

## **Bridging the Corporate Knowledge Gap – Conferencing with Execs**

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The room was excellent, providing seating for about 50 people per session. The chalkboard and flip charts were fully stocked with fresh chalk, clean brushes and brand-new Sharpie markers. There were three thermoses of organic coffee, which never seemed to empty, no matter how many cups were consumed. The overhead projector and the A/B/C switch (attached to the three laptops used by the presenters) were wired and the movie screen behind the podium automatically raised and lowered at the push of a button. Sizing up the situation at half past seven o'clock in the morning, Bruno, Frank and I smiled, each knowing something interesting was going to happen in just a few short hours.

Yesterday, I had the privilege of speaking at the inaugural [Search Engine Business World](#) seminar held at the downtown campus of Vancouver's Simon Fraser University. The event was a success though registrations were slightly lower than expected. The number of attendees was relatively small but based on the names of the corporations they work for; the collective advertising budgets they work with are enormous.

Speaking to a room made up primarily of corporate executives is somewhat different than other forums where the audience is generally the IT crowd. It is easier to speak to a room full of executives than it is to speak to a room full of techies. The executives have absolutely nothing to prove to each other and are willing to accept the panel as experts in our fields. The attendees have, by and large, benefited from a classical education and it shows in their manners, their language and their depth of understanding. The session feels more honest and the audience feels more willing to make a connection with the speakers.

The tone and phrasing of questions is milder and often clearer, even if the person asking the question is sometimes unclear about a few technical concepts or advances. Along with the five-star treatment, there is a healthy measure of respect in this room from both sides of the podium. The conference eventually becomes a very interesting, agenda driven conversation between business people and highly qualified technicians.

Here are a few observations I walked away with.

First of all, the event was well received by the audience. The format, lower number of attendees and the overall attitude of the group allowed for a more intimate conversation. This gave the presenters enough room to work from one idea to another. The environment was crucial to the event.

Secondly, though their website doesn't necessarily show it, the execs have learned a lot about search engines and search engine marketing. They are fascinated with the world of search from a number of different angles. For instance, a portion of my presentation dealt with the evolution of search engines and the evolution of SEO techniques. As I assumed, the audience was very interested in the general history of search engines and I saw a number of people nodding or smiling when various names were mentioned. I used the history and evolution of search to demonstrate how SEO techniques have evolved over time. By knitting the history of search with the evolution of SEO technique, I hoped to address concerns about redirects, doorway pages, link-farming, and other spammy techniques that have become synonymous with SEO in the mainstream press.

This approach led to my third observation. There is a perpetual knowledge gap among corporate executives when it comes to IT, their corporate websites and search marketing. Without a doubt, they understand the “big picture” perfectly well. It is the little things, the numerous fine details of how the machine actually works that they often face problems with. Based on my experience yesterday, the executives came to the presentation already knowing this. That’s why they were there without people from their IT departments.

The people I presented to yesterday have experience managing the people who run their search marketing campaigns, but for the most part were really not satisfied with the results of those efforts. They either want to micro-manage in house SEO and SEM efforts, or they want to learn how to properly outsource it.

The knowledge gap appears to be one of language and definition more than a lack of conceptual understanding on the part of the execs. While they don’t necessarily expect themselves to be on the cutting edge of technology, they realize they need to know more about how the medium is, and can be used for marketing.

A simple example of this is the use of the word “Keywords”. It is impossible to address SEO without using the word in several sentences. The word has two distinct meanings, one more relevant than the other. Keywords are found on a document and in the source code.

Many of the attendees understood the word to mean the Meta tag, period. It took me a few minutes to realize why many of them were not quite getting it when I was speaking about keywords found ON a document. I had to take about 90 seconds to clarify the difference. That’s when I made a fourth observation.

Even when I stressed that the keyword Meta tag is not an important or powerful tool, questions often drifted back towards the use of it. It happened at least twice as the seminar progressed. In both instances, I found the executive was holding on to the last information he or she had received, likely from their IT department. In order to comfortably let go of one idea and start to see another, they had to push a bit to test the strength of the limb they suspected I had ventured out on.

For the past few years, their firms have been using search marketing in one way or another and they have absorbed a lot of information in that time. Some of them confessed to feeling overwhelmed during the session, while others were furiously reconsidering a number of assumptions they had made about search marketing.

The knowledge behind their assumptions comes from two primary sources, the IT workers in their offices and business media relevant to their industries. Members of the IT department forwarded much of the technical information they received about search marketing. They know they need to challenge these assumptions, especially in light of the thumping some of their sites have taken as a result of the Jagger/Big Daddy updates at Google. They are going to be attending a lot more conferences, seminars and workshops in the future.

A fifth and final observation is that the executive level is learning, en masse, that the world of search and search marketing is moving faster than their already beleaguered IT departments can keep up with. Corporate executives are people whose roles train them to think about a number of factors surrounding any given issue. Their job is to set the big goals and marshal the efforts of different departments in their organization to achieve them. In some ways, the execs appeared to view search marketing as a “space

race" against their competitors, an attitude formally reserved for traditional media such as television and print.

There is going to be a lot of pressure put on IT departments from firms that want to exploit the marketing potential of search with in-house talent. At the same time, it will be extremely important for those in-house SEO/SEM teams to learn to communicate their knowledge to their management. SEO and SEM are becoming far more important and management is starting to find outside sources of information.

This is a good thing for everyone involved in the SEO/SEM sector, both corporate in-house workers and independent SEO/SEM firms. Corporate decision makers are without a doubt, favorably reconsidering the importance of organic search engine placements. SEO consultancies, such as the one offered by StepForth, will be in much higher demand in order to help outline and analyze campaigns executed by in-house SEOs. Outsourcing of SEO and SEM projects is also likely to increase as the decision makers realize that the boundaries of the search marketing world are constantly shifting and expanding.

Search Engine Business World Vancouver was a mini-conference that became a conversation and looks like it could become a community. For me, it was more than a pleasure and a privilege speaking to a room of corporate executives; it was an invaluable learning experience. I hope it was for those who attended as well.