

# MARKETING YOUR BUSINESS ON SEARCH ENGINES

When it comes to marketing your business online, few tactics may be as effective as using search engines. After all, the first stop customers and prospects make online to find information on products and services like yours is usually a site such as Google, MSN or Yahoo!. The challenge, however, is ensuring that they see your business in their search results. Unfortunately, there are no ways to guarantee that your site will show up in a relevant search. But there are steps you can take to help improve the chances that qualified prospects can find you online.

Marketing on search engines may be most critical for businesses with a strong online presence – it should be considered as a primary area of ad spending for e-commerce businesses where a click to the right product may result in a quick sale. For other businesses, determining how much effort and money you put into this area may depend on how important your website is to your prospecting efforts. In either case, marketing on search engines can be affordable and easy enough that it is may be worth testing as a way to find new customers.

## — SEO AND SEM

Using search engines for promotion comes down to two similarly-named but different disciplines – search engine optimization (SEO) and search engine marketing (SEM). SEO involves creating your company's website in such a way that it ranks high in search results when an appropriate term is used (see sidebar). SEO generally takes some technical know-how, as well as an understanding of the various algorithms search engines use. It's not for the faint-hearted.



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SEM, on the other hand, requires less technical knowledge and can often be done effectively in-house. SEM generally refers to pay-per-click ads that show up in search engine results. They are offered by programs like Google Adwords that let you create ads that appear above or next to the “natural” or “unpaid” results of a search. By purchasing ads based on keywords, you can reach customers when they are actively looking for information on your type of offerings. And you pay only when your ad is clicked on. If only it were that easy. Used incorrectly, SEM programs can be inefficient. For example, if your ad attracts browsers instead of buyers, you'll find yourself paying for traffic that doesn't generate any sales.



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## SEM GUIDELINES

Use these guidelines to help avoid some possible pitfalls of search engine marketing.

### *Set your budget*

It may seem obvious, but don't bid more than you can afford for a keyword. Defining what a visitor is worth is as much art as science, but as a start you may want to estimate how much a typical customer nets you in profits, and multiply that by the likelihood that a site visitor will become a customer. In most SEM programs, the advertiser paying the most shows up highest in the results. But paying for the top position may not have much affect on how often your ad is clicked. For popular searches, users may go several pages deep, so having your ad featured on the much less expensive second or third page can still get results. Depending on the search engine you use, it also may be possible to set a daily budget for your search advertising, helping to control your campaign costs.

### *Think like your target audience*

What search terms would a hot prospect use when looking for your business online? It's easy to know what you would search for, but what about everyone else? Ask your customers what search terms they would use. What keywords bring up your competitors? These may be the ones to consider.

## OPTIMIZING YOUR SITE

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is the process of developing your website so it ranks higher in the natural (i.e. free) search results. Although all search engines work differently, there are basic steps to help your site show up correctly in search results.

**Use the right keywords:** Knowing the terms customers use when they search is the starting point for any SEO effort.

**Put keywords in the right places:** Your site is full of hotspots that search engines check regularly for keywords. Make sure they show up in context in headlines, subheads and the body text of your pages.

**Keep keywords in context:** Integrate keywords as naturally as possible into your copy. A simple list of keywords won't work – they have to be in context.

**Keep your content fresh:** Frequently updated, relevant content can have a positive impact on your site ranking.

**Build links:** Reputable, relevant sites that link to your site can improve your ranking.

**WARNING! Beware of “black hat” optimizers:** Certain SEO “tricks” may yield higher short-term rankings, but these techniques may get you banned from search engines:

- Long lists of keywords for your site
- Putting keywords in invisible text
- Using software to copy content from high ranking sites and representing it as your own
- Creating multiple pages just for the purpose of being indexed by search engines rather than for viewing

— *Create limits*

To find the most qualified buyers, make your keyword choices highly specific by using descriptive phrases instead of individual words. For example, “shoes” may be too general; “women’s Italian shoes” is better. Also, many SEM programs have ways to limit your ad delivery, which can keep it from showing up in inappropriate searches. “Exact matching” makes sure your ad shows up only when there is an exact keyword match. “Negative keywords” keep your ad from being delivered when there’s a term that could have two meanings (for instance, the word “virus” can be used by both computer-software and flu-symptom searchers). Geographic limits allow for regional or even city-level targeting.

— *Test and retest*

Consider varying your keyword purchases, your rankings and your ad language to see what generates the best results. For example, try combinations of broad keywords with low ranking, or run split tests with different ad copy.

— *Don’t forget second-tier search engines*

Keep in mind that you’ll be competing with a lot of business owners for keywords on the leading search engines. There are quite a few search sites on the Web; look for those that cater to a particular industry, interest, geography or other niche. These options can be more affordable and still have a sizable impact. ■



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## WHEN TO CALL IN THE HIRED GUNS

Search engines are complicated and constantly-evolving programs. Maximizing your search engine marketing and optimization effectiveness may take more than just an employee with an aptitude for the Web. You may decide it is necessary to hire an experienced partner. Use these criteria to make an informed choice:

— **Trust**

Remember that you are first and foremost establishing a business relationship. Does the company answer your questions honestly and completely, or does it avoid certain topics or give vague answers to your questions? You should feel completely comfortable that you are dealing with a knowledgeable and ethical vendor.

— **Experience**

Does the company have experience in your industry? If not, how does it intend to learn about what’s important to your customers? This is especially important for SEO consultants, since they’ll need to make sure you’re highlighting the right keywords on your site.

— **Credibility**

Ask for a list of references. When you call them, ask these referrals how the projects were run and what kinds of results they achieved.

— **Metrics**

Whether you gauge success by site visits or sales, how will your consultant help you measure your success?

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# WORKSHEET

## THINK LIKE A SEARCH ENGINE

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**To get the results you want from your search engine programs, it helps to learn about how search engines work. The major search sites (Google, MSN and Yahoo!) provide basic explanations of their engines and ad programs, and may even have an online tutorial. Once you're comfortable with search engine terminology, use this worksheet to plan your campaign.**

**1. WHO IS YOUR TARGET CUSTOMER?**

Profile your most profitable customers to frame your thinking about the terms they may use for searches.

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**2. WHAT IS THE GOAL OF YOUR SEARCH ENGINE MARKETING PROGRAM?**

Successful SEM campaigns can be measured by clickthroughs (or site traffic), site engagement (i.e. demos, downloads, completed contact forms, new subscriptions to your newsletter, etc.) or sales. Prioritize your objectives.

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**3. WHAT KEYWORDS AND PHRASES DO YOU THINK YOUR PROSPECTS USE TO FIND YOU?**

Brainstorm primary and secondary terms that best describe your offerings and audience.

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**4. WHAT KEYWORDS AND PHRASES DO PROSPECTS ACTUALLY USE?**

Speak to your customers about the search terms they would use. Check this list against the list you created in step 3.

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**5. WHAT 'NEGATIVE KEYWORDS' CAN YOU USE?**

When you use a negative keyword, your ad will not show up when that term is used. For instance, a used bookstore might want to use the negative keyword “textbook” to keep away people searching for used textbooks.

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**6. HOW CAN YOU CREATE AN EFFECTIVE AD?**

Look at ads for companies like yours. Try to find the shortest way to describe the unique benefit of your offering, and exactly who your target audience is. If you can, show your ad to a few customers or prospects to get their reactions.

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**7. WHAT'S YOUR BUDGET?**

How much are you willing to pay per click, and in total? You'll need to calculate the value of getting a customer to your site.

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