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Client / SEM Relationships – Dealing with Times of Great Change
By Jim Hedger, StepForth News Editor, [StepForth Placement Inc.](#)

*“What’s the use of a good quotation (**algorithm**) if you can’t change it?” Dr. Who (The Fortune Program)*

Search engine optimization firms tend to have unique relationships with their clients. Like our colligate cousins in the web design field, our clients often see our services as one-time events. Once the initial SEO campaign is completed and websites have achieved Top10 placements, some clients are content to go about their business assuming their placements are going to stay in place. In many cases, they do. A website that has been optimized by a good SEO can prove difficult to dislodge, even when these placements are targeted by other SEOs.

Strong placements can stay in place for months but change is an inevitable constant, natural in both the real world and in the virtually real world we work in. There have been a lot of changes in the search environment recently. From the introduction of new ideas about search-engine functionality (vertical vs. general search) to the increasing sophistication of Google’s link-evaluation algorithms, to the unveiling of parts of Become.Com’s AIR algorithm, the changes predicted in previous months are quickly defining what will be a constantly shifting “new normal” for search marketers.

The emergence of a “new normal” in the search marketing industry presents as many problems for search marketing companies as it does opportunities. Search marketing is still a highly disorganized industrial sector that has only risen to prominence in the past three years. Even though countless articles have been written about the sector and huge ad-firms such as Avenue A have entered the picture, there still remains a great deal of misunderstanding about the cause and effect nature of the work. It is not only difficult to track outcomes past the actual placements; it is also difficult to quantify how general changes in the search sector might affect each individual client.

In times of change, one of the biggest problems for established SEO firms is in sustaining good relationships with previous and current clients. These problems can be easily characterized by two categories. Regardless of the category these issues might fall into each represents real people whose incomes are partially dependent on the outcome of the campaign.

The first category consists of issues presented by past clients whose rankings have dropped over time or because of a variety of on-site issues. While most SEO firms offer some form of long-term maintenance options, clients often see these options as unnecessary expenses, especially when placements are sticky over long periods of time. In our practice, about half the clients choose a post placement maintenance contract. The other half is willing to take their chances over time, a decision that in some cases might be cost-effective but could also present major expenses for others. In previous years, if a site with great placement continued to enjoy that ranking over twelve or more months without a lot of intervention, a maintenance contract would likely be an unnecessary expense. On the other hand, if one or more competitors also hired professional search optimizers, the cost of maintenance might be considered a necessary cost of retaining prominent placements in the organic SERPs.

That was the general gist of advice we offered our clients when they considered their options towards the end of a successful placement campaign. That advice works well when all factors that might affect rankings remain static or equal. We don't want to dissuade any client from signing up for long-term maintenance; after all we are in business. We do however wish to provide them with an honest view of what might or might not happen in the future. Under the "old-norm" where Google was the absolute dominant search tool and things were a bit more stable, the advice was sound. Today, search is more serious and the structure of the "new-norm" for organic search is quite different. In other words, what was good advice yesterday might not be wise today.

For past clients whose relationships have lapsed over time, there are often high costs associated with reoptimizing their websites. Costs in the SEO sector have increased over the past few years as the environment has become more complicated. Clients returning to SEO or SEM shops should be prepared to pay fees higher than those charged two or three years ago. Then again, maybe the site simply requires a quick once-over and fees can be limited in light of a previously successful relationship. Every situation is different and this is a topic in which generalization is very difficult.

The second category pertains to current clients whose sites were optimized for what would be considered the "old-norm" or need to be re-optimized to meet the criteria of the new and unique vertical search tools. As a contractual arrangement exists between SEO and client where a rhythm to the working relationship has already been established these circumstances are a bit more precarious.

Here is an unlikely scenario that could realistically play out. (Please note: I am just making this up. This scenario does not pertain to any current or past client.) Client X has a website optimized in January. The site springs to the Top10 of the rankings on all four major search engines and is relatively settled in place within eight weeks. The contract between the SEO firm and Client X was scheduled to last twelve weeks. On the Friday of Week6, the largest of the search engines implements a new algorithm that radically alters they values it applies to incoming links and on-site elements but the effects of that change don't actually manifest on the results pages for another two weeks. On the Monday of Week8, the client sees that his or her site is ranked exactly where it should be but as the week progresses the site starts to drop.

Who is responsible and what should be done about it?

Many SEO firms faced a similar situation in previous years. Those in the business in November 2003 might remember weeks of sheer panic. Given the propensity of many in the sector to play fast and loose with linking strategies over the past year, many more might soon face another dilemma; a very complex scenario for both SEO and client as neither is remotely responsible for Google deciding to update its algorithm. The common way of looking at such situations is to assume the SEO conformed to what would be considered the best practices of the time the work was performed. In our world, an algorithm shift is sort of like an Act of God is to the insurance companies.

Here is another scenario that every SEO firm faces right now. A new type of search engine appears on the scene and slowly gains popularity. It uses a unique ranking formula that is based on the use of spiders but differs from more common algorithms in many ways. While in previous months it was relatively easy to balance the needs of Google, Yahoo, MSN and Ask Jeeves in a full-site optimization campaign, the addition of a new search tool complicates your optimization plan. You have several clients at various stages of their campaigns and do not have the time or resources to upgrade each and every client to meet a new set of standards introduced midway through their contracts. At the same time

however, ethical SEOs have an obligation to immediately inform their clients of major changes in the search landscape that would affect their campaigns. What to do?

First of all, absolutely nothing should ever be done to a client's site unless the SEO has a full understanding of the new criteria. The new search tool is Become.Com and their new algorithm is known as [Affinity Indexing Ranking](#) (AIR). SEO practitioners are urged to learn as much as possible about AIR in the coming months. Next, as each placement campaign develops, most SEOs tinker here and there with it during the period of the client contract. StepForth's head SEO, Scott Van Achte often adds new snippets such as zip codes for local search and even longitude and latitude coordinates for GPS search tools as part of his ongoing service to clients. By adding new snippets of geographic content to sites during the campaign, he can regularly update the site with highly useful information in addition the more general updates. During the contractual period, it is possible to lightly add new optimization elements to a site as part of regular optimization updates.

There are some cases in which algorithm updates necessitate a full reoptimization of a website or retooling of a large section of current optimization plans. For the SEO, this is a nightmare scenario in which they must explain to their clients exactly what has happened and that there is nothing anyone can do about it except roll up their sleeves and get to work as quickly as possible. Most SEO contracts have a section recognizing that the SEO is not responsible for costs associated with a major algorithm shift. Telling your client that they will have to pay for reoptimization, no matter what the contract says, is never an easy task. The test for this necessity is fairly straightforward but the SEO had better be very certain before talking to the client. First, an algo shift must be demonstrated to have taken place and acknowledgement of that shift within the SEO/SEM community is essential. Next, the SEO has to be able to show that the shift will affect the client. Lastly, the SEO must have a coherent plan to reestablish rankings before calling the client.

Ultimately, the relationships between the SEO/SEM community and their clients can be characterized as healthy, unique and evolving. Both sides of the relationship should realize that the next few months are likely to be highly volatile times. The search engines are changing friends. There is nothing the SEO/SEM community can do about these changes except to study, experiment and learn as quickly as humans with electronic assistants can. Again it is important to note that this article is not intended to frighten clients into calling their SEO or to lecture SEOs on their obligations to their clients. It is meant to convey the idea that the environment and the markets it supports are changing and many of those changes are happening right now.

"Obstacles cannot crush me. Every obstacle yields to stern resolve. He who is fixed to a star does not change his mind." **Leonardo DaVinci**, *Notebooks* (c. 1500)