

## **SEM Growing More Complex**

**By Jim Hedger, StepForth News Editor, StepForth Placement Inc.**

Working out a marketing plan for new and evolving websites is a bit more complicated than it used to be. There are a few new things to be considered before embarking on a search marketing campaign than in previous years. Search marketing has become more important and is thus becoming more professional. With growing acceptance of online communication tools, and a number of alterations to the faces of search engines themselves, the marketing arena has been upgraded from a three-ring circus venue to a Super Bowl sized stadium.

Three general factors push the increasing sophistication of the search-marketing sector. The first is simple; consumers are becoming much more Internet savvy, as are the businesses that advertise on the net. The second is far more complicated; the nature of search marketing has been affected by the popularization of new communication techniques such as instant messaging, email/desktop search, blogs, press releases, social networks and special interest forums. The major search engines are both driving and being driven by the development and proliferation of cool new tools. The third factor is the changing faces of the search engines themselves. Over the past six months the major search engines have introduced new features and advertising opportunities, and new forms of search engines have emerged, giving SEOs and SEMs a lot more to think about and plan for.

### **Smarter stuff makes us all smarter**

While the domain-specific website remains the central vehicle of an online advertising campaign, websites have become larger and more sophisticated. Over the years, search engine users have become comfortable using a variety of tools to read information, most of which are already bundled into their browsers. Search engines are able to find and spider information from multiple file types, permitting search marketers and advertisers entry into a number of new venues. Increasingly, SEOs and SEMs are being asked to help clients understand how new applications or technologies can affect their marketing campaigns, an increasingly difficult task as the environment is evolving so rapidly.

### **New Tools**

Today, many advertisers are interested in establishing blogs, both as a means of client communications and as a search-ranking device. Blogs are very easy to establish and with proper maintenance can be very effective tools. They can also have a significant impact on search marketing and site content, provided the blog offers RSS feeds for the major search engines and personal blog-reading appliances. Blogs allow businesses to easily update their clients with new information and receive important consumer feedback from readers. Blog postings have a habit of being proliferated across other blogs. As each blog posting likely has a link to a feature or product page as well as a link to the index page of its keeper's site, the proliferation of good postings can dramatically increase relevant link popularity at the major search engines.

Advertisers in the information sector are taking advantage of social networking applications such as Google or Yahoo Groups, or one of the thousands of special interest forums around the web. Along with a growing community of other knowledgeable workers to bounce ideas off and receive information from, social-network applications help knowledge-based workers promote their strongest assets, their knowledge. Social networking groups are extremely interesting for the engineers at the major search

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engines. While they are somewhat interested in what is being said, they are even more engrossed in who is saying what to whom and how that knowledge spreads across a network of related persons. Smart SEOs and SEMs are helping their clients use these types of groups to subtly promote their websites by teaching them how to use forum-signature links and how to responsibly offer good and relevant advice.

The new applications and tools offered and/or honoured by the search engines have changed how search engine marketing is practiced. Both blogs and social networking tools have been around for a few years. After the early halcyon days of spam-exploitation, most search marketers have settled down to use these tools wisely to offer long-term benefits for their clients. In this way, search marketing requires a longer-term commitment between client and practitioner especially in light of the changes in the search engine environment brought by new communications technologies.

### **The changing face of search**

The search engine environment has fundamentally changed over the past six months. There are four major general search engines and dozens of smaller ones. That part hasn't changed. For the most part, general search has not changed that much either though a number of algorithm shifts have kept SEOs on their toes lately.

What has changed is the stuff behind the veil at every major search engine though; the more things change the more they seem to be the same. Each search engine has similar features and applications such as local-search, paid-search advertising and desktop tools. The smaller search firms also have similar features and applications, some having more innovative core-functions than anything the Big4 currently offer. There are also a growing number of sector or interest specific search tools called vertical search engines.

Part of the search engine environment is fragmenting into a more specific list of tools from highly specialized search tools to local search engines designed to find shops or products just down the street from you. While played on an enormous field, search marketing is often seen as a game of inches. Knowing how to get sites placed in local and vertical venues is important for your clients.

### **Local Search and Mapping**

Local search is becoming more important as cell phone users are now accessing the search engines to plan their general shopping itineraries. By combining geographically based listings and highly detailed maps, local search tools have carved a useful niche that is growing more popular with busy consumers. A local search listing will soon be as important as Yellow Pages listings currently are.

Luckily, it isn't that difficult to get your client listed in a local-search tool. The largest like Ask, Google and Yahoo have deals with the phone companies and publishers of the Yellow Pages to include all their listings, regardless of whether the businesses listed even have websites. The first thing a search marketer should do when considering local search is to use an internet based local yellow pages or telephone directory to see if their client is listed. If they are a new business, the search marketer should call the phone company or phone directory publisher in their client's region to get them into the local-business database for future spidering. Search marketers should also place geographic identifiers such as street address, telephone numbers, zip or area codes and even GPS coordinates in the footer of each page of the site.

### **Vertical Search**

This is an area that is much more commercial than general or even local search. A vertical search engine is one that hones in on a specific topic such as travel, shopping, books or cars. Populated by the a

number of well known names such as Travelocity, Expedia, ABE Books, the field is rapidly expanding with new entries such as Become.Com for shoppers, CyberGolfSearch.com for golfers and EdComp.com for education and training opportunities. The Big4 are already on board in one way or another with features such as Google's Froogle and Yahoo Shopping.

Vertical search engines are betting that as the Internet grows more complicated, search users will turn to a search tool they know specializes in the product, service or activity they are directly interested in. LookSmart has jumped on the vertical search bandwagon with five unique verticals and another vertical search tool, Answers.Com has developed a deal with Google to provide information culled from its various vertical databases. Earlier this year, the shopping focused vertical search tool Become.Com was launched by industry leaders Michael Yang and Yeogirl Yun who quickly hired industry legend Jon Glick away from Yahoo.

Most high-quality vertical search engines are spider-driven or draw from spider-driven databases so getting a site into them should be as easy as paying attention to relevant link-building however SEOs and SEMs are advised to check into vertical search tools for clients by their specific sector and to ask their clients if they know of any sector-specific search engines.

### **Desktop Search**

Desktop search and other personalized search applications have emerged to help specific users find information they have already seen. Desktop search locates documents and files housed on the hard-drive of the user, including references to websites that user previously visited. Optimizing for desktop search is fairly simple in that most of the same basic rules apply. Once visited, clear titles and single-focused page content should help clients' sites re-appear when a specific desktop user types keywords relevant to the client's site, page or documents.

The number of methods used to express and recall information across the Internet are increasing and becoming simpler to use. Webmasters and advertisers now incorporate audio/video files, blogs, and Flash animations into their websites and the major search engines are indexing them. Search engine marketers are finding the environment in which they practice evolving faster than the techniques used in their practices. There are literally dozens of different tools to use when building a web presence and each approach will have an effect on search marketing efforts. Fortunately, much of what is new is based on the foundation of how spider-driven search engines have always worked. New technologies provide better ways to communicate ideas, services and products and savvy search marketers are learning to use them. As long as spiders act like spiders and search engines continue to spider sites, finding the way to the future by following the paths of the past continues to be the best marketing plan.