



## **BUILDING ONLINE MOMENTUM FOR YOUR BRAND VIA SEARCH ENGINE MARKETING**

In June 2009, more than 10 billion searches were performed across the leading search engines—an increase of nearly 20 percent over 2008<sup>1</sup>. Only email garners more online usage in a typical day. Forrester Research predicts that spending on online marketing will top \$55 billion over the next five years.<sup>2</sup> Of that, \$31 billion will be invested in search engine marketing (SEM)—vastly more than any other channel. Search marketing continues to build momentum in offering marketers one of the most effective of all marketing opportunities—and perhaps the least understood and most often underutilized. Search marketing can be overwhelmingly technical, deceptively complex, and veiled in mystery. For the marketer new to SEM, navigating the waters of effective search marketing can be tricky. Vendors, services, and products promising success abound. The various tactics, costs, and methodologies are confusing and distracting.

So how do you effectively leverage this predominant beast? How can you avoid the snake-oil pitches and Midas promises of unscrupulous salespeople?

Think strategically. Clarify your objectives. Know your audience. Develop a comprehensive strategy that engages appropriate tools effectively over time, execute your plan methodically, analyze your successes and failures meticulously, and adjust your tactics regularly. By applying the marketing fundamentals that have formed the basis of effective campaign implementation since long before the Internet existed, a savvy marketer can harness the search engines to accomplish sophisticated marketing objectives.

### **THE BASICS**

The core of most SEM efforts lies in search engine optimization (SEO). These efforts, focused on increasing the position and number of relevant entries referencing website content within the main search results area of the leading search engines—Google, Yahoo!, and

Bing—can yield dramatic results. A top listing in Google of a relevant link to information about a company's product can represent a strong revenue stream and create a significant competitive advantage over listings further down the page.

Achieving success in organic optimization involves many factors, incorporates a variety of

tactics, and demands a long-term approach. Success comes incrementally, building slowly over time. Organic efforts often require investment up front, but pay off in time through decreasing costs and steadily increasing visibility in the search engines. Knowing which SEO tactics to use and to what degree can greatly affect your results and the associated costs.

Paramount to the organic strategy are keywords—terms and phrases that relate to your products and services and correspond to the words a user will type into a search engine. The process to develop the strongest set of possible terms that will bring the most qualified traffic to your website should focus on understanding your products and services, developing detailed insight into the online behavioral tendencies of your audience, and knowing the practices of your competitors. With this keyword list in hand, a myriad of tactics related to developing and organizing the content and architecture of your website around themed subsets of keywords creates a foundation

**“As the competition for users’ attention and the demand for an ever-increasing ROI intensifies, planning and executing your search marketing efforts strategically becomes more important.”**



upon which most other tactics can build and advantage can be gained. Focusing on eliminating obstacles and building momentum toward conversion goals as a user completes a desired action (buy, register, download, request more information, etc.) increases the likelihood that a visitor will become a customer.

With the preliminary on-site implementation complete, submitting the pages of your website to leading search engines ensures that the pages of your site are included within the indexes. Relevant searches by qualified prospects will yield results that prominently feature your website's offering. Similarly, submissions to leading online directories such as Yahoo!, the Open Directory, LookSmart, and Business.com can position key sections of your site in front of large relevant audiences. Niche directories that service specific industries and audiences may further hone your approach.

## BUILDING MOMENTUM

As you build your core SEO strategy, a number of additional tactics proven to influence natural search efforts are worth considering. Specifically, efforts to increase and improve the quantity and quality of external websites that link to pages on your site should be pursued. Traditional contextual link-building efforts, such as public relations efforts, relationships with local and trade organizations and business directories, and providing web-based tools such as mortgage calculators, can be of great value, but none are more popular today than opportunities that leverage social networking sites and online PR optimization—both discussed later in this document. Additionally, if your audience is international, you can maximize your international exposure through targeted visibility using related tactics focused within international and localized search properties.

A growing opportunity exists with local search. Local results increasingly preempt natural or organic results and feed the growing mobile search market. For example, the popular Google "10-pack" that shows an embedded map with plotted listings often appears

at the start of a search results page. A listing in the 10-pack can provide a return similar to a hard-fought battle to mount the traditional non-localized results. As the sheer volume of web-based content rises exponentially, the search properties, in an effort to increase the relevancy and value of the results, are

applying local filters to meet users' needs. Clearly local search will predominate in many new search efforts and may even provide decidedly national objectives with a local-focused tactic to reach specific user segments.

Building a strong foundation positions you well to expand your efforts and increase your success. Linking objectives and audience

characteristics, and focusing on core organic tactics such as keyword research and content development, strengthens your relevancy in the natural search results. Though SEO efforts can have a disproportionate level of initial investment compared to the early returns, it truly is an investment that increases in value with time.

## REACHING OUT

Establishing a strong platform upon which to build can have, in the long run, a multiplier effect as you engage additional tactics to enforce your search marketing objectives. With a strong organic effort under way, it often makes sense to look to various paid search efforts. As an SEO effort builds in time, paid search can offer more immediate satisfaction to help bridge the gap of expectation.

The paid search or search advertising opportunities are dominated by pay-per-click (PPC) sponsored listings that appear as text ads alongside organic results in the major engines. When compared with traditional advertising opportunities, PPC advertising offers unparalleled precision in tracking, testing, and refinement while targeting segmented audiences to complete specific conversion goals. And while PPC can offer terrific ROI when executed effectively, it too can be a complex and expensive pursuit of elusive gains. Similar to the SEO effort that underlies effective PPC, the possible tactics are varied and should be employed methodically.

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The PPC effort, like SEO, begins by developing targeted keywords and phrases based on audience characteristics, business objectives, and search inventory—the popularity of actual searches using terms relevant to your conversation with your customers. Expanding on the SEO keyword process, the PPC keywords reflect actual search tendencies, histories, and related ad costs. It's not unusual to start with a list of 25 core keywords and expand that list through various modifications to a potential list of 500,000. The various PPC keyword development methodologies all focus on meeting particular goals for different objectives around increasing relevant traffic, realizing conversions, and minimizing costs.

Moving from keyword research to actually seeing your text ads run alongside the search results involves a number of steps. The platforms provide a number of tools to assist with organizing the keywords, defining the correct ad messaging, testing, and implementing the ads. A number of commercial tools are also available. As the stakes get higher, in terms of budgets and expectations, the nuances of incremental adjustments and management play an increasingly important role. Few automated tools produce the results that hands-on management can in terms of building valuable relationships and maximizing media dollars.

At the top of the sales funnel, where potential prospects gain awareness of your products and services and begin the research phase of the purchase cycle, qualified prospects enter the funnel and the sales conversation begins. The initial landing page that a user is directed to from a PPC ad has a fundamental effect on both the effectiveness and costs related to the acquisition process. It is vitally important to engineer this process to ensure that relevant and direct messaging correlates to the specific ad or ad group and that a clear and effective call to action aids the user in moving forward. Pay particular attention to traffic tendencies and user behaviors throughout the entire conversion process to increase the likelihood that a user completes the desired action (purchase, signup, info request, etc). Focus on the user and where he or she is in the process.

**“Focus on the user and where he or she is in the process. Provide the information needed to encourage forward momentum.”**

Provide the information needed to encourage forward momentum. Engage various testing mechanisms such as simple A/B testing or more effective (and complex) multivariate experiments to bring scientific precision and build significant incremental gains.

With your campaigns deployed and active, your attention turns to managing your efforts to maximize ROI. Monitoring effectiveness, trends and performance patterns will protect you from fraud attacks, competitive advances, and changes in search-engine product behavior that can all dramatically (and quickly) erase your recent gains. Measuring, testing, and refining your tactics is an ongoing opportunity.

A number of fee-based opportunities are also mainstays of the SEM world and warrant consideration when reviewing paid search tactics. Depending on your objectives and audience characteristics, paid content inclusion services may leverage specific opportunities to increase visibility and drive qualified visitors to your website by strategically selecting specific website pages for inclusion within leading search properties. Similarly, feed-based services can be particularly beneficial for retail product marketers by creating platforms to dynamically supply optimized data feeds to relevant search properties and product-oriented directories such as shop.com, nextag.com, and shopzilla.com.

## GET PUBLIC AND GO SOCIAL

A foundational principle in developing a strategically focused search marketing program relates to the interconnectedness of individual efforts. While possible tactics abound, and the methodologies for choosing and executing specific them are equally varied, the synergies achieved by combining individual efforts can lead to multiplied results. With the rise in popularity of social networking sites focused both at the consumer and business communities and the shift of traditional public relations efforts to online tactics, the number of high-value resources to publish targeted content across search-friendly web properties has exploded. Leveraging public relation efforts and the social web to

support and build upon SEM goals can yield dramatic results.

Lines are blurring that separate traditional roles. Search efforts are enhanced by optimizing PR efforts, and search strategies can validate online PR efforts. Your PR staff is an important part of your search marketing team, and the rewards from integrating efforts can benefit both teams. Carrying this practice forward through the emerging social channels is also proving fruitful. In the same way that PR professionals are employing the social web to position companies, encourage consumer engagement, garner media attention, and monitor brand sentiment, a cooperative search-focused objective can both extend your public relations efforts and strengthen your search marketing effectiveness. Press releases, optimized for search relevancy according to guidelines established during the search strategy definition process and published via appropriate online services such as prweb.com and pitchengine.com, encourage stronger organic

listings. Wire services, news aggregators, and media outlets carry strong authoritative weight, and the links they publish are held in high regard by the search engines, thus influencing rankings. Posting a press release via a reputable wire service can disseminate that release across a myriad of reputable media and news sites. Similarly, a targeted and optimized presence within social and emerging media networks can affect the search prominence of your websites' organic listings and facilitate a groundswell of publicity, link sharing, user-generated content creation, and word-of-mouth marketing effects that represent unprecedented opportunities.

## MEASURE, MONITOR, AND ADJUST

Arguably, the greatest value of search marketing as well as the other core online channels lies just beneath the surface. They offer an unparalleled ability to track and analyze each activity; to accurately evaluate the success, failure, cost, and benefit of individual ads and

campaigns; to create detailed statistical models that can tie the results of combined multi-channel efforts to direct revenue gains; and to uncover audience segments that have specific targetable characteristics. Each campaign contributes to creating valuable marketing intelligence that can be used to adjust and optimize each subsequent effort.

Ads can be tested with live audiences, and incremental changes can be made at to exploit successes each stage of the process. Budgets can be adjusted to build on opportunities as they appear, and can be protected during down cycles. Marketers can move beyond click-through rates, numbers of visitors, and page views

and into a strategic approach that connects actual customer data and acquisition methods in order to paint a picture of the specific tactics that not only drive traffic and encourage action, but also build strong and profitable customer histories. Why settle for knowing the click-through rate of a banner ad when you can tie the results driven through an individual search term to a

12-month revenue projection of a targeted customer segment? Combining the measurement analytics of all your online marketing efforts, such as search, email, mobile, and websites, can create a powerful marketing intelligence asset for your organization.

As marketers are being held to higher standards and are expected to produce more results with fewer resources, analytics become an important asset. By establishing measurement criteria and collecting relevant data at each stage of the marketing process, smart marketers can track on a real-time basis the effectiveness of individual tactics with particular segments of users and build robust statistical models of their customers that can be used to glean insight about the entire customer relationship and value cycle.

## THE NEXT FRONTIER

The constant in this age of immediacy is change. Despite the speed at which a strategy can be formulated, a plan

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developed, and tactics deployed by even the most highly motivated teams, the rules of the game are in constant flux. In less than a year Twitter grew by more than 1,300 percent from obscurity to dominance.<sup>3</sup> YouTube, if ranked alongside the traditional search engines in terms of searches executed on a daily basis, would outpace all but Google, with Facebook not far behind. If Facebook users banded together, they would form the eighth largest country in the world. Mobile search, advertising, SMS/text, and mobile content publishing have reached the mainstream, earning a prominent place in many of today's marketing plans, and offer seemingly limitless potential. The sands have shifted beneath our feet and will continue to shift. Standing still invites being swept into obscurity.

Search engines continue to evolve; to be more predictive; and to strive to answer users' questions faster and more completely. They are also growing. More than 100 billion searches have been performed in

2009—40 percent more than a year ago. Google, the 800-pound gorilla of the search world, continues to grow, increasing its search volume by 58 percent in the last year.<sup>4</sup> Competition for consumers' attention intensifies

each day—and the successes of those who effectively leverage the intersecting search technologies continue to prove both the value of search marketing and the complexity of executing an effective search marketing strategy. Today's marketing environment demands a methodical approach to search marketing founded on clear objectives and

driven by a focused plan that strategically engages synergistic tactics for specific audience segments.

**“Proactively measuring and monitoring performance facilitates rapid adjustment to extend your budget and exploit opportunities.”**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Chitwood is director of digital strategy and online marketing for Cohn Marketing in Denver, Colorado. He has over 15 years of online marketing and interactive development experience. He has worked with numerous clients, recommending digital touchpoints and creative communications solutions that marry brand goals with consumer needs, and guiding multidisciplinary teams in integrating traditional and online marketing tactics. To learn more about Cohn Marketing and its integrated services, please visit [CohnMarketing.com](http://CohnMarketing.com). You can also follow Cohn Marketing at [Twitter.com/cohnmarketing](https://twitter.com/cohnmarketing), become a fan on Facebook, or view our profile on LinkedIn.

### Sources

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