

Search Marketing: An Overview

A guide for CEOs, CIOs and Marketing Professionals

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In its simplest form, search engine marketing (SEM) can be reduced to one basic concept: build a great web site and then drive targeted traffic to it. However, the definition of a great web site has changed over the years. A great web site involves much more than pretty pictures, cool animation and fancy technology. Successful SEM programs begin with web sites that ultimately make a difference in your company's bottom line, generate leads, increase revenue, boost market share and improve customer satisfaction.

What is Search Engine Marketing?

By definition, search engine marketing is a form of Web marketing that promotes web sites by increasing their visibility in search engine result pages. It really boils down to getting a web site to appear within the top 10 listings when a relevant search term is entered in Google, Yahoo or MSN. Current statistics indicate that approximately 85% of people find what they're looking for on the Internet by using one of the major search engines.

There are literally thousands of search engines. However, there are really just a handful that serve as the primary gatekeepers to information on the Internet. The big players are: Yahoo, Google and MSN.

Knowing which search engines are considered dominant is the first hurdle. However, knowing how to position your web site in a way that these search engines will favor your site over your competition is the more important issue for you and your business to address.

Visibility

Prominent ranking is defined as being in the top 10 listings in any search, which is generally on the first page of results when a key phrase is typed into any one of the major search engines. This is an area where being close won't count. As a matter of fact, research shows that less than 10% of people will look past the first page. Instead, they will frequently refine their search term to be more specific rather than scroll past page one of their search results. Therefore, being ranked anywhere past the first page isn't going to drive much traffic to your web site. The first 10 positions are where the action is ... the only action.

Getting Visibility

There are generally two methodologies for getting ranked in the search engines:

- SEO -- Search engine optimization is the process of creating or modifying a web site in order to achieve higher rankings in the search engines. SEO is sometimes referred to as “natural ranking” or “organic ranking.” The search engines use a complex algorithm to determine how sites are ranked. (To learn more about SEO for part of a web marketing strategy, read our “Search Engine Optimization: Best practices” whitepaper.)
- PPC – Pay-per-Click is a marketing tool used on search engines where advertisers only pay when a user actually clicks on an ad to visit the advertiser's website. Advertisers bid on keywords they predict their target market will use as search terms when they are looking for a product or service. When a user types a keyword query that matches the advertiser's keyword list, or views a page with relevant content, the advertiser's web site may be shown. (For more on PPC, read our “Pay-per-Click Advertising – Best Practices” whitepaper).

Should you focus on SEO or PPC?

The question is often asked, “Should I do SEO or PPC?” Each methodology has advantages and disadvantages. A web marketing strategy works best when these techniques are used in tandem (Add a newsletter campaign component and some social media exposure and you’ve got the ingredients for killer web marketing results). The table below provides a comparison of the key factors of these two types of web marketing strategies:

	SEO	PPC
Time required to see results	3 months minimum, some results may take up to 12 months	1 to 2 weeks
Shelf life	Consistent; once ranking is achieved, doesn’t fluctuate radically, as long as SEO maintenance strategy is used.	Highly volatile. Visibility and position varies with each search. Once click budget is spent, ads disappear.
Budget impact	No ongoing advertising click cost.	Monthly advertising budget can be expensive, depending on industry.
Can I do it myself?	Unlikely, professional involvement is needed.	Possible, but better results with professional input.
Are results measurable?	Yes	Yes
Placement in results	In column (see sample below)	Top-sponsored ads and right-side bar column
Perception	Ads perceived as more credible due to placement	Viewed as a “commercial”, less credible

The Goal

The goal of search engine marketing is simple: If a site is in the first 10 listings, that business will have significantly more exposure. Otherwise, a site is essentially invisible, which makes ROI for that particular SEO program zero.

In addition to measuring site rank, consider these other measurements of success:

- Increased revenue as a direct result of your SEM efforts
- Increased phone calls to your offices
- Increased “contact us” requests or request for quotes
- Increased newsletter sign-up requests
- Increased overall web traffic

How to determine Key Phrases

What key phrases apply to a business? What key phrases should be used as part of a search marketing strategy? Should different phrases be used for a PPC strategy than a SEO strategy? These are all great questions, and should be considered when planning an SEO strategy.

Pick the wrong phrases for the campaign and all efforts will be in vain. Obtaining a top 10 listing in a search engine with the wrong key phrase is like winning a one person marathon.

Before beginning an aggressive SEM campaign, make sure the homework has been done to determine which key phrases should be targeted. This applies to both SEO and PPC strategies.

Be specific and use phrases that contain two or more words. Make sure the targeted phrases are ones being used by the people you want to visit your site. Be specific, but not too specific; it is of no value to be ranked No. 1 in a key phrase that is too broad, since most searches are done using three or more phrases. At the same time, being highly ranked under a phrase that is too unique and specific likely won't bring in significant additional traffic either.

When selecting key phrases, consider the following:

- Use your company name
- Use brand names you represent (and have legal right to use)
- Use activities associated with your product or service
- Use acronyms in your industry
- Consider misspelled versions of key phrases (this is the only time you get brownie points for spelling something wrong; take advantage of it)
- Be specific, but not too specific

Measuring Results

When developing an SEM campaign, make sure mechanisms are in place to measure results. Different campaigns are measured differently, and it's not just about the number of "visits" to a site. In fact, visits are about the last thing at which you should look.

Some types of campaigns will bring in more immediate results. PPC campaigns can be expected to deliver results fairly quickly, while SEO campaigns will take more patience.

SEO results are measured by determining the number of target keyphrases that have obtained a top 10 position. A visibility score is the common measure of success and is an aggregate of the number of top 10 positions you have obtained for the phrases you are targeting.

PPC on the other hand is measured by conversions. An example of a conversion is someone placing an order on an ecommerce web site. The conversion rate is often presented in terms of a percentage of overall visits from the PPC campaign.

Compare results to goals. Formally measure results to goals at least once a month. However, in the beginning, it's important to watch your campaigns closely and measure frequently.

Wrapping It up

At BEM Interactive, we see the impact an aggressive search marketing campaign can have on a business. We see it every day. Gone are the days of "if you build it they will come." Your web site can be a significant lead channel into your business, but it takes a well-crafted strategy and often a professional team to implement the strategy.

About the Author:

Malinda Pengelly believes in success – both for herself *and* for her clients. That's why she works so hard to build relationships with her team and her clients that have become the gold standard in the Information Technology industry.

As President and CEO of BEM Interactive (formally Beyond Email), Malinda's primary mission is to put the customer's needs first. As such, she remains involved on a hands-on level, always available to customers to discuss any question or concern.

With more than 25 years of experience in Information Technology, Malinda has worked in technology management for start-ups and Fortune 500 corporations, managing areas of technology implementation, business process re-engineering and marketing communications.

In 2008, Malinda received the Small Business Person of the Year award from the Greensboro Chamber of Commerce and received the Mover and Shaker designation by Business Leader Magazine as a leader in the field. She is a recipient of The Business Journal's Women in Business Award, the Greensboro Chamber of Commerce Small Business Advocate of the Year Award, and her company was nominated for the North Carolina Small Business of the Year

Award. She is an outspoken advocate for small business, and remains actively engaged in activities that help other small business owners succeed.

She is a professional speaker, serves on the advisory board of North Carolina A&T University's Integrated Internet Technologies Program, and is chairperson for the Greensboro Chamber of Commerce's Technology Thursday program.

Malinda received her Bachelor's Degree in Engineering & Computer Science from Virginia Tech University and her MBA from James Madison University.

About BĒM Interactive:

BĒM Interactive (formally Beyond Email) has helped companies of all sizes remain profitable in their online marketing efforts through web design, development and cutting-edge Internet-based solutions. Client sectors include retail, manufacturing, wholesale, distribution, government, service, non-profit and education sectors. Located in Greensboro, NC, BĒM Interactive is a leader in maintaining positive, measurable results through web-based marketing, search-engine optimization, Pay Per Click marketing and other forms of Internet solutions.

Since 1996, the company's core values include innovative design, fanatical service and positive, measurable results for their clients. These values create the foundation upon which all of their business is based, and the focus from which all their relationships exist. This will never change.

At BĒM Interactive, we see the impact an aggressive Web Marketing strategy can have on business. We see it every day. Gone are the days of "if you build it they will come." Your web site can be a significant lead channel into your business, but it takes a well-crafted strategy and a professional team to implement the strategy.

Additional Whitepapers:

If this topic has piqued your interest, see other companion guides at www.BEMinteractive.com.

Topics include:

- Search Engine Optimization: Best Practices
- Pay Per Click: Best Practices
- Choosing a Web Marketing Firm: A Checklist from the Inside

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BĒM Interactive

416 Gallimore Dairy Road, Suite N.
Greensboro, NC 27409
Voice: 336.851.0040
Fax: 336.851.0664

BEMinteractive.com
editor@BEMinteractive.com

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