

it's all about **traffic**

Search Engine Marketing Strategy for 2005



 **emagine**

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Section One

Search Engine History:

Understanding How the Industry Has Evolved

Much of the Internet evolved out of Yahoo!, a search directory that categorized websites. Users would browse Yahoo!, as opposed to the "search" function that followed. Businesses used to be able to simply submit their company information and web address to the Yahoo! directory and get listed, resulting in a lot of new traffic to their site. Soon search engines began competing with the directory - allowing people to search for what they want from a database instead. If your website was listed among the top of these search results, your traffic level would spike. As the internet grew, the percentage of users "searching" for things would eclipse the number of people "browsing" for things.

It became very important very quickly to attain a top position on the search engines. An entire industry was born out of this quest to become the number one ranked website listing for the keywords people were searching with. In the early days, optimizers used techniques such as stuffing a page with keywords or hiding keywords in the same color as the background of the page. As the search engines caught on, they started improving their search logic so that these methods did not work anymore. They do this because manipulating a page's code to get a top position was always contrary to the goal of the search engines - which was and still is delivering the most relevant results.

Today's search engine uses a complex scientific algorithm to try and find the most relevant content. The most popular search engine, Google, also uses a formula that takes into account the number of incoming links that a site has - rationalizing that if a site has a large number of high quality links, it must be a good resource, and thus, should be ranked higher. Of course, marketers were hip to this and started to manipulate the link counts to their sites through link farms, free for all link pages and even by buying link positions on other sites. Google now discounts bad incoming links as best it can.

Section One Continued...

Search engines like Ask Jeeves accept natural language queries such as "Who won the World Series in 1918?" and displays matching results. Localization and personalization are some of the industry buzzwords that crop up in the beta sites of Google and Yahoo now.

Google also extends their search to your personal computer files, and allows you to send a text message via your cell phone and receive a return text message with a matching business name, location and phone#. Since going public, Google has been releasing a frenzy of new products and services. Most of their money now is made via pay per click advertising sales.

Section Two

Traditional Marketing vs. Search Engine Marketing How They Differ and How They Compliment Each Other

Traditional marketing encompasses print advertising, radio and television advertising, trade shows, corporate identity, signage, and more. These forms of media are great at gaining exposure at a broad level. Much of traditional marketing pricing models are based on the number of eyeballs that view the campaign.

Search engine marketing has become such an essential part of the overall marketing plan that it is even hard to consider it non-traditional at this point. Targeting your audience by identifying the specific keywords they use in their search is a very focused and track-able method of marketing. Search engine marketing pricing models range from service-based monthly pricing to a pay-per-click model.

Not everyone loves it, but the pay-per-click format is very close to a true ROI-based model, and certainly is better than some of the alternatives – such as banner advertising. Consider using television as an example... imagine if Pepsi only had to pay when a couch potato opened a can of Pepsi, instead of the \$ 200,000 (or so) per-30-seconds rate they pay now just for appearing in a commercial on a popular television show. It would be as if Google charged you simply to show your ad on their network, and charged you a base fee without regard for the search term used?

Today many marketers are using their traditional marketing to drive traffic to their website as well as get a message across. They are putting their URLs on billboards, business cards, fleet trucks, atm receipts, and everywhere else they can think of. They want the eyeballs to visit the website because there the engagement is interactive and it is track-able from the point they hit the home page.

Search engine marketing drives traffic to the website as well, but the major difference is that it is measurable from the start, from before the visitor hits the home page. Take it a step further and track conversions, and you're on your way to continuous **improvement of your web marketing campaign.**

Section Three

Current Search Engines

What is a search engine?

"Search Engines" allow you to enter a search keyword query and they return results that are (hopefully) relevant. Google is the most prominent. Their search engine database currently feeds Netscape, AOL and Iwon among others. Countless other websites carry their syndicated sponsored ads. They are constantly innovating with features such as wireless phone text message queries to their database, localization, personalization and even fraternization on social networking acquisition orkut.com.

Other strong search engine players include Yahoo, MSN and Ask.

Other types of web-based search tools that are mistaken for search engines are: Directories and Meta Crawlers. Directories are categorized lists of websites that you can browse. Meta Crawlers combine the results from multiple search engines and then rank the results based on a number of different factors.

Besides the free search engines, there are paid search listings provided by firms such as Google, Overture, whom own the majority of the paid market, and the secondary players, FindWhat.com and Kanoodle.com.

Based on the definitions of what type of search sites are not pure search engines, you can conclude that an actual search engine is an online searchable database of indexed web pages. An actual definition from webopedia.com reads: "A program that searches documents for specified keywords and returns a list of the documents where the keywords were found."

Section Four: Current Directories

Directories differ from search engines in that they are human edited and categorized. Getting your site listed in a high quality directory is equivalent to obtaining a high quality link - search engines think very highly of directories such as the Yahoo! Directory (different from the Yahoo! Search Engine) and the Open Directory.

Open Directory is open source, and free to be listed in, and it can take up to six months to be reviewed and included. It's not easy to get listed, as each category has an editor, and depending on the mood of the editor, they may include your site - or even reject your site. Since it's all voluntary, there may not even be an active editor in your category.

There are free directories that are very important to submit to - including entireweb.com, familyfriendlysites.com, gimpsy.com, illumirate.com, mavicanet.com, qango.com, selectsurf.com and skaffe.com, among others. Do not submit your site to the "free for all" link farms that accept all link submissions and exist just to facilitate link exchanges.

Yahoo! Directory on the other hand, used to be free, but for the last few years they have been charging \$ 300 for an "express" review (7 days or less) - it's non-refundable and becomes an annual charge if they accept your site.

Other paid directories include Business.com, B2Byellowpages.com, Zeal.com, About.com, Allestra.com, Goguides.org, MSN Small Business Directory, and there are countless others.

One of the main reasons you'll want to hire a professional web firm to manage your online marketing campaign is because you won't have the time or the resources to discover all the new directories that emerge. So much research goes into successful search engine promotion that finding new, VALID sites to submit to is almost worth the SEO investment alone.

Section Five

Selecting Your Keywords: The Most Important Step

Keywords are the most important part of the entire SEO process. They are what you potential customers will use when searching for a new supplier on Google or Yahoo!. Sometimes they will search with broad terms such as "metal detector" but often they will also search for specific brands such as "white's metal detectors" or they will look for a regional supplier with and enter a term such as "Boston metal detectors".

In preparing to do keyword research, it is best to be broad at first and then to get more precise with the results. Data that is considered include search volume, number of competing sites, and value to the company. Once the data is gathered for both the broad and the precise keywords, it can easily be sorted to rank the keywords and select a targeted list.

Depending on how well-indexed your site is, or how many incoming links you have to your site, you can choose a range of keywords to pursue. Some SEO companies use a metric called the "KEI" (Keyword Effectiveness Index) that looks at both search volume and competing sites. What you want to select are the keywords that have the highest search volume and the lowest number of competing sites.

With the introduction of pay per click, you can also pursue the broader keywords using the paid method, ensuring a top ranking for even the most competitive keyword phrases. Of course, then you have to watch the bid amounts.

With a thorough keyword analysis, you will be on your way to an effective search engine marketing campaign. Follow your traffic logs closely and look for keywords that show up - you may see some you didn't plan on, and you may want to add them into your targeted list (and optimization efforts of course).

Section Six

Optimizing Web Content for the Search Engines

Once you have selected the target keywords that you would like to get ranked in the search engines, the next step is to determine what content on your website should be optimized.

What does "optimize" mean?

It means formatting your pages in a manner that the search engines will understand and allow them to index the pages in their databases. If a page is optimized properly, when a search engine "indexes" the page, it will pick up on the relevance of certain keywords - the targeted keyword phrases that have already been carefully selected.

How can you make your pages more relevant, or more "optimal", from the start?

Make sure your site has the following:

- At least one content page for each targeted keyword phrase
- Shortened, non-dynamic URLs without ?s in them - many sites now use rewrite scripts. This is done so the search engine spiders can follow them.

And then make sure your content pages have the following:

- a text headline that uses the exact keyword phrase
- at least two paragraphs of text, including variations of the keyword phrase
- additional keywords that are linked to other pages within the site
- a footer with a link to the sitemap

Good optimizing also includes:

- crafting well-written meta tags (title, keywords and descriptions)
- image descriptions
- link descriptions

The key to gaining search engine visibility is NOT in stuffing your pages with the same keywords over and over, but in making sure that your target keywords are represented in your content.

Section Seven

Analyzing Your Site Content

Content is king.

Older search engine optimization techniques are dead, and now the key to penetrating the search engines is to have ample content that is relevant to your target keyword phrases.

If you have 100 keyword phrases in your target list, then you should make sure there are at least 100 pages of content on your site. Pretty simple, actually – just one page of content for each keyword phrase.

The content page should include two or three paragraphs that use the keyword phrase, and should also include internal links to other content pages on your site.

An even more basic rule would be "the more content, the better".

For example, a site with minimal content, lots of images and a dizzying flash movie is going to turn off the search engine spiders, and probably some prospects as well. A site that is deep in content and easy to navigate will win fans and loyal visitors, and you guessed it, hungry search engine spiders will come a-crawlin'.

Search engine spiders don't just like to read HTML files, though - they also devour PDF files, Microsoft Word documents and anything else you'll link to from a site map. You can even optimize your PDFs for your keywords as well, as Google and others now can read those files.

The best time to write (or re-write) your content is after you've completed some thorough keyword research, which can then drive your content themes, and eventually, your search engine rankings.

Section Eight

Effective Site Design for Search Engine Performance

It's not that easy, everyone knows that. Web developers want to use all the latest code, designers want to jazz up client sites with flash, and clients want their sites to appear both professional and consistent.

Much of this is in stark contrast to what the search engines want to index, though, which is content, content and more content.

Compromise is the key to any great relationship.

Achieve a good compromise here and you'll end up with a usable web site that is ranked well on the organic search engines. Be stubborn and you'll get a showcase site that no one visits or a highly positioned site that no one will ever come back to.

Here are some key elements to make your new site effective on all fronts:

- create a usable layout and make it consistent throughout your site
- use familiar link names and layouts so users are comfortable and navigate easily
- include a sitemap to every page of content on your site, and break it up into multiple categorized sitemaps if you have a large site
- make sure you've done thorough keyword research before you write your content pages
- create a content page for each targeted keyword phrase
- make sure each page has a text headline that uses the exact keyword phrase
- make sure each page has at least two paragraphs of text, including variations of the keyword phrase
- don't be afraid to link to other pages on your own site
- use HTML text menus in your navigation so the search engine spiders can follow the links
- use HTML text footer with a link to the sitemap and your address info (this will get picked up by the search engines' localization features)

Section Nine

Considerations for Database and Flash Sites

It seems that you've skipped over part eight and went ahead and created a cutting edge flash site that will certainly dazzle your prospects with a science fiction theme and stunning visual morphing. Only problem is, no one is visiting the site and if they do, they don't stick around. Is there hope?

Hopefully you also created an "HTML" or "Plain" or "Low Bandwidth" version of your award winning flash extravaganza...that is where you can implement some search engine optimization.

If not, all is not lost. Google and the others are getting better and better at reading flash files and long dynamic urls. If you use extremely unique text in your flash files, chances are they could show up in the top pages of Google.

This is not Flash-bashing, by any means. Flash is a very powerful tool that if used properly can demonstrate a process or a product better than html. That's a fact. Entertainment sites SHOULD use flash. You'll notice that the ones that use it best embed their flash movies inside an html shell - that way you can include text links and content that the search engines WILL read.

Most e-commerce sites have very long URLs, with many dynamic variables in them (like question marks) -- in the past the search engines could not navigate through them and would not index these pages. Google just announced that they now allow for 6 dynamic variables in their URL strings. An effective way of making these URLs search engine friendly is to implement a "mod_rewrite" script that shortens the URL considerably and makes it static, as opposed to dynamic.

So you've made a flash site with database driven content? You may want to look into pay per click ads until the search engines are able to fully index your content.

Section Ten

Metrics: Measuring Results

The only way to measure the success of your search engine marketing program is to use comparative metrics at a regular frequency. Some of the metrics used may include:

- website traffic
- search engine rankings
- Google PageRank
- Alexa Rating
- # of incoming links
- pay per click click-through rate
- pay per click conversions

Use these metrics to determine if your site is on track or if there needs to make improvements.

Of course, the best metrics that you can follow are to track the number of inquiries or orders (or perhaps you have other calls to action, such as a white paper download) you receive each week that result from your various campaigns.

One of the most compelling benefits of working with an SEO company is that they will most likely be able to pick up on search engine algorithm changes in their research (ahead of time) or they will notice changes in rankings among a cluster of client reports. They can then re-optimize based on what is believed to have changed.

A web marketing company should be able to measure your performance and deliver **continuous improvement**.

Section Eleven

Continuous Performance Improvement

One important question you may have is "When I look at my metrics from month to month, what can I expect?" or "What can be done to improve my current performance?"

A successful search engine marketing program would be one that does not just have a short term strategy, but a long term plan for improving initial results and also integrating new keywords whenever needed.

Continuous Improvement is a popular catch phrase heard in manufacturing circles in the eighties, around the same time as the Malcolm Baldrige Quality Award was born. There is no reason it can't be applied in a search engine marketing capacity. Once a metric is established and a baseline is recorded, it should be fairly easy to measure the progress.

Of course, a process must be in place to analyze and respond to the metrics, and the search engines themselves can throw a wrench into the plan as they modify their algorithms, and your search engine marketing manager must be prepared to modify the plan at a moment's notice and take action. As the search engines evolve, so should the continuous improvement process.

Like any process, it's important to determine what the bottlenecks may be:

- lack of keyword-rich content
- long dynamic urls
- lack of incoming links
- site HTML errors
- changing search engine acceptance criteria

Once you know what your bottlenecks could be, and you have determined what your goal is, then continuous improvement is possible.

For more about "the goal" you can read a highly-recommended book of the same name by Eliyahu Goldratt!

Section Twelve

Pay-Per-Click Advantages

For years some people wished that they did not have to play the search engine optimization game - that they could just buy their way to the top.

Advertisers had longed for a way to ONLY pay for visits to their site from TRUE prospects.

Add to these wishes the items of conversion tracking and daily budgeting and you have perhaps the ultimate interactive advertising method. Throw out the click fraud and you may have the perfect prospect delivery mechanism.

With pay per click advertising, you select your keywords, set your daily budget, write a compelling ad, and you're on your way. Faster than the organic listings, you're going to appear almost exactly where you plan to be.

You can end up getting more traffic from your organic listings, and certainly it will be cheaper traffic, so it is VERY important to optimize your site and ensure you are getting as much organic traffic as possible - otherwise you may have to break the bank for pay per click traffic. You can almost certainly dominate your landscape by showing up on the top of both sides of the search page - the organic side AND the paid side. You will almost guarantee yourself the click - and make it that much harder for your competition to get the click.

Any serious search engine marketer will be using pay per click to their advantage. It has many advantages over other forms of marketing:

- easy-to-implement conversion tracking
- instant setup and delivery of ads
- real-time ad performance statistics
- constant introduction of new tools

A smart search engine marketing campaign will contain both an organic strategy and a pay per click campaign. You should be able to use both to maximize your website's visibility and meet your targeted traffic goals.

Section Thirteen

Google AdWords, Overture Precision Match

Pay per click advertising has fueled the current search engine wars at the start of 2005, as MSN and Yahoo jockey to keep up with Google's ever increasing number of innovations. Google has a good reason to keep innovating and coming up with different ways to search. The more searches offered, the more places Google has to show their ads. Demand for ad space far exceeds the available inventory, so expect your ads to start appearing in the "content" space (non-search) such as G-mail, Yellow Pages, News Groups, RSS feeds and more.

Advertising on Google and Overture/Yahoo has a similar feel to it, but the way they position their ads is extremely different. While Overture is a pure economic model, where the highest bidder gets the highest position, Google takes other factors into consideration, such as click through rate (popularity of your ads), daily budget and maximum bid. Google will stop showing your ad, even if your bid is high, if not enough people are clicking on it. Google goes out of their way to try to deliver the most popular ads in the top positions. Both services have an editorial process that seems to get tougher all the time. Google has an automated ad optimization feature that you can turn on to help your ads get maximum exposure.

Both services offer free conversion tracking. Basically, you copy a snippet of code and place it on your confirmation (thank you) pages. The code then can track which keywords sent people to your site and completed an order/inquiry/call to action. This will tell you which keywords to continue bidding on, where to increase bids and maintain position during a bidding war, etc..

If you've never tried pay per click advertising, it can be beneficial to outsource it to a knowledgeable firm who will review your keywords/bids/ads/click through rates/conversions on a regular basis.

Tip: Use the targeted keyword phrase as the headline of your ads. In Google's AdWords program, they have a snippet of code that will automatically insert them for you.

Section Fourteen

Reciprocal Link Strategies

Think of it as a simple exchange of business cards. A friend of a friend - simple networking can often yield huge results. The same holds true for your website. The more sites that point to your site, the more of a resource your site is viewed as.

Consider that a search engine spider visits, say, 1 million sites every day, and follows all the links from these sites to find, or "index" more sites. Of the million, 100 sites have a link back to your site. The search engine will run into your site 100 times that day - good chance you'll be indexed.

Now, if of the 100 sites that link to you, let's say 50 use your company name in the link text, and 50 use a keyword phrase that you've targeted. So the search engine spiders run into 50 links to your site, using the "keyword phrase". That's pretty good, and the search engines will pick up on this relevance.

Let's look at your competitor. They have 100 links as well, but none are for the keyword phrase. The search engine spider doesn't pick up the relevance. Thus, when that search engine is used for a search with that keyword phrase, your site comes up higher than your competition.

Getting a large number of incoming links will help you. Getting a large number of keyword-savvy incoming links will help you A GREAT DEAL MORE. Even better is if those incoming links came from high quality sites that have a ton of content relevant to your keyword. A step further, do these sites have a high number of quality incoming links?

A good place to start is with your own customers, vendors, partners, associations, trade publications, etc...

Make sure you have a page on your site that facilitates link exchanges - but don't use the word "links" in your title or headlines or even filename... some search engines may mistaken your page for a link farm. Organize your links by topic if possible. Be responsive to link inquiries and audit your link network often for mistakes or removals.

Section Fifteen

Paid Directories

It is extremely valuable to get incoming links from high quality websites. Some of the best links you can get are from the large, human-edited directories that followed in the footsteps of the Yahoo! Directory.

These directories have very high Google PageRank - 7s, 8s, and 9s abound. They know their value and have all begun charging fees for what used to be a standard free review and inclusion.

Yahoo! led the way and began charging \$300 for an express review. The \$300 is non-refundable and does not guarantee inclusion - only a review. If your site is accepted, it becomes an annual fee.

Other for-a-fee directories include Business.com, which for an affordable \$99 provides you with four keyword links to your site. These guys definitely get it. Their listings often appear at the top of search engine results.

For about \$39 each, you can get your site included in other paid directories that have a high page rank - allestra.com and goguides.org are good examples of these.

If you start out your web visibility campaign by obtaining links in these directories, you'll have seven or eight high quality incoming links, and you'll be ahead of the game.

Most web marketing companies will include these directories in their process or will offer to do the legwork for you at a premium.

Part Sixteen

Publishing News Content to Increase Rankings

Another way to gain valuable links from external, high quality sites is to distribute your news to the various online news outlets that will carry it - and the accompanying optimized links with them.

There are multiple ways to do this - publish your news on a page on your web site, to a Blog, to an RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feed, and as an electronic press release.

The search engines will find all of these news items, as they scour news sites daily. When they read your news, they will follow your keyword links back to your site. The more news stories you've distributed, the more potential links you've created.

Not only will you get link exposure for your site, but you may also get some traffic from people who've read the news piece.

Once you have a news distribution strategy in place, you should use it at least every time you re-optimize your web site, and more aggressive marketers will actually use this as often as they can produce actual news.

Ideas for news releases include:

- new product or service
- new hiring
- new client
- new partner
- new process or technique
- new market
- product or service upgrades or changes
- charitable event

Section Seventeen

Industry Success Stories

Manufacturing

SEO is a MUST for manufacturing companies. In a competitive environment where global outsourcing has ignited price wars across many industrial categories, companies must fight for their share of marketing visibility. Organic search traffic can be attained by targeting EVERY specialization and niche and combining those keywords with regional terms if applicable. Pay per click listings are also increasingly necessary to maintain an aggressive online marketing plan. PDFs, white papers and more can be additional sources of content to represent keywords.

Technology

Tech companies are **expected** to be in the top tiers of both the organic and paid listings. Paid listings are a must because they can allow a business to exhibit credibility. Organic search is extremely competitive, which also drives the paid search bids up, so a careful eye needs to be planted on pay per click campaign budgets. Conversions definitely need to be tracked - whether it is a sales inquiry, a literature request, or a software download. Even though a top listing is expected, many tech companies benefit from even lower-tiered listings if they produce visitors and conversions.

B2C/E-commerce

E-commerce sites need to be as visible as possible. Every click is a potential sale and every competitor's click is a lost sale. The ROI on each click is typically less than that of a technology company or manufacturer's site. Inversely, the pay per click bid rate may be higher. Link campaigns are vital to an e-commerce site's success, and besides the SEO benefit, many companies utilize affiliate programs that pay a commission on click referrals that result in business.

Section Eighteen

What's Next?

Will there be another acquisition?

Has the landscape settled on the big three - Google, Yahoo and MSN? Will one of them buy Ask Jeeves? Remember back in the day when search engine acquisitions and mergers were commonplace. Remember when Excite.com was a player? MSN would be in a good position to pick up AskJeeves' natural language query capability and its' Teoma search technology and Iwon.com consumer site. Just a theory of course.

What other content will be indexed?

Google is leading a frenzied effort to begin indexing every book published, including college libraries. Their G-mail free email service indexes public email, Key-hole indexes satellite imagery. Google's Desktop software indexes your personal computer and has been followed by Desktop search apps from MSN, Yahoo and AskJeeves.

PDFs, Flash, and other file formats are now easily indexed and retrieved from the web, as are video and audio. Google can now even spider a dynamic url string with up to 6 variables. Making this info easy to be classified so that it can be retrieved with a simple keyword search is the goal of publishers, businesses and even search engine optimizers alike. It's only just begun.

Will Pay Per Click completely replace Organic listings?

This doesn't seem likely as organic clicks still happen far more frequently than paid ones. As long as you can still receive a highly targeted click from an organic, free, search listing, businesses will want to appear in these databases.

What the heck is a Blog?

Blogs are the hot new thing in the web world. Short for "Web Log", the blog is a WYSIWYG website (you edit it like you are using MS Word - very easy) that functions like an online diary. There are tens of millions of blogs published every day. It puts the power in the people's hands. Many companies now maintain their own Blog in order to present a daily or frequent update of company news. It's also a good mechanism for creating some additional high quality keyword links to your site. Google purchased Blogger.com, a completely free service - where they can place more pay per click ads.

C O N T A C T U S

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