

Ethics and Advertising – A Debate in SEO/SEM Circles

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In nearly every technical trade from auto mechanics to refrigerator repair, a series of four letter words are used to express frustration or to project one's vexation on an inanimate object. Frequently these words, regardless of the shop in which they're said, bear a striking similarity to each other. For many search engine marketers, one of the strongest four letter words is spam. On the Internet, the word spam is most often associated with unsolicited junk email but search engine marketers use the word to describe techniques that violate search engine guidelines or are in some way or another based on offering search engines spiders one set of data while presenting another on the site. Over the past three weeks, threads about search engine spam at various SEM forums transited from discussion to debate, at many points descending into downright nastiness and incivility.

Even those brave enough to try to find logical footholds in arguments often found themselves shouted down and improperly branded. Suffice it to say the ongoing debate has become rather ugly.

This has been a difficult column to write but I think it is one that needs to be written. At this point I think I should make a short disclosure statement. Readers looking for specific examples from threads should know now that very few will be provided in this piece. The only ones that will are those that have already hit the public realm. Those who read and contribute to the dozen or so SEO/SEM forums know the material being referred to and for those who don't, it is there to be found. I've actually held off for a few weeks while watching the various threads unfold. Many of the contributors are folks I've had the privilege of meeting in person, speaking with over the phone, or corresponding with on a regular basis. I have a lot of respect for nearly everyone involved, including some who openly use techniques I consider dangerous to clients and to the industry's relationship with the search engines. I am a moderator in one of the forums involved and have appeared at conferences organized by another. Some of the forums publish my articles on their websites. Just thought y'all should know before you read any further.

For the uninitiated, online discussion forums can be enlightening though intimidating environments. Populated by all levels of skill and talent, online discussion forums are meant to provide specific communities with a place to share skills and ideas, a place to converse and debate issues. Virtually every professional group on the Internet has a discussion forum dedicated to their sector. Some, such as the search engine optimization and marketing sector, have several unique discussion forums, each with its own personality. Like other communities, the face and traditions of the various forums are sketched by the attitudes and behaviors of the members. Through the tone and helpfulness of the postings, especially those by moderators, a collective consciousness of sorts is formed. Most forums tend to be populated by good, honest hard working folk who share each other's skills and knowledge in order to improve their community. The forums share several attributes of real-world communities, the most obvious being the fact all human communities are populated by highly emotional human beings. Periodically, all communities deal with inflamed emotions around a highly polarizing debate with the hallmark of a mature society being the way it handles such debate.

The search engine optimization and marketing forums are alive with the sound of anger, some of which is spilling out of our not-so-gated community into the consciousness of the general public. This isn't one of

the normal run-of-the-mill spats between two or three posters who seem to have it in for each other. The debate, which has transited all forums, is over the ethics of the search marketing industry and what constitutes search engine marketing spam. While pages of postings at several places read like flame-fests, the central points focus on the morality of different types of techniques used in providing SEO or SEM services.

"Spam is as spam does", is a saying that could be adopted by one side of the debate. The other side could easily reply, "Desperate climbs call for disparate measures". Both sides agree that all forms of search engine marketing are forms of advertising but that's about the point all agreement tends to break down.

The search engines themselves haven't helped define the debate very much either. Until the recent Bourbon update, it could be said that Google didn't always uphold its stated standards and the quality of search results seemed to suffer for it. (The jury is still out on the medicinal effects of Bourbon.) Last year, at the Chicago Search Engine Strategies conference, Yahoo's Tim Meyer's was quoted saying "If you're being entirely organic and going after 'Viagra,' it's like taking a sword to a gunfight. You just aren't going to rank."

The crux of the issue is that some organic optimizers and pay-per-click marketers use techniques that fall within a loose set of guidelines provided by the search engines while other SEOs and SEMs don't. This isn't a new thing. There have been white-hat vs. black-hat debates as long as the SEO/SEM industry has existed.

Here's a thumbnail description of attitudes on both sides. Please excuse the use of the limiting "white-hat" and "black-hat" monikers.

The white-hat side considers itself more ethical than the black-hat side. Existing within an algorithmic order based on the accurate location of words, descriptions, links and content, white-hat practitioners have three critical bottom-line responsibilities. One is to their client. Another is to their business and staff. A third is to search engine users and the search environment.

Each of these bottom-lines are loaded with ethical considerations. For instance, ethical SEO or SEM shops offer clients exclusivity over their target keyword and keyword phrases. It stands to reason as even the best SEO in the world can only make one site rank in the #1 organic position at any given search engine. (For some dark-art practitioners that simple line can be blurred by the precarious power of mass cross-reference linking between disposable sites. Why not have three clients using the same keyword phrase if you can, at least temporarily, deliver three times the traffic?) A more long-term white-hat responsibility is to avoid using any tactics that will get the client's domain in trouble with the search engines. For many clients, their domain name is a part of their brand name. Getting a brand name banned by Google is considered to be pretty much the worst disservice to a client an SEO can commit.

The commitment to business and staff is obvious. Less obvious is the commitment to the search engine environment as a whole. Search engine optimization can be a very powerful tool. In the early days the adult industry dominated any term that could even remotely be considered sexual. Last year, blogs, link-factories and affiliate content were used to game search results. The search engines have been wary of the power of optimization. White-hat SEOs and SEMs would tend to say we have a collective responsibility to deliver exactly what is promised in the SERPs. Not only that, we also have an ethical responsibility to keep relations with the search engines and search engine users on an even keel by

considering the effect of our work on how the search engines themselves work. After all, they provide the billboards upon which our clients' advertisements are hung.

Many who use tactics labeled black-hat would say that much of the white-hat stuff is a load of wood, or some other non-sector specific four-letter word. The black-hat side considers itself more honest than the white-hat side. This is serious marketing and if the client of the black-hat practitioner is not in the Top3, there are a lot of stops that can be pulled to get them there. The client-focused black-hat might be concerned about getting caught by the search engines but that concern can be assuaged with a series of throwaway sites. If one domain goes down or gets banned, there is always another to take its place. The real concern is in getting results.

As one famous black-hat said, "Search engines chose whom they will list and whom they won't list. That is a choice made by electronic bots whose sole purpose is to scour the web and sort what they find. When a client comes to a search engine optimizer, they expect to be found in the first place and that's it". The primary allegiance is to the client and the client only. After all, the contract is with the client, not with the search engines. What does the SEO owe Google, Yahoo, MSN or Ask Jeeves anyway? If a massive link-factory can get a few months of rankings and the client is fully aware of the strategy, nobody really suffers, except perhaps the ones who designed the algorithm in the first place. In other words, if it works well and your client gets results, do it.

In between both sides are thousands of shades of grey whose choice of tactics would cross the polarized white-black pallet gradient. Many of these are relative new-comers to the industry. Those who have gotten involved in SEO and SEM over the past year might feel a bit confused with the recent debate as it has evolved over the last few weeks. In the past two years, the search environment has changed enormously. The new twist to the debate is the rapidity of change in the search engine optimization world. Two years ago, Google was it. There are now four unique search algorithms that compile results, each of which has implemented upgrades in the past eighteen months. The SEO/SEM industry, while evolving rapidly simply hasn't kept pace with the hyper-evolution of the search engines. Ironically, the SEO success of various branches of the affiliate marketing industry has driven much of the recent change in the organic algorithms at Google and Yahoo.

The High Ranking forum has an interesting (and still civil) thread that appeared earlier today. Jill Whalen has long been associated with the school of thought that says good content gets great results. She is still in that school, at least judging by the company she keeps most of whom are among the best SEO copywriters in the business. A post at her forum today shows how the search environment has shifted and that due to those shifts, a shared sense of ethics might be found in the databases of the beholders. In a posting titled "Is there such a thing as spam anymore", Jill notes something a famous red-suited black-hat said. The current generation search engine spiders are smart enough to find, sort and deliver results without much direct human intervention. Spiders crawl links. Humans place them but once placed, spiders find and devour the content they lead to. In the next generation of search, (Google Personal and Yahoo myweb2.0) the human intervention that will affect results is highly subjective and might be based on behaviors of the searcher and his or her peers. Considering these facts, what is the boundary for search engine spam these days and, does it really exist?

Jill will almost certainly get massively flamed for asking the question but it is a good question to think about. Google, Yahoo, MSN and Ask have made the machines. They have given us literally dozens of ways of getting client content into these machines and once there, the mechanisms of these machines take over. The debate is likely going to take a new turn in the coming days.

The bottom line for anyone involved in SEO and SEM is that the rules of the game are evolving. The ethical debate in the industry needs to evolve as well.

The hallmark of a truly great society is the way it deals with disagreements. Mature democratic societies elect bodies of representatives to hash it out while the rest of us get on with the business of minding our own industriousness. Whether we like it or not, our industry is changing faster than our industry's traditional and often libertarian values on ethics in search advertising are. The only professional body that was talking about trying to define a sense of ethical best practices, the SMA-NA seems stalled in process due to lack of secure funding. For the most part, SEO/SEM practitioners regardless of the color of their hat tend towards ethical client relations. Perhaps a constant debate in forums dedicated to search marketing is the only way our industry can define a code of ethical technique. If only we could just agree to discuss without degrading and stop feeding the trolls.