

How to Do Competition Analysis That Actually Wins Retainers

Every SEO agency has pitched a prospect who nodded along until someone said "we can look at what your competitors are doing." That moment should feel like an opening, not a cliché. But most agencies treat competition analysis as a one-page PDF with a few screenshots from SEMrush or Ahrefs and a table of overlapping keywords. That approach rarely closes a deal, and it almost never keeps a client past month three.

What separates a retainer-winning analysis from a forgettable one is depth. Not just data depth, but the kind of depth that shows you understand which moves actually drive a competitor's growth. The real question is not what keywords they rank for. It is why those keywords matter to their business model and which of their tactics are repeatable for your client. This article walks through how to do competition analysis that delivers those insights, step by step, with tools you already have or can justify adding this quarter.

Start with the Right Frame

Before opening any dashboard, define the competitive set. Too many analyses fail because they include every domain that ranks for one overlapping term. That is noise. Instead, pick three to five direct competitors that share a similar audience, price point, and value proposition. If your client is a regional accounting firm, a national chain with a different service mix is not a direct competitor. A local firm with the same niche and a slightly smaller ad budget is.

Once you have a shortlist, decide what you are trying to reverse-engineer. Is it their organic traffic growth? Their paid acquisition funnel? Their content authority? Each question requires a different tool stack and a different slice of the analysis. Trying to cover everything at once guarantees a shallow report.

This is where the discipline of [how to do competition analysis](#) begins: with a hypothesis. "Competitor A has grown their blog traffic 40% in six months. I think they are targeting long-tail informational queries that their competitors ignore." That hypothesis gives you a thread to pull. Tools like SEMrush and Ahrefs can validate or refute it quickly. Without a hypothesis, you end up with a laundry list of rankings and backlinks that tells no story.

Audit Their Organic Visibility from the Ground Up

Start with Google Search Console if you have access to the client's properties, but for competitor domains you need third-party data. Ahrefs and SEMrush both offer competitive domain overviews that show top pages, traffic estimates, and keyword distribution. Look for

patterns. Does the competitor dominate a cluster of topics you have barely touched? Are they winning featured snippets on terms you only target with product pages?

Moz Pro can also surface domain authority trends over time, which helps you see whether a competitor is gaining trust steadily or plateauing. A plateau might signal an opening for your client to push past them with better content or stronger internal linking.

One practical exercise: export the top 50 landing pages from each competitor and group them by content type (blog post, product page, landing page, video, etc.). Then note which formats generate the most estimated traffic. You will often find that 20% of their pages drive 80% of their organic visits. Those pages become your blueprint.

When you move beyond surface-level keyword overlap, you start to see the strategic gaps. That is the moment the analysis shifts from reporting to consulting. A client who sees a gap they can exploit is a client who stays on retainer.

Reverse-Engineer Their Backlink Strategy

Backlinks are still a strong ranking signal, but the quality of that signal depends on context. A single link from a niche industry publication can move the needle more than twenty directory listings. Tools like Majestic SEO and Link Research Tools give you a historical view of link acquisition, so you can see when a competitor launched a PR push or a guest-post campaign.

Screaming Frog paired with Lumar can crawl competitor sites to identify pages with the highest internal link equity. Those pages often reveal what the competitor considers strategically important. If their "about us" page has twice as many internal links as their pricing page, they are probably optimizing for trust signals, not conversions. That insight changes how you advise your client.

BuzzSumo helps you see which competitor content earned the most social shares and mentions. That data is less about direct ranking impact and more about understanding what resonates with the audience. A piece of content that earns shares is also likely to earn natural links over time. If your client can produce something similar but more comprehensive, they can capture that link equity.

How to do competition analysis at this level means looking at the competitor's link trajectory, not just their current link profile. Are they building links steadily or in bursts? If they rely on one or two high-authority sources, your client can diversify their own portfolio to reduce risk and eventually overtake them.

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Dig Into Paid and Referral Traffic

Organic is usually the focus, but paid and referral channels reveal a competitor's willingness to spend on growth. SpyFu and Similarweb can estimate how much a competitor spends on paid search and which ad copy they test most often. That data is imperfect but directional. If a competitor spends heavily on branded terms, they may be protecting a weak organic presence. If they bid on competitor names, they are aggressive.

Google Keyword Planner gives you auction insights for your own account, but you can infer competitor intent by cross-referencing their paid keywords with their landing pages. A competitor who sends paid traffic to a blog post rather than a product page is probably testing content as a conversion funnel. That is worth noting.

Referral traffic from Similarweb can also highlight partnerships or media placements that drive consistent visits. A mention in a niche newsletter that sends 500 targeted visitors per month is more valuable than a random link on a low-quality site. If your client can replicate that mention, they get the same benefit without needing to rank for it.

Use Rank Tracking to Monitor Movement

Once you have a baseline, you need to track changes over time. Tools like Nightwatch, SEOMonitor, and Woorank offer daily rank tracking and alerting. Woorank in particular gives a competitive dashboard that compares your client's visibility score against competitors on a per-keyword basis. The goal is not just to see who is up or down, but to correlate rank changes with specific events: a new page launch, a site migration, a link-building push.

Searchmetrics and Conductor are enterprise-grade options that integrate competitive intelligence with content optimization. They are expensive but worth it for agencies that serve large clients with complex keyword landscapes. BrightEdge is another strong choice, especially for agencies that need to report on share of voice across organic and paid in one interface.

When you track movement, pay attention to volatility. A competitor who jumps from position 15 to position 3 in a week probably did something specific. That event might be a new piece of content, a technical fix, or a link from a major publication. Identify the cause and decide whether your client can replicate it faster.

Build the Narrative for the Client

Data without a story is just a spreadsheet. The final step of how to do competition analysis is packaging the findings into a narrative that drives action. Start with the competitor's strength, then show the gap, then recommend a specific move your client can make in the next 30 days.

For example: "Competitor X ranks in the top three for 'enterprise CRM pricing' because they have a dedicated pricing comparison page with schema markup and 12 referring domains. Your pricing page has no schema and only three internal links. In the next sprint, we can add FAQ schema, build three internal links from your high-traffic blog posts, and pitch the page to two comparison sites. That alone should move you from page two to the top five within 60 days."

A story like that shows you understand the mechanics, not just the metrics. It also gives the client a concrete deliverable to approve. That is how analysis turns into retainers.

One last note: do not neglect the people side. Neil Patel has written extensively on competitive content audits, and his frameworks are a good sanity check for your own process. But your analysis should be specific to your client's market. Every niche is different. A template helps, but the real value is in the customization.

Competition analysis done right is not a report. It is a roadmap. And every client wants to know where the road leads before they agree to pay for the trip.