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## How (Not) to Build Your SEO Strategy: 10 Tricks Your Consultant Won't Tell You

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The foundation of a good search engine optimization (SEO) strategy is a well thought out keyword strategy. Unlike the instant gratification of pay-per-click advertising, organic search efforts often take six months or more to show results. During those six months, a business will be creating mountains of content and building targeted links, all focused on 5-10 specific keyword phrases. For a business that targeted the wrong phrase – perhaps it was too competitive, or there wasn't enough traffic, or the traffic didn't convert – the wrong keyword strategy will have cost thousands of hours in wasted effort.

A thorough analysis can easily take several days and require hundreds of dollars worth of analysis tools. Hiring a specialist who knows how to use them costs even more. We explain how to use data visualization to get it done in a few hours and for just a couple bucks.

## 1) Get the Tools

A wide range of factors come into play when evaluating keywords' potential for SEO. Of these, the most important are search volume, conversion rates, competitiveness, and relevancy to a site. With endless rows and columns of keyword data, the intuition required to balance these factors is a blend of art and skill that can only be developed with time.

However, data visualization makes it possible to do the same thing cheaply. The human brain can process pictures much more effectively than tables of numbers. By incorporating different parameters into different dimensions of a visualization, a huge list of keywords can be quickly scanned and the phrases worth pursuing easily selected. In this paper, a number of free tools are used to collect the necessary data, build visualizations, deliver actionable insights, and set benchmarks.

- Microsoft adCenter Add-in Beta for Excel (free)
- Tableau Desktop Trial (free)
- Google AdWords Keyword Tool (free)
- Google AdWords Traffic Estimator (free)
- SEO Chat Keyword Difficulty Check (free)
- Wordze 1-Day Trial (\$7.95, optional)
- SEO for Firefox (free)
- SEObook Rank Checker (free)

## 2) Get the Lay of the Land

Consider a hypothetical website, ImaginaryCreatures.com, that wants to develop a keyword strategy for organic (unpaid) search. The marketing department knows that, compared to traffic from paid search advertisements like Google AdWords, organic traffic converts well, clicks through at a higher rate, and views search results as more trustworthy.

Marketing wants to drive more unpaid traffic to their website, but doesn't know where to begin. They can't afford to pay an expensive consultant to build out a keyword strategy. Data visualization can help them accomplish their goals cheaply.

We begin by exploring the competitive space. We wish to understand which broad keyword categories are worth competing in. Our goal is just a high level overview for now – we'll do a deep dive a bit later.

Imaginary Creatures provides a list of the main websites in their space, which are then added to an Excel spreadsheet. We perform a few related searches and add the top results to the spreadsheet as well. The Keyword Extractor from Microsoft's Ad Intelligence Add-In now saves hours of effort. It scrapes the (potentially hundreds of) webpages in the spreadsheet and identifies what words they're optimized for. Why go through all the bother of figuring out the best keyword categories when competitors have already done it?

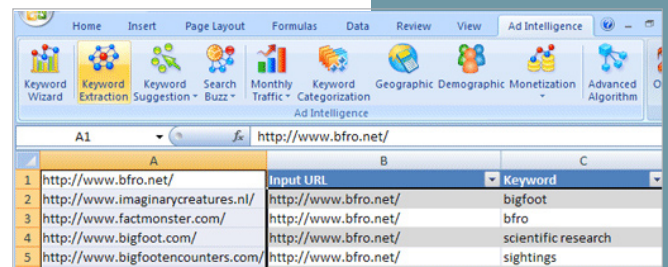


Figure 1: Microsoft Ad Intelligence scrapes your competitor's webpages for the keywords you should be targeting.

The Keyword Extractor tool lists hundreds of keyword ideas, some of them relevant, some of them not. But looking through the list, three main categories stand out: "bigfoot", "dragons", and "unicorns". Our keyword ideas are divided into these three categories and the ones that don't fit are thrown out.

### 3) Even More Potential Keywords

Google AdWords Keyword Tool is a powerful resource to expand a list of keywords. The Keyword Tool generates a huge list of related keywords, ranging from high volume generic terms ("bigfoot") to low volume niche phrases ("memorial day bigfoot video"). The longer the list of initial seed keywords, the longer the list of suggestions Google provides. Since we'll be using data visualization to quickly sift through this data, a huge list of keywords is no problem at all.

Keywords	Advertiser Competition	Approx Search Volume: January	Approx Avg Search Volume	Match Type: Broad
<b>Keywords related to term(s) entered - sorted by relevance</b>				
bigfoot sightings	<input type="checkbox"/>	33,100	40,500	<a href="#">Add</a>
bigfoot	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1,000,000	1,500,000	<a href="#">Add</a>
pictures of bigfoot	<input type="checkbox"/>	3,600	5,400	<a href="#">Add</a>
bigfoot sighting	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	6,600	9,900	<a href="#">Add</a>
sasquatch bigfoot	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	12,100	9,900	<a href="#">Add</a>
bigfoot videos	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	6,600	9,900	<a href="#">Add</a>

Figure 2: Keyword Tool expands your list of potential keywords and provides the search volume for each phrase.



#### 4) Keyword Data Point #1: Search Volume

Not only does the Keyword Tool generate a huge list of new keyword phrases to consider, it provides the monthly search volume (“Approx Avg Search Volume”) for each of those phrases. Being ranked #1 on Google for “nigritude ultramarine” does no good if no one is searching for that phrase. Checking the search volume of the target phrases early ensures that time isn’t wasted later in the process. The data is exported to a CSV file and added to a spreadsheet for analysis in step 7.

#### 5) Keyword Data Point #2: Value

After using the Keyword Tool to build a long list of potential keywords in each of the initial three categories (“bigfoot”, “dragons”, and “unicorns”), the list is fed into Google AdWords Traffic Estimator. Traffic Estimator provides the estimated cost per day for each keyword, which can be used as a rough approximation for its value.

Because different searchers have different goals, some search phrases are simply more valuable than others (e.g. “buy digital camera” vs. “free digital camera”). In general, though, intuition and common sense are inadequate tools for estimating how much a keyword is worth. A phrase’s value depends on

many factors: the number of searchers, the rate at which they convert, the average size of their orders, even the average margin on the items they purchase. Because Google AdWords represents a reasonably efficient market, it can be assumed that all this information is already encapsulated in the daily cost of advertising on a particular keyword. Using the Cost/Day data from the AdWords Traffic Estimator allows keywords to be recognized if they convert particularly well, even despite lower search volumes.

Keywords ▾	Search Volume	Estimated Avg. CPC	Estimated Ad Positions	Estimated Clicks / Day	Estimated Cost / Day
<b>Search Network Total</b>		\$0.40 - \$0.56	1 - 3	122 - 154	\$50 - \$90
bigfoot	<input type="checkbox"/>	\$0.37 - \$0.53	1 - 3	106 - 134	\$40 - \$80
bigfoot com	<input type="checkbox"/>	\$0.44 - \$0.57	1 - 3	3 - 4	\$2 - \$3
bigfoot footage	<input type="checkbox"/>	\$1.52 - \$1.92	1 - 3	0	\$1
bigfoot pictures	<input type="checkbox"/>	\$0.33 - \$0.54	1 - 3	3	\$1 - \$2
bigfoot sighting	<input type="checkbox"/>	\$0.00 - \$0.40	1 - 3	0	\$0 - \$1
bigfoot sightings	<input type="checkbox"/>	\$0.73 - \$1.10	1 - 3	1	\$1
bigfoot truck	<input type="checkbox"/>	\$0.65 - \$0.85	1 - 3	4 - 6	\$3 - \$6

Figure 3: Traffic Estimator’s Estimated Cost / Day indicates how well a phrase will convert.

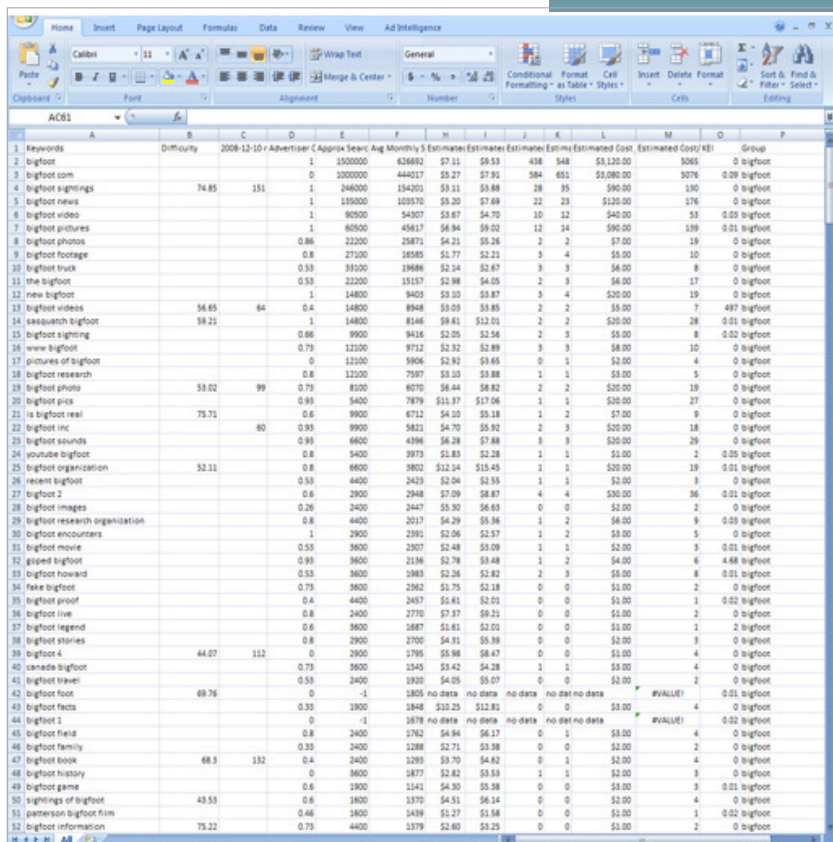
#### 6) Keyword Data Point #3: Competitiveness

Wordze is an online keyword analysis tool that accepts a list of keywords and returns a measure of competitiveness for each phrase. There are plenty of alternative tools available and for our purposes they are mostly interchangeable – we’re just looking for a rough measure of each keyword’s competitiveness and performance. We chose Wordze because it’s cheap (\$7.95 for a one-day trial) and because it allows keywords to be cut and pasted in bulk.

Wordze’s Keyword Effectiveness Index (KEI) attempts to weigh the competitiveness of a keyword against its traffic potential, so it aggregates a lot of the numbers that have already been collected. For many people, that’s a good thing – choosing the right keyword strategy requires balancing so many factors that an arbitrary weighting and aggregation of the factors is sometimes the only way to reach a decisions.

However, we will be using Tableau Desktop, a data visualization package that makes it easy to perform analysis across multiple dimensions. For us, aggregation is bad – we would prefer transparency so that we could use the underlying data and do the analysis ourselves. So we'll just use KEI as a quick first-round screen to make sure we don't miss any high-potential keywords.

The first task is to pare down the current list of several hundred keywords. Here's a screenshot of the data in Excel. The goal is to identify keyword phrases that have a balance of high traffic, high value, low competition, and high relevance to Imaginary Creatures' website. But finding these high potential keywords amidst endless rows and columns of numbers is an extremely time-intensive process



### 7) Narrow the List of Potential Keywords

Fortunately, this is where Tableau excels. In five or six clicks, we built this visualization of all the terms in our spreadsheet. The keywords are separated into their umbrella categories (bigfoot, dragons, unicorns) and within each category, ordered by Estimated Cost / Day. The length of the bar corresponds to the Avg Monthly Search Volume (we're using a logarithmic scale here, or else the highest trafficked words simply overwhelm the visualization), while the color is determined by the phrase's KEI.

Data visualization provides an alternative to struggling to make sense of hundreds of rows and columns of data. It takes only a minute or two to scroll

through the visualization and pick out the most valuable keywords (higher in the list) that have either high traffic (long bars) or good KEI's (green color)



Figure 4: Insight is absent when data is presented in endless rows and columns.

Figure 5: Visualizing the data provides actionable insight instantly by allowing multiple dimensions to be considered simultaneously.

Additionally, look at all the green for the bigfoot category vs. the unicorn category (see visualizations of the long tail/lower value keywords, Appendices A and B). We already have a preliminary indication that Imaginary Creatures should focus their efforts on bigfoot rather than unicorns. That's an actionable insight that never would have been noticed with a table of numbers.

## 8) Make the Final Keyword Selections

KEI was used as a rough measure of keyword competitiveness, mainly because there's a cheap tool to compute KEI for phrases in bulk. Now that the list of potential keywords has been narrowed, a tool like SEO Chat's Keyword Difficulty Check can be used to evaluate the competitiveness of each term by hand.

The last visualization is copied and the KEI measure replaced with the new Difficulty measure. We tell Tableau to ignore the keywords for which a difficulty score was not collected, and almost instantly we have a new visualization.

Examining only the bigfoot terms for now, it's clear that "bigfoot sightings" is the dominant phrase in search volume. The dark red color indicates the term is extremely competitive – Imaginary Creatures won't be ranking for it anytime soon. If the phrase "bigfoot sightings" is hidden temporarily, Tableau rescales the graph and new insights jump out.

"Bigfoot sightings" was too competitive, but there are some variants that look very promising. "Sighting of bigfoot", "sightings of bigfoot", "first bigfoot

sighting", "new bigfoot sighting", "Oklahoma bigfoot sighting", and "recent bigfoot sighting" are all very nice shades of green. These phrases are closely related, so it will be easy to create plenty of quality content to target all of these phrases. And the best part is that all that effort will be building up relevant authority for an eventual run on the big-money phrase, "bigfoot sighting".

There's even a misspelling that looks interesting. "Bigfoot sitings" doesn't look competitive at all – one highly optimized page might net a few hundred extra visitors a month.

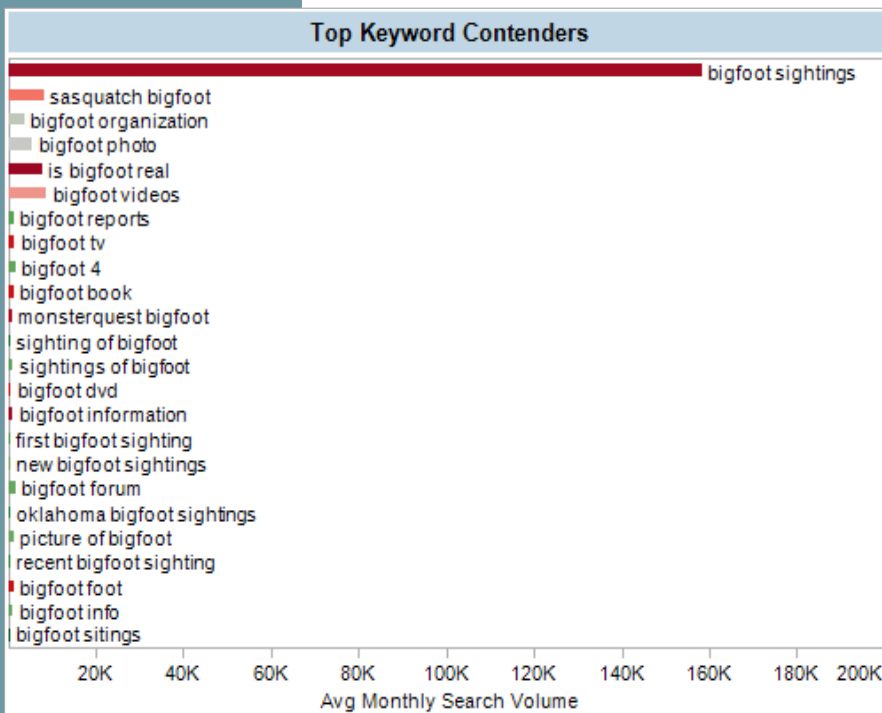


Figure 6: "Bigfoot sightings" has high search volume but the dark red color indicates that it is far too competitive a term.



“Bigfoot organization” and “bigfoot photo” also stand out as highly trafficked, very valuable, but less competitive phrases. We make a mental note to evaluate them more carefully later. When we get a chance, we use SEO for Firefox to examine the competitive landscape. The top few results on Google have fairly high pagerank and a lot of incoming links, but the results from #5-#10 are unimpressive.

Imaginary Creatures has a number of avid bloggers on staff, has a very active forum on their site, and hasn’t done any SEO at all until now. They could be a contender in search so we keep both those phrases in mind.

In only a few hours, we have created a keyword strategy for the “bigfoot” category. The strategy identifies a nice set of niche keywords to attack for some immediate traffic, two somewhat more competitive terms to shoot for in the medium term, and one dream phrase (“bigfoot sightings”) that we’ll be building SEO karma for with all the groundwork right now. The process can be repeated in just a few minutes for “dragons” and “unicorns”, and Imaginary Creatures will have a solid foundation for their SEO strategy.

*Extra Credit: One Final Check and Tracking Performance*

**9) Due Diligence**

Before pulling the trigger on any new keyword strategy, the competitive landscape should be examined in detail. The Difficulty Check is a good estimate of how hard it will be to rank for a specific keyword phrase, but hard numbers are preferable.

SEO for Firefox integrates with Firefox and, when enabled, automatically inserts a table of useful information in Google’s search results. For each of the target search phrases, SEO for Firefox displays the PageRank (“PR”) and number of backlinks (“Y! Links”) of the top search results. Comparing that to Imaginary Creature’s PageRank and backlinks gives a rough idea of whether they have a realistic chance of ranking for their target keywords.

Examining the Google search results page for “oklahoma bigfoot sightings” reveals that the #3 result has no pagerank and only 22 incoming links. Imaginary Creatures will have an easy time ranking well for this term.

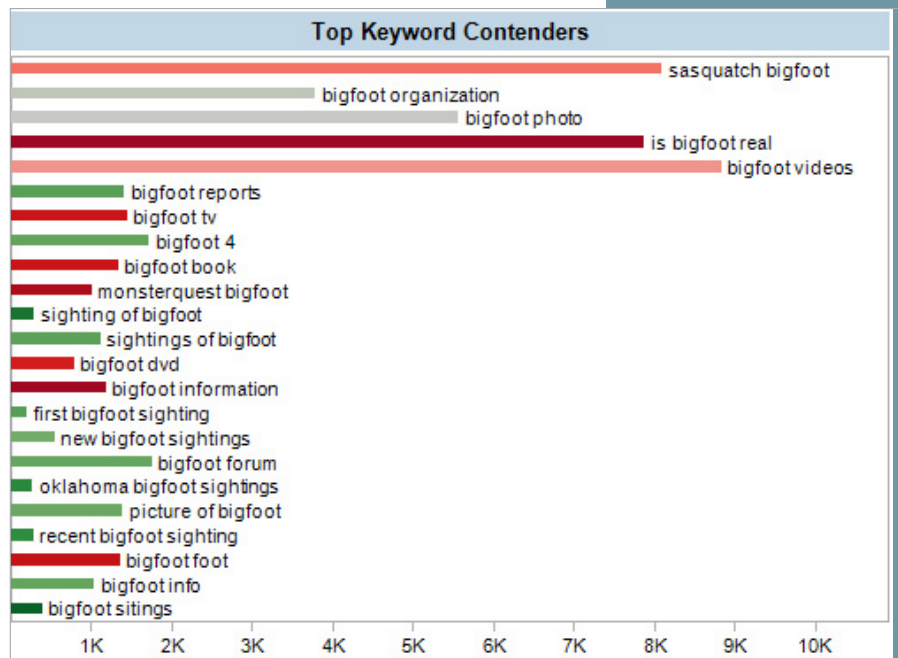


Figure 7: Keyword phrases with strong potential stand out when data is presented visually. Keywords are listed in order of value, with the length of the bar representing search volume and the color the amount of competition.

## 10) Set Metrics

No SEO strategy is complete without benchmarking. Where are we now vs. where do we want to be? SEObook's Rank Checker provides the current rank for a long list of keywords. In seconds, the data can be exported to Excel and added to a visualization.

[OklahomaBigfoot.org](http://OklahomaBigfoot.org)  
 Our endeavor is to provide you with a comprehensive place to find information about **Bigfoot** in **Oklahoma**. Several Sasquatch **Sightings** are reported every year ...  
[www.oklahomabigfoot.org/](http://www.oklahomabigfoot.org/) - 5k - [Cached](#) - [Similar pages](#)  
 #3 | PR: 0 | [Google Cache Date: ?](#) | [Traffic Value: ?](#) | [Age: ?](#) | [del.icio.us: ?](#) | [del.icio.us Page Bookmarks: ?](#) | [Diggs: ?](#) | [Digg's Popular Stories: ?](#) | [Stumbleupon: ?](#) | [Twitter: ?](#) | [Y! Links: 22](#) | [Y! .edu Links: ?](#) | [Y! .gov Links: ?](#) | [Y! Page Links: ?](#) | [Y! .edu Page Links: ?](#) | [Technorati: ?](#) | [Alexa: ?](#) | [Compete.com Rank: ?](#) | [Compete.com Uniques: ?](#) | [Trends | Cached: ?](#) | [Dmoz: ?](#) | [Bloglines: ?](#) | [Page blog links: ?](#) | [dir.yahoo.com: ?](#) | [Botw: ?](#) | [Whois](#) | [Sktool](#) | [Yahoo position: ?](#) | [Majestic SEO linkdomain: ?](#)

Figure 8: A PageRank of 0 and only 22 backlinks indicate that this will be an easy term to rank for.

For visualization purposes, 1/rank is a preferable metric to rank itself. Using 1/rank means that longer bars are better,

corresponding with natural intuition. Furthermore, it magnifies the difference between, say, a #3 and a #4 ranking term vs. a #103 and a #104 term. This is desirable because clicks on search engine results pages exhibit the same distribution.

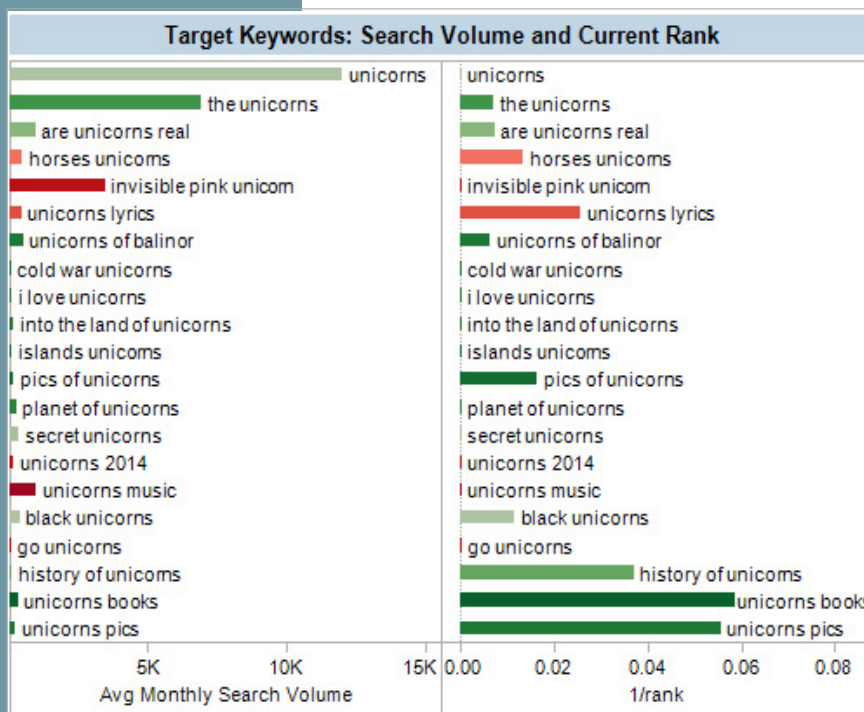


Figure 9: Current search rank is a good metric for measuring the success of an SEO campaign. Keywords are listed in order of value, while the color represents the amount of competition. Bar length corresponds to search volume in the first column and current search rank in the second (longer bars indicate higher rankings).

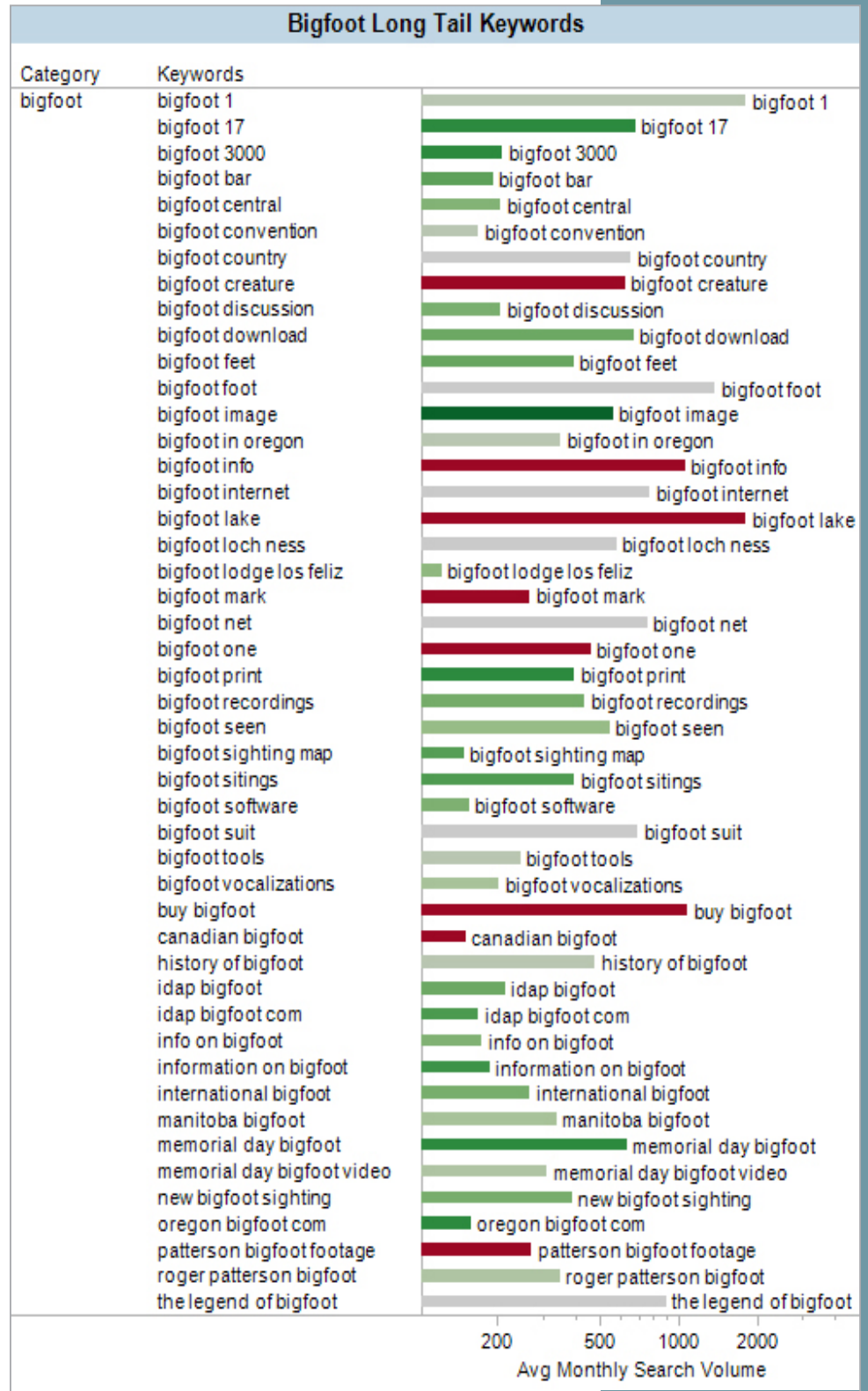
visualization allows even non-technical users to quickly and easily evaluate keywords across a range of different factors. At businesses where developing a thorough keyword strategy would otherwise have been prohibitively expensive, an afternoon spent analyzing freely available data with a tool like Tableau can now provide a solid and actionable understanding of the competitive search space.

Turning to the unicorn category this time, it's clear that Imaginary Creatures' current SEO strategy (or lack thereof) isn't delivering results. They are ranking strongly for terms with no traffic at all and are barely on the board for higher volume terms. This visualization will be a great benchmark to refer to in six months when the head of marketing wants to know whether the SEO efforts have paid off.

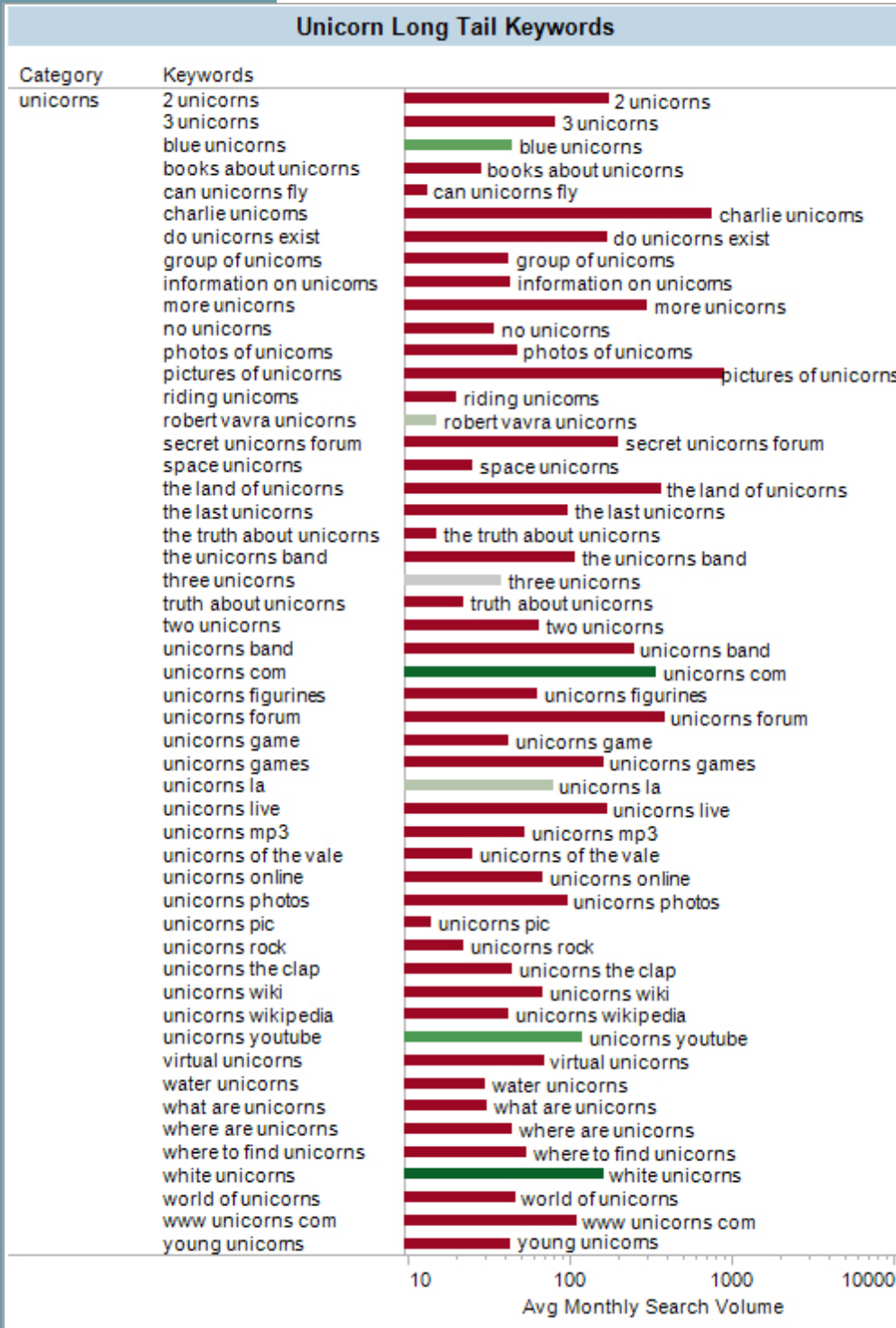
Ranking for the right keywords is the big payoff in an SEO strategy. But choosing keywords is difficult because it requires weighing so many factors: competitiveness, search volume, and conversion potential. It's up to an individual business to decide how much time and money they want to invest into developing their keyword strategy. For those whose budgets permit, by all means hire a specialist. But data



## Appendix A: Visualization of Long Tail Bigfoot Keywords



## Appendix B: Visualization of Long Tail Unicorn Keywords



### ABOUT TABLEAU SOFTWARE

Access a trial copy of Tableau Software to dive deep into all types of data, quickly analyze campaign performance, conversion metrics, and easily determine ROI on marketing efforts at <http://www.tableausoftware.com/products/trial>