



Search Engine Marketing Basics

Search engine marketing

Search engine marketing (SEM) refers to the overall process of marketing a website on search engines. This includes submitting the right ad, optimising it well through style and placement, and ensuring it ranks highly in searches by paying for priority positioning where possible. But it does not end there. It is about improving how your site interacts with search engines overall so your target audience can find you. SEM is a continual process and not a one-off task. For that reason, while many small business owners choose to manage their own SEM, some may decide this is an area better left to the experts. We will discuss ways to select a search expert for your business later in this chapter.

What are search engines?

The term "search engine" is often used generically to describe both crawler/spider or spider-based search engines and human-powered directories. These two types of search engines gather their listings in very different ways.

Crawler/spider-based search engines

Crawler/spider-based search engines, such as Google or sensis.com.au, create their listings automatically. They "crawl" or "spider" the web according to the search request and present the searcher with a list of all the related links found. People then search through their findings for the most relevant result. How quickly your business is found, and where your business ends up in the search results, will generally depend on how closely matched your business is to the search query and how easy your website is to find by the crawler or spider. Changing your web pages can impact the way you are found and listed which is one reason why sometimes you might suddenly have more traffic after a change



to your site. Page titles, text and other elements can all play a role. Search engines can also make changes to the way their crawlers behave which can also impact the way you are found - this is one of the reasons why search engine optimisation is not a one-off task.

Search engine submission: listing your business

Search engine submission means having your website listed with search engines. This does not necessarily mean you will rank well every time, but search engines should be able to locate your site.

Two ways you can get listed with search engines are:

1. Search engine optimisation (SEO) – this means adapting your site and employing methods to help increase your chance of being found for free
2. Paid-for listings, also known as “pay-per-click” or “pay-for-performance,” we will call them P4P. (More on this later).

How search engines work

When you search for anything using your favourite crawler/spider-based search engine, the search engine should sort through the millions of pages it can find and present you with results related in some way to your topic. The matches should also be ranked, so the most relevant ones come first.

Of course, the search engines don't always get it right. Non-relevant pages make it through, and sometimes it may take a little more digging to find what you are looking for. Crawler/spider-based search engines go about determining relevancy by following a set of rules, known as an “algorithm”. Search engines are unlikely to share their rules or algorithms because it is a key ingredient in determining which search engines work better and who has the most successful search results. They can change the way their algorithm is set which can affect how the crawler or spider behaves as mentioned earlier. This in turn can impact the way your site is listed and ranked. One way to help ensure your listing is not impacted by these changes is to pay for your placement, more on P4P later.



Location and frequency

The location and frequency of keywords on your web page can help or hinder your listing on search engines. An algorithm may assume your website is more relevant than your competitor's because the search term is in your web address or at the top of your home page whereas the same search term does not appear until your competitor's third page. This means every word on your website can impact your business' chances of being found. So it is important to ensure you consider the relevance of information when you are designing your website.

Frequency can also play a role in how search engines determine relevancy. A search engine might analyse how often keywords appear in relation to other words in a web page. Those with a higher frequency might be deemed more relevant than other web pages. Some search engines "index" or collect more web pages than others. Some search engines also index web pages more often than others. The result is that no search engine has the exact same collection of web pages to search through. That naturally produces differences, when comparing their results.

Search engines may also penalise pages or exclude them from the index, if they detect search engine "spamming". An example is when a word is repeated hundreds of times on a page, to increase the frequency and propel the page higher in the listings. Search engines can watch for common spamming methods in a variety of ways, including following up on complaints from their users.

Off-the-page consideration

As this market matures, many "webmasters", or designers, are learning more about the way search engines operate and some are constantly rewriting their web pages in an attempt to gain better rankings. At the same time, crawler/spider-based search engines are becoming familiar with the ways people



are doing this and, as a result, many of them now also make use of "off-the-page" ranking criteria.

Off-the-page mechanisms are those a webmaster is generally unable to influence easily. Chief among these is link analysis. By analysing how pages link to each other, a search engine can determine what a page is about and whether the page might be important enough to achieve a higher ranking. In addition, sophisticated techniques are being used to screen attempts by webmasters to build artificial links designed to boost their rankings.

Another off-the-page mechanism is click-through measurement. In short, this means that some search engines may monitor what results people are selecting for a particular search and may drop previously higher ranking pages not being selected, while promoting the lower-ranking pages being selected. As with link analysis, systems are also available to determine artificial click-through mechanisms generated by webmasters.

Crawlers and spiders

One way to help improve your chances of being found is to build links to your website from other relevant and popular websites. Why? Because crawlers and spiders follow links, and by linking with popular sites you are more likely to be found by them.

Pay-for-performance (P4P) search engine marketing

Generally, search engines will offer some form of P4P listing service.

If managed well, P4P advertising can be one of the most cost-effective marketing solutions for businesses on the internet. Unlike SEO, P4P provides the opportunity to ensure a higher ranking on search engines in return for a fee.

Website owners can usually bid for keywords so can determine how much they are prepared to spend. Search engines can also place a minimum price point on page placements to ensure top spots are not being sold too cheaply in the case



where there is only one person bidding. Search engines might also offer reduced prices for websites with high click-through. This means popular sites aren't deterred from advertising because they have to pay every time someone selects them. (This means an advertiser with a high click-through rate might pay less in position #1 than an advertiser in position #2 with a lower click-through rate).

When someone enters a keyword into a search engine, ads are usually displayed. The highest ranking ad is likely to be determined by a combination of relevance, click-through rate (popularity) and the amount paid. The highest bid can usually ensure a higher place than anyone else, but may only guarantee you the highest placement if you have paid the minimum fee for that spot based also on your site's click-through rate. Importantly, though, P4P means website owners don't pay unless the person searching actually selects their ad. To help increase your options of ranking highly in a cost-effective manner, it is important to build up a strong click-through rate. A good way to do this is to ensure your site is user-friendly and you promote it so people are more likely to recognise it and click on it when they see it.

Tips to successful search engine copywriting

Search engine copywriting should satisfy two audiences:

- The search engines - which reward content-rich sites written according to SEO copywriting standards with higher positioning
- Your customers - who rely on relevant, easy to read and understand content to help enable their purchase decision and process.

Here are some tips for successful copywriting taken from the SEM Council's book *Search Marketing Demystified* and searchenginewriting.com:

1. Always research your keywords using trusted industry research tools. Unfortunately, many business owners claim to know the phrases their potential customers are likely to use and forgo any actual research. This can



be a very easy step and can deliver some good results. Popular research tools include:

- Wordtracker
 - Sensis.com.au Keyword Suggestion Tool for BidSmart
 - Google AdWords Keyword Selection Tool
 - Overture Search Term Selection Tool.
2. Make sure your copy is well written, grammatically correct and void of spelling mistakes. While it can be important to include misspellings in your keyword list, making them visible on your site may affect the perceived professionalism of your business. (When purchasing keywords, you should try to anticipate common misspellings for example, a hotel should not limit its keywords to accommodation and rule out other variations of the word such as acomodation because they could miss out when someone spells it incorrectly).
 3. Choose two or three key words or phrases specific to every page in addition to key phrases specific to each page. Remember, people can enter your site on any page, so a per-page optimisation strategy is vital. Try to include your key phrases at least three times each within the body text. If you are working with a highly competitive keyphrase, strategically insert the keyphrase more than three times if possible. Crawlers and spiders can zoom through your entire web page, indexing every word. The goal is to strategically scatter your key phrases throughout your page copy.
 4. Emphasise your key phrases in headlines and sub-headlines where appropriate. Emphasised text, like headlines, subheadlines and boldface, can be important coding properties for search engines. This means key phrases appearing as emphasised text can stand out to crawlers and spiders and may help your site achieve higher positioning.



5. Try to include a minimum of 250 words per page. Although this may seem like a lot of text, a 250-word count for each optimised page can help meet search engine and reader needs. This is because:
 - Search engine crawlers and spiders look for content. You may see a lot of words, but they are likely to see a document with lots of content to extract
 - A longer word count can make it easier to include your key phrases without sacrificing your marketing message. Potential customers are likely to want more product information than less - and they may leave your site if they don't find it.

6. Don't compromise your site to achieve search engine positioning. Some people may think if mentioning a key phrase three times is good, then mentioning it 30 times on a page is even better. Although the page may position well, visitors are likely to question key phrase-packed writing and may not like your site.

From Small Business, Big Opportunity Rob Hartnett/ Sensis 2006