12 Steps for Getting the Most of Your Search Engine Marketing Campaign

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This week I'm not going to deal with whether search engine marketing actually works. I'm going to assume that you already know it works. I'm also going to assume that you've chosen to work with a reputable SEO firm, rather than doing it yourself. With those two assumptions out of the way, I'm going to focus on 12 simple steps to help you get the most from your search engine marketing campaign. Believe me, after dealing with hundreds of clients over the past 5 years, these steps have been field tested over and over again!

1. Go In With the Right Expectations

Search engine marketing can be incredibly effective, and yes, is some cases, can provide marketing miracles. But don't expect the impossible. Don't expect overnight rankings for exceptionally competitive or generic keywords. You're setting yourself up for disappointment from the very beginning.

If you've been paying attention to the industry over the past 3 years, you have to know that most search engines are a lot smarter than they were in 1998. A little bit of HTML savvy and keyword stuffing are no longer going to shoot you to the top for a keyword like MP3 or Computers. Now, search engines take into account things like total content, relevant incoming links, outgoing links and other factors that are impossible to fake.

Also, account for the "head scratch" factor. Sometimes you will find a site ranking highly on a search engine for a seemingly impossible keyword with no rhyme or reason. Search engines rely on secret and highly complex algorithms to determine rankings. When you have something this complex, there will be glitches and results that are hard to fathom.

So, what can you expect? If you follow the hints outlined below and pick the right SEO firm, who will help you with your keyword analysis, you should see a number of top 20 or 30 (preferably top 10) rankings across most search engines in 3 to 4 months. After this initial boost, you should see an overall trend of increasing visibility as time goes on, bearing in mind that search engine rankings tend to fluctuate, sometimes dramatically. In 6 months, you will see significant increases not only in search engine traffic, but overall traffic. Based on my past experience with a wide number of clients, traffic doubling in the first 6 months is not at all unusual.

2. Understand the Importance of Targeted Keywords

The most common misconception with search engine marketing is that you have to rank for generic single word keywords to attract any traffic. The opposite is true. While a single generic term may generate traffic, the quality of the traffic is generally poor. High quality traffic comes from great search engine rankings for well thought out, relevant terms.

The keyword analysis is the key to the success of your search engine marketing program. You need to think like the searcher and anticipate what words they would use to find you. You also have to understand that people are becoming more sophisticated in the ways they search.

Let's look at an example. Say you're looking for accommodation in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. Would a top ranking for "hotels" do you any good? No, the scope of the phrase is far too wide. If the searcher did start their search with this phrase, they would quickly find that the results they receive aren't relevant, and they would narrow their search. Even if they searched for "Mexican hotels", the results would still be too irrelevant. They would search for "Puerto Vallarta hotels" or, depending on their requirements, they might even further refine their search to "Puerto Vallarta all inclusive resorts" or "Puerto Vallarta family hotels".

As a matter of fact, we do have a client here in Kelowna, BC, that not only ranks highly for "kelowna motor inn" and "kelowna accommodation", but also has a couple of number one rankings for "motor inn" on major search engines. At first glance, this is great... but while the geographic specific terms generate hundreds of qualified leads a month for the client, the number one ranking for "motor inn" has done nothing for him. (No, we didn't purposely try to get the client a number one ranking for motor inn, it just happened.)

So, focused keyword phrases are good, but you don't want to focus so specifically that no one is looking for your term. The second part of a professional keyword analysis involves looking for the search terms that are relevant and that people will search for. Just bear in mind that 150 qualified searches a month are far more valuable than 10,000 unqualified searches.

For more on picking keywords, see "Picking the Right Keywords"; and for more on the way people search, check out "The Psychology of Searching".

3. Know Why Search Engine Targeted Content Pages (or Anchor Pages) are The Way They Are

Search engines like lots of good content simply presented in a clean HTML format. Search engines don't like Flash, dynamic content, java coding, extensive graphics and all the other bells and whistles that designers and programmers love to use. That's why many SEO firms will "beef up" the spiderable content of your site by adding additional content pages. These pages will be referred to as doorway pages, focused content pages, or gateway pages. At SEP, we create pages that go one step further, called anchor pages, that are interlinked within your site.

Whatever the name, it's important for you to understand the purpose of these pages. Generally, they are written and constructed to feature one keyword phrase. They are built specifically for a search engine. In our case, they quickly provide a "front door" through which a visitor will click directly into your site. These are pages that are built for search engines, not people. The entire purpose is to rank highly on a search engine. A good SEO firm will carefully construct these pages to be highly optimized. This is why the body text may sound odd and repetitive. It's why you won't find rollovers and flash. When you force the SEO firm to make changes to these pages to satisfy human tastes, you will usually make them less effective with search engines. You're defeating the whole point of the page. If your SEO's writer has completely missed the whole point in writing the text, then by all means ask for a rewrite. But please don't try tweaking the scripts to make them more grammatically pleasing to you. There's a very good reason the words are in the order they are.

4. Don't Encourage Spamming

Clients who are comfortable with aggressive marketing will often demand that SEO firms "push the envelope" in their positioning tactics. They will insist on known spam tactics such as cloaking, keyword

stuffing, invisible text and others. Their reasoning is that their competitors are doing it, so they have to follow suit to survive. Let me explain the flawed logic in this approach.

First of all, spam usually doesn't work. As I've said before, search engines are smarter at recognizing spam and rendering it useless. However, there are still sites out there that rank highly and are filled from the head tag to the closing body tag with every type of spam imaginable. Sooner or later, however, the search engines will catch up with these sites and eliminate them from their index. It's just a matter of time.

And that brings me to the main reason for avoiding spam. By encouraging your SEO firm to use spam tactics, you run a very real risk of having your domain permanently banned from a search engine. Once this happens, you can write off any traffic that search engine would have provided. To me, that's a very high price to pay for a tactic that isn't very effective in the first place.

Also included under this topic are the webmasters who decide to give their SEO firm a "helping hand" by including hidden text, stuffing keywords in their meta tags or other spam tactics. Please don't try to second guess your SEO firm.

5. Upload Optimized Pages Promptly

Part of our service involves taking existing pages from a site and optimizing them. This means going through the HTML coding carefully and making the page "search engine friendly", with the primary keywords for that page appearing in all the right spots. We also create specific content pages called anchor pages (described in tip number 3). Until these pages are uploaded to your site, there's nothing we can do for you on the search engines. We can submit your site, but there's not optimized content for a search engine to index. The longer the uploading of these pages is delayed, the less effective your search engine marketing program will be.

We have found the greatest success with sites that have allowed us ftp access, giving us the ability to upload the optimized pages ourselves. While this isn't possible with every client, it is imperative that the webmaster take responsibility for ensuring that these pages are uploaded quickly.

6. Don't Overwrite Optimized Pages

Once optimized pages are uploaded, the second biggest problem we encounter is clients overwriting or deleting optimized pages. This eliminates the coding and content that has been carefully prepared for the search engines, putting your SEO firm back to square one. Rankings that suddenly disappear from a search engine are traced back to overwritten or deleted pages in over 90 percent of all cases.

There's two things a site owner or webmaster can do to ensure this doesn't happen. First of all, if you're making a revision to an existing page that has been optimized, make the changes to the page that's currently sitting on your server. Don't make the changes to a local copy of the page on your hard drive. This way, you won't eliminate the meta tags or other optimization your SEO firm has done. Secondly, don't eliminate unfamiliar pages from your website without checking with your SEO firm first. Chances are, these are additional content pages placed on your site specifically for search engines.

7. Consult with an SEO Professional Prior to Site Design or Re-Design

The best time to start thinking about making your site search engine friendly is when it's still in the planning stages. All too often, the goals of a site designer and the goals of a search engine marketer are

at cross purposes. As I've said over and over again, search engines don't look kindly on bells and whistles. For more on this subject, read "Planning a Site Redesign? Read this first!"

8. Provide Access to Visitor Logs

If your SEO consultant doesn't have access to your visitor stats, it's like asking them to bowl blindfolded. They can monitor your progress on search engines, but they'll have no idea how successful they are at converting those higher rankings into the only statistic you really care about, increased traffic. Ongoing analysis of visitor logs allows a good SEO firm to fine tune their search engine marketing campaign, placing emphasis on the highest performing traffic sources, discover new links and refine their choice of keywords. Visitor numbers can make the difference between a strike and a gutter ball.

9. Make Sure Your Host Server is Reliable

And now, a simple lesson in Internet cause and effect. If your site is down when a search engine spider comes to visit, you won't be included in the index. What's even worse, if you've already achieved some high rankings, they'll probably disappear because the search engine will purge those listings from its index, assuming your site is no longer active.

A site being down for a day, or even an hour, could affect your visibility for months to come. For this reason, make sure your hosting service is reliable. And if you're planning to take your site down for awhile, but don't want to lose your rankings, consider leaving place holder pages online to help hold your position in the search engines. Make sure you inform your SEO consultant well before you take the site down and enlist their help in making sure those rankings don't disappear.

10. Don't Put All Your Eggs in One Basket

Yes, search engine marketing is the most cost effect form of online marketing I've ever found. That's why it's the focus of our business. But it's also the most difficult to control. Search engine rankings are constantly subject to wild fluctuations up and down, and often disappear entirely. For this reason, it should never be your sole online marketing strategy. Buffer the unpredictability of the engines with other marketing vehicles and you'll sleep much better at night.

11. Understand that Not All Search Engines are Created Equal

A good search engine marketing firm will spend their time and efforts on the engines and directories that will produce the greatest results. Right now, Google and Yahoo produce about 60% of all search engine traffic. Hotbot may produce 2 or 3 percent. Which traffic vehicle would you want your SEO consultant spending their time on?

12. Budget for Paid Inclusion and Submissions

Paying for inclusion into engines and directories is a fact of life now. You simply can't expect to have an effective search engine marketing campaign without setting aside some budget for paid submissions and inclusions. The first one I'd recommend is Yahoo's Business Express Submission. For more on your paid inclusion options, read "Paying to Play: Search Engines and Directories Rated"

13. Pick the Right SEO Firm

Yes, I know I said there were only 12 tips, but this could be the most important step you'll make in your search engine marketing campaign. It's imperative you pick the right SEO firm. There are many to choose from, but unfortunately, few of them are very good. An excellent guide to help start your search is Marketing Sherpa's Buying Guide to Search Engine Optimization and Positioning. They've reviewed 24 firms to date and have 31 more (ours included) that they'll be reviewing for their second edition. As you'll see, the prices charged and the results delivered vary widely. It's an excellent read and the $119 investment could save you far more than that by pointing you in the right direction for your search engine marketing strategy.

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