (see section 5.1).

Indeed, the research process has shown the following: **what sets SEO measures for featured snippets apart from general SEO are the specific requirements for source content.** Its high quality, logical structure, particularly concise phrasing and clear formatting characterize content that is eligible for featured snippets. Thus, the factors outlined in this publication are of particular relevance in the stage of content production which has been addressed as part of the second research question.

The second research question guiding this e-book connected the SEO topic 'featured snippets' with the field of strategic content marketing:

Research question 2: What are the strategic implications of featured snippets for content marketing?

The findings of this e-book have confirmed the overall strategic relevance of featured snippets for content marketing (see section 6.1). The degree of relevance, however, depends on a number of factors. Above all, the overall importance of organic search as a distribution channel determines whether featured snippets deserve a detailed analysis in the context of content marketing strategies. Furthermore, whether or not featured snippets should be particularly targeted as part of a content strategy deserves careful consideration.

Content marketers should keep in mind the following considerations in each stage of the content marketing cycle:

- **Content marketing strategy development:** Among the analytic steps and models that are traditionally applied in the elaboration of a content marketing strategy, the customer journey stood out as the

most useful instrument to determine what role to assign to featured snippets in a strategy. Naturally, this is only relevant in the context of strategies that consider organic search to be an appropriate content distribution channel. In addition, targeting featured snippets should only be one element of a much larger array of measures (see section 6.2).

- **Strategy implementation:** When implementing a content strategy, the step of content planning must take into account featured snippets if organic search has been identified as a relevant channel. Indeed, compiling a list of topics or keywords when planning content requires marketers to be aware of the likelihood to rank for these keywords and whether the content is likely to attract clicks. Therefore, a competitive analysis of the SERPs is essential when narrowing down the list of keywords. Indeed, experts highlight this as one of the most crucial steps when optimizing websites for featured snippets. Afterwards, in the actual content production stage, awareness of the above-mentioned ranking factors is vital. Content marketers usually work with structured outlines that contain precise instructions for content producers. Indeed, the widespread method of using content outlines is well-adapted to the requirements of featured snippets which demand particularly concise and structured content. In some cases, it may be enough to slightly adapt existing outlines (see section 6.3).
- **Measuring and evaluating performance:** A number of performance indicators are frequently evoked in the context of measuring the success of featured snippet rankings. While Google's tools do not provide insights into the number of featured snippets a website may appear in, there are professional SEO tools that do provide such insights. Furthermore, the click-through rate is an often-cited indicator of success. Nevertheless, as experts pointed out, the conversion rate is a much more meaningful indicator. With regard to featured snippets' impact on brand awareness, experts are reticent regarding their potential positive impact. In the end, a review of the content marketing strategy should also take into account the return on investment which may be significantly influenced by featured snippets – both positively and negatively.

In conclusion, content marketers should be aware of a number of factors in relation to featured snippets. One of the most important consequences of featured snippets is **their role in increasing the on-SERP competition for visibility and clicks**. Furthermore, Google itself has become a competitor.

As the search engine provides as much information as possible directly on the SERPs, the share of zero-click searches has increased. Nevertheless, empirical research helped to put these developments into perspective. Both SEO and content marketing experts are of the opinion that high-quality and in-depth content will continue to attract clicks, since Google's space for displaying content is limited. In addition, users who are satisfied with the content shown in the snippet box are likely still in an early stage of their customer journey. This underlines that the conversion rate is the most central KPI that should be used to measure the performance of a strategy.

In general, the findings of this e-book have confirmed a trend that has been previously observed by experts: **In recent years, Google has more and more developed towards becoming an answer engine instead of a search engine.** In light of these developments it seems essential that content marketers keep an eye on future developments, as the share of featured snippets or similar SERP features will likely still increase, as could be established by empirical research for this publication. Knowledge of featured snippets and SERP features in general will therefore become more and more essential for developing and implementing ROI-oriented content marketing strategies. In addition, voice search and, particularly, voice answers delivered by digital assistants also have the potential to disrupt the current marketing landscape as they increase the competition even further.

In the course of the research process, featured snippets turned out to be an **interdisciplinary study object** which encompasses aspects that are relevant not only to marketing research or technical disciplines such as computer sciences. In fact, **additional research should examine socio-political as well as linguistic questions more closely.** The fact that a featured snippet box presents a single search result as 'the best answer' renders the question about the selection criteria and quality control of these answers essential. Nevertheless, as demonstrated in this e-book, very little is known about the criteria that Google applies. Presenting a single source as an absolute answer, without any kind of transparency, raises questions of accountability. It also raises questions of political power and influence that Google and its featured snippets may potentially exert on politics and society as a whole. In addition, the requirement to produce particularly concise content to rank for featured snippets may also influence the way language is used online and in every-day life. While this e-book has contributed to analyzing featured snippets from a strategic content marketing perspective, additional research is necessary to critically discuss featured snippets from these angles.

In addition, there are also still a number of **gaps to fill in the area of marketing research** and search engine optimization in relation to featured snippets. Knowledge of the inner workings of Google's featured snippet algorithm still remains limited, despite a number of studies that have tried to shed light on the subject in recent years. Furthermore, up-to-date insights into on-SERP click-through dynamics would be important for data-driven decisions on whether or not targeting queries which show featured snippets is a strategy that can achieve a return on investment. This seems particularly relevant in light of Google's decision to show the source web page of a featured snippet only once on the SERPs instead of duplicating it in the 'traditional' results. More empirical research about featured snippets in relation to zero-click searches would certainly be insightful as well, and particularly to examine whether they really have a positive effect on branding. In addition, **a quantitative study on how Google produces featured snippets by extracting and reassembling content would be useful for further backing up existing qualitative research.** These insights would be particularly useful to elaborate more precise recommendations addressed at content producers. Video snippets also remain an area which has not yet received much attention by SEO publications, which might change if the share of video snippets on the SERPs increases. The area with the greatest need for additional research seems to be the dynamics of featured snippets on mobile versus desktop. While it is known that there are differences regarding the share of featured snippets or the source URLs, little is known as to why these differences exist. Furthermore, it would be interesting to explore whether there are differences in the click-through dynamics between mobile and desktop devices regarding featured snippets. Lastly, studies that focus on a particular economic sector or thematic niche would be interesting, as existing studies have shown that the prevalence and behavior of featured snippets varies tremendously according to the sector. All in all, **it is likely that the relevance of featured snippets will continue to increase in the future** and therefore further research will be crucial to enable marketing and SEO specialists to better understand and react to this development.

8. References

8.1 Books, journals, and theses

Ansari, Sepita (2017). Content Marketing. Das Praxis-Handbuch Für Unternehmen: Strategie Entwickeln, Content Planen, Zielgruppe Erreichen. MITP, Frechen.

Erlhofer, S. (2019). Suchmaschinenoptimierung - Das umfassende Handbuch. Rheinwerk Computing, Bonn.

Grunert, G. (2019). Methodisches Content Marketing. Erfolgreich durch systematisches Vorgehen, integriertes Arbeiten und klare ROI-Orientierung. Springer Gabler, Wiesbaden.

Jefferson, S./Tanton, S. (2015). Valuable Content Marketing: How to Make Quality Content Your Key to Success (Vol. 2nd edition). Kogan Page, London.

Sam-Martin, K. (2020). Google's Featured Snippets in the Context of Strategic Content Marketing. Master's Thesis. Department of Continuing Education Research and Educational Technologies. Danube University Krems.

Lieb, R./Szymanski, J. (2017). Content - The Atomic Particle of Marketing: The Definitive Guide to Content Marketing Strategy. Kogan Page, New York.

Löffler, M. (2019). Think Content. Content-Strategie, Content-Marketing, Texten fürs Web. Rheinwerk Computing, Bonn.

Wagner, E. (2018). Voice Search und die Veränderung in der Suchmaschinenoptimierung. Masterarbeit am Department für Interaktive Medien und Bildungstechnologien. Donau Universität Krems.

Wakefield, C. (2019). Achieving position 0: Optimising your content to rank in Google's answer box. In: Journal of Brand Strategy, vol. 7, no. 4, pp. 326–336.

8.2 Online sources

- American Marketing Association (2019). Definitions of Marketing. <https://marketing-dictionary.org/m/marketing-research/> (23.09.2019)
- Barish, T. (2017). The Complete Guide to Featured Snippets. In: RankRanger Blog. 7 Sept. 2017. <https://www.rankranger.com/blog/complete-guide-to-featured-snippets> (8.1.2020)
- Baxter, R. (2016). How to get Answer Boxes in Google Search. In: Builtvisible Blog, 3 May 2016. <https://builtvisible.com/answer-boxes/> (20.1.2020)
- Carter, J. (2020). Search engine marketing statistics. In: Smart Insights. Actionable Marketing Advice, 5 Jan. 2020. <https://www.smartinsights.com/search-engine-marketing/search-engine-statistics/> (10.2.2020)
- Content Marketing Institute (2019). What is Content Marketing? Useful content should be at the core of your marketing. <https://marketing-dictionary.org/c/content-marketing/> (23.09.2019)
- Dean, B. (2018). We Analyzed 10,000 Google Home Results. Here's What We Learned About Voice Search SEO. In: Backlinko Blog. <https://backlinko.com/voice-search-seo-study> (18.2.2019)
- Dean, B. (2020). Content Optimization Strategies - Featured Snippets. In: Backlinko Blog. <https://backlinko.com/hub/seo/featured-snippets> (16.3.2020)
- Dorfman (2015). The Evolution Of Google SERPs: Three Key Takeaways From SMX West 2015. In: Search Engine Land, 13 March 2015. <https://searchengineland.com/evolution-google-serps-three-key-takeaways-smx-west-2015-216555> (25 Oct. 2019)
- Enge, E. (2019). Featured Snippets Resource Center. In: PerficientDigital Insights, 19 Nov. 2019. <https://www.perficientdigital.com/insights/our-research/featured-snippets-guide#latest> (2.12.2019)

Fishkin, R. (2019a). How to Appear in Google's Answer Boxes - Whiteboard Friday. In: Moz YouTube Channel, 9 March 2017.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=poj6yXLOqA> (27.11.2019)

Fishkin, R. (2019b). Less than Half of Google Searches Now Result in a Click. In: SparkToro Blog, 13. Aug. 2019.
<https://sparktoro.com/blog/less-than-half-of-google-searches-now-result-in-a-click/> (31.1.2020)

Fishkin, R. (2019c). An Unpopular List of Marketing Trends for 2019. In: SparkToro Blog, 27 March 2019.
<https://sparktoro.com/blog/an-unpopular-list-of-marketing-trends-for-2019/> (2.2.2020)

Frost, A. (2018). Videos are Showing up in Featured Snippets. We Analyzed 165 of Them. In: Hubspot Blog.
<https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/what-are-featured-clips> (31.1.2020)

Galvez, M. (2017). Improving Search and discovery on Google. In: The Keyword. 5 Dec. 2017.
<https://www.blog.google/products/search/improving-search-and-discovery-google/> (23.10.2019)

Ghergich, A.J. (2017). Large-Scale Study: How to Rank for Featured Snippets in 2018. In: SEMrush Blog, 29. November 2017.
<https://www.semrush.com/blog/large-scale-study-how-to-rank-for-featured-snippets-in-2018/> (18.2.2019)

Google Inc. (2014). Annual report pursuant to section 13 or 15(d) of the securities exchange act of 1934 for the fiscal year ended December 31, 2014.
<https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1288776/000128877615000008/goo2014123110-k.htm> (2.2.2020)

Google (2019a): Featured snippets in search. In: Search Console Help.
<https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/6229325?hl=en>
(23.09.2019)

Google (2019b): Enable Search result features for your site. In: Search Console Help.
<https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/7358659?hl=en>
(23.10.2019)

Google (2019c): Useful responses take many forms. Featured Snippets. In: How search works.

https://www.google.com/intl/en_uk/search/howsearchworks/responses/
(23.10.2019)

Google (2019d): Google Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines. 5 September 2019.

<https://static.googleusercontent.com/media/www.google.com/en//insidesearch/howsearchworks/assets/searchqualityevaluatorguidelines.pdf>
(23.11.2019)

Google (2019e): How Google's featured snippets work. In: Google Search Help.

<https://support.google.com/websearch/answer/9351707?dark=0>
(23.11.2019)

Google (2020): Google QUEST Q&A Labeling. In: Improving automated understanding of complex question answer content. In: Kaggle - Open Code Competition.

<https://www.kaggle.com/c/google-quest-challenge/overview/description>
(27.1.2020).

Haynes, M. (2019). E-A-T and the Quality Raters' Guidelines - Whiteboard Friday. In: MOZ Blog, 13 Sept. 2019.

<https://moz.com/blog/eat-and-the-quality-raters-guidelines> (31.1.2020)

Hunt, J. (2019). The Evolution of Google's SERPs. In: JBH - The Content Agency.

<https://jbh.co.uk/blog/seo/evolution-googles-serps/> (25.10.2019)

Indig, K. (2019). My notes from the Gary Illyes Q&A @ Bay Area Search, 26 October 2019.

<https://www.kevin-indig.com/my-notes-from-the-gary-illes-qa-bay-area-search/> (4.11.2019)

Jacobson, B. (2019). HubSpot CEO Brian Halligan reflects on the evolution of inbound marketing. In: Marketing Land, 9 Jan. 2019.

<https://marketingland.com/hubspot-ceo-brian-halligan-reflects-on-the-evolution-of-inbound-marketing-255026> (18.12.2019)

Johnson, R. (2019). The explosion of PAA: Answering questions is the new way to dominate search. In: Search Engine Land, 14 Jan. 2019.

<https://searchengineland.com/the-explosion-of-paa-answering-questions-is-the-new-way-to-dominate-search-310409> (31.1.2020)

Linn, M. (2014). The Basics of SEO for Successful Content Marketing. In: Content Marketing Institute Blog, 27 June 2014.

<https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2014/06/seo-successful-content-marketing-basics/> (8.1.2020)

Litsa, T. (2016). What are featured snippets and how do I get them? In: Search Engine Watch, 25 April 2016.

<https://www.searchenginewatch.com/2016/04/25/what-are-featured-snippets-and-how-do-i-get-them/> (17.3.2020)

Marketing Accountability Standards Board (2019a): Search Engine Results Page (SERP). In: Common Language Marketing Dictionary.

<https://marketing-dictionary.org/s/serp/> (23.09.2019)

Marketing Accountability Standards Board (2019b): Search Engine Optimization (SEO). In: Common Language Marketing Dictionary.

<https://marketing-dictionary.org/s/search-engine-optimization/> (23.09.2019)

Meyers, P.J. (2017). Lessons from 1,000 Voice Searches (on Google Home). In: MOZ Blog, 23 May 2017.

<https://moz.com/blog/lessons-from-1000-voice-searches> (2.2.2020)

Meyers, P.J. (2019). How to Write Content for Answers Using the Inverted Pyramid - Best of Whiteboard Friday. In: Moz Blog, 27 Sept. 2019.

<https://moz.com/blog/writing-content-for-featured-snippets> (8.1.2020)

Moxley, E. (2018). Providing more comprehensive results to your questions in Search, 28 Feb. 2018.

<https://www.blog.google/products/search/providing-more-comprehensive-results-your-questions-search/> (25.10.2019)

MOZ (2020a). Introduction. In: The Beginner's Guide to SEO. Rankings and Traffic Through Search Engine Optimization.

<https://moz.com/beginners-guide-to-seo> (20.1.2020)

MOZ (2020b). Google SERP Feature Graph. In: Mozcast, 31 Jan 2020.

<https://moz.com/mozcast/features> (31.1.2020)

MOZ (2020c). SEO Fundamentals. In: MOZ Blog.

<https://moz.com/learn/seo/what-is-seo> (20.3.2020)

Muller, B. (2019a). Featured Snippets Essentials. What to know & how to target. In: Moz Webinar, 25 Oct. 2019.

<https://moz.com/webinars/webinar-featured-snippets-essentials?submissionGuid=f4bc5f51-393b-4668-9e88-2cf117e71a13>
(25.11.2019)

Muller, B. (2019b). The Featured Snippets Cheat Sheet and Interactive Q&A. In: Moz Blog, 25 Oct 2019.

<https://moz.com/blog/featured-snippets-qa>

Muller, J. (2019c): Voice Search in the Google Search Console: #AskGoogleWebmasters. In: Google Webmasters YouTube Channel, 1 August 2019.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKengeAJpHA> (27.11.2019)

Nayak, P. (2019a). Finding fresh, helpful information through featured snippets. In: The Keyword, 1 Aug. 2019.

<https://www.blog.google/products/search/find-fresh-information-featured-snippets-google-search/> (25.10.2019)

Nayak, P. (2019b). Understanding searches better than ever before. In: The Keyword, 25 Oct. 2019.

<https://www.blog.google/products/search/search-language-understanding-bert/> (2.2.2020)

Nguyen, G. (2020). Listings that earn featured snippets will not repeat on the first page of Google search. In: Search Engine Land, 22 Jan. 2020.

<https://searchengineland.com/listings-that-earn-featured-snippets-will-not-repeat-on-the-first-page-of-google-search-328089> (31.1.2020).

Schwartz, B. (2015). Google: Structured Data Not Currently Used for Featured Snippets. In: Search Engine Roundtable, 17 November 2015.

<https://www.seroundtable.com/google-structured-data-not-featured-snippets-21206.html>

Schwartz, B. (2019). Welcome BERT: Google's latest search algorithm to better understand natural language. In: Search Engine Land, 25 Oct. 2019.

<https://searchengineland.com/welcome-bert-google-artificial-intelligence-for-understanding-search-queries-323976> (25.10.2019)

SEMrush (2017). Winning Featured Snippets on Mobile. In: Search Engine Journal, 19 Dec. 2017.

<https://www.searchenginejournal.com/semrush-mobile-featured-snippets/225925/> (20.1.2020)

SEMrush (2020). SERP features occurrence. In: SEMrush Sensor.

<https://www.semrush.com/sensor> (27.1.2020)

Smith, R. (2016). Featured Snippets: A Dead-Simple Tactic for Making Them Stick. In: MOZ Blog, 23 Nov. 2016.

<https://moz.com/blog/featured-snippets-a-deadsimple-tactic-for-making-them-stick> (13.1.2020)

Smith, I. (2019a). How to Win Featured Snippets Like a Boss. In: ContentKing Blog, 14 May 2019.

<https://www.contentkingapp.com/blog/featured-snippets/> (3.2.2020)

Smith, I. (2019b). SERP-Rising Tips to Drive Meaningful Clicks - Unboxed Oxford. In: SlideShare, 17 Oct. 2019.

<https://www.slideshare.net/IsobelSmith10/serprising-tips-to-drive-meaningful-clicks-unboxed-oxford> (3.2.2020)

Soulo, T. (2017). Ahrefs' Study Of 2 Million Featured Snippets: 10 Important Takeaways. In: ahrefsblog, 29. Mai 2017.

<https://ahrefs.com/blog/featured-snippets-study/> (18.2.2019)

Southern, M. (2019). Google is Creating Featured Snippets from PDF Content. 21 Jan. 2019. In: Search Engine Journal.

<https://www.searchenginejournal.com/google-is-creating-featured-snippets-from-pdf-content/287973/> (25.10.2019)

Spencer, S. (2018). OK, Google: How Do I Optimize My Content for Featured Snippets? In: Content Marketing Institute Blog, 30 Aug. 2018.

<https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2018/08/content-featured-snippets/> (9.2.2020)

Sullivan, D. (2018). A reintroduction to Google's featured snippets. In: The Keyword, 30 Jan. 2018.

<https://www.blog.google/products/search/reintroduction-googles-featured-snippets/> (25.10.2019)

Shure, D. (2014). More Google Answer Boxes (That Mostly Fall Short). In: Evolving SEO, 27 Jan. 2014.

<http://www.evolvingseo.com/2014/01/27/google-answer-boxes-that-fall-short/>
(31.10.2019)

Smarty, A. (2017). How to Optimize for Google's Featured Snippets to Build More Traffic. In: Moz Blog, 23 Aug. 2017.
<https://moz.com/blog/optimize-featured-snippets> (8.1.2020)

Smarty, A. (2018). The Evolution and Expansion of Google's Featured Snippets. In: Search Engine People, 17 July 2018.
<https://www.searchenginepeople.com/blog/evolution-expansion-googles-featured-snippets.html> (31.10.2019)

Oberstein, M. (2018a). Is Machine Learning Increasingly Influencing Featured Snippets? In: RankRanger Blog, 30 May 2018.
<https://www.rankranger.com/blog/machine-learning-featured-snippets>
(8.1.2020)

Oberstein, M. (2018b). The Guide to Handling Feature Heavy SERPS - The Experts Speak. In: RankRanger Blog, 2 Oct. 2018.
<https://www.rankranger.com/blog/how-to-rank-with-google-serp-features>
(20.1.2020)

Oberstein, M. (2019a). How Often Does Google Change Featured Snippet URLs? [Study]. In: RankRanger Blog, 24 January 2019.
<https://www.rankranger.com/blog/featured-snippet-url-stability>
(19.11.2019)

Oberstein, M. (2019b). What Is the Market Share of Featured Snippet URLs? [Study]. In: RankRanger Blog, 21 February 2019.
<https://www.rankranger.com/blog/featured-snippet-market-share>
(19.11.2019)

Oberstein, M. (2019c). Are Featured Snippets Getting Shorter? [Study]. In: RankRanger Blog, 26 June 2019.
<https://www.rankranger.com/blog/featured-snippet-length>
(19.11.2019)

Oberstein, M. (2019d). In Search [Episode 44]: Dealing with The Evolution of Featured Snippets, In: RankRanger Blog, 17 Sept. 2019.
<https://www.rankranger.com/blog/in-search-seo-podcast-episode44>
(8.1.2020).

Oberstein, M. (2019e). Rising from the Ashes of Zero-Click Searches: The Future of Site Content, In: RankRanger Blog, 29 Oct. 2019
<https://www.rankranger.com/blog/how-to-handle-zero-click-searches>
(20.1.2020)

Soulo, T. (2017). Ahrefs' Study Of 2 Million Featured Snippets: 10 Important Takeaways. In: Ahrefsblog, 29. Mai 2017.
<https://ahrefs.com/blog/featured-snippets-study/> (18.2.2019)

Walker, K. (2019). Now is the time to fix the EU copyright directive. In: The Keyword, 7 Feb. 2019.
https://blog.google/around-the-globe/google-europe/now-time-fix-eu-copyright-directive/?_ga=2.75616285.949472276.1566964287-709807878.1565729847(3.2.2020)

Willson, A. (2017). A Complete List of the Different Types of Featured Snippets. In: Search Engine Journal, 20 Oct. 2017.
<https://www.searchenginejournal.com/featured-snippets-types/219907/>
(25.10.2019)

9. Abbreviations

BERT	Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers
CTR	click-through rate
HTML	hypertext markup language
KPI	key performance indicator
SCRB	Special Content Result Block
SEO	search engine optimization
SERP	search engine results page
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats
NLP	natural language processing
PAA	People Also Ask
URL	Uniform Resource Locator