Mango

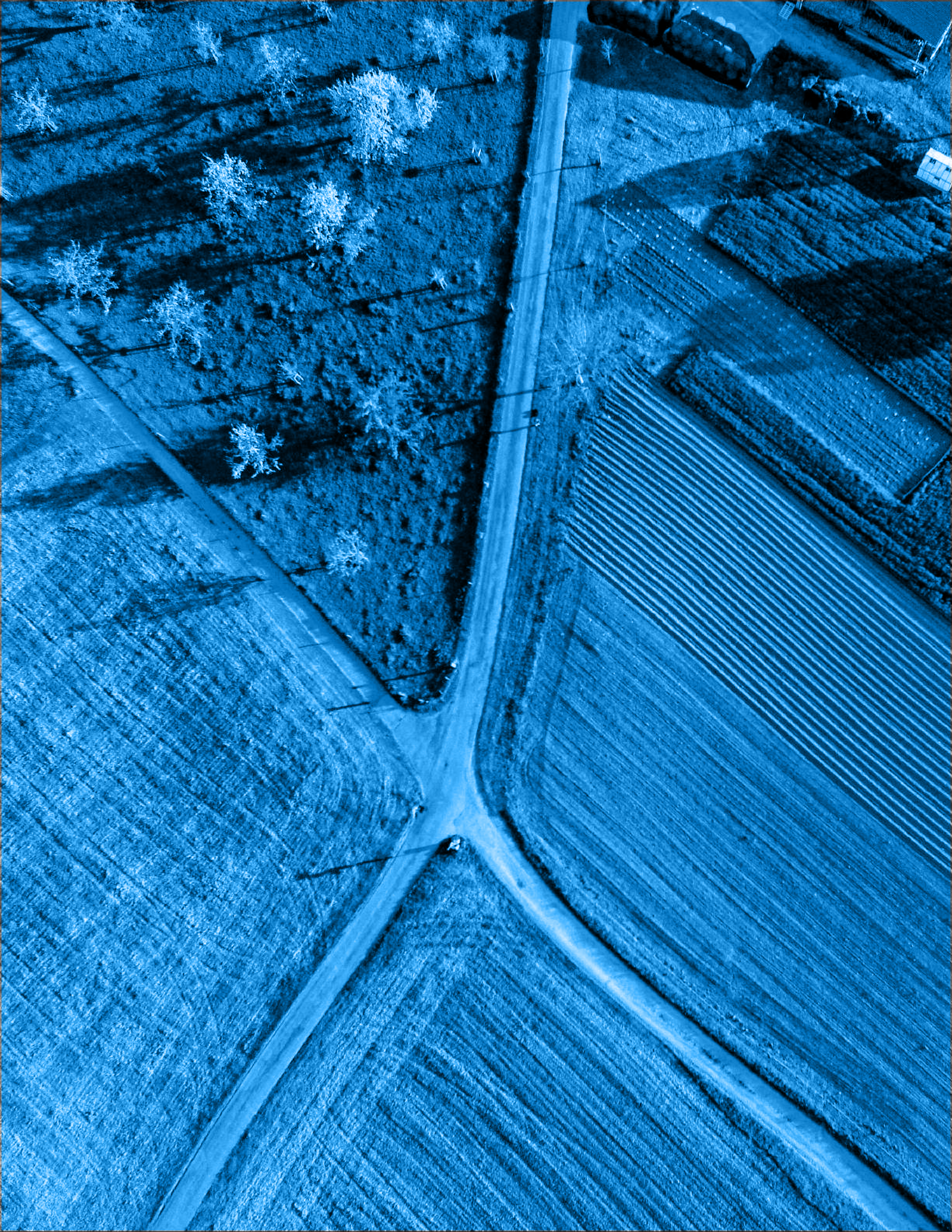# *How to Get Your Web Maps to the Top of Google Search*

HOW TO GET YOUR WEB MAPS TO THE TOP OF GOOGLE SEARCH

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SEO for web maps is particularly challenging because search engines use the text in a web page in order to index it and ordinarily web maps contain very little plain text. In this article I will be sharing some tips and tricks that will help your web maps achieve the position they deserve in the search engine rankings.

As we all know search engines are the maps of the internet, without them we are completely lost and unless we please the Google gods we will never be given a prominent position.

On this metaphorical map we need to ensure our web map is a capital city, with a prominent symbol and large typeface.

We definitely don't want to be a small village with a tiny symbol and a label that can only be made out by those with the keenest of eyesight.

So *how do we get noticed by search engines?*

Firstly they need to know we exist (Indexing), secondly they need to know what we are about (Placement) and lastly they need to be given reason to think that we are important (Ranking).

Indexing

To be included in search engine results, our site needs to be indexed, which is carried out in one of two ways.

The first way is by programs known as "spiders", which crawl the web, following links from one page to another. When they discover a web page that hasn't previously been indexed, they send the content back to the search engine so that it can be listed.

The search engine will then analyze the page, decide which words and phrases in the page are important and give the page a quality score based on the structure of the page and how many other pages link to it.

The second way to get indexed is using something called a sitemap. A sitemap is submitted to Google and other search engines and basically says, "here are a list of pages I would like you to go index".

For your map to be indexed, another website or webpage that has already been indexed must have a link that directs to your web map, the spider will then follow that link and discover your page.
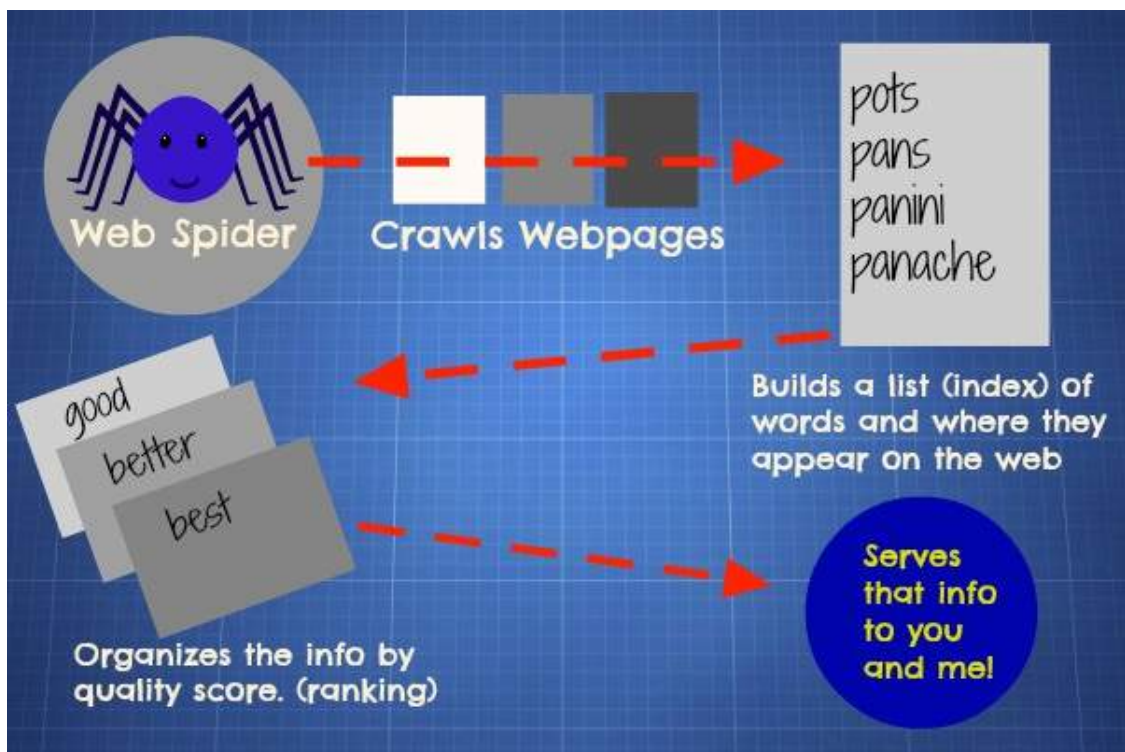
Luckily for users of Mango, we automatically submit a sitemap for your public maps to Google for you, so your maps will be included automatically.

Placement

Once Google knows that your web map exists it needs to figure out which search engine result pages to place it (SERPs). It does this by analysing the text on the web page to try and figure out what the page is about.

It places more importance on words and phrases (known as keywords in the search engine world) that are used in the URL, the page title and any text that is using HTML header tags (H1, H2, H3 etc) or that is more prominent on the page.

If your map is about national parks in Texas, you want to make sure that the works "Texas", "national" and "park" are featured prominently on your page so that the search engines know they are important.

This means making sure they are included in the page URL, in the page title (contained in the <title> HTML tag in the page header) and that are used in the most prominent text on the page preferably using <h1> HTML tags.

Once again users of Mango don't need to overly concern themselves with this.

We automatically use the map name in the URL, the pages <title> HTML tag and use the correct HTML tags to let the search engines know which text is important. We also give you plenty of places where you can add additional text such as the map description, layer description as well landing pages for the map.

It's also helpful to have the words in other sections of the page, but try not to go overboard and use the keywords in an unnatural way.

Google and other search engines are very smart and know when people are trying to game the system and will actually *penalize* your page if it thinks you are excessively loading the page with keywords.
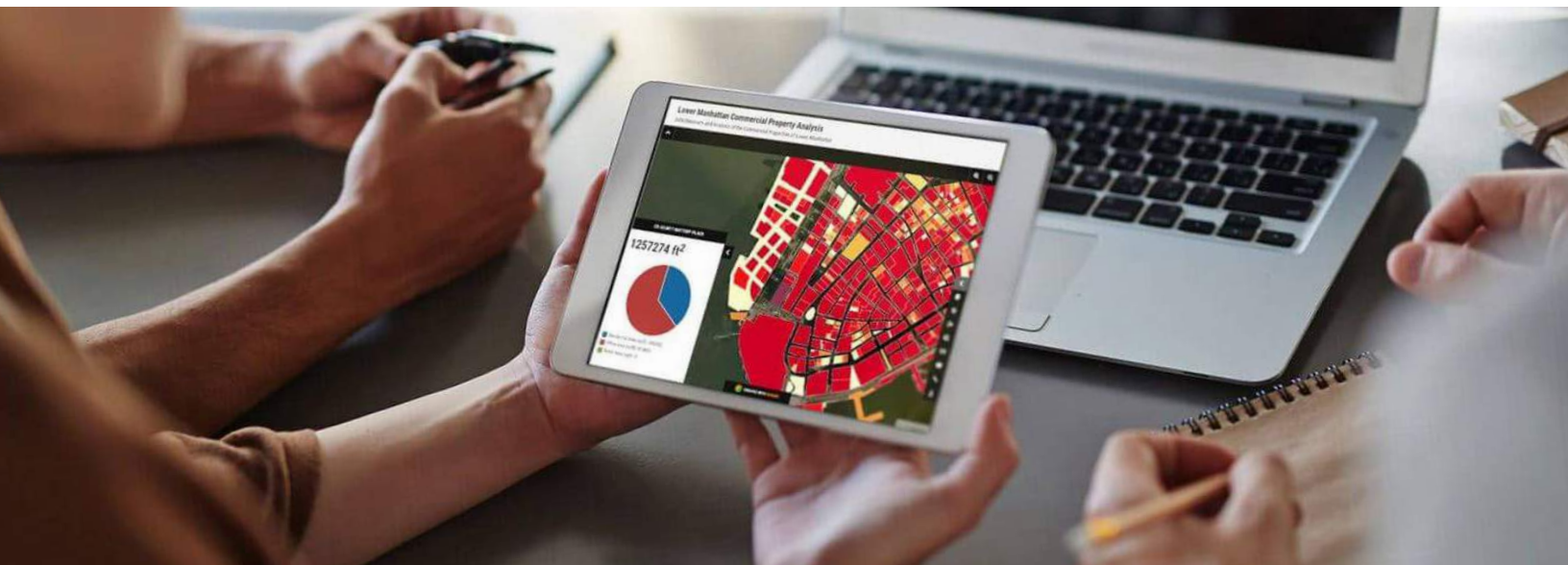
Maps, by their visual nature, tend not to have a lot of plain text that can be read by search engines.

Remember, search engines **can't read the text in images** so can't use the labels and other things displayed on your map.

This means that as mapmakers we need make the most of the few areas of plain text that we do have on the webpage.

We need to pay careful attention to the names we give our maps, the names we give our layers in the legend and make the most out of any other places where we can place text, such as layer descriptions or map landing pages.

The best strategy is to pretend the search engine is a human visitor who knows nothing about you or your project and can't see any of the images on the page.

Ask yourself whether a new user to the page is given a clear and concise description of what the map is about and what it contains, if the answer is yes, it's safe to assume that Google will index it correctly, if not, then you need to fix that.

Lets take a look at a practical example. If we are making a map that shows U.S counties by the average property value, we would like to rank well in search engines for the term "*map of counties by property value*" or "*counties by property value*". Here's an example of how **not** to do it:
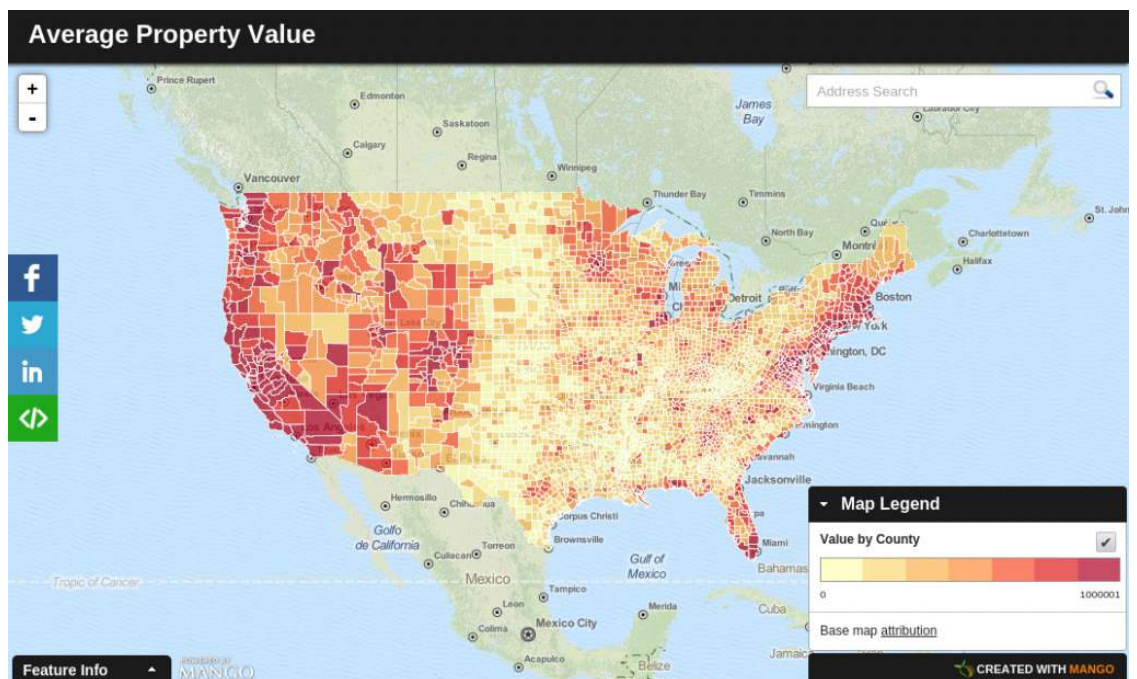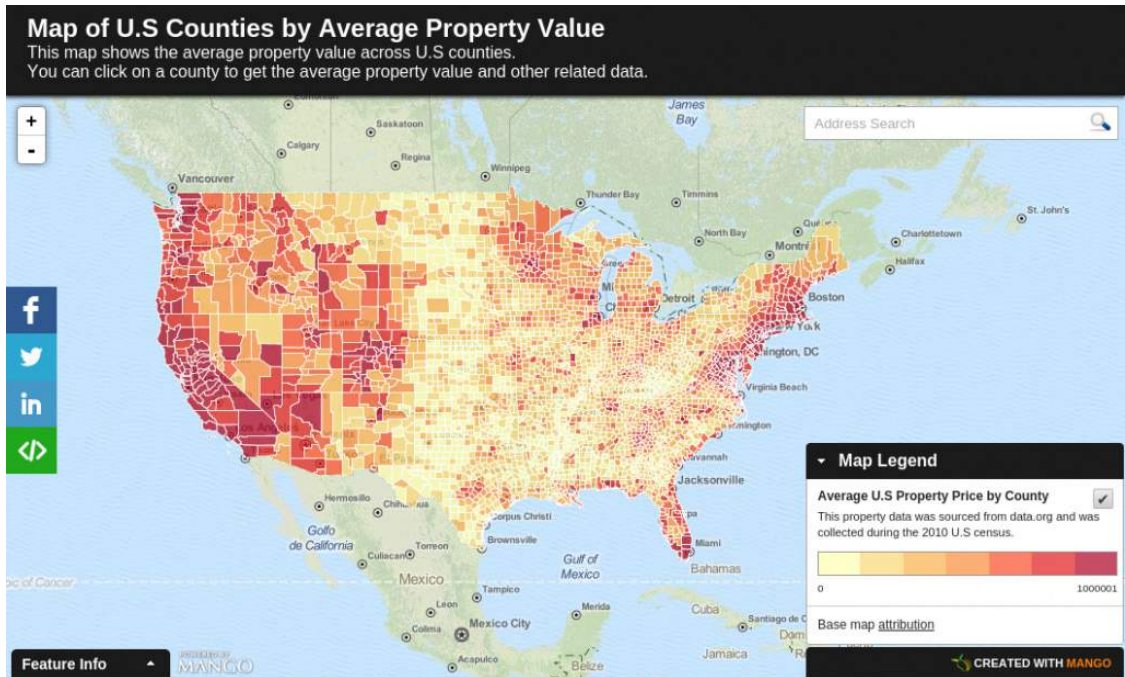
Remember that unlike a human visitor the search engine spiders can't see the map, so can't see that this is a map of U.S counties. They also can't guess based on the text used in the page as the words from our target search terms aren't very heavily used:

- "county" : 1
- "property" : 1
- "value" : 1
- "map" : 0

Also the exact search phrase *"map of counties by property value"* wasn't used anywhere on the page, never mind the title.

Here's a much better example:

The first thing you will notice is that the page has much more text, which gives the search engine spiders much more to work with.

You will notice that our target keywords have been used multiple times in the page, which will let the search engines know that these words are important in the context of the page.

We can also see that the exact search term we're targeting is the name of the map, which is the biggest lettering on the page and is placed at the top. Google will know this text is important.

We've also added more text to the legend and used this area to repeat the keywords in the search phrase. The keywords in the search term have been used far more times:

- "county" : 4
- "property" : 5
- "value" : 3
- "map" : 2

If we let both of these examples be indexed by Google and were to wait a few weeks, the second map would rank highly for the search term "map of counties by property value" whilst the first map would be nowhere to be seen.

Ranking

So now Google knows that your site exists and hopefully it has a good idea what your site is about, we can start thinking about pagerank.

Pagerank is the position that your web page appears in the search engine result page (SERPs) for a given search phrase e.g. "map of Texas National Parks".

Obviously, in order to increase discoverability we want to appear as close to the top of those results as possible.

Google places pages that it thinks are important for a given keyphrase at the top.

So how does it decide what pages are important?

Firstly, it wants to see that the given search phrase is featured prominently on the page (as discussed in the previous section), but more importantly it wants outside sources to confirm that the content is important for that search term.

It does this by analysing the outside web pages that link to your page.

Websites that link to your page and that have a high search rank themselves are the most valuable. For example if we want to rank well for "map of Texas National Parks", having the National Parks Service (www.nps.gov) link to our map would be very beneficial.

How to Improve Pagerank

Here are my top tips for improving the pagerank of your maps so that they will climb to the summit of Google:

Keep Your Maps Focussed

It's often tempting to build a single broad map with lots of layers that can be turned on or off, but in reality it's often better for your users and your search engine ranking to make a number of more focussed maps.

The reason for this is that in SEO it's better to focus on "long tail" search terms. Long tail search terms are search terms that are specific rather than general.

When we look at the total number of search queries to search engines, the long tail accounts for the majority of all searches made.

Focussing our SEO efforts on long tail search terms has two added benefits. The first is that there are far fewer web pages that are optimized for those search terms, which means it's much easier to achieve a high ranking.

The second advantage is that you will get much higher quality traffic as your content is much more likely to match what the user was actually looking for.

It's always better to have a high rank for lots of long tail search terms than to have a mediocre ranking for a single high value search term.
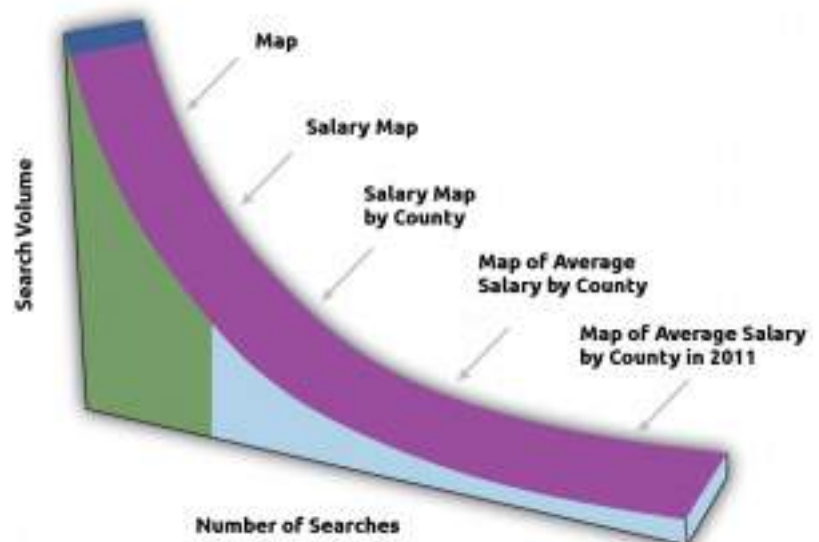
For example, imagine we had some data on salary and unemployment that we wished to publish.

The most obvious approach would be to make a single map with three layers that can be toggled on/off:

Map Name:

Map of U.S Employment Data

Layers:

- Unemployment Rate
- Average Salary
- Average Length of Employment

However it would be better for search engine optimization purposes and also usability to make three separate maps:

Map 1

- Name: Map of Unemployment Rate by County
- Layers: Unemployment Rate

Map 2

- Name: Map of Average Salary by County
- Layers: Average Salary

Map 3

- Name: Map of Average Length of Employment by County
- Layers: Average Length of Employment

Each map can have a navigation bar so the user can navigate between the associated maps or you could even make one additional map that contains all of the data for users who wish to compare. This approach would be far more friendly for the search engines as each map is targeting its own long tail search term.

The term "U.S. Employment Data" would be a common search term and very competitive. However terms like "map of average salary by county" are more likely long tail and your map will stand a much greater chance of a high position in the search results.

When we talk about design we say "less is more", but when is comes to SEO, ***"more is more", because content is King.***

The greater the number of focussed high quality maps you have, the the more search terms you will rank well for on Google.

Increase Your Map's Authority

Whist indexing lets the search engines decide what search terms your map should be listed for, it's your maps "authority" that plays the biggest role in deciding where it ranks for a given search term. The algorithm that search engines such as Google use to rank pages is a closely guarded secret and changes regularly, but one thing that's remained consistent over the years is that if your page (or map in our case) has content that is so good that lots of people are viewing it, sharing it across social networks and even linking to it from their web pages then it will rank well.

So how do you give your map authority?

The answer is simple: you make it authoritative ;)

That means making sure that your map is the best map of its type on the internet. If for example you are making a map national parks in Texas, then make sure that your map is head and shoulders above the competition in terms of content, presentation, ease of use and functionality. If you have the best resource in your particular niche, then naturally people will want to view it, share it and link to it.

Having best in class content will almost guarantee high search engine rankings, but if we just let it happen organically it could take a very long time, we can accelerate that process and give our map a head start by getting it seen by as many people as possible. Here are some ideas about how you can get that initial traffic boost:

- Send the map out across social networks (Twitter/Facebook/ LinkedIn etc)
- Get the map featured on your company's blog and website
- Send out a press release
- Ask industry specific websites to link to the map
- Ask industry specific blogs if they can feature the map
- Offer to write a guest post for industry specific blogs about the map and how it was made
- Find industry specific internet forums, groups and chat rooms to share the map with
- Give presentations at internal meetings, external meetups or conferences about the map
- Ask local or industry specific press to cover the map

Most bloggers, local journalists and niche social network personalities are always on the lookout for new and interesting content and you will be surprised how cooperative they often are when new and interesting content is presented to them.

Make it easy for users to share your map

In the last section we learned how exposure will accelerate your maps ascent of the search engine rankings and a big part of that is social sharing.

This is why you should strive to make it as easy as possible for users to share your maps. You should enable users to share the map across social networks with a single click.

Your map's sharing tools shouldn't be hidden away, but should be very visible and their use strongly encouraged.

You can easily add social sharing buttons to your web map using free and simple tools such as AddThis or Shareaholic.

In Mango we have a social sharing bar displayed by default on all maps which allows the map to be shared on Twitter, Facebook or LinkedIn with a single click.

In the mapping context it's also very beneficial to allow users to embed your map in their site. You should aim to make that process as simple as possible.

In Mango, users can copy a snippet of code in order to embed the map in their website or email.
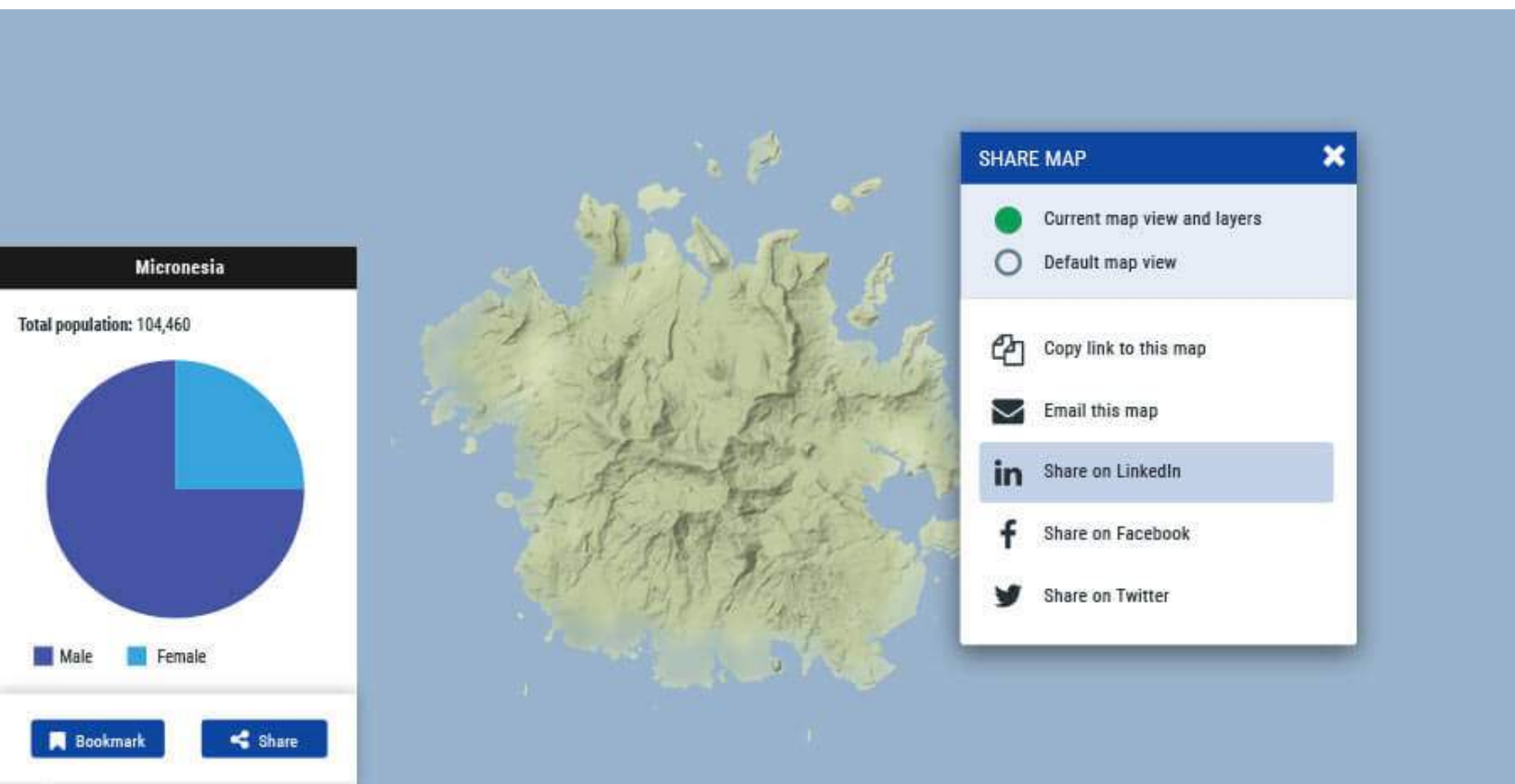
The bottom line:
SEO is hard, and takes time.

Just remember that SEO is a marathon not a sprint. It often takes weeks or sometimes even months (for newly registered domain names) after making changes to start seeing results, so remember to be patient.

If you make sure that content is first class and you do the hard work to make sure your map gets the exposure it needs, then strong search engine ranking for your target keywords will follow.

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