

## **Christmas Time for Search Marketing**

**By Jim Hedger, StepForth News Editor, and Bill Stroll, Sales and Marketing Manager, [StepForth Placement Inc.](#)**

Christmas is coming. Six months from today, retailers and E-Tailers relying on a strong holiday season will be assessing the bounties of the season. The winter holiday season is the most important segment of the year for North American retail businesses, often accounting for more than half of annual revenues. For many businesses, the period between October and mid-January makes or breaks the bottom line. For online businesses, the early months of summer are the right time to be thinking about the end of the year. Conventional wisdom states it takes about three to four months to achieve Top10 placements with an already established website. It can take even longer with new sites.

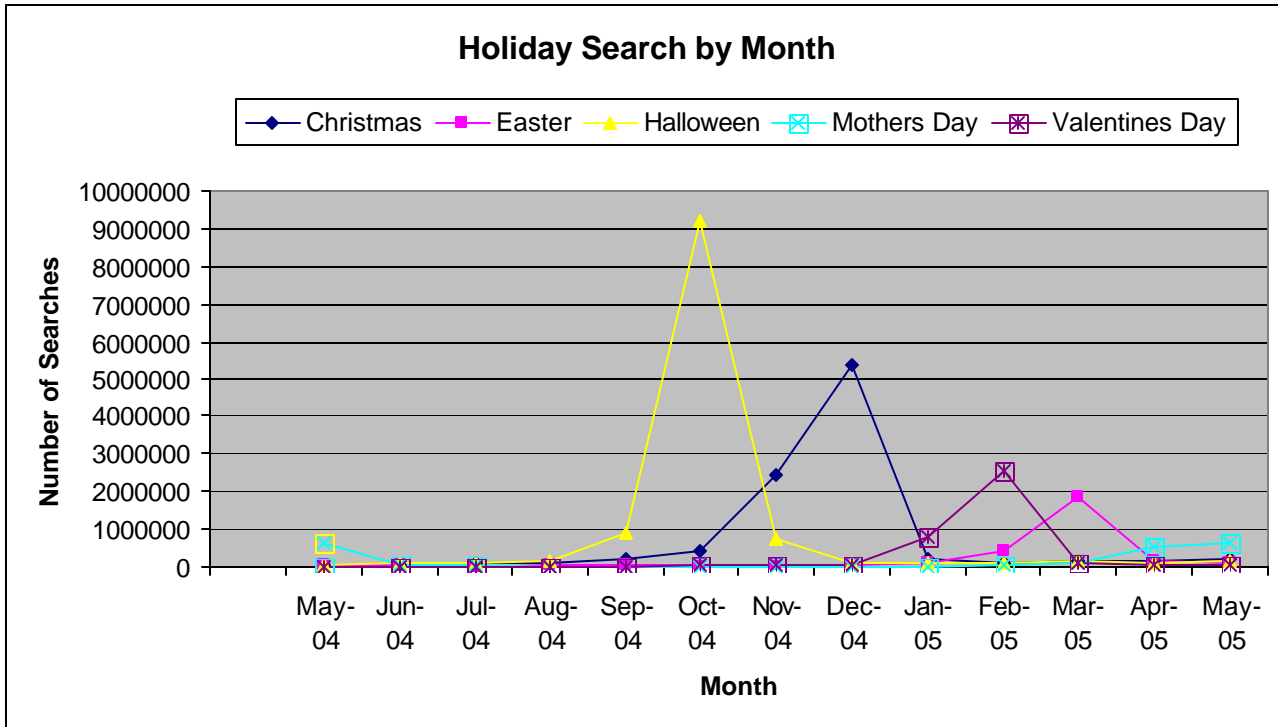
Seasonal advertising is almost always based on what are called saturation campaigns. For instance, North American consumers will be swamped with images of Santa and sugar plums. Songs by Bing Crosby and David Bowie will ring nostalgically through our minds. Streets, shopping malls and schools will be festooned with tinsel, holiday decorations and ornamentation designed to get one and all into the season of getting and giving. Increasingly the Internet has taken the holiday spirit, or at least the shopping part of it, away from the mall and onto the monitor.

Savvy retailers are taking advantage of the ever expanding online audience afforded via search marketing and Internet advertising. Retailers who once had a localized marketplace are now competing with retailers from around the world for customers. Regardless of the fact that nobody's real-world store is starting to look a lot like Christmas yet, the race for strong search engine placements for Christmas related items begins this month. Is your website positioned to achieve the visibility it needs to give you the Christmas season you want for your business?

Time is of the essence. While it might be the most wonderful time of the year, Christmas, from a search marketing perspective, is just around the corner. This is an opportune time to begin the process of planning for success.

Choosing strong keyword phrases to market towards is extremely important. Lycos has studied keywords used by search users for years, compiling the weekly list, the [Lycos 50](#). Appearing for the first time this week as the eighteenth most searched word is, "Christmas".

That conforms to StepForth's weekly tracking of holiday related keyword terms which shows a steady rise in the use of Christmas related keyword phrases starting right about now. In May 2004, 73,276 people entered the word "Christmas" at Overture (now Yahoo Search Marketing). In July 2004, that number jumped to 90,215. In August 2004, there were 111,261 Overture searches for Christmas. By October 2004 there were nearly 415,000 searchers for the word Christmas. In November, the floodgates open with 2,426,425 searches, a number that more than doubled in December with 5,383,254 searches conducted for Christmas. A common thread in the study shared by all holiday related phrases shows interest starts to increase radically 90 – 120 days before the calendar date of the holiday.



You might first want to figure out exactly how you wish to be visible on the major search engines as we move towards the holiday buying season. There are two basic types of search engine advertising characterized as Organic or Paid. Organic ads are the general free listings that come up in orders of 1 – 10 under related keywords or keyword phrases. Paid ads tend to be found above or to the right hand side of organic search results and are also distributed across networks of millions of other websites. Knowing the most advantageous ways of using both common forms of search advertising builds a strong foundation and forms a good starting point.

Both types of ad drive traffic though recent studies have shown that traffic driven by organic listings outpaces traffic driven by paid-advertising by a margin of almost 80%.

When most search engine users think about search, they visualize the free, organic listings. Achieving a Top10 organic placement is essential for online retailers who want to be noticed against the millions of other Christmas or holiday related listings that will begin to appear in the coming months. A recent Eye-tracking study of search engine users by Kelowna based SEM [Gord Hotchkiss](#) reveals, "There seems to be a "F" shaped scan pattern, where the eye tends to travel vertically along the far left side of the results looking for visual cues (relevant words, brands, etc) and then scanning to the right if something caught the participant's attention." In other words, because they occupy the best real estate on the screen, organic placements are seen by a greater number of eyeballs than their paid-advertising counterparts over to the right.

That's not to say that paid search advertising is a waste of money. It most certainly is not. It pays to pay for paid-search advertising for a number of reasons. Paid search advertising offers distribution opportunities that organic listings do not. Through their networks of partnered websites and publications, ads placed with both Google and Yahoo, (along with second and third tier competitors) tend to appear on

literally hundreds of millions of other web properties, based on similarities between text on those properties and text appearing in the ad-copy. Known as contextual distribution, the networks of websites displaying paid advertising from one of the major search engines continues to grow as more independent webmasters sign up as distribution partners.

Another good reason to plan for a paid search advertising campaign is the instant gratification of instantly appearing on the first page of search results under the keyword phrases you have chosen to bid on. Seconds after entering your ad-copy and placing your click-through bids, your advertisement will start to appear on search results. PPC is often used as a temporary measure by search engine optimizers until organic listings begin to appear in order to ensure their client's service or product receives attention as quickly as possible.

Most search marketers agree that a coordinated search engine marketing strategy is important for advertisers in competitive categories and during highly competitive seasons such as Christmas. Understanding the common behaviours of search engine users helps to define the parameters of a smart search marketing campaign. A groundbreaking study by iProspect CEO [Fredrick Marckini](#) shows that 92% of all sales generated by search engine marketing actually occur offline. In other words, search engine users tend to research products before purchasing them from a local source or ordering them via traditional mail. This makes search marketing, both in paid and organic forms, an important branding tool. High placement in organic listings, accompanied by a paid-ad which is distributed on other sites relating to the product advertised, brings credibility, customer awareness, and ultimately, converted sales.

Christmas sales have increased every year for the past five years as have searches for holiday related keywords. Just as the seasons follow predictable patterns, search engine users tend to choose seasonally predictable phrases. Given the fact major interest in Christmas related words begins to climb in October, July is the right time to start your organic search engine optimization work. It is also a smart time to begin planning your paid-search advertising campaign and discussing strategy with your search engine marketers. Knowing the trends and how to harness the power of search engine marketing is only part of the battle. Making effective use of that knowledge is the other.