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Capture & Convert: From Search Engine Visibility to Closing the Sale

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Search engine visibility is top of mind for marketers, especially in a budget-tightening economy that necessitates measurable tactics. Through search engine optimization (SEO) and pay per click advertising (PPC), your brand and a brief message can show up to your most targeted audience - those looking for your services - at a minimal cost. But that doesn't get you a customer. Optimization time and PPC media costs add up, and if this investment isn't yielding conversions it could be money poorly spent.

To make the most of search marketing efforts, ROI-driven marketers are focusing on the funnel: what happens after the listing is displayed? Just like any channel, there are many steps between a user seeing a message and writing a check - and each one needs attention. Let's look at each stage of the funnel:

The Listing
This is what the user sees when she finds you on the results page, through a sponsored listing or organic result. The listing is important - it may be your brand's first face time with the prospect. You can significantly improve your conversion if the listing presents a key differentiator about your business, and even better, a call to action.

Editing your listing is simple when you're dealing with pay-per-click - simple but not easy, because you have only 95 characters to work with: 25 for the title, 70 for the description.
It's important to understand that you can guide the content of an organic listing as well. As long as the indexed page is not in Flash and contains the right meta data, most search engines pull in the page's title and description meta tags for the listing. On each page of your site, make sure you give a clear, captivating message within 60 characters of the title and 140 characters of the description.

The Landing
If the user is sold on the listing, he'll click through to the destination site.
Think of every page as an opportunity to get to the next phase of the relationship. What stage of the sales cycle is this individual in? What should he see next? If there's room for error in that thinking (and there always is), can you shortcut him right to a later-stage call to action?

If he clicks on an organic listing, chances are the destination is a page within your corporate site. (These sites generally have better search engine visibility than landing pages, because they have deeper content.) You only have so much control over organic listings, and you have to design your corporate site for all target audiences - which reduces your ability to funnel a specific search audience to convert. However, you can build conversion best practices into a corporate site. Use "contact us" call-outs, calls to action in a consistent area of each page (such as the gutter), and clear paths to a newsletter sign-up.

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If the prospect clicks on a PPC ad, you have more control over the destination. Use this advantage. When possible, direct her to a landing page or marketing microsite. Unlike a corporate site, these tools are designed for a campaign, the creative layout is intended to drive someone to register for a knowledge-based offer, and with the right technology platform the user's original search is tracked to help analyze the financial results of your marketing activities.

Calls to Action
On the topic of knowledge-based offers, calls to action are the key to converting a visitor into a lead. This stage of the funnel is critical. You've gone through the time and expense to get the prospect to the page. Put the effort in to develop an attractive offer. If your offerings are ecommerce-ready and you believe you are hitting the prospect at the decision point, you can expedite the funnel with a shopping cart. For B2B, the more viable options are free knowledge-based offers like white papers and webinars, to help the audience through a complex purchase decision and to position your offering.

The Registration Form
Three words: keep it short. Long forms absolutely increase drop-off. Remember the level of effort and cost you have incurred to get the prospect this far. If you want more profile data, use progressive registration to gather it in the next interaction.
Among other registration best practices, use good privacy practices and make sure these are highlighted on your form. Trust yields registrants.

The Follow-up
Now you have a lead. What next? Sometimes it's appropriate to have a sales person call the prospect right away. If so, the sooner the better - if you follow up within a day, your response can be excellent. With lower involvement offers like white paper downloads, and with longer purchase decisions, sometimes a call is unwelcome and bound for unanswered voicemail. This is natural: even qualified prospects aren't always ready to buy. They do their homework long before they have to make a decision. They want to stay in control of the process, because they are looking at your competitors, too. The challenge is, this is the time when you really want to make sure they get your full pitch.

That's where lead nurturing fits. Also known as drip marketing, nurturing uses sophisticated logic to automate the delivery of progressive informational offers targeted to a sales prospect's profile and interactions. This enables a company to conduct deeper, more relevant communications with prospects who are already in its database - without costly manual intervention. Leads move steadily down the sales funnel. In the end the sales team receives opportunities that are more likely to convert.

Where to start?
That's the funnel. But where do you focus? Whether you are launching a new program or auditing an existing one, start at the end and work backward. There are two reasons for this approach. First, financial: it's the nature of the funnel. A closed sale is worth more than an opportunity is worth more than an unqualified lead is worth more than a click is worth more than an impression. Start by optimizing the most valuable piece. If you get side-tracked after Phase 1, you've addressed the highest ROI area first.
Second, the bottom-up approach creates a workplan that enables multiple direct response efforts. If you optimize your sales follow-up, your sales force will be ready to close leads coming from any source. Next, work on your registration form, so you can send multiple programs through a standard form. Next, focus on the offers on your landing page or corporate site. If you are driving

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a response-based campaign, develop a landing page or microsite. Now you have a destination for not only search but also online and offline push media tactics. Only after these plans are in motion should you focus your efforts on tweaking your PPC campaign or your SEO efforts.

Search engine visibility is a powerful tool… as long as it doesn't stop there. You can increase your return by optimizing the entire funnel.

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