



The Fundamentals of Search Engine Marketing:

How to get the best return on your web investment.

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Introduction

“Build it and they will come” may work in the movies, but it doesn’t work on the internet. Driving traffic to your website is critical to achieve a good return on your web investment, but it’s not a trivial undertaking. Following is an overview of major considerations.

Sources of WebTraffic

There are four basic sources of website traffic: search engines, other websites, email marketing, and non-web media. Non-web sources include your business cards, business stationery, invoices, brochures, print advertisements, radio or TV ads, refrigerator magnets and other promotional materials. *Of course you’re already putting your web address on all of those materials... right?*

According to various sources, search engines are the primary source of web traffic for most websites. The top three search engines at this time are Google, Yahoo, and MSN. Together, they represent over 80% of the total web searches. Placing ads or links on other websites may also generate significant website visitors. This includes web sites relating to directories, business partners, trade groups and the like.

Email marketing is principally a means of generating repeat visits to your website. Because of spam concerns and regulations, email marketing is not the best tool for generating first time visitors to your website. The preferred method is for a client or prospect to “opt-in” to join your email list. A sign up box may be added to your website to entice visitors to signup, perhaps with a promise to provide a free report, discount coupons, entry into a drawing, or future news updates and special offers. The rest of this article shall focus on search engine strategies.

Search Engines

There are two major methods for using search engines to drive traffic:

1. **Organic search results**, also known as the *free* search results. These results are supposed to be driven by complex algorithms related to the relevance of search results, and are not affected by advertising.
2. **Pay Per Click (PPC)** are also known as *Sponsored Links*. Examples are *Google Adwords*, and *Yahoo Sponsored Search* (formerly *Overture*). These are the small ads, which a user must pay to display along side the organic search results. The ads may also be displayed on other websites to generate revenue, such as the *Google Adsense* program. The account owner must pay a fee every time a visitor clicks on his ad near the



search results, which takes the visitor to his website. Using a PPC program to place your ads on third party websites, with a topic similar to your keyword, is known as *content matching*.

Organic Search Results

The organic results are widely viewed to be unbiased, and most web surfers are more likely to select from these results, rather than the Sponsored Links. The goal is to be listed on the first page of results (the top 10 listings) for search terms which describe your business or products/services offered. Search positions 11 through 30 often get significant search traffic for high volume keywords, but the volume drops dramatically after the first page, and few web surfers look beyond page three of results (the top 30 listings).

A **keyword** is actually a single word or short phrase that is entered into the search box. It might be virtually anything, such as *piano*, *gold jewelry*, or *San Diego dry cleaners*. In order for your website to be listed in the search results, your website needs to be found and indexed by the search engine. The position or ranking of your free listing depends upon a complex and ever-changing formula devised by each search engine. The formula typically takes into account things like the presence of the keywords in your web page text or the hidden code, and the perceived importance of the website, such as the Google Page Rank. Web page importance is heavily influenced by the number and quality of links into your website.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is a type of Search Engine Marketing related to tweaking web pages and the links into the site, in order to boost the rankings on organic search results. It typically takes *at least* a month or so to see an impact from optimization efforts, and it may take several months for a new website, or one with few good links into it.

Search engine companies are constantly trying to thwart those who attempt to manipulate the search results through dubious or banned tactics, such as hidden text, keyword spamming, or cloaking. Sites found to be using banned techniques may have their site penalized, or even banished, from the search engine listings for a period of time. Therefore, it's normally best to employ a qualified specialist to provide this service for you. No, it's not as simple as trying to cram as many keywords as possible into the keyword metatag on your web page. This was common a few years ago, but due to abuse, the search engines now put little or no weight on this.

Pay Per Click (PPC)

Pay per click has gained favor as a method to ***quickly drive targeted visitors to a website***. Setting up a campaign involves selecting appropriate keywords, designing small text ads, and choosing a bid price for each keyword. At this time, your position on the search results is determined by your bid price and your Click Through Ratio (CTR) for Google Adwords. CTR is the percentage of visitors who click on your ad. Ads with high CTR are deemed to be more relevant. An important part of campaign management is to test and optimize the ads to maximize the CTR. Click through rates of 1-3% are typical, and a CTR of up to 10% or more is possible for a well designed and targeted ad. Until recently, Google disabled ads with CTR less than 0.5%.



A key benefit of PPC is response time. A new campaign can be setup and getting clicks in just a few days, instead of waiting weeks for organic search results.

Search Engine Strategies

In many cases, a balanced approach is wise. We normally suggest that our clients do at least a **“bare bones” search engine marketing** on their home page, using the top 2-3 keywords related to their business. The company name should be also emphasized, because many people forget precise web addresses, and search by company name. Major cities served should also be included. In addition, link building must be carefully conducted to boost the site’s Page Rank to at least a 3 or 4 out of 10. To win a top position for competitive keywords may require a Page Rank of 5-6, or even higher, combined with proper keyword optimization.

In addition, **those who expect significant leads or sales from their sites, should consider investing in Pay Per Click.** It can be viewed as a means to drive web traffic until organic search results take hold, and/or to supplement the organic results. This may be critical when launching a new ecommerce website or new product.

It’s also critical to have good **website traffic statistics**, so you can track the main sources of your visitors, and manage your website conversion of visitors into leads and sales. The data must be used to fine tune your keyword optimization and PPC campaigns. Free software bundled with a hosting plan is often inadequate.

Do It Yourself?

Many small business owners are tempted to save money and muddle through doing their own search engine marketing. Few have the focus or skills to do a good job, unless they dedicate dozens of hours to the task. Of course, the **opportunity cost** must also be considered.

What is the value of your time? Which project must be pushed aside in order to make time for this new task? How much profit could that project generate if you did focus on it? What is the risk of getting your website penalized or even banned by using improper methods? How long will your search engine marketing be delayed while you try to get up to speed? Can you do it as effectively as an experienced professional? Can you stay abreast of the latest changes? All of these factors must be considered.

Summary and Conclusions

Search engine marketing is a critical activity, which is often overlooked. It has become increasingly complex and rapidly changing. Successful implementation is key to achieve an acceptable return on your web investment.

The bottom line is that every website needs to have a budget for search engine marketing, as well as for design, development and maintenance.

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