

## **Changing Faces of Search Marketing**

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A year of unprecedented change in the search engine landscape and online business environment has forced many SEOs and SEMs to alter and, in some cases, drastically rethink the services they offer and the techniques they use. For some SEOs, the changes represent a world of opportunities to expand their services and experiment with emerging techniques. For others, the changes in the search world have hit with the repetition and intensity of a series of destructive environmental disasters.

Before getting into the changes to services and techniques, a quick look at how the search marketing sector has changed is in order.

To begin with, I need to stress that a news time deadline and word limit of 2000 or less permits only a very general overview of this expansive industry. There are exceptional SEO and SEM practitioners working far beyond the fringes of the mainstream SEM world. The growing numbers of SEOs employed by global corporations are an example of an exceptional group outside the typical small or micro-business SEM shop model. Similarly, traditional advertising firms have started to understand the importance of search marketing and are hiring or sub-contracting their own in-house search marketing teams. Regardless of who works for or with whom, or who has what resources to work with, the same general factors affect the products of our toilsome tinkering.

As the search marketing industry matures the knowledge base that supports it grows rapidly. The numbers of practitioners grows every year as well with thousands of new SEMs annually entering the field. The field they enter is already well populated with established firms, some quite large and some much smaller. Fortunately, there is more than enough work for the sector to continue expanding. Very few SEM shops went out of business for lack of clients this year.

It is important to know how SEMs tend to make their money before considering how search industry changes affect the SEM sector. The two extremities of the professional SEO/SEM practitioner world are those who do it for their own online ventures and those who work for outside clients. The vast majority of SEM practitioners are found somewhere in between those two extremes with the bulk tending towards the latter. There is however, an apparent correlation between the choice of SEO tactics and the spot on the spectrum of a practitioner or specific project.

Those working on their own web properties exclusively tend to see revenues from participation in affiliate programs or paid-ad distribution programs offered by Yahoo and Google. SEMs who take outside clients tend to see revenues from service fees and commissions. Ultimately, for small business SEO and SEM shops, financial planning and scheduled money management are the essential skill sets that bridge the gap between success and failure.

SEOs and SEMs who achieved most of their revenues promoting their own website properties have been the most adversely affected by the changes at Google, Yahoo and other search giants. This side of the sector established itself in the early days of the late 90's finding ways to tempt web surfers into affiliate program sales, gambling industry sites and of course, adult entertainment sites. Until recently, the

“anything-goes” attitude formed around those sectors, and the inability of the major search engines to keep up with them, allowed self-interest SEOs to use obvious and highly creative algorithm exploits to get their sites ranked higher.

During and just before the recent Jagger Update at Google, many of these sorts of sites found themselves virtually unfindable as Google delisted or degraded their placements. Google took action for a number of reasons, the greatest of which was the long-term incompatibility of Google’s PageRank based algorithms and the various (and often amazingly intricate) link-based exploits used. To be honest, incompatibility might be exactly the wrong word. Many of these exploits were designed specifically to maximize the behaviour of Googlebot but often forgot about the content to keyword contextual relationships Googlebot is searching for. Eventually Googlebot started acting like a jilted suitor, especially after reading about such exploits (or people bragging about them) on various search related forums.

Frequently, SEOs and SEMs working solely for themselves stray towards what has been labeled the “black-hat” side of the search marketing sector. Basically, black-hat SEO is technique that does not follow the stated guidelines posted by the search engines. As the sites they promoted, for the most part, belonged to them, any sanctions faced stemming from a violation of search engine guidelines would ultimately be less severe for them than it would be for SEM practitioners working on someone else’s sites. It is much easier to sluff off damage your actions caused to your own property than it is damage caused to the property of others.

SEOs and SEMs who work as agents for other businesses tend to be more like traditional advertising firms in their relationship with and reliance on their clients. Agency type SEO and SEM shops tend to adhere to a loose and unregulated code-of-conduct that includes a commitment to following search engine guidelines. For the most part, this group, and by extension their clients, tended to come out of the Jagger Updates in fair to fine condition. Those who view the search engine guidelines as a quasi legal-code are often labeled “white-hats”.

Algorithm updates are more of an interesting inconvenience to this group, a thunder and lightning storm with obvious destructive potential that is compelling and wondrous to behold. In such storms, some stuff might be damaged by rain, hail or even lightning and it is not entirely safe to play in the water but at the end of the day, if you play it safe you’ll probably be ok. Sudden and unexpected algorithm changes at Google might have minor effects on techniques used by “white-hat” SEO and SEM practitioners however algo-shifts don’t keep them up at night.

The growing segmentation of the search world and the adoption of emerging technologies and trends is what keeps them awake into the wee-hours of the morning, trying to figure out exactly what is happening and how provide expert services in a rapidly changing environment. As most SEO and SEM shops are small to micro-businesses, daytime is for operating the business and nighttime is for reading and experimenting. Things were much simpler for three years ago.

The introduction of several new types of search engine makes the job of a search marketing practitioner more complicated. Where once we thought about Google, we now have shopping and comparison search tools, local search engines, RSS, music and video search, blog and podcast search appliances to think about. Not only does the SEM need to have a working knowledge of how each type of search engine works, they also need to know how to write and/or code for them. Over the coming year, expect to see the SEO and SEM sector start to segment to offer specialized service packages for specific types of search appliance.

Electronic commerce dominates our economy. From individual consumers and Christmas sales to the flow of global capital, the Internet has become the backbone of business everywhere. As more and more people become Internet savvy, the environment moves towards becoming more professional. Information begets information and the more of it we have, the better we can run our businesses. Site statistics and established industry metrics drive a lot more of the decision making than they used to. As search develops from the \$12billion industry it is today to the \$25billion industry predicted in five years, the ability to offer analytical services to clients is going to be emphasized by expanding search marketing firms.

An assumption made about both Google and Yahoo is that each place increasing importance on the intent of a document in their indexes and the relationship it shares with other documents in their index. The relationship between document A and document B is further judged by the relationships both share with other documents found in Google or Yahoo's indexes. Expect the link-generation business to evolve and become far more professional. In order to seriously sell links, link brokers will increasingly need to be able to vouch for the contextual relevance of the links they establish between documents.

Furthermore, both Google and Yahoo take an interest in user behaviours. How a user acts when they visit a document found in search results has an impact on how important the search engines think the document might be. This leads us to conclude that usability, or the ease of use of a website or document, will play a greater role in rankings on both Google and Yahoo. We expect to offer a greater range of usability consulting options and urge current clients with questions about usability to contact us.

Lastly, the introduction of [Google Base](#) and Microsoft's very similar [Fremont.Live](#) will force SEOs and SEMs to add a number of hours to client accounts as product and service offerings should be inserted into both systems as quickly as possible. Base and Fremont are both sort of mysteries in development. They appear to be the equivalent of classified ads but given the intent of their owners and the feel of the systems, are obviously designed to be something greater. Whatever they become in the long-term, it only makes sense to put client information in them as soon as possible, a process that could unfortunately take hours per client.

The face of search marketing is changing and those changes pose a lot of challenges. New services, more analytics and a greater volume of work per client are expected in the coming year. Finding and training staff is going to be one difficulty faced by smaller firms. Retaining staff will continue to be a challenge for larger ones. Fortunately, given the array of tools at our disposal, attracting new clients, retaining old ones and achieving strong rankings for all should be the least of our challenges.