

Essential Venues for Small Business in 2006

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Search engine marketing has displaced every traditional media with the exception of television in relevancy and importance in the eyes of ad-buyers. With much lower costs and a much greater reach, online advertising makes up the second largest area in which advertisers spend money and marketers pass messages. There are a growing number of advertising channels available via the Internet and the major search engines are interested in acting as facilitators for as many of them as possible.

These channels or services, unlike traditional predecessors, are open and available to virtually anyone with a product to sell or message to communicate. Openness, ease of use, a sense of fairness and the global reach of the Internet are factors that make search marketing so popular. Ultimately, the versatility of the Internet combined with the much lower costs associated with online communications is what has brought search marketing to today's prominence. Add the evolution of the medium and expanded accessibility and it is a safe stretch to say that search marketing will eventually surpass traditional television advertising by 2010 as the communications vehicle of choice. Here is a short list of what the search engines currently offer in the way of services to small business advertisers.

Organic Listings

By far, the strongest form of search engine advertising is found in the free organic listings, at least if your site is in the Top10. According to a number of studies, the most well known of which is Gord Hotchkiss' [Google Eye Tracking study](#), the vast majority of search engine visitors examine and select organic listings over paid listings.

Organic listings are also the least expensive form of online marketing. All that is required is a good website and information on items people are searching for. Delivering a bigger bang for less money, a strong placement at Google, Yahoo and MSN can provide dramatic increases in site traffic.

Ironically, organic search marketing is not seen to be nearly as sexy or interesting as its wealthier cousins from the paid-placement side of the family. The free, organic listings are the loss leader of the search engine world. None of the major search engines makes a penny providing free listings and the search marketing sector servicing organic placements is still seen as an arcane and murky world by many advertisers.

Pay Per Click Advertising and Placement

Pay Per Click or PPC is currently the most popular advertising service offered by the major search engines. Mainstream marketers love it because PPC is fairly easy to understand and not nearly as difficult to explain to others as organic SEO. Because of this, and the base fact that search engines make money hand-over-fist from PPC programs, the rise in interest in search by major advertisers mirrors the evolution of the various PPC systems offered.

Overture started the ball rolling with their original pay per click search engine GoTo.com. The model was copied and modified by Google and Yahoo purchased Overture, rebranding the service Yahoo Search Marketing. Overture was fairly successful in its early years, sticking deals with the search engines of the day to display paid results much in the same way Google and YSM do today but it wasn't until Google introduced AdWords that mainstream advertisers took notice.

When they did, the sky was suddenly no longer the limit. (Google is actually working to send search services to space.) Mainstream advertising agencies and the absurd amounts of money they control started attending conferences and learning as much as they can about pay per click and other forms of search marketing.

PPC offers a number of definable results that organic SEO simply cannot. You can guarantee with absolute accuracy that the result will be visible on the front page as long as the money and effort is there to make it happen. Good SEOs haven't made guarantees for a number of years now. PPC has another hidden advantage that makes it widely attractive to larger advertisers.

Contextual Ad Delivery is possibly the coolest thing since the automated bread slicer was invented, at least if you think like a marketer or a search engine financial executive. The delivery system works in two unique ways. The first is based on keywords entered by searchers; the second is based on keywords found on a page or document.

Many search engines display ads generated by a larger search tool. AOL for example currently runs ads generated by Google. The specific ads coming up to the right of the organic search results are placed there because they somehow correspond to the keyword query made by the searcher viewing them. That's the basic form of contextual ad delivery.

The more complex form is found on non-search related documents. Next time you visit a website that is not a search engine, (perhaps even this one), take a look around the sides of the screen. If you see any ads by Google or YSM, you are looking at contextually delivered product. The ads appear on the screen because the website owner has partnered with Google or YSM. The ads are generated based on keywords found on the document on which they are displayed. Whenever a site visitor clicks on one of those ads, the site owner shares a percentage of the click-through bid. Similarly, users of Gmail have become accustomed to seeing paid advertisements generated based on keywords found in the text of their email messages.

Marketers see contextual delivery as the predecessor of personalized ad-delivery, a service MSN feels it is close to introducing when it takes adCenter out of beta.

Shopping Search

Another form of search service is shopping based search engines. Shopping engines deliver product information directly to consumers, and help them find online merchants to purchase from. They are not meant to be places people look for lost relatives or seek solutions to common health ailments but they would be glad to refer visitors to a good book or microwave oven.

Most shopping search engines receive information directly from the databases of merchants using their systems via an XML feed. Two well-known independent examples are [Become.com](#) and [Shopping.com](#). They are not alone however as the major search engines know a good thing when they see it. Earlier today, another well-known shopping engine, [PriceGrabber.com](#) was purchased by London based [GUS PLC](#) for \$485million.

Google, Yahoo and MSN all have their own shopping search engines. Of the three, Yahoo's is arguably the most interesting application of Web2.0 philosophy, MSN is the most traditional and Google is the most comparative.

[Yahoo Shopping](#) has moved forward into the world of Web2.0 providing lists of products and reviews compiled by its massive user base. It actively promotes users to save lists to an area known as my lists, and to make those lists available to other users. Yahoo has tied Yahoo Shopping into Yahoo local search and provides maps to stores found through their shopping engine.

[MSN Shopping](#) is fairly traditional and straight forward with product listings by category and price range.

Google's shopping service [Froogle](#) is actually more of a comparative price engine than a pure shopping engine but, in conjunction with Google Local and Google Maps, Froogle can provide directions to the lowest cost items near you.

Local Search

Perhaps the biggest marketing bonanza will be found in local search engines. Many search engine observers suggest local search will replace the Yellow Pages as users start to interface with search via handheld devices and cell phones. Most often used by consumers looking for a product or service near their own home, local search engines tend to draw information from the general search databases.

The types of search services mentioned above are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the full range of features, tools and services offered by the major search engines. For small business advertisers though, these are the services that are easiest to take advantage of and tend to return the best results.

Marketing in general has become more complicated and search marketing is becoming extremely complex. Small businesses that already have a relationship with an SEO or SEM firm might want to arrange a meeting with their search marketing vendor to discuss plans for the coming year. With or without the assistance of SEOs or SEMs all online advertisers have a lot to think about over the holiday season. 2006 looks like it is going to be wild and highly productive year.