

Planning and Networking Key to Marketing Success

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The searchable universe has expanded enormously over the past year. From the doubling or tripling of the size of search engine indexes to the evolution of several engines with unique focuses, the amount of data accessible by search engine users has grown faster this year than any other since the dawn of the public, commercial Internet.

The growth of search over the past twelve months presents advertisers and search engine marketers with several options when planning their search marketing efforts. With so many avenues opening for search marketing, it is much easier to envision and facilitate several different multi-channel advertising campaigns for a single client, product or service.

The major search engines can now spider and index information from virtually any type of common file format. While the extraction of useful information from some file formats such as Flash still presents challenges, we have seen tremendous advancement in the power and scope of the search engine sector.

While these advancements have opened the sector to newcomers, the two largest search businesses, Google and Yahoo continue lead though both appear to be taking slightly different directions. Whenever the giants move into uncharted territories, they create a technical and cultural wake that pulls others along with them. This trend, combined with the innovative minds populating the search industry has fostered the emerging web-marketing environment.

For some, online marketing campaigns are about to become a lot more challenging and, hopefully, a lot more fun. Technology and innovation have given advertisers a wide array of options when it comes to phrasing their messages. Subsequently, website planning and design is much more complex today than in previous years. One positive evolution seen in the search engine optimization sector is the trend to consult with search marketers before embarking on site construction or alterations.

A well-planned and properly executed search marketing campaign can help these reach the eyes of millions more people than ever before. Websites are now being built combining the best elements of video, audio, text and image in ways that, while possible two years ago, would have been impractical from a search marketing perspective. Today, video and audio files can be created with relative ease and multicast in several search-spider friendly formats. Spiders can now drill deep into most databases to extract product or item specific data. Search engine users not only have a widening number of information sources to choose from, they have a growing number of search providers to find it on.

The following example is purely hypothetical but, in the full spectrum world of advanced search marketing, entirely possible. Imagine the thrill of managing a complex online marketing campaign for travel and tourism in the breathtakingly beautiful city of Victoria, British Columbia.

Victoria is arguably the nicest city in the world. Perched on the southern tip of a very large island off the Pacific coast of Canada, Victoria is blessed with what most Canucks consider a very mild climate. It is the

capital city of BC and has some of the most outstanding neo-colonial architecture in a city that once saw itself as solidly British as the Queen it was named for.

For any number of reasons, tourism is the major industry in Victoria and therefore extremely important to all who live here. We have a very well funded tourism bureau which has a very well designed website. Not only does the town benefit from the tourism bureau, a provincial government ministry is assigned specifically to travel and tourism. Victoria also serves as a day-trip destination for tourists visiting Vancouver and Seattle, enjoying the close proximity to both urban centers. In short, there is a lot of resources to work with it's a pity no-one has bothered to string them all together. Here's the synopsis of the dream promotion.

The first stage of this hypothetical promotion is to begin a full optimization overhaul of the website of the tourism bureau. This process does not begin in the source-code. It begins in the boardroom.

As mentioned before, there are several natural partners in the search marketing of tourism to Victoria. The tourism bureaus of Victoria, Vancouver and Seattle all have a stake in the success of the industry in this small city. The provincial and municipal governments also have a stake, so much so that each has dedicated civil servants working to coordinate and facilitate opportunities. The largest group of stakeholders is made up of the businesses that serve tourists. There are literally thousands of tourism-based businesses in this city and surrounding areas. There are also online tourism-marketing businesses promoting accommodation and entertainment options under travel friendly domains.

A well-planned search marketing campaign requires input from all these groups as each has specific and useful items to add to the mix. By inviting the various stakeholders to participate to one degree or another, a much more powerful campaign can be organized.

The first step is information gathering. Who has what to offer? Which businesses compliment which? Are there any package deals that involve the services of multiple businesses? Chances are, the answers to most initial questions have already been researched. The tourism bureau certainly keeps a running inventory of tourism related resources in its files and what it doesn't have can be filled in by other stakeholders in the initial meeting.

The goal is to set up as multi-faceted a marketing campaign as possible. Here's what we would be looking for from tourism site owners at the initial meeting and on the site of the tourism bureau (which is assumed to be the client).

Basics

Good Content

Assuming the domain already exists and common sense technical issues are addressed, all good search engine promotions begin with good content. Content is more than simple body text. There is some content search engines tend to like better than others so learning to layer content on the site is an important tip.

Search engines continue to prefer body text to any other means of communicating. Text is easy to read and easy to assess. The basis of any website should be well written body text, even if you have the most amazing animations or videos to share.

Smart Site Architecture

Search engine spiders like to follow simple paths. The way a site is initially constructed influences the development of future paths as new content is added to the site. By advocating the simplest site architecture possible (depending on the tools or techniques used to build the site), we would hope to start fashioning a network of similarly themed, well-constructed sites.

External Linking Strategies

Assuming the tourism bureau was our client, we would want all member businesses of that bureau to link back to it. In turn, we would also make recommendations on what would otherwise be called a planned link-exchange between local businesses relevant to each other, who wanted to get involved in the greater promotion.

Advanced

RSS Feeds

The first advanced advice we would give all local businesses (including our client) would be to add an RSS feed to their sites. It can be as simple as a basic XML sitemap but it should cover every page in the site. This will become important when considering the use of new and/or improved features available via the search engines such as Froogle, Blog search (and tagging), and podcasts.

Tools for site visitors

One of the common things all web marketers tell their clients is to try to foster loyalty in their site visitors. On the Internet, the best visitor is one who keeps coming back. They are more likely to purchase a service and cost a lot less per visit than new visitors do. Give them stuff to make that visit worthwhile.

As the active example is tourism, a currency converter and distance estimator are two obvious (and likely pre-existing) basic tools to add to the site. A more advanced tool would find accommodation and help tourists plan their itineraries. Such tools could be promoted as a feature of the site and under keyword related phrases in organic and PPC formats.

Blogs

At the initial meeting, a full hour could easily be devoted to the use of blogs as a promotional tool. A Victoria BC tourism blog could mention the weather (even in the dead of winter it is relatively warm here), local events, featured businesses and a multitude of other items of interest to tourists. Now if every, or even most, local tourism related businesses could be convinced to keep a blog, the networking power would be incredible. One of the best features of Blogs is their versatility and inherent cross-link capability. I am not suggesting weaving a mess of links for search engine ranking manipulation but instead as a means of referring readers to other local, complementary businesses.

Podcasts

Podcasts are a kin to a radio or television show except they are recorded as audio or video presentations and distributed online. Users access them over the web or download them into their ipods for future viewing or listening.

An innovative use of podcasting was reported today in [Wired magazine](#) where a tourism business in Venice Italy is using podcasts to guide visitors to parts of the ancient city that are not often frequented by travelers. Podcasts are searchable documents.

External Linking Strategies

As mentioned before in relation to individual websites, a large link network could be fashioned out of the membership of the local tourism bureau. This network is built using links that are highly relevant to each other and excluding irrelevant links as much as possible. In helping reorganize the external linking policies of businesses who are members of the local tourism bureau, we would hope to serve two purposes. The first is obviously to drive the most relevant links possible to our client's website. The second is to improve the link-history or footprints in the local industry and for our client overall. Such opportunities are difficult to otherwise imagine.

Sharing and Permissions

The last thing we would be looking for at the initial meeting would be the willingness to share and cross-reference content. For example, a local golf course might have a video that could be linked to or shown at various accommodation websites. The governments could pitch in with RSS-driven information applets such as ferry schedules and road conditions.

The simple statement, "the more things change, the more they stay the same", will again prove true in the coming year. The newly emerging web-marketing environment will look and feel a lot like the old one. Think about the evolution of the city you live in. Chances are it was founded a few years back and some areas of the town have changed dramatically. New buildings have replaced old ones over the years and new shops open in spaces that have been previously occupied by several others. The streets however tend to remain the same. New ones get built but they always connect to and are directly affected by the street pattern the city sprang from.

While the advances in search technology are huge, the ways we use common tools, even new ones, is more often than not, formed by how we used the old ones. In other words, while search might be bigger and better, our methods of marketing will continue to rely on fairly predictable but now enhanced human and search-spider abilities and behaviours.

The use of RSS will allow video, shopping, blog and podcast search engines to find materials on the site they otherwise might miss. The addition of an XML sitemap allows webmasters and search marketers to tell Google, Yahoo and other search tools exactly where to look for information and when to expect updates.

As for improving the fortunes of the tourism bureau and its members, along with pleasing the provincial and municipal bureaucrats involved, another old saying comes to mind. A rising tide lifts all ships, or in this case, shops. By improving on a pre-existing network and utilizing marketing resources developed by members of that network, the local tourism bureau can build a better tourist trap, or at least make entry into the one we call home much easier.