

Search Engine Marketing and Optimization - Know Your SEO From Your PPC

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A simple beginners guide to all things SEO.

Content:

Online marketing has become a confusing place. With so many new buzz words, acronyms and old thinking around it can be hard to work out what and who to believe, and more importantly, where to invest your money. A few questions any company with an online presence should be considering: 1. Are you getting enough traffic and are visitors responding the way you want them to? 2. Should you invest in Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), pay-per-click campaigns or other strategies? 3. Is your website working hard enough to convert visitors into customers? How should you split our budget between offline and online activity? The best place to start is to really understand the performance of your current web strategy by analysing traffic, content and conversion rates. Then you can plan how offline promotions and marketing can crossover in an effective and streamlined manner. Getting Quality Traffic - Direct it and Help it Find You
There are 4 main ways of directing traffic to your site: search engine marketing, links from other websites and affiliates, online advertising and offline promotion.

It makes sense to maximise the potential of all of these channels, but budgets can be easily wasted by putting too much emphasis on one or more area, rather than spreading spend efficiently. Should you use SEO companies? Many companies turn to SEO specialists to solve what they see as low traffic to their website or because it doesn't rank highly for certain search terms. Unfortunately they don't always realise what SEO can really mean in practice. Generally, these specialists will attempt to recode existing pages and insert keywords and phrases in order to make them more attractive to search engines. These 'repaired' pages can soon seem hijacked and incomprehensible due to text that doesn't always make sense. Good SEO uses a combination of new page creation, careful page enhancement and inbound referral link generation. They will be honest about the level of change required and what can be realistically be achieved. Anyone who guarantees top of Google should be avoided as this is impossible. Rather than Fixing Old Pages, Create Better Ones An effective alternative to 'fixing' old pages is to create new high quality content that's designed to be found, along with a reassessment of the whole website. Web users respond to well written, punchy text and Google will reward proper syntax with better rankings. It's also worth noting that it is only possible to make a page relevant to about 4 core search terms. If you are a hotel and your prime location is 'townsville', it's hard enough getting up the ranks for your main search term 'townsville hotels'. Trying to get high rankings for the neighboring town when your whole site is optimised for 'townsville' (through adding more keywords to those existing pages) will be ineffectual. You may have to create new pages specifically designed to rank highly for the other town and get referral links pointing to it. What Terms Should Our Site Be Ranked For? Many companies get this wrong, including most of the big ones. Big brands tend only focus on the brand itself and forget what people are really looking for in relation to their brand and offering. Look at it from your customer's point of view. What might they be looking for? What language might they use? By getting this text into the pages you'll create content that will be found by the people you want to find it. Google PageRank Google PageRank ranks all web pages between 1 and 10. This is Google's way of ranking a website's importance. It has nothing to do with traffic to your site, but more about its standing and place in the pecking order. For example, Google is ranked 10, Microsoft is ranked 9, BBC is ranked 9. A website with minimal inbound links and a new URL may never even get a ranking. This usually happens to small sites that never receive any promotion or updates. While ranking is important, niche search terms can still be effective for low ranking websites (e.g. 'two bedroom apartment in Harrow, London'), but if you need more traffic on more general terms (e.g. 'Apartments in London') you may need to use PPC in the short term and work on improving your ranking by increasing high quality inbound links and developing content in the longer term. To Understand Search you must Understand Search Engines So what is Google's, Yahoo's and MSN's goal in life? Making money, of course. Google makes its profit not from search, but from advertising. Google's success in the Search Engine business relies on 2 things; the quality of its search results and the relevancy of its advertising (Adwords and Adsense) to the viewers of those results. When a user types a search term into Google they have to trust that Google is delivering the most relevant pages in order to supply the best answers. It does this by trying to work out the quality of the page content and the popularity of the website that hosts the page. Content and Popularity - Driving your Search Engine Results Placement (SERP) They are many different variables that govern your result position, but page content and website ranking are the most important. Content is about building well designed, well written and well coded websites and is the area we have most control over. Popularity, however, is a much harder nut to crack as it relies on how the rest of the web interacts with your website. To understand it we need to know how Google measures popularity. For a better insight, you need to understand how Google views the web. Imagine the web is a large social community and web pages are the people that live in it. If someone needs advice on a matter, it's best to consult the most knowledgeable and trusted person in that community. The problem with large communities is finding that person. The best way might be to ask other people who they believe is the best person. After all, personal recommendation is generally a good measurement of quality and trustworthiness. If the majority of people recommend one person, then you'll have more confidence in consulting them. Google sees links from one website to another as a recommendation by association and by mapping the whole web it can count these links. When Launching New Sites -

Remember the Age Filter Sandbox All new sites are subject the Google 'aging filter'. This means any new URL is indexed by Google, but not page ranked for anything between 3-6 months, leaving it with a low ranking. There is currently no effective way around this, other than to either get a holding page up ASAP on any new site, or to add to an existing site with good page rankings. Don't forget there are other search engines out there like Yahoo and MSN who don't employ such filters yet, and Pay-Per-Click advertising can help increase traffic when needed. Pay-Per-Click (PPC) Time for some definitions. Google Adwords are Google's name for pay-per-click advertising. These ads can bring targeted traffic to your site as a direct result of people searching on Google, or one of their search partners such as Ask, Netscape and AOL. You'll probably have noticed the 'sponsored links' that appear on the right hand column of Google search results pages. Sometimes a few of these links will appear at the top of the page above the main 'organic' results. This is a large area that I'll cover another time.

Web Stats v Web Analytics Most website owners are familiar with occasionally looking at their website's logs and noting the amount of visitors, pages viewed, keywords used and time spent on the site. While this is valuable information, it doesn't really say much about visitor behaviour. Your site may get high levels of traffic, but that traffic must consist of the right visitors finding the right content and being motivated to do what you want them to. Web analytics can give valuable insight into:

1. Which buttons are clicked on the most and which are ignored?
2. Which keywords are the most effective and profitable?
3. Which pages are exited immediately (bounce rate) and most often?
4. Where are people entering the site and where do they end up?
5. How many visitors achieve the goals you want them to?

Google Analytics can help answer these important questions and understand how to address them. It can give clues as to what content is working for you, and which isn't. Only by continually assessing a website's performance, balanced with web advertising, HTML email and offline promotion performance, can you really know if your marketing strategy is repaying your investment in it.

Goal Conversion Virtually all websites have a goal; to get someone to subscribe, to register, to enquire or to buy something. The conversion rate is the percentage of visitors who complete the 'goal' you have set on the website. A low rate could be the result of many things; poor design and navigation, an unclear or undesirable proposition, complex or tiresome paths to the 'goal', or just the wrong people viewing the site. This can only be rescued with regular assessment, leading to action that either increases the quality of the traffic or improves the content of the site. Keep paths to conversion simple and make offers appealing and easy to redeem.

Linking Transaction and PPC Data into Google analytics Google analytics offers the ability to track traffic and monitor conversion rates, and this is made all the more powerful when transaction data is added. This is simple for a developer to implement and should be part of any e-commerce related website. Also, when you link PPC data to conversions you can monitor the effectiveness of you campaigns and quickly take action if they are under-performing.

Content is King - Keep it Fresh and Up-to-date This makes sense for your visitors and your ranking. A site that is updated regularly and has innovative content will retain visitors and encourage them to return. It will also give other sites, feeds and blogs a strong reason to link to your site. Also, many site owners are unaware that Google will begin to ignore web pages that aren't updated regularly. Companies should focus on producing fresh, clear and relevant web content, rather than wasting money on SEO tricks. More and more web analysts agree that high quality, search engine friendly content is the key to higher rankings and more effective traffic.

Keep it HTML - Clean and Accessible to All Search engine bots love clean html content because it's the easiest to crawl. Other content, however, can become a barrier to effective results. PDFs, for example, are useful for displaying floor-plans, maps and copies of brochures etc., but shouldn't be a replacement for real web page content. Best practice is to always create findable content as xhtml css based pages that comply with w3c validation.

10 steps to online and offline integration:

1. Decide the goal
2. Identify the target audience
3. Define the proposition
4. Select the mix of channels (on and off line)
5. Create a creative theme that works across all media
6. Produce offline and online content simultaneously
7. Craft the Keywords and Phrases for web pages and PPC
8. Build landing pages, microsites and goal pages that are SE friendly and simple to navigate
9. Make sure HTML email, banners, printed material follow the creative theme
10. Continually assess all aspects of each campaign and learn from them.

This way you can maximise ROI across all channels and make your whole offline and

online strategy work hard for you.

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About the Author:

[Peter O'Flynn](http://www.marketingteamdirect.com/) is Creative Director of [Marketing Team Direct](http://www.marketingteamdirect.com/) - the through-the-line integrated marketing agency that understands the power of the web.