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# Danone & Digitad: Building a Data-Driven Digital Marketing Strategy

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#### **Background on Digitad**

Digitad is a digital marketing agency based in Montreal, Canada.<sup>1</sup> The company was founded by Jeremie Abbou in 2015, after he realized that many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) were not fully leveraging digital and social marketing tools to promote their businesses and enhance their online presence. Two years later, Jeremie was joined by Alexandre Corbasson, an ex-strategy consultant who took the role of partner and CEO. To date, Digitad serves a network of 850 clients in Canada and France placing it as a top 20 digital marketing agency in Canada.<sup>2</sup> The agency is built around three core service lines and several key support functions. The three core service lines are:

- 1. **SEO (Search Engine Optimization).** This service line focuses on helping businesses improve their organic ranking on search engines (e.g., Google, Bing). As part of its offering, Digitad provides technical recommendations (loading speed improvement, mobile adaptability, website security), link building services (creating links on external websites to improve reputation), and content creation or copywriting (i.e., creating and publishing relevant content that meet the criteria used by Google's robots when crawling websites). More details on SEO can be found in Appendix C.
- 2. **Online Advertising.** This service line provides online advertising services on search engines and on social media.
- 3. **Social Media Management.** This department focuses on managing clients' social platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) including content creation, publication, and community management.

Support functions include Administration (HR, accounting, and finance), Marketing, Customer Success (account management), and Consulting. The latter was recently added and encompasses all Digitad's consulting services such as market research and digital transformation.

Digitad draws its strength from its ability to deliver high-quality results at affordable prices. Specifically, the agency is committed to an ROI-focused approach, based on advanced digital marketing expertise and data-driven recommendations.

# A Growing But Increasingly Competitive Landscape

Over the last decade, the advent of advertising on Google (originally called AdWords but now called Google Ads) and on Facebook allowed early adopters to build a strong competitive advantage. These new channels have offered an opportunity for brands to reach targeted audiences and better capitalize on their marketing budgets.

Today, online advertising is an ubiquitous practice for any company with a digital presence. But talent remains scarce and difficult to attract, especially for SMEs. To fulfill this growing need, the number of digital marketing agencies sky-rocketed, creating a highly competitive environment which requires relentless innovation to stay ahead of the curve (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Results for the search query "digital agency" over the last five years in Canada (source: Google Trends).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> <u>https://digitad.ca/agence-digitad/</u>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> <u>https://clutch.co/ca/agencies/digital-marketing?sort\_by=0&min\_project\_size=&avg\_hrly</u>

For these agencies, the addressable opportunity is nothing short of colossal. In 2019, the Canadian digital advertising market recorded a total revenue of 6.4 billion, with a compound annual growth rate of 19% between 2015 and 2019.<sup>3</sup>

Competition is fierce and stems from different angles. Growth in the number of agencies has been exponential in a market with relatively low-entry barriers. Competitive intensity also comes from businesses attempting to develop in-house digital marketing teams. Finally, agencies must also cope with platforms such as Google and Facebook that are offering their own support and automation services.

As a result, after an initial phase of hypersegmentation, the trend is now towards consolidation.<sup>4</sup> To better face industry headwinds, agencies are increasingly starting to merge and acquisitions have become common practice. Through targeted M&A deals, larger (and often more traditional) agencies often aim to acquire the talent and know-how of small, specialized digitally-native agencies to expand their service offering while accelerating their client portfolio growth.

That said, the future of digital marketing still looks promising. In Canada, digital spend is expected to increase by 25% over the next four years,<sup>5</sup> driven by structural drivers (e.g., budget shifting from traditional to digital channels, growing availability of talent, education around digital marketing) but also by external factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic which has forced businesses to rethink their route to market and disrupted the overall customer journey. In this context of growing competitive intensity and market consolidation, developing a unique, best-in-class offering has become paramount.

# Efficiently Addressing Large Companies' Digital Needs

In an effort to create a differentiated, more customer-centric approach to digital strategy, Digitad decided to launch a new business unit, at the intersection of strategic consulting and digital marketing. The premise is simple: leveraging the myriad of available data sources used by digital marketers on a daily basis to generate strategic insights into businesses' underlying market dynamics and identify new opportunities.

By extracting, segmenting, and analyzing datasets from sources such as Google (e.g., Keyword Planner, Google Analytics) or specialist SEO third-party data providers (e.g., Semrush, Wordstream, Ahrefs), Digitad aims to provide actionable insights on businesses' addressable market size, growth, consumer behaviour, and competitive performance. The analyses also include a mapping by product/service segment and/or by geography, which makes it possible to identify potential business opportunities. While traditional market research can be time consuming and expensive, the goal is to deliver innovative strategic insights without the pain of conducting focus groups, lengthy surveys or purchasing expensive market reports. These insights can then be used to inform web-marketing initiatives (high potential keyword opportunities to target, content strategy), but also more general strategic decisions across the company (product launch, new market entry, acquisition search).

# **Data Availability**

The input data used in digital marketing research studies comes from a variety of sources, including the following three types of data.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> <u>https://store.marketline.com/report/ohmf8537--digital-advertising-in-canada-2/</u>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> <u>https://prometheanresearch.com/digital-marketing-agency-industry-report/</u>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> https://www.statista.com/outlook/216/108/digital-advertising/canada

#### a) Google Data

The first data source originates from Google and provides information on the searches performed by Internet users. Several tools (including Google Keyword Planner, built to help advertisers identify keyword opportunities) are used to determine which words have been typed by users, how often, and when. These tools not only provide average monthly volumes of searches for specific keywords, but also deliver insight into search patterns around a specific topic. More precisely, by inserting one or two keywords, the tool is able to suggest up to a hundred other keywords belonging to the same "family."

By repeating this action multiple times and casting a wide enough "net," one can gain insight into several key areas. For example, one can reach a better understanding about the digital search marketing size (i.e., number of people searching for a specific topic), its growth (i.e., overall monthly search volumes over several years), seasonality (i.e., monthly variations) as well as behavioural trends and search patterns. The latter is particularly important because it helps businesses better understand their users' behaviours (i.e., the way Internet users are searching for information), and helps build a website architecture and content that perfectly match the search patterns of Internet users while fitting their "persona." In this context, a persona is defined as a user profile that corresponds to a segment of targeted customers who share similar attributes or activities (e.g., demographic data, location, past habits and searches, interests in products).

Marketing studies in online advertising often focus on the research intention of users in order to answer questions such as who is searching for what, how, when, and why. By analysing how Internet users conduct research, marketing analysts can build more elaborate consumer profiles and even reconstruct each step of the marketing funnel (i.e., what consumers are searching for during the exploration, consideration, evaluation, and action phases).

This data is updated every month and is easy to manipulate and segment. For example, it is possible to drill down into one or several specific geographic areas (e.g., country, group of countries, region, city). It is also possible to observe search volumes over time (data is generally available over the last four years), which can be used to calculate the search market growth. Finally, it is also possible to obtain information on the share of searches made from different platforms (mobile, tablet, desktop).

To access this data, a Google Ads account with active advertising campaigns is needed, but no minimum spend is required. This data is made available by Google as a courtesy to help companies identify and select the most relevant keywords as part of their paid advertising campaigns. Agencies like Digitad also leverage this data to generate an exhaustive list of relevant keywords that can be used to estimate the size and growth of specific digital markets. The volume of identified keywords depends on the market (a more niche market will naturally have fewer keywords than a market with a broader scope). Typically, market research can range from a few thousand keywords (for niche markets) to tens or even hundreds of thousands of keywords (for wider markets).

# b) Ranking Performance Data

A second source of data comes from tools that evaluate the ranking of a website in the search results, for given keywords. Several (subscription-based) tools, such as AHrefs, SEMRush, and SEO Powersuite, can be used to access this data. Thanks to these types of tools, it is possible to know the rank of a website and to compare it to its competitors. Ultimately, this allows to identify which player has the largest market share (i.e., share of searches), being the best ranked on Google search results. These tools provide the position of websites, that is, their rank among the organic results, which does not include the sponsored ads at the top of the search results. Figure 2 shows a typical screenshot of

the data from the AHrefs tool for different keywords related to dairy grocery products. Each row corresponds to a different keyword. The first four columns refer to specific companies/websites (the client and its main competitors), the fourth column (volume) is the number of searches (averaged over the last 12 months), the fifth column reports the keyword difficulty (see next section), and the sixth column to the country under consideration. The numbers displayed in the first four columns correspond to the rank of the website in the Google results.

		-					
Keyword	e activia.ca/↓	biokplus	aligngi.ca	nancysyo	Volume	KD	Location
plain yogurt	7	>100	>100	>100	400	10	• EN
probiotics yogurt	15	>100	>100	42	200	27	• EN
probiotics	>100	>100	>100	>100	18,000	80	• EN
almond milk	>100	>100	>100	>100	8,100	67	• EN
evaporated milk	>100	>100	>100	>100	4,700	31	• EN
lactobacillus reuteri	>100	>100	>100	>100	600	18	• EN
fairlife milk	>100	>100	>100	>100	6,000	24	• EN
half and half	>100	>100	>100	>100	2,300	28	• EN
mozzarella cheese	>100	>100	>100	>100	1,400	37	♦ EN

Figure 2. Extract from the AHrefs tool (source: Digitad's AHrefs account, 2019).

#### c) Keyword Difficulty

The third type of accessible data is an indicator, called the keyword difficulty (KD), which corresponds to the level of competition (and hence the effort required to rank on the first page) for given keywords. The KD is a score ranging from 1 to 100, where 100 corresponds to the most difficult level to rank on the first Google page. Each tool has its own in-house formula for calculating the KD, so it may slightly vary from one tool to another. Such tools are typically based on one main factor: the reputation of the websites that are currently ranked in the top ten Google results. If the first ten websites have a strong reputation, it will be more difficult for a website to rank on the first Google page. To better understand how Google estimates the strength and reputation of websites, we refer the reader to Appendix C.



Figure 3. Illustration of the keyword difficulty indicator (source: Wordstream, Sept. 2018).<sup>6</sup>

Figure 3 illustrates the concept of KD and a typical range of domains for the different scores. This indicator must obviously be read in light of the website being analyzed. If a website is strong and has a great domain authority, it will be able to reach higher KD levels, as opposed to a recently launched website with a weak domain authority.

#### The Activia Case Study

#### Introduction

In 2020, The Danone Group in Canada reached out to Digitad to support them in their digital transformation efforts. Danone's first website was launched in 2002, and its digital presence has continued to evolve ever since. However, the food multinational was now seeking to modernize its digital assets while ensuring that data played a central role in their future strategies.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> https://www.wordstream.com/blog/ws/2018/09/12/keyword-difficulty

For this initial assignment, the Danone group decided to trust the agency to carry out digital market research for their Canadian portfolio, with a key focus on one of their most emblematic and long-standing yogurt brands: Activia.

#### **Brand Background**

The history of Activia began at the end of the 19th century with the French pediatrician Henry Tissier, who for the first time identified bifidobacteria in the intestinal flora of breastfed babies.<sup>7</sup> Over the course of history, several researchers studied these molecules and discovered the positive effects of fermented dairy products on health.

The first Activia yogurt was sold in 1919 by Isaac Carasso, who created a company called Groupe Danone (a name inspired by his son, Daniel), and marketed yogurts based on ferments in pharmacies. Launched at the end of the 1980s in France and Belgium under its former name ("Bio"), the brand is now marketed in more than 70 countries under its new name "Activia" (since 2006). In Canada, the brand has been present since 2004.<sup>8</sup>

While the brand has changed over the years, the products still have the same key manufacturing process: the addition of a probiotic—Bifidus BL regularis—to the microbiotes naturally present in yogurts.<sup>9</sup> According to Danone researchers and to the World Health Organization (WHO), this probiotic, when ingested in sufficient quantities, enhances intestinal transit. The WHO defines probiotics as "live microorganisms which when administered in adequate amounts confer a health benefit on the host."



Figure 4. Activia's advertising campaign.

These products, based on more than 30 years of scientific research in the field of digestive health give Danone a positioning that is both healthy and targeted to the mass market. Today, it is unarguably one of the Danone group's pillars. In 2010, the brand dominated the probiotic dairy sector. In 2011, based on Nielsen data, Activia was the largest global fresh dairy brand worldwide. The probiotic yogurt market is now valued at  $\notin$ 4 billion and is expected to grow by a 6.5% compound annual growth rate by 2023,<sup>10</sup> driven by an increased awareness of the health benefits (in particular in lowering the risk of type-2 diabetes and colorectal cancer).

But as competition in the probiotic yogurt market intensifies and consumers are increasingly moving online, the Danone Group is eager to ensure that Activia's digital presence remains relevant and cutting edge. This led them to seek external help and call Digitad to assess their current online market and build a suitable data-driven digital strategy.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> https://activia.fr.dan-on.com/%C3%A0-propos-de-nous/lhistoire-dactivia

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> <u>https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Activia</u>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> https://www.danone.com/brands/dairy-plant-based-products/activia.html

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> <u>https://www.mordorintelligence.com/industry-reports/probiotic-and-prebiotic-yogurt-market</u>

#### **Key Business Objectives**

Danone and Digitad's objectives are threefold:

- Understanding the nature and dynamics of Activia's online opportunity (size, growth, user behaviour);
- Evaluating Activia's performance and digital maturity relative to its key competitors as well as other brands in the Danone portfolio. The key questions include: Who the key online competitors are and are they outperforming Activia? How well is Danone allocating its marketing efforts across brands?
- Formulating clear recommendations to improve Activia's digital presence in the short and longer terms. Specifically, one key question is: How can we increase Activia's website visibility in search engines and offer the right experience to consumers who are searching for Danone's products? Given the current performance, what is the right SEO strategy for Activia and how should they prioritise future actions?

The final deliverable should include a summary of findings as well as a clear detailed roadmap of actions aiming to sustainably improve key SEO indicators (such as the volume of organic traffic, the quality of the traffic, and the number of conversions on the website). Ultimately, the long-term success of this mandate will be evaluated according to these performance metrics.

#### **Challenges and Methodology**

Digitad's analysts and executives are facing a challenging task. Activia's teams have high expectations, and the agency must deliver concrete actionable results. The project has been divided into three phases:

- Phase 1: Understanding the underlying market dynamics. This phase aims to form an accurate data-driven understanding of Activia's underlying market size, market growth, as well as users' behaviours and online search patterns. Insights gathered during this phase will be key both to ensure that Danone's marketing and communication strategy is aligned with consumers' needs as well as to prioritise spend and efforts based on where key opportunities lie. To accomplish this, Digitad's consulting team plans to conduct a comprehensive keyword analysis of Activia's search market. This includes creating an exhaustive list of consumer queries from the Google Keyword Planner tool revolving around yogurts and probiotics. For each query, Digitad analysts will generate actual search volumes (monthly, across the past four years) providing insight into query growth and seasonality. Once this list has been generated, the next step is to sort these keywords by importance (relevance to Activia), product category, and funnel stage (informational or transactional). As Danone was also interested in understanding how Activia's market compared to other portfolio brands, this step was repeated for several selected references such as Oikos and Silk. Keywords were then sorted by brand, that is, allocated to the brand it corresponded the most. For more generic queries such as "yogurt," they were allocated to a multi-brand category.
- Phase 2: Analyzing Activia's current performance. This step aims to enhance the current keyword database with additional performance indicators such as keyword difficulty, current Google ranking for each query, and competitor rankings for each query. Since the queries have previously been sorted and categorised, this allows us to draw high-level insights such as comparing Activia's average ranking relative to a competitor's average ranking for a specific product category. Competitors' lists were determined based on both inputs from Danone and by analysing which businesses had a good ranking for relevant keywords. We refer the reader to the list of competitors for the Activia case study in Appendix A.

Understanding the current rankings and performance is definitely useful but it can be even more important to understand what may be driving (or limiting) this performance. The next step is thus to conduct a full SEO website audit (see the SEO audit results for the Activia case study in Appendix B). This audit aims to evaluate a website's performance on the hundreds of key SEO criteria that are used by Google's search algorithms. Ultimately, these results allow us to identify the factors that need improvement in order to rank higher in search engines.

- **Phase 3: Building a strategic plan.** The final step is to transform all the insights gathered into a clear, actionable plan. The plan can generally be broken down into three steps:
  - Step 1: Finalising the strategy and ensuring stakeholder alignment
    - The first step is to select and agree on the main keyword opportunities (based on strategic objectives, search volume, difficulty and current positioning). The number of keywords to be targeted varies based on the industry complexity and the time and budget allocated. For a website like Activia, it would make sense to select at least 50 keywords.
    - If required, one needs to revisit the website architecture (i.e., site map) to ensure that it reflects consumers search behaviours. For example, if the keyword analysis shows that consumers mostly search for recipes and the website does not include any recipe, it would make sense to add a specific section with recipes. A good site map should be clear, well structured, and avoid any overlap (i.e., each page is meant to answer a specific search intent, rather than aiming to cover various semantically different topics). Each page on the website should target a single core keyword opportunity and the semantic field associated to it.
    - Finally, one needs to set objectives and performance indicators to track and determine resources (people, financial).

Step 2: Solidifying foundations

- The second step starts by identifying and prioritising key technical errors present on the website that may be limiting the search performance (such as but not limited to load speed, mobile adaptability, accessibility to Google crawlers, and security). Then, one can build a detailed plan which states the deadlines, responsibilities, and resource allocation.
- Next, one can identify and prioritise key pages where the content needs to be optimised. For example, this could mean identifying product pages that are particularly important to Activia but yet to rank properly on Google. As before, the goal is to build a detailed plan which states deadlines, responsibilities, and resource allocation.
- Last, one needs to ensure that analytics and tracking tools are well configured (e.g., Google Analytics) and test these extensively.

Step 3: Increasing traffic via recurring actions

• This step consists of building a content marketing plan that determines which pieces of content (product pages or blog articles) should be created over a time window (usually of 12 months) and specifying keywords to be targeted.

This plan can help toward sustainably improving Activia's ranking on Google, increasing its organic traffic, and by doing so eventually outranking competitors and increasing market share.

# **Case Questions**

The goal of this case is to understand the typical process of developing a data-driven SEO strategy. Using the Danone & Digitad case study, we aim to dive into the motivations, data sources, performance analyses, and recommended actions. This process should ideally help form actionable recommendations which will in turn generate tangible results. The analysis is divided into three parts.

# Part 1 - Analyzing Activia's Underlying Market

- 1. What is the estimated size of Activia's digital search market? What is the dynamic observed over the last four years?
- 2. What are the main identifiable market sub-segments (i.e., clusters of keywords) and how fast are each of these growing?
- 3. Can you identify any clear search patterns (e.g., seasonality, themes) emerging?

# Part 2 - Evaluating Activia's Current Search Performance

- 1. How well does Activia rank for relevant search queries overall? What share of its current search market is Activia currently capturing and what share is it missing out on?
- 2. How does Activia perform versus its key competitors and how does this vary for the product segments previously identified? Please map the key competitors and the relative performance for each product segment.
- 3. What are some of the factors limiting Activia's rankings and associated opportunities?
- 4. Based on Activia's strategic positioning, market dynamics, and current performance, which product segments offer the most attractive opportunity?
- 5. How attractive is Activia's opportunity relative to other Danone brands? Please map the selected Danone brands based on opportunity attractiveness and on current performance. Knowing this, how would you prioritise marketing efforts moving forward?

# Part 3 - Building a Strategic Plan

- 6. What short-term actions do you recommend?
  - a. What keywords would you advise Activia to focus on and why?
  - b. How would you adapt Activia's current site map to better reflect consumer search behaviour?
  - c. What web pages would you advise Activia to focus on for content optimisation?
- 7. What recurring actions would you suggest to implement?
  - a. What type of content would you suggest as part of Activia's blogging strategy?
  - b. What type of link-building strategy would you implement and why?

# Part 4 - Data Science Questions (Optional)

- 1. How would you design an algorithm capable of automatically selecting the best keyword opportunities for a brand?
- 2. Develop a tool to automatically segment the keyword databases.
- 3. Use data visualization tools to identify key market trends and opportunities.
- 4. Positioning improvement opportunities: Develop an algorithm to identify the keywords to be targeted according to different parameters and industry constraints.
- 5. Develop a predictive tool to anticipate results according to the number and type of SEO actions implemented and according to the industry profile.

# Appendix A - Activia's Main Competitors



Figure 5. Activia's key competitors (source: Digitad's market study, 2019).

#### Appendix B - Website SEO Technical Audit



Figure 6. Results overview of the SEO audit (each percentage number was computed according to proprietary methods that allow to assess the performance of each SEO factor).



Figure 7. Summary of Digitad's SEO technical audit for the Activia case study, 2019 (for each SEO factor, the main areas of improvement are listed).

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#### **Online Performance Analysis**



Figure 8. Summary of Digitad's online performance analysis for the Activia case study (2019).

Google page rankings (2019)	1-3 top position (1st Page)	4-10 top position (1st Page)	11-20 (2nd page)	21-30 (3rd page)	31+
Activia.us.com	23	62	71	53	374
BiokPlus	7	17	19	32	508
Activia	5	15	20	37	506
Califia Farms	4	13	8	11	547
logo	0	0	3	3	577
Rise Kombucha	0	0	0	0	583
Align	0	0	0	0	583
Prana	0	0	0	0	583

🔈 digitad

\*Data extracted from Ahrefs Rank Tracker Tool \*\*Data for keywords identified as relevant

Figure 9. Study of the number of keywords on which Activia and its competitors rank, and their position in the search results.

# Appendix C - A Primer on SEO

SEO consists in optimizing a website according to the key criteria established by search engines. The goal is to improve the perceived quality of a website to rank higher on search engine results (e.g., Google, Bing), without paying the search engine to appear in the sponsored results (i.e., paid ads).

Hundreds of factors are taken into account in search engine's ranking algorithms. According to Digitad, these factors can generally be classified into four main categories: reputation, content, technical components, and user experience (UX). Their weighting is constantly evolving.

Digitad's research indicates that a website's reputation accounts for roughly between 35% and 45% of Google's ranking algorithm. Reputation is determined by a web domain's "authority" (i.e., credibility and trustworthiness), which itself is based on the volume and quality of links (referred to as "backlinks") directed towards this website. The more quality "friends" a domain has, the better. If a highly authoritative website (e.g., a famous blog or journal) links back to a website, Google will perceive this as a positive sign, reinforcing the website's credibility and thus its authority. Over the years, data providers (such as AHrefs or Semrush) have built domain authority indicators, to score how much search engines are likely to trust a website. These indicators analyze a domain's "link profile" (volume of links, quality of sites that link to the website, frequency in receiving these links, etc.) and are generally graded between 1 and 100 (where 100 corresponds to the highest possible score). It is important to understand that an "authority" is not attached to a website but to a domain. This is why one needs to be careful when deciding to revamp a website and change domains.

The second factor, which Digitad estimates accounts for 25-35%, is the website content. Unsurprisingly, this is a central factor for SEO. If a search engine does not understand the website content or deems it poor quality, it is unlikely to "serve" it as a response to a user's query. To build optimised content, several factors must be taken into account including title structure, keyword selection and density, lexical field, readability, depth, and quality. Ultimately, Google needs to believe that the page provides the best quality answer to a specific query.

The third factor, which accounts for 15-20%, includes a large number of sub-factors that can assess the performance of a website, for example loading speed, security, mobile and tablet responsiveness.

Finally, the UX factor accounts for 5-10%. This factor has become more and more important in recent years. Google measures this aspect mainly through "core web vitals,"<sup>11</sup> which allow to evaluate the performance of the focal website in terms of response time or visual stability.

For more details on SEO, we refer the reader to the following resources:

- <u>https://searchengineland.com/</u>
- <u>https://en.semrush.com/blog/</u>
- <u>https://moz.com/blog</u>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> <u>https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/9205520?hl=en</u>