

Search Engine Advertising Choices

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Search advertisers are offered two basic marketing models, paid-ads and free organic ads. While there are advantages and disadvantages to both models, one clearly stands out as a better advertising option than the other. Why is it then that advertisers from small business to mega-corporation tend to show higher interest in the more expensive and least effective of the two?

Most SEOs speculate that advertisers understand paid-advertising better than organic placement. As much of search marketing is conducted in-house and optimization is a learned-skill, corporate marketing departments lean towards the very simple model of paid-search. Organic search engine placement continues to be perceived as a nebulous service that can take time to show results. On the other hand, paid-ad placements tend to show up minutes after they are established and bidding one's way to top spot is relatively easy.

With search ad-spends sometimes topping five or six figures per month, many SEOs shake their heads at businesses that refuse to invest a much smaller (generally low to mid four figure) sum on organic optimization. Ranging from small to mega sized operations, the number of paid-ad advertisers that ignore organic optimization seems to be growing.

Over the past three years, independent research has consistently confirmed that search engine users tend to click on the center column organic (free) ads far more often than on paid ads. Earlier this year, search marketers benefited from a number of published studies that clearly demonstrate the higher value of organic placements. While the results of this research is easily available to all, traditional and tech media stories tend to focus on paid-search advertising.

Two studies that made an enormous impact on the search marketing field this year are the [Eye Tracking](#) research conducted by Enquiro CEO Gord Hotchkiss and a whitepaper published by Lisa Wehr, CEO of OneUpWeb titled, "[Target Google's Top Ten to Sell Online.](#)" Gord's study shows the basic F (or triangular) shape search user's eyes tend to follow when examining search results. Lisa's study found that search users are up to 6X more likely to click on the first few organic results as they are to choose any of the paid results.

A third study, "[Accurately Interpreting Clickthrough Data as Implicit Feedback](#)", released earlier this week by Cornell professor Thorsten Joachims looked at the links users found on search engine results pages and questioned why they choose which link. The results show again the importance of high organic search engine rankings. The researchers asked subjects to perform searches and looked at which results they viewed, which they clicked on, and what happens if those links are mixed up.

The Cornell study found that search users tended to view (look at) the first five organic results with a high percentage of them (approx. 2/3) viewing the top two listings with 42% of them selecting or clicking on that link. The number of search-viewers halves to approximately 1/3 of users viewing sites appearing in positions 3, 4 and 5. The numbers drop to about 1 in 10 users tending to view the 9th and 10th placed sites.

When a search user views search listings, it doesn't necessarily mean they click on those listings. In this context, to view means to examine. Users tend to examine the text used to phrase the reference link as well as the descriptive paragraph appearing beneath the link before deciding to click on it. This is especially true for the smaller number of searchers who view listings found in the 3rd to 10th positions as users who examined those listings tended to spend more time on the results page before choosing the link to click first. In other words, 1/3 to 1/10 of users are conducting preliminary research by seriously reading the text used to phrase the results before clicking.

This finding was backed up in another part of the Cornell study that showed when the same Top2 results were reversed, the text used in the link and description had a notable influence on which link the user clicks. The research found that when results were switched around, 34% of the users would still click on the site ranked in first place, even when they had seen the now #2 site there earlier. This left about 8% (nearly one in ten) who recognized the switch by reading the text used in the link and description. While 8% might seem like a low number, the researchers believe it is statistically important. They also note that some search subjects might have been looking to see if the new #1 site was more relevant.

In his [Alertbox review](#) of the Cornell study, Jakob Nielsen succinctly notes, "If users always clicked the best link, then swapping the order of the two links should also swap the percentages, and this didn't happen. **The top hit still got the most clicks.**"

These findings led the research team to suggest there are two biases playing out in the minds of search engine users. The first is the Trust Bias, which leads the searcher to believe that a site ranked in the number 1 position is there because it must be the best reference for that keyword. The second is the Quality Bias, in which viewers consider the link-text and descriptive paragraph as well as rankings to determine which site is most relevant to their search.

For search engine marketers and more importantly, search engine advertisers, there are two glaringly obvious implications.

First of all, it is extremely important to be found at the Top of the search engine results. Being in the Top10 is likely sufficient for many businesses but the sites getting the most business are found at the top. To further these findings, Gord and Lisa's research clearly shows that searchers are choosing organic placements over paid-ads.

Secondly, the copy used in your Title tag and site content has to be more compelling than that of your competitors. Search users are reading before clicking. If they have to make a choice between three sites that are all perceived to be equal (those in the 3rd to 5th positions), they will almost always choose the one with the most topically relevant descriptive text and link-copy.

Put together, the results of the three studies show that search engine users are able to tell the difference between paid and free listings and tend to trust the free organic listings more than they do the paid ones. The studies also show that search users, while still tending to put a higher bias on the Top5 results are becoming sophisticated enough to seriously consider descriptive copy before choosing to select a link. In other words, the search users are starting to make what appears to them to be the wisest choices when selecting search advertising. The advertisers are advised to do the same.