



The Revolution Search Marketing Report

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Conspire to climb

Consumers are much more likely to click on natural search results, being sceptical of the value of paid listings. But how do you get to the top of the rankings, asks Adam Woods

Travellers from ancient times wouldn't find much familiar terrain in the digital world, but you can't help thinking that they would feel some spiritual connection with the dark art of search engine optimisation.

With their impenetrable algorithms and immense commercial power, what do the major search engines resemble if not fickle, inscrutable gods? And in that context, don't the desperate efforts of organic search specialists to second-guess their machinations start to look rather like modern-day sacrifices?

But though organic/natural search/SEO still contains many mysteries, we do seem to be moving into an age of enlightenment, where there are certain basic pieces of wisdom we can all hold to be true. Keep your website content and link strategy up to date, pay attention to social media and tactical paid search and you are already well on your way, with not a drop of sacrificial blood spilt.

"Natural search has been demystified a lot," says Jonty Kelt, managing director of Google-owned digital marketing specialist, DoubleClick Performics International. "Paid search has been taken up much more quickly because it easier to understand, but natural search is a growth story."

There are those who remain sceptical about organic search, or at least about those who believe they have cracked it. The time it takes, the unpredictability of the medium and the questionable credibility of many self-described experts all strike an underwhelming note with ChannelAdvisor UK managing director, James Scott. "SEO is often something of an inexact

science, and the industry has attracted a number of snakeskin oil-sellers who promise the world and deliver very little" he says. "It can take weeks or even months for an SEO campaign to come to fruition."

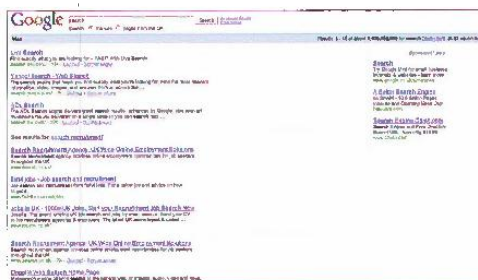
Even advocates of the medium are obliged to concede that SEO can be hard to justify in budgetary terms. "Paid is still what people concentrate on more than organic, partly because, with paid search, you can sit down and say: 'Here is a budget, let's go out and do this'," says Conrad Bennett, technical services director of WebTrends. "Paid gives you direct results you can more easily see."

Going organic

But there are impressive numbers to support the case for organic search, as well. Studies point to the fact that an advertiser present in both rankings can expect only a small proportion of clicks to come from paid search. JupiterResearch goes as far as to estimate that 87 per cent of clicks derive from organic search, and this message seems to be coming through.

Google, unsurprisingly, towers over this space. In November 2007, google.co.uk and google.com accounted for 86.2 per cent of all web searches in the UK – a solid increase on their November 2006 position, when they powered 78 per cent of searches (source: Hitwise).

To give a further sense of scale, if the mooted Microsoft/Yahoo! tie-up had happened to be finalised last November, figures from the same source show that their combined UK share of search would have been a hardly Google-threatening 5.1 per cent.



Google: offers lots of advice on improving your natural results





The Green Awards make strides with organic search

The Green Awards were launched in 2006 to recognise outstanding creative work that communicates the importance of corporate social responsibility, sustainable development and ethical best practice for brands. The awards need stand out and they maintain it with a page-one ranking in Google, above instances where other publications have mentioned the awards.

The trick to achieving this is in careful tracking and analytics, according to Ané-Mari Peter, managing director of on-IDLE, the web

design and development agency behind the project. "It is important that the customer has a site that appeals to them and reflects their organisation's services, products and brand positioning accurately, but it is equally important that the site can be found on organic search – and not just in Google," says Peter.

"Sometimes, compromises must be made and we explain these to customers by physically running searches and going through the results. Training a customer to read and understand their site's usage



Green Awards: used web agency on-IDLE to boost results

tracking is critical – it is not just about unique visits."

Using SEO specialist Elemental Communications, on-IDLE employs traffic analysis to review keywords and results monthly and

ensure keywords are reflected in a site's metadata in a variety of formats, to cater for typos and different forms of expression.

According to Elemental director, Tim Gibbon, the

most essential requirements for a successful site are to be found within the website itself. "The basics, such as site architecture, technology, good, clean code and maintenance, are critical," he says.

"From the building blocks of a site, brands need to tie in the cosmetics and the detail, which really makes the difference. There is a generic checklist that all brands should consider, but ultimately it will be their products, services, audience and the media or platforms that determine what services they use."

It is no wonder, then, that SEO specialists continue to spend an inordinate amount of time attempting to divine the logic by which Google creates its rankings. Though Google denies it, for instance, there is a widespread suspicion that investing in paid search will improve a company's organic ranking. Easier to prove is the notion that frequent content updates represent one of the most powerful ways to promote a site.

Fresh and new

"It has become apparent lately that Google is favouring new sites a lot, and sites with new content," says Darren Jamieson, content editor at Manchester-based Just Search. "If you have got a site that does car leasing, and someone is looking for something on the new Audi R8, a site that hasn't been updated for three months won't come up, even if it has a page on the R8."

Google itself, while cagey about its methods, is happy to confirm this much. "We always say, build things for the people you want visiting your site, and that is what we try to reflect with our ranking," says Google spokesman Anthony House. "It is not about trying to trick your way into the highest results."

Indeed, Google's advice for improving a company's organic ranking all relates to the kind of housekeeping that makes a website visitable in the first place.

"There are some tried-and-true methods: make sure your content is unique, make sure you update it regularly," says House. "But these are the things that make websites compelling to their visitors anyway. No one wants to visit a site more than once if the information is stale, and I guess that is sort of our over-arching, perennial SEO message."

For a company that famously cloaks its most potent commercial weapons in the utmost secrecy – these being its legendary algorithms – Google is cheerily free with useful tips for those who would optimise their site for search. Recently, for instance,

it has been actively endorsing the use of Sitemaps as the best way to alert search engines to the key parts of a site.

"Webmasters submit an index of their site so that our crawler knows all the pages the site owner wants us to search," says House of the Google-/Yahoo!-/MSN-developed system. "You can submit your Sitemap to Google through Webmaster Central, or you can put it on the root directory of your website, and that way all the major search engine crawlers can find it."

Another tip House volunteers is that companies might like to focus their search on a handful of well-linked pages. "One thing a lot of people don't seem to know is that page ranking is page specific, not site specific," he says. "They don't necessarily need every page on their site to be extremely high in the page ranking – just the ones they want to get people to."

Google denies that advertisers will have more luck with their organic links if they spend on PPC campaigns, but there are many who believe a mixed strategy remains the best one, using the increasingly expensive sponsored listings to generate momentum while the cheaper natural results are gradually building up traction. "The key thing is to adjust your campaign as you go," says Tamar search director, Neil Jackson. "If you are a travel site and you are not ranking well for cheap flights organically, you can use PPC tactically to pick up the traffic you are not getting. If, after a while, you start to rank better for cheap flights, you switch your PPC budget into the more niche terms – 'cheap flights to Alicante', 'cheap flights to Florida', that sort of thing."

Another reliable principle is the one dictating that companies need to start thinking about search before they have laid the first digital brick of a new website. "The main thing is to ensure the site is set up correctly, that the architecture is good, that the site can be crawled and indexed by the search engines," says Jackson. "We always say, broadly speaking, that about 40 per cent of the work is on site and about 60 per cent is off site."



A link that appears across a forum obviously gives additional equity and status, as well as driving the actual traffic through

James Keehan,
The Searchworks



PriceRunner looks in-house for indexing

While some specialist companies can attempt to corner the market in a particular niche term, spare a thought for those whose very business specifically involves an enormous breadth of product choice.

Price comparison shopping engine PriceRunner.co.uk, part of ValueClick, is in that very position, which meant the decision to manage its SEO strategy in-house was a huge undertaking.

"As a business, we have about 235 different categories, as opposed to lots of niche retailers who have a very limited inventory," says Adam Wilson, search manager, PriceRunner.co.uk. "Finding keywords is not a



PriceRunner: offers about 235 categories on its web pages

problem – it is trying to open up all that content to the search engines." Google's advice that websites should make careful use of Sitemaps is crucial here, but with around a million products in its database, just the task of indexing the site

for the search engines was a major one.

"We are effectively the amalgamation of various retailers' product feeds, so every product has a page," says Wilson. "We had a lot of dynamic characters in the URLs – ampersands and

symbols that the search engines don't like. A lot of companies use agencies, but we did the vast majority of work in-house and it was really quite time consuming."

Some of the biggest drivers of the site are consumer electronics gadgets such as MP3 players and digital cameras and, though the effort to keep on top is a never-ending one, Wilson is reasonably satisfied with PriceRunner's rankings in those areas, two years into the in-house SEO project.

"The way the site works, we would like some pages to be ranked higher than others, but ultimately, like everyone else, we are in the lap of Google," he says.

Companies who enlist a web designer with no knowledge of search are making the first and biggest possible mistake, argues Barry Mills, chairman of web design and online marketing consultancy Netstep. "It is unbelievable how many people build a website and then go to an SEO specialist," he says. He likens it to building a roof and putting in the walls later.

Once the architecture and the indexation are sound, the remainder of the work begins and, by common consent, this part of the job never really ends. The challenge divides itself into two parts: content and linking.

As Google makes clear and most clued-up companies have learned, the watchword for content must be freshness, combined with a commitment to ensuring that the content matches the keywords that are supposed to be driving traffic to the site.

Linking strategy

New and relevant content is also essential for building the linking strategy, especially because Google is able to see through a strategy of bought links. "After indexation and content, the way other sites link to yours is a very important third pillar," says Kelt. "The algorithms see it as a very relevant indicator of the expertise of your site."

The rise of social media, blogs and forums all play into the linking part of the process, but they also call for a higher degree of creativity among SEO specialists. "A link that appears across a forum obviously gives additional equity and status, as well as driving the actual traffic through," says James Keehan, commercial product director at The Search Works. "So this is where we start looking at more innovative ideas, like how can we encourage more forums to link to this site?"

The growth in social media is not the only development to have created challenges for the search world during the past year. The introduction of universal search, pioneered by Ask.com and Yahoo! but officially christened by Google last May, brought news, pictures, video, maps and other data into the equation, and very quickly the SEO industry has had to come to terms with the implications. "It will get to the point where it is not a question of standing out with an image or a video clip," says Mills. "It will be that you are broke without one."

For the time being, however, most advertisers continue to fight over text results. But there are also significant worries here for the corporate world, as the arrival of universal search brings with it an increased threat from unsolicited user-generated content. "UGC is very fresh, so quite often it gets listed quite high in the rankings," says Jonty Kelt. "If you are an advertiser and one of your last 100 customers had a bad experience and then wrote something on a blog or social media site, that may well show up on page one."

In terms of the worst-case scenario, Grant Whiteside, co-founder and technical director of Ambergreen, is pithier still. "The higher the profile you have, the more you are up for a slapping from the public," he says. "A search engine now is fast becoming almost like a PR tool, and you can sink or swim by it."

Search engine reputation management is the key. "One of the main things is to ensure there are more positive than negative reviews online," says Kelt. "You can create your own customer feedback on your site, encouraging people to submit photos of the hotel room view or reviews of how much they liked the beds."

All of which is evidence that, while SEO isn't getting any easier to cheat, it is at least becoming far harder to ignore.



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Jonty Kelt,
DoubleClick Performance
International