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"A Science, a Black Art or an Essential Marketing tool?"

Grow Your Business Online:
The Commercial Approach to
Search Engine Marketing

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Introduction

The demand for website marketing solutions has remained strong throughout the recession and this is due to continued strong growth in the Internet coupled with the recognition by many businesses that they need to work harder at their marketing activities during difficult trading periods.

The name of the world's leading search engine, Google, has now become a verb, and the typical way to search for a product or service is to 'Google it'. This makes a well-designed, regularly updated and search engine optimised website the most powerful and cost-effective method available to promote your products and services.

Although businesses are increasingly aware of the important role played by search engines, it is still the case that the majority of websites are not properly optimised. Relatively few businesses really understand how well their websites are performing when it comes to attracting visitors and many websites need to be improved if they are to efficiently and effectively convert visitors into customers.

There is, however, strong interest from businesses keen to understand how blogging and social media marketing can be harnessed as part of their overall marketing activities, and this has extended the reach of search engine marketing (SEM) beyond the previous emphasis on keyword-based optimisation.

Investing in search engine marketing is essential if you are to gain the maximum benefit from your investment in online marketing, and search engine marketing services are an integral part of every website project.

The Commercial Approach

Some early entrants to the SEO market place took advantage of naïve businesses who believed the promises of guaranteed first page ranking on Google. In fact, we're still taking calls from SEO 'cowboys' claiming to be calling 'on behalf of Google', so we're really not surprised that website marketing has got a bad reputation and many marketers are very wary of the hype.

As an established website design and development business with long-standing customers and a reputation to protect, we take an entirely different and totally transparent approach. Despite the leading edge nature of SEO and SEM, our approach is based upon tried and tested marketing techniques that involve setting measureable business goals, and reviewing our performance on a regular basis. The approach is something like this:

1. Agree business objectives for marketing campaign such as:
   - Target territory (local or national), measureable business goals

2. Benchmark your existing website:
   - Visitor numbers, rankings against target keywords

3. Design and implement the campaign:
   - Keyword optimisation, Link Strategy, Adwords etc.

4. Monthly report:
   - Generated from Google Analytics showing current month and campaign to date

5. Performance review:
   - Regular reviews every 6 months covering:
     - Activities carried out, achievements vs. objectives, recommendations for next 6 months, adjusting the campaign accordingly (including opting-out)
   - An Adwords pilot might have a 3 month review

So What Are SEO and SEM?

There are many different definitions of search engine optimisation (SEO) and search engine marketing (SEM), and the abbreviations SEO and SEM are often used incorrectly, so here's a quick overview of where we believe SEO and SEM can help you to grow your business.

What is SEO?

Whenever someone decides to search for a product or service they visit Google (or Bing, Yahoo etc.) and enter a query based on the keyword or keyword phrase they think is most likely to yield the correct result. When they enter a query in a search engine and hit 'Enter' they are presented with a list of results that contain the keyword term they have selected. Users normally tend to visit websites that are at the top of this list as they perceive those to be more relevant to the query.

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) is a technique which helps search engines to find and rank a website higher than the millions of other websites found in response to a search query. SEO thus helps to draw visitor traffic from search engines.

In fact SEO is where it all started but today we prefer the much wider 'umbrella' term of SEM (ie. search engine marketing).

What is SEM?

Clearly there is much potential for confusion, so here is a definition:

"Search engine marketing is the process of gaining traffic from or visibility on search engines".

Note that the phrase 'search engine marketing' is also sometimes shortened to 'search marketing'.

We used the term 'umbrella' earlier and this is because SEM is a term that covers two broad areas:
- Gaining 'free' website traffic through search marketing efforts.
- Gaining website traffic through paid search advertising.

Even this definition has its limitations because, today, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter have an increasingly important role to play, so let's have a look at how search engines actually work.

How Search Engines Work

The first thing to remember is that search engines are not human, and understanding the differences between how search engines and humans view web pages is essential.

Unlike humans, search engines are text-driven. Although technology advances rapidly, search engines are far from intelligent creatures that can appreciate the beauty of a cool design, appreciate that "a picture is worth a thousand words", or enjoy the sounds and movement in movies. Instead, search engines **crawl** the Web, looking at particular website items (mainly text) to get an idea what a website is about. This brief explanation is not the most precise because as we will see next, search engines perform several activities in order to deliver search results – *crawling*, *indexing*, *processing*, *calculating relevancy*, and *retrieving*.

First, search engines crawl the Web to see what is there. This task is performed by a piece of software, called a *crawler* or a *spider* (or *Googlebot*, as is the case with Google). Spiders follow links from one page to another and index everything they find on their way. Having in mind the number of pages on the Web (over 20 billion), it is impossible for a spider to visit a site daily just to see if a new page has appeared or if an existing page has been modified, sometimes a month or two might pass in between visits by crawlers.

After a page is crawled, the next step is to **index** its content. The indexed page is stored in a giant database, from where it can later be retrieved. Essentially, the process of indexing is identifying the words and expressions that best describe the page, and assigning the page to particular keywords. It would require an army of humans to process this volume of information but humans would do a great job of understanding a website and indexing it correctly. While search engines are capable of processing the data they sometimes find it difficult to correctly interpret the purpose of a website page and index it correctly. The process of search engine optimisation is to ensure that a page will be accurately interpreted by a search engine and indexed in such a way that it will be one of the first to be recommended as a suitable match for searches on the target keywords – ie. to get higher search rankings.

When a search request comes, the search engine **processes** it by comparing the search string in the search request with the indexed pages in the database. Since it is likely that more than one page contains the search string (practically it is millions of pages), the search engine starts **calculating the relevancy** of each of the pages in its index with the search string.

There are various algorithms to calculate relevancy. Each of these algorithms has different relative weighting for common factors like keyword density, links or 'Metatags'. This is why different search engines give different search results pages for the same search string. What is more, it is a known fact that all major search engines periodically change their algorithms, and if our objective is to keep a particular website at the top, it is necessary to constantly adapt its pages to the latest changes. This is an important reason for investing in on-going SEO, if a website is to maintain its ranking position. Other important reasons are competitive activity and changes in the market place.

The last step in search engines' activity is **retrieving** the results. Basically, it is nothing more than simply displaying them in the browser – ie. the endless pages of search results that are presented in order from the most relevant to the least relevant websites.

Differences Between Major Search Engines

Although the basic principle of operation of all search engines is the same, the minor differences between them lead to major changes in results relevancy. For different search engines, different factors are important.

There are many examples of these differences. For instance, for Yahoo! and Bing, on-page keyword factors are of primary importance, while for Google links are very, very important. Also, for Google websites are like wine – the older, the better - while Yahoo! generally has no expressed preference towards websites and domains with tradition (ie. older ones). Thus more time might be needed for a website to mature and achieve a high ranking in Google than in Yahoo.

SEM Service Overview

We have been successfully providing SEM services since 2004, and since then the range of services provided has gradually increased to include the following:

- Keyword research
- Website optimisation
- Copy writing and editing
- Search engine and directory submissions
- Link development
- Blog content generation
- Social media marketing
- Setup and management of 'Pay-per-Click; campaigns (e.g. Google Adwords)
- Provision of VOIP telephone services (including reporting data)

It is important to remember that these services are a means to an end and not the end itself, and while your ranking position, traffic generation or visitor numbers might be interesting statistics, our real objective is increasing the number of enquiries or orders from new customers.

So, to be truly effective and deliver real business benefits, our overall service delivery is measured by account 'conversions' - ie. the % of website visitors that go on to make an enquiry or place an order.

This section provides a brief overview of the services available.

Keyword Research

Now we know why keywords are important, how do we assess which are the best keywords to use for a particular website?

Our keyword research is aimed at providing an insight into the client's market. We use a multitude of data resources to help us build a profile of the industry landscape looking at competitors, search volumes, keyword competition, user intentions (based on language used), likely number of visitors based on a prime ranking as well as advanced SEO metrics like KEI (keyword effectiveness index) and KER (keyword effectiveness and relevance).

We use all of the above to enable us to make data-led decisions on which keywords a business should target. We also utilise our own common sense and experience in search engine optimisation to weed out unsuitable keywords and help find the 'gems' which enable customers to find the website when they are looking for the relevant products and services.

We will always endeavour to produce a 'hit list' of keywords that we would recommend, but the depth to which a market is researched depends upon the package selected. For example an 'In-depth' keyword report will analyse around 300 keywords.

On-page SEO

Search engine optimisation best practices are forever changing as the major search engines update their algorithms. You need not worry about that as we dedicate a proportion of our time to ensure our knowledge is up to date ensuring each website we work on is given the best possible chance of achieving prime search engine visibility.

Our on-page SEO service looks at all aspects of a website covering everything from the coding and structure of a page, to the META titles, META descriptions, URL structures, internal linking structure, image attributes and actual content.

We will make changes (or recommend changes) to ensure the website has solid foundations thereby allowing us to build a stronger more successful website once we commence our other optimisation efforts.

Linkbuilding

It is a widely accepted fact that search engines look at links to a website as 'votes' for the quality and relevance of that website. To put it simply the more incoming links you have, and the better quality links you have, the higher up the search results the website will appear.

We take a strategic approach to '*linkbuilding'* but we maintain an ethical stance to ensure our clients are never penalised by search engines like Google. Paying for links is not a practice that we participate in, exactly for this reason.

Our linkbuilding activity aims to provide a mix of *velocity*, *volume* and *authority*. This means that we seek to generate backlinks from a variety of sources including lower authority but higher volume sources such as directories, and then lower volume but higher authority backlinks like blogs. We try to ensure appropriate 'anchor text' is used in the backlink – this will usually be the keyword we are trying to target - as this gives added credibility to the website and helps to boost ranking positions for that keyword.

We maintain a close eye on the link profile to ensure that everything appears natural, and to ensure that we don't attain links too quickly, which could lead Google to believe it is being manipulated. This is where the velocity must be right in order to ensure that our linkbuilding efforts are steady but deliver consistent results.

Blog Content Creation

Content forms the bedrock of many successful websites and search engine optimisation campaigns. It helps to pull in traffic and attract natural backlinks; keeping a website 'fresh' and ensuring it maintains high search engine visibility. We use content as a vehicle for ensuring a website grows but also as a way of securing backlinks from authority websites in the form of guest posts.

Our UK based web copywriters deliver work that is thoroughly researched and/or prepared to your specifications, carefully crafted by hand and independently proofread, search engine optimised and matched to the required tone/brand.

Social Media Management

Social media has seen phenomenal growth in the last few years with sites like Facebook attracting over 700 million users, and it is essential for a business to interact and engage with existing and potential customers in places where they spend time online.

Our social media management service is all about delivering engagement, and we help to forge stronger relationships with the customer base through conversation rather than pure direct marketing.

We will assess your business, its customers and market to understand the best forms of social media to adopt and then we will set about delivering a social media package that is right for your business.

This can include anything from a Facebook page, to managing a Twitter account, to creating a LinkedIn group, to assisting with Facebook's self-serve advertising platform. We assist clients in most areas of the leading social media platforms, which means our expertise and experience is far reaching.

Social mediums like Facebook are now serious business and can deliver tangible competitive advantage if administered correctly. This is why it is important to consider an on-going investment in maintaining a high quality social presence.

Pay-per-click (PPC) Management

Paid search marketing (such as Google Adwords) is a great way to boost visibility whilst organic search engine optimisation techniques are being put into practice, so this is especially important for websites on a new domain. PPC provides a channel for testing keywords and measuring how users

react to them, and weaving this information into the organic SEO campaign allows us to optimise both simultaneously.

Our primary PPC platform is Google AdWords, and we specialise in developing 'high-performance' campaigns that focus on driving down the cost per click, improving *clickthrough-rate* and, more importantly, delivering qualified traffic to a website that is more likely to convert into customers. We have the capability to setup and manage a paid search campaign.

Our tried and tested process is to commence paid search marketing campaigns with keyword research, and by looking for less competitive keywords we aim to deliver a higher proportion of qualified visitors to your website. We use research, existing knowledge and language analysis to identify the keywords that are best suited to advertising your business, products and services.

We build the campaign by creating Adgroups with closely connected keyword variations and a series of text adverts for each keyword. We will then manage and optimise the campaign to ensure the best performing ads are shown more frequently by slowly phasing out the worst performing keywords and weaker adverts. We will also work closely with you to ensure the maintenance and improvement of campaign landing pages, making suggestions for alterations in order to improve conversion.

We usually recommend clients assign a testing budget (particularly if they are new to paid search marketing) which helps us identify the areas to invest more heavily in. This ensures minimum wastage and a truly high-performance campaign in the long run.

VOIP Telephone Service

This service involves the allocation of a Voice-Over-IP (VOIP) telephone number, which is promoted on your website. All calls to this number are automatically forwarded to your usual phone number but each call is tracked and monitored. Every month a report is generated showing the exact number of telephone enquiries generated by the website.

This can be very useful in accurately assessing visitor conversion levels.

On-Going Optimisation

Once the initial campaign objectives have been achieved it is still necessary to continue monitoring the websites' performance and make updates to take account of changes in your business, competitor activity and search engine technologies.

The ongoing optimisation work will also often include an element of link development and may run alongside blogging and social media content delivery services.

One of the most important aspects of the ongoing service is to ensure that business objectives are being achieved, and the focus here is on analysing visitor activity and recommending website updates aimed at improving visitor conversions into enquiries or orders.

Creating Your Bespoke SEM Campaign

The level of investment in SEM projects varies depending on the business objectives (and budget) but recent projects range from a one-off fee of £150 through to on-going commitments with monthly budgets in excess of £2,000.

Each campaign is geared to the budget of a particular business and the focus throughout the campaign is on the achievement of agreed business objectives. These business objectives can be expressed in a number of ways including the following examples:

- Obtaining a first page ranking position in Google, for an agreed range of keyword terms within n months.
- Achieving a $p\%$ increase in visitor numbers within n months.
- Obtaining x enquiry form submissions per month within n months
- Obtaining x enquiry submissions and y telephone enquiries within n months
- Achieving x newsletter subscriptions per month within n months
- Achieving an ROI of $p\%$ within n months or years

SEM projects can consist of a combination of services delivered either as a discrete project or delivered over an agreed minimum period. The campaign typically consists of an initial setup phase, which is usually followed by an on-going campaign over an agreed period of months or years.

The various search engine marketing services we provide can be considered as potential ingredients and, based on our knowledge of your business, your website, objectives and budget, our specialists will prepare the appropriate combination to deliver the required results.
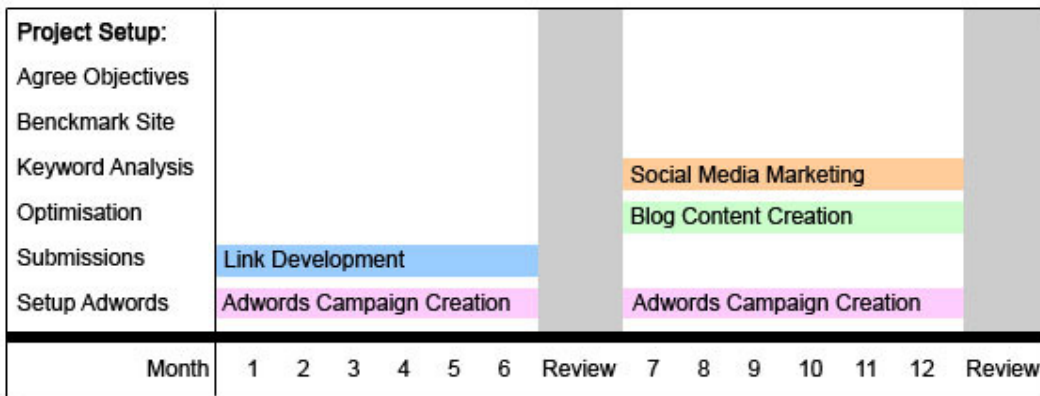
This chart shows the first 12 months of an example campaign for a new website which uses a combination of our services.

Given a positive result during the first six months, the business might decide to increase the monthly budget to allow link development activity to continue alongside blog content and social media activity. If rankings and visitors are seen as the main priority, blog content would be the preferred option in this situation. A new website (on a new domain) will have to be established for many months before Google will start to recommend it, so a pay-per-click (Adwords) campaign is essential in the beginning. After time, however, Google will come to trust the website, and supporting evidence provided by incoming links, blogs and social media activity will encourage Google to rank the website higher in 'organic' search results, so it might be possible to decrease the Adwords budget after a number of reviews.

Where projects are run over several months regular reports are usually delivered, and at the end of an initial campaign a full review of the campaign results is produced, including recommendations on future campaign activity.