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Search Engine Marketing: Maximize Your ROI

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Marketers use a dizzying array of acronyms to describe the online advertising tactics they integrate into their marketing plans. And while search engine marketing (SEM) programs—including search engine optimization (SEO) and pay-per-click advertising (PPC)—require diligent tracking, measurement, and ongoing improvements, the results they yield contribute another important three-letter word to your business: ROI.

It's common knowledge online tactics are highly measurable. Marketers are able track the actions of prospects from the awareness stage all the way through their ultimate purchases to determine which strategies and campaigns truly achieve the best ROI. This is particularly important in a downturned economy, when marketing departments must make the most of every dollar.

"It is well documented that brands that increase advertising during a recession, when competitors are cutting back, can improve market share and return on investment at lower cost than during good economic times," said Harvard Business School Professor John Quelch. Rather than seeing only the downside to today's economic climate, proactive marketers are taking the opportunity to re-strategize online marketing plans and implement programs that create conversions.

In fact, in April of 2008, Forrester Research reported 25 percent of senior marketers would increase online spending in a recession, while only 13 percent would reduce it.

SEM is a cost-effective online tactic for increasing your organization's online visibility and driving qualified visitors to your Website, where they convert—or take action—to become qualified leads. On a typical day, almost half of U.S. Internet users conduct a search using a search engine.

According to a survey commissioned by the Search Engine Marketing Professional Organization (SEMPO), 30 percent of advertisers identified PPC as the advertising/marketing vehicle that produced the highest ROI, while 22 percent chose SEO. These were the first and second most popular tactics on the list. Plus, searchers are more likely than non-searchers to be brand advocates, according to comScore. In other words, maintaining online visibility is essential to a solid marketing plan.

How to get started? At the outset of your SEM program, determine the keywords and phrases your target audiences use to find you. Analyze search behavior and search term popularity to narrow this list. Your keyword strategy is the cornerstone of your SEM program, and once it is established, you can utilize it to create thriving SEO (organic search) and PPC advertising (paid search) programs.

Your search programs should reach prospects in every phase of the purchase cycle. During the research phase, search can be used to build brand awareness and to target consumers based on lifestyle and demographics. Use the Demographics Prediction tool from Microsoft adCenter Labs to help shape your program. Advertise on non-branded terms to increase your prospect's consideration set and recognition of your brand. During the evaluation phase, utilize paid search to increase brand equity.





Your impressions can also provide free brand lift. During the decision-making phase, increase your prospects' intent to purchase by running a paid search program in tandem with SEO, or organic optimization. This will ensure your offerings garner more real estate on the search engine results pages. The following free keyword tools can help you find the right keywords for each phase of the purchase cycle:

[Google Insights for Search.](#)

[Google AdWords Keyword Tool.](#)

[Wordtracker \(seven-day free trial\).](#)

Measure your search programs regularly to track whether they are producing the results you need. PPC is measurable real-time, as are your Website analytics, which show conversions, leads, and a variety of other data revealing the strengths and weaknesses of both your paid search and organic optimization efforts. As budgets shift, use this information to make informed decisions specific to your business goals. With everything from impressions on ads, to Website visits, to conversions on your site, to closed sales, you can assess the value of each tactic you have employed online.

Once you have your analytics in place and you are measuring what works, reallocate budget toward keywords that convert, and note which offers on your landing pages are showing the best conversion. To improve conversion rates, consider whether your keywords are targeting the right audience, adjust your creative ads, reassess your calls to action and offers, review your registration forms to see if they follow best practices, and check to be sure that all elements of your campaign are in line with each other. SEO and PPC programs are cyclical in nature and can always be refined.

Capitalize on tactics your competition isn't able to devote budget to at this time, and be more aggressive in areas showing high return. Identify how your audience is finding you, and utilize online tools to achieve your best ROI. Get tactical with your online mix, drilling down into what works and swiftly eliminating what doesn't.

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