

Search Environment Prompts Specialization in SEM Sectors – Mid 2006

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The first six months of 2006 have been a period of expansion, growth and significant change in the search marketing universe. There have never been as many online options available to commercial advertisers and their agents as there is right now, a trend that shows no signs of abating. Just to keep things interesting, lot more change is expected in the second half of the year as well.

Search engine marketing, as an online business sector, covers a lot of virtual ground. Search engine optimization started as a cottage industry in the mid 90's. By the mid 2K's, Cottage country had become an industrial district. Today, the search marketing sector extends far beyond the organic search results the business was originally built on.

Search is part of the mainstream marketing consciousness but as the online environment evolves so quickly, what works in the mainstream world often needs to morph through several experimental stages before finding a way to adapt. The scariest and most beautiful thing about Internet is that nothing lasts long enough to be considered a constant. There is still obviously so much room for innovation and outright invention that the playing field is naturally prone to change at any given time. That's been the back-story of the first six months of 2006.

The sudden expansion of advertising options has presented a dilemma for the traditional, independent-operator, search marketing sector. There are far too many methods and means of online marketing for any one person or company to keep track of. The sector appears to be responding by developing a sense of segmentation based on specialization that goes far beyond the separation of organic SERPs and Pay-per-click advertising.

Today, there are at least three major search related marketing venues, and each of which has developed industrial sub-sectors and interacts with the others. The first is the traditional organic search results, the Top10 lists that started it all. The second venue is the paid search advertising market that now ranges from typical PPC to video placement. The third venue is found in the emerging fabric of social networking taking place on MySpace, Flickr, in the blogosphere and other interactive media, an environment that can be safely tagged Web2.know.

Each of these three venues relies on some form of search to guide users towards information and there is a great deal of integration and interaction between the three venues. As search functions are always reliant on key-triggers of some sort or another, there is always a way to include key-triggers in web documents and files.

The fall-out from change has hit the SEO sector the hardest. Consistently overshadowed by the PPC market and suddenly challenged by social networking, organic search engine optimization has fundamentally changed over the past three years as Google and Yahoo have improved and innovated on methods for ranking web documents.

There are now several sub-sections of SEO, each of which can be considered a specialty of its own. As a practice, SEOs focus the myriad of on-site/on-page issues as well as several off-site issues such as

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hosting, link-acquisition and competitive research. There are also an increasing number of applications on which organic search results are displayed including local, mobile and shopping search results.

There are dozens of on-site or on-page elements SEOs work on which range from correct site structure to various forms of copywriting to accessibility and usability issues. It is an increasingly complicated atmosphere that involves more hours per file than ever before, leading to the necessity to outsource various components of a well rounded campaign.

One of the rules in most established SEO firms is that every SEO has to have a background in website design. Without it, the SEO is lost among the source code with no real knowledge of how a web page is actually written or a website is structured.

Over time, the process of website design itself has become far more complex with a widening array of file types accessible to search engine spiders and an increasing number of CMS tools. SEOs now deal with Flash, Acrobat, variants of HTML, and the learning curves associated with unique content management systems. Similarly, where websites used to tend to follow a relatively simple linear tree, they can now descend into seemingly limitless databases with file-paths that are subject to sudden change.

The array of file types that can be present on a single web document and the complexity of most commercial websites create a market for usability specialization, one of the fastest growing sub-sections of the industry.

As search spiders tend to favour sites featuring fresh and focused content, SEO copywriting has long been a specialization in the industry. There is continued growth in this sub-sector of the industry, especially in light of the rapid growth of the second major venue, paid search advertising.

In highly competitive areas such as tourism, real estate, clothing and web services, SEO has always been a game of inches as competing website optimizers work to better each other on behalf of their clients. In order to compete, we are increasingly depending on website statistics and analysis to tell us how visitors actually use our clients' sites. This allows us to make (or recommend) changes in real time, as compared to the two-three week delay in previous years. Knowing how visitors use the site gives us the advantage of improving traffic patterns and thus improving overall site quality.

The second major search marketing venue is the Paid Search Advertising market. This is the area that has seen the most growth over the past few years, having provided the successful business model that has propelled Google and Yahoo to the front of the pack.

Pay-per-click advertising, on the surface, is fairly straightforward. Advertisers bid a certain amount that is billed every time their ads are clicked on. Google, Yahoo and MSN each have significant paid-search advertising programs but each of those programs significantly differs from the others. Widely recognized as Canada's leading paid-search marketing firm, [Page Zero Media](#) employs experts in both Google AdWords and Yahoo Search Marketing due to the different techniques required to work within the competing programs.

Paid search advertising is undergoing several forms of expansion at this time, allowing a number of new options for advertisers. Earlier this month, Yahoo unveiled a revamped Yahoo Search Marketing interface that gives advertisers more control over the timing and placement of their campaigns. Last week, Google announced it was allowing advertisers to bid for video ad placements alongside typical paid-search ads. Microsoft is also rapidly moving forward with their PPC division, AdCenter.

The most interesting facet of paid search advertising continues to be in the distribution of paid ads to third-party web properties such as the websites of major newspaper or privately operated websites. As the major search engines continue to find ways to distribute paid search advertising, especially video ads, the sector servicing this market will continue to grow and areas of specialization will continue to form.

Another specialization associated with PPC is the business of click-fraud detection and advocacy. Click fraud is a continuing problem facing paid search advertisers and vendors. There are now about a dozen reputable firms that can credibly offer assistance in determining if click fraud is happening and advocate on behalf of a client with the major search engines.

The third and most fluid search marketing venue is found in the mysterious space known as the social networking sphere. This is an emerging area that is growing and changing so rapidly that it appears to be more of a transition than a plateau in web-interactive development.

Social networking is a complicated topic best described through the parlor game, Six Degrees to Kevin Bacon. (Name an actor from the 20th century and chances are you can put him or her beside someone who worked with someone who worked with Kevin Bacon.) The web of personal connections we have is immense. There is no place to prove this better than MySpace, the fastest growing network of young people on the Internet.

MySpace is a phenomenon in the field of online communication in the same way Google was seven years ago. There are several similar social networks including Facebook, Orkut and Friendster however, none is as widely known or visited than MySpace. Its immense popularity is spread, primarily, through word of mouth. For younger Internet users, its reach and usefulness is incredible. From the sharing of hosted music tracks, images and videos, to the formation of user-interest groups, MySpace and other social networks are quickly becoming the live-time meeting spaces and marketplaces of the Internet.

The basic element that makes something "Web2.0" is the ability of users to communicate, add to, augment, debate, inform, and, in doing all of the above, somehow alter a shared or personal environment.

Knowing how to establish social networking identities and add items or information of interest to users of those networks is a segment of search marketing services that is just now starting to grow rapidly.

Google, Yahoo, Ask and MSN all use elements of Web2.0 ideas in formulating their search rankings and in new features and applications they offer to their users. Yahoo is an especially enthusiastic adopter with services ranging from Yahoo 360, Yahoo Shopping, Yahoo Answers and the Yahoo Publisher Network all touching in some way on Web2.0 elements. Google is also experimenting with Web2.0 thinking in allowing its users to present quality feedback and to affect search listings through personalization and bookmarking.

Being involved in the search marketing industry over the past few years must be similar to the experiences of cartographers during the various [ages of nautical exploration](#). From the days when humans first learned to sail, approximately 4800 years ago, we've been going places, seeing new things, establishing trade, disrupting established economies, altering societies, and documenting our experiences along the way.

According to the [American Mariner's Museum](#) in Newport News, Virginia, the ages of nautical exploration spanned nearly 45 centuries, stretching from 3200BC to 1779AD, the year Capitan Cook was killed in Hawaii. It took 4400 years for humans to produce an accurate map of the world and, though we are knocking them off at an alarming rate, we are still discovering undocumented species of insect, plants and even animals. Exploration and documentation takes a long time. Cook took nearly two years to travel from Portsmouth England to the Pacific Coast of North America on his third and final voyage.

The Age of Search, on the other hand, is only about a decade old and exists in a world in which one can electronically travel from the Pacific Northwest to Portsmouth England via Virginia before eating breakfast. Documentation still takes a while but the commute isn't as challenging as it once was.