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In Search of Results

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Google is in the dictionary and has become part of every marketer's vernacular, as have Yahoo and MSN. Consumers and companies seeking products and services are using search engines to research what's on the market, evaluate their options, and make purchase decisions. In response, businesses are implementing larger budgets to engage with their target audiences through these engines.

According to the State of the Market Survey by the Search Engine Marketing Professional Organization, spending on search engine marketing (SEM) exceeded 2007 projections to reach \$12.2 billion. The organization also expects the healthy growth to continue, with spending reaching \$25.2 billion in 2011.

Search spending is making dents in marketing budgets at the expense of print magazine advertising, Web site development, and other marketing channels. In BtoB's 2008 Marketing Priorities and Plans study, B2B marketers said that online would constitute nearly 34% of marketing budgets in 2008. That's up from 27% in 2007.

Why does SEM continue to increase its budget share? It is a cost-effective and measurable demand-generation tactic that also offers an invaluable glimpse into trends in consumer behavior. That data is always important, but it carries additional weight given the current financial climate.

As purchasing habits change with the ebb and flow of the economy, SEM programs allow marketers to reach out to prospects in the most effective way: by giving them what they want. It's a win-win relationship. By using a search engine, prospects are virtually raising their hands (showing interest in what you offer), and you're responding (tailoring your marketing to address their needs).

Search marketing also demands more attention as it becomes increasingly sophisticated. Google has employed universal search to include optimized rich content, such as images and video, in its results. That and a greater emphasis on the personalization of search results are making such metrics as Web site traffic and conversions more important than straightforward rankings.

Words are key

Whether you're ready to implement optimized video on your site or not, prospects won't find your site if you don't have search engine visibility for the terms they're using to seek out companies like yours or the products or services you offer. So, your site must be optimized with relevant keywords. "

When it's time to revamp your keyword strategy, think of your target audiences first. What terms would they use to conduct a search for your organization? Use popularity reports and search behavior to help refine the list. Remember that about 85% of searches are composed of queries four words or fewer.

Also consider your prospects' purchase cycle. Are you hitting prospects at every stage of the decision-making process (research, evaluation, and decision)? Generally, your prospects' search terms become more focused as they move farther into the decision-making process. Focus on problems in the research phase, introduce product names in the evaluation phase, and increase competitive product attribute terms





in the decision phase.

Once you have developed your keyword list, it's time to put it to work for you. Keywords are implemented in several ways, including for organic (or natural) results in the search engines and for paid search engine marketing campaigns.

First, the organic piece: search engine optimization (SEO). Your keywords should be used frequently and thoughtfully throughout your Web site copy—don't use random pairings of keywords simply to gain search engine rankings. You're aiming for an SEO program that delivers visibility, but your ultimate goal is to convert prospects into customers. That means your copy must be meaningful to your visitors. Think of content from the prospect's perspective. What will help them make an informed decision about your product or service?

Keywords are also used for Web site metadata. Metadata, which includes Web page titles, descriptions, and keyword tags, lies in the pages' source code, informing search engines and Web developers about the content the page offers.

To supplement organic visibility in the search engines, keywords are also used for paid search or pay-per-click (PPC) advertising. Leverage paid search services from Google, Yahoo, or MSN to push your advertising messaging into the search engines.

Tailor the language in your creative ads, which are usually limited to a 25-character title and 70-character description, to convey that you will solve a problem for your prospects. When carefully crafted, a small number of words will successfully encourage prospects to complete an action on your site—in other words, the ad will drive conversions.

By communicating your product's or service's value in both your organic and paid search engine marketing campaigns, you cost-effectively get closer to your goal of business growth.

Analyze me

If your SEM programs aren't showing the results you had hoped for, you can use analytics to track what prospects are doing once they find your site through organic or paid search. Are certain types of messaging working better than others? Which areas of your site are eliciting the most interest? Once you have uncovered this information, make changes to your program to impact your results.

To maintain optimal results, refresh your SEM strategy about once a year, assuming you make ongoing updates to your Web site. Reflect changes to both your corporate strategy and the messaging surrounding your products and services in the SEM strategy refresh. By staying proactive, you keep pace with the ever-changing search landscape.

As the amount of people using the Internet for gathering information and making purchases grows, so does SEM. Investing in a solid SEM strategy, covering target audiences, purchase cycles, and keywords, enables you to gain and maintain the visibility you need. That visibility opens the door to communicating your company's value and, finally, converting prospects into profitable customers.

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