

THE VIDEO MARKETER'S GUIDE TO WATCH TIME

YOUTUBE'S MOST IMPORTANT
RANKING FACTOR



WATCH TIME



WHO THIS GUIDE IS FOR?

- YouTube Channel Managers
- Agencies
- Creators, Brands, and Media Companies

With at least 500 hours of video uploaded to YouTube every minute, the site needs an effective way to 'judge' the quality of the video content so that it can return the most relevant results for a search query and recommended suggested videos.

There are many metrics and signals that YouTube takes into account, but the number one ranking factor is 'Watch Time'. Creating content that keeps the viewer hooked is now the most important and influential posts on Watch Time in one handy ebook.

This guide will teach you everything you need to know about Watch Time including:

- **What is Watch Time and why is it the most important ranking factor on YouTube?**
- **Tips on how to make Watch Time work for you by optimizing your YouTube Channel and video content**
- **How to measure Watch Time Metrics in YouTube Analytics**

This comprehensive guide will give you key takeaway tips and strategies to optimize your channel for this important ranking criteria.

WHAT IS WATCH TIME AND WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT?



YouTube encourages video creators and marketers to increase Watch Time on your videos and channel to boost popularity

Watch Time, according to YouTube, is “the amount of time in aggregate that your viewers are watching your videos.” According to YouTube, this metric optimizes search and discovery for videos that increase watch time on the site. This prioritizes videos that leads to more overall watchtime on YouTube, not just more watchtime of your own videos.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE YOUTUBE RANKING ALGORITHM

Up until 2012, view count was considered the primary measure of success for video content on YouTube. Videos were ranked, according to the number of views they had accrued. In the past, a creator could upload a video with a spammy title and racy thumbnail with the intention of increasing clicks to that video’s watch page which, would then lead to an increase in view count for that video. Therefore, a video like this could attract a large number of views, but high bounce rate and low audience retention, indicating that the user was not satisfied with the content.

YouTube realized that view count alone is not a good indication for relevance or quality. Additionally, view count is something that is open to manipulation and abuse (e.g. buying YouTube views, Click Fraud, etc.). Overall, how much time a viewer spends engaging with a video is a far better measure of video relevance and their satisfaction.

SESSION WATCH TIME YOUTUBE'S NUMBER #1 RANKING FACTOR

In October 2012, YouTube rolled out a brand new algorithm aimed at rewarding video content that really engaged viewers and kept them onsite for as long as possible. The algorithm favors videos that lead to greater Watch Time. In other words, video views ceased being the primary signal for YouTube to rank content. YouTube confirmed the update by stating that:

"We've started adjusting the ranking of videos in YouTube search to reward engaging videos that keep viewers watching. The experimental results of this change have proven positive less clicking, more watching. As with previous optimizations to our discovery features, this should benefit your channel if your videos drive more viewing time across YouTube".

WATCH TIME EXAMPLES:

- **If a user does a search on YouTube and then watches a series of videos with yours being the first every video that is watched in that series (whether it's your video or someone else's), will be factored into the session watch time for that content. If they immediately bail and go back to perform another search, watch time will suffer.**
- **This is also true if a YouTuber posts an update to their social media followers. Their influence will drive followers to YouTube to begin a viewing session and if those followers then watch other YouTube videos, watch time is positively influenced.**



A complete channel strategy triangulates among all available metrics, including view counts, watch time, and engagements.

In 2014, YouTube shed some light on how the Watch Time metric benefits the searcher and the viewer, and how it is almost impossible to game.

Watch Time is not simply a measure of how long, or what percentage of your video is watched. Stretching a 30 second video into 20 minutes in the hope that viewers stick around to the very end and you'll be rewarded with higher rankings is not a strategy with legs. If the viewer were to stick around and engage with the content before leaving the site, then YouTube may look on these actions favorably. But, only if the content additionally helped to "increase watch time on the site." In summary, if you're making video content that engages users and gets them to watch beyond the first click, that video content should be favorably served by YouTube's algorithm.

DISCLAIMER: Watch Time is the main ranking factor on YouTube, but there are other factors that you need to consider. Your strategy should be all-encompassing and focus on all aspects of your video and channel to increase value for viewers. Another useful metric is 'engagement rate'. Engagement rate is calculated as the number of comments, likes, and social shares divided by the number of total views on a video or series of videos. Tubular helps creators track their engagement rate, which is a good measure of how engaging and valuable video content is to viewers.

It's important to remember that Watch Time is the main factor in YouTube search rankings. Increase Watch Time by following our tips in the next section.

TIPS TO INCREASE WATCH TIME FOR BETTER YOUTUBE RANKINGS



Beyond creating great content and building up your subscribers, there are certain best practices and strategies that can help to further drive greater Watch Time.

1 CREATE ENGAGING, ENTERTAINING CONTENT & BUILD YOUR SUBSCRIBER BASE

The cliché is true consistently create and publish quality video, and you will attract a loyal following, in the form of subscribers. It's a wellknown fact that subscribers watch, engage with, and share more video than nonsubscribers, and so a strategy to build subscribers is one way to influence watch time.

Active, engaged, and enthusiastic subscribers will lead to a higher rate of accumulated Watch Time from the moment you publish new content. Subscribers have already bought into you, your brand, and your channel, and you'll get a more committed response from these fans, and have a higher audience retention rate than from viewers who have found you via the search results. Don't forget that you can solicit subscribers across the web by promoting your own YouTube channel subscribe button.

2 HOOK THE VIEWER WITHIN THE FIRST 15 SECONDS

When the viewer starts watching your video, they're wondering, "Is this video worth my time? Should I keep watching this or not?" Answer that question for them right from the very beginning, certainly within the first 30 seconds, and give them a reason to stay as long as possible - a 40% Audience Retention score is better than a 5% one.

3 CHOOSE THE RIGHT TITLE AND THUMBNAIL

There is no doubt that a really great thumbnail and video headline can drive an enormous number of views. These elements are critical for SEO, they're within your control, and are usually the first thing that provides users with an indication of your video content.



With Watch Time it's critical that you use the most accurate, descriptive titles and thumbnails. Poor quality thumbnails, or the wrong ones, and generic or misleading titles may attract clicks, but if the viewer decides within the first few seconds that they don't like what they are seeing, they will bail. This sends a low Watch Time signal to YouTube and videos which perform better will outrank yours.

4 CREATE INTERACTIVE END CARDS

End Cards (or End Slates, Outros, End Screens) are a very effective way to add awareness to other content. And, unless the video is being played on a mobile device, viewers will be able to easily click within your video to take action.

There are two important strategies for developing an end card that can help to drive increased Watch Time. The most direct strategy is to extend viewer time spent in that particular session through promoting other video content that they can then click on to watch. Since you want to extend the viewing session, you might as well do it by keeping them on your videos instead of letting them stray to YouTube suggested videos.

Additionally, though it will not directly lead to an increase in watch time for the session, adding channel subscription callstoaction at the end of your videos can help drive an increase in subscribers.

5 USE ANNOTATIONS TO KEEP THE VIEWER ENGAGED THROUGHOUT

Annotations are a great way to keep the viewer engaged throughout the video. There are a number of ways of using them, but for Watch Time, the most relevant use for annotations is to link viewers to other content on YouTube which may be of interest to the viewer.

Although you can link off YouTube with Associated Website Annotations, keep in mind that once the viewer clicks and leaves YouTube, the session has ended. So, external linking can be a juggling act. It is best practice to avoid driving viewers away from YouTube.

6 CREATE PLAYLISTS & DRIVE A LINEAR VIEWING EXPERIENCE

Creating playlists can help to guide potential viewers towards a more linear viewing experience whereby they may watch more of your content (in comparison to someone else's). This is another way you can help to influence a user's total Watch Time session.

By organizing your videos into a meaningful sequence (relevant topics, events, series, shows, etc.), you make it easier for users to watch the next video in the session. This not only helps with Watch Time, but it gives you an added opportunity to surface suggested video results on the watch page.



You can further optimize these playlists using the Start and End Times feature in YouTube to specify “in” and “out” points for each video which creates a more seamless experience. For example, you may want to trim intros and outros from your playlists.

Also, be sure to feature your playlists wherever you feature your video content on your YouTube channel page, embedded players, etc. When you link to other videos via annotations (which is strongly encouraged), link to the playlist page with the video instead of the single video watch page URL. And when you link to a video using an end card – typically you may have a “video preview” at the end of the video that a viewer will click to watch one specific video – use the same video preview to link to content inside of a playlist, using a playlist URL.

**Learn how
to measure
Watch Time
in the next
section.**

HOW TO MEASURE WATCH TIME IN YOUTUBE ANALYTICS



Viewers, especially Millennials, are used to skipping about on YouTube with lightning speed and won't tolerate misleading content, longwinded branded intros, or content that doesn't get to the point within the first 15 seconds. You may be getting the views, but are viewers really that engaged with your content and are they staying on YouTube? The YouTube Analytics Audience Engagement Reports, Views Report, and Audience Retention Report will help you measure the performance of your videos, playlists, and overall channel.

AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT REPORTS

These reports measure how users engage with content, including information about subscribers, likes and dislikes, favorites, comments, sharing, and annotations. In addition to the engagement data available in these reports, remember Watch Time is a key indicator of audience engagement. Find Watch Time data under the 'Watch Time Report'.

VIDEO VIEWS REPORT

The Views report contains in-depth data about views and estimated minutes watched how much time a viewer has watched a video(s), measured in actual minutes and seconds on YouTube, the embedded player, and the mobile app. The report highlights 'Estimated Minutes Watched' by video, location, and date, and shows you content viewers are sticking with and content they are abandoning.



AUDIENCE RETENTION REPORT

Audience Retention is closely related to estimated minutes watched. It measures the average amount of time an individual viewer spends with your video. A high retention rate for an individual video is an excellent indicator of its ability to hold the viewer's attention.

Absolute Audience Retention measures views per moment as a percentage of video views. It's critical that you pay very close attention to the first 15 seconds of each video. A high dropoff rate is an indication that viewers are disappointed with your content and are leaving to watch someone else's. Relative Audience Retention refers to how your video is performing in terms of retaining viewers during playback against video content of a similar length.

The easiest way to increase Watch Time is to keep viewers watching your videos for a longer period of time. Analyze your Audience Retention scores to see where viewers are leaving. Think about any commonalities there are running through your videos that are making people abandon them when they do. Analyze your Audience Retention scores and reevaluate how you can keep viewers hooked to the very end.

USING ANALYTICS TO MEASURE THE SUCCESS OF PLAYLISTS

As mentioned in the previous section, one way to increase Watch Time is, instead of linking to a specific video at the end of one of your videos, linking to a themed playlist. If this content is useful or entertaining, viewers will just stay and watch, which will help with search or "suggested videos" or wherever videos are pushed by YouTube.

There is no doubt that his brand works, but there are hundreds of thousands of other gamers doing the same thing, so how did he come to dominate?

To figure out whether this is working, you can go to YouTube Analytics:

- Go to "Views Reports"
- Click on Views
- Go to the pulldown menu "Compare Metric"
- Click "Unique Cookies"

If you see that viewers are watching more videos per session, that's an indication that a playlist strategy is onpoint.

HOW WATCH TIME HELPED PEWDIEPIE CONQUER THE WORLD



You don't have to be a gamer to have heard of YouTube sensation PewDiePie. The 24 yearold Swede is the most successful video game commentator on the site, and is reported to be generating around \$7 Million USD by streaming videos of himself playing video games. His channel is the most watched and subscribed to channel on YouTube, and his fame is spreading, far beyond the confines of the gaming walkthroughs that initially propelled him into the spotlight.

PewDiePie consistently uploads multiple longform videos, that his fans devour. They watch, watch some more, and then watch other content, either on his channel, or a related one. Therefore, Watch Time increases, YouTube recognizes the intense level of engagement, pushes the channel via search and discovery, suggested and recommended channels. This results in an increase in views and visibility, which drives more fanatically engaged subscribers, who boost the channel's Watch Time.

PewDiePie's channel strategy uses all of the best practices for influencing Watch Time, YouTube's most important ranking factor.

The Worldwide Leader in Online Video Intelligence.

Tubular Labs is the worldwide leader in online video intelligence, serving over 4,000 video creators and 90+ enterprise customers to date, including Viacom, Warner Bros., HGTV, Activision, Pepsi, AwesomenessTV, Maker Studios and Fullscreen. Tubular's audience and content insights empower our customers to refine their content and distribution strategy, find and partner with influencers, and optimize their promotion budgets. Only Tubular analyzes the engagement of over 400 million viewers and tracks 2 billion videos across 29 platforms, including YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Vine, Instagram, AOL and Yahoo.

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