Report 4 of 7 - Basics of Search Engine Optimisation

- and why this helps for Paid as well as Free search

When you search on Google or one of the other search engines, the page returns two sets of results: the so-called "organic" or "natural" listings, and the paid listings or "Sponsored Links". The natural listings take up about three-quarters of the page width on the left hand side. The Sponsored Links are in a narrow strip down the right, and also sometimes there are one, two or three of them above the natural listings.

The organic listings are selected by the Search Engines according to their own criteria. They display the pages they judge to be the best match for the words searched on. The paid listings are – as the name suggests – placed in return for a payment by the site owner. They are essentially a form of advertising. The advertiser is charged for each visitor who clicks on the link to view their site, hence the name Pay-per-Click (PPC). I'll be saying more about how to get the best results from paid listings in Report 7.

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) is the name given to the set of practices and tactics to get high places in the organic search listings.

In the early days, Search Engines were not very sophisticated, so SEO was originally thought of as a set of tricks to fool them. These so-called 'Black Hat' techniques are increasingly counter-productive and more likely to get you banned than highly-placed.

I'll be having a look at the sort of techniques that do help in a moment, but first lets have a quick look at the advantages and disadvantages of free and paid search results

Organic "Free" Search:
Advantages:
- They are free (obviously), at least in the sense that each visitor does not involve an extra cost.
- They tend to get a higher response and better conversion – many searchers regard them as more credible than the listings that they know to be just paid advertising entries.

Disadvantages:
- Your results are uncertain – it may take weeks or months to get a good position, even if you are using the best practices. Even when you get a good position, you may lose it at any moment. The search engines may change their algorithms, or competitors may get better at playing the game.
- Effectiveness falls off very rapidly with position. It may be a big achievement to get your ranking up to say 25th out of maybe a million pages for a given keyword, but it will bring you almost no traffic at all.
- They are not really 'free' at all! Although you don't pay for the visitors you get, it takes time, effort and skill to optimise pages and to keep up-to-date with the constantly changing factors.

- To make matters worse, there's an acute shortage of really good expert SEO advice. Perry Marshall estimates that *"70-80% of SEO guys are incompetent and 5-10% are Con Men. The few that remain are hard to hire because they have a backlog of work from successful clients who want more."* Most of the people I know who have real skill in this field drive traffic to their own sites rather than working for clients.

Paid Listings:
Disadvantages:
- The traffic costs money - but that's not as much of a drawback as you might think. We already looked at the concept of Value-per-Visitor in the first Report. As long as this is reliably higher than your click costs, you can carry on spending money on traffic and making more back in return.
- You'll usually get lower response and conversion rates than with organic traffic, but once again – as long as the arithmetic above works out – you'll still be making a profit.

Advantages:
- They are reliable – at least up to a point! Once your site has been approved, and as long as you keep within the Terms of Service, you can expect to get predictable traffic as long as you keep paying the bills. Of course there are horror stories about people having their campaigns suddenly slapped by Google, but I'll be saying a bit more about how you can avoid that below.
- They are rapid - you can set up a campaign and be getting traffic in 15 minutes
- You can experiment and find the keywords and phrases that get the best results, so you then know which ones to concentrate on when you start optimising for organic search placings.

I'll be showing you how to make your PPC campaigns as cost-effective as possible in Report 7.

For the remainder of this report, I'll be concentrating on the factors that improve your chances of getting a high listing in the organic results, and explaining why this also helps the performance of your PPC campaigns.

The Big Picture

Search Engines become successful by delivering pages that users find relevant and useful in relation to the words they were searching for. They are throwing more and more resources at identifying those pages, in both computing power and human evaluation. Thus the best long-term strategy is to provide genuinely great content, and to make it easy for the search engines to know that. Tricks to 'game the system' that worked a few years ago will probably not work at all now, and certainly will cease to work some time in the near future.

On-page and off-page factors

There are two areas to direct your attention to when trying to optimise for search position. Firstly the material you put on your web pages, the way you implement them, and the way you structure the internal linking within the site. And secondly the quality and quantity of links pointing in to your pages from other sites out on the web. The first group is referred to as **"on-page factors"**, and the second as **"off-page factors".**

Keyword Research, Keyword Grouping, and Landing Pages

It is not your **site as a whole**, or your home page, which is highlighted by the search engines, but the **individual pages** within it. Suppose you have a website about ecological issues. There would be various topics within that area – Pollution, Energy, Raw Materials, and so on. Within each of these there would be sub-topics, for example the Energy area might have pages on Fossil Fuels, Nuclear, Renewables etc; and within each of these there would be yet finer sub-sub-topics.

It's going to be much easier to rank well for a narrow group of specific searches relating to these sub-sub-topics than for the more general keywords. And this is a win all round. The searcher who typed in "how do I build a home solar electricity generator" is much better served by being taken to a page dealing with that specific issue than by landing on the home page of a site and then having to navigate within it.

Ranking well for these narrow searches builds the reputation of the site as a whole and makes it easier for you to tackle the more general terms, which will of course have more competition.

On-page factors

If your site has been implemented by someone else, some of what I say here may seem a bit obscure here. If so, don't worry – just concentrate on the broad issues, and discuss them with your site designer. They will understand the detail.

The first thing is that the site must be implemented in a way that allows the Search Engines to actually see its content so they can analyse it. Some 'rapid development' systems produce pages that are opaque to the engines so they can't tell what the content is. Editors that produce raw HTML code (eg Dreamweaver or PageBreeze) are fine. So are blogging platforms such as Wordpress, Blogspot or Movable Type.

Your keywords and semantically related terms should appear in the following:

Title
This is a tag in the 'head' section of the code for the page, and shows up in the title bar of the viewer's browser window.

Meta Description
Another tag in the head-section. This is not displayed to the viewer but can be read by computers. It should be a keyword-rich summary of the contents of the page. This tells the search engines what the page is about. Often it is shown when they list your page in the search results, so you'll want to write it in a way that encourages the viewer there to click through to your page.

Meta Keywords
This is yet another head-section tag. It just contains a comma-separated list of keywords that are relevant to the page. This was very important in the early days, but much less so now. It is generally agreed not to be significant at all for Google, but may help with some other engines. Be careful only to list keywords that reflected in the page content - not everything under the sun that you would like to be found for. That would definitely count against you.

Text on the page
Obviously the keywords and related items need to be included in the page text. Once again writing good content in a natural appealing style is a better long-term strategy than doing something artificial in an attempt to second-guess the search algorithms.

Headlines and sub-heads
More weight is assigned to the wording of these, so keywords should be included here in an appropriate manner.

Alt-tags
When you include an image on the page, the Search Engines can't decode what it shows, but they can read the 'alt-tag' if one is attached to it. The tag is often overlooked by web designers as its original purpose – to cater for users with primitive web-browsers that couldn't display images (!) – is now obsolete.

Filenames
The name of the file for your page code appears as part of the address of the web-page, so it helps to call it, for example, "solarpowergenerator.html", rather than "page67.html". Similarly it's better to have keyword-rich filenames for your image files.

Domain Name
Obviously there's nothing you can do about this if you are optimising an existing site, but if you are planning a new one, do register a name which contains major keywords that you want to be found for.

If you are in a very uncompetitive niche, sorting out all of the above may be enough to get you good rankings and significant free high-quality traffic. But in most cases you will also need to pay some attention to the factors below.

Off-page factors

Google's big idea was to measure the popularity of a website by the number of other sites linking to it. The reasoning was that good quality sites would have lots of other sites referring to them. It produced such dramatically better results for the searchers that Google very rapidly displaced the existing established Search Engines.

Of course the players who had been gaming the system quickly figured out that the new game was to get lots of inbound links. Google immediately responded by stepping up its efforts to identify artificial measures and penalise sites that use them, often eliminating them from search listings entirely.

Getting good quality inbound links to your site is a whole topic in itself, but I'll give you some quick pointers here:

Some of the things that used to work but don't now
- Owning lots of sites and having them all link to each other
- Paying to get links from "directory" sites
- Getting reciprocal links by arranging to swap with other site owners
- Links from "bad neighbourhoods" – ie sites known for devious behaviour
- In short, anything that looks artificial or contrived.

Things that do work
- articles
- blogging (as long as it's done responsibly and ethically)
- social networks
- press releases

Each of these merits an article of its own – I'll probably put one out on each sometime soon.

What's the significance of SEO for Paid Search?
The original paid search operators gave their advertisers a position based purely on the amount they were prepared to bid for a visitor. Google's big idea when they launched Adwords was to have the position dependent on the product of the bid price multiplied by the Click-through-Rate (CTR) of your advert. This was good for the advertiser because it rewarded those who could write compelling ads. And it was good for Google, because they would earn more money by displaying more successful ads.

Then they found that some advertisers who had been getting good click-through rates were giving the readers a very poor experience. Obviously this is not in Google's interest, as it would hit their revenue if users became disillusioned with the material found by their paid search results. So their second big idea was to penalise sites that had a low "quality score". No one outside Google knows exactly what goes into this (and it

certainly continues to evolve), but there is consensus that the following factors are taken into account:

1. Low proportion of visitors bouncing back quickly to try a different site
2. Good match between Keywords, Ad Wording, and content of site
3. Good quality useful relevant information on landing page
4. Overall good quality of site – at least five pages, contains contact information, has Privacy Policy and Terms of Service
5. Provides disclosure of possible conflicts of interest (eg receiving commissions on products recommended)
6. Click-Through-Rate is still important.

Clearly, if you take care of all of the on-page factors I discussed in the organic SEO section above, you will automatically take care of condition 2. (items 3, 4 and 5 will also help you to get good organic listings too).

Taking care of all these things will not only improve your quality score and bring you more clicks from Google Adwords. It will also bring you a higher conversion rate from the visitors who do come, because the page content will be better matched to their searches.

This is the fourth in a series of seven complementary reports on getting the best results from your website.

(If you didn't get this report directly from http://BusinessBuildingHelp.info you can go there and sign up to receive the entire series, free of charge and with no obligation).

Feel free to send any enquires about this material to me: derek@businessbuildinghelp.info

I'll do my best to respond, but I don't make any promises to do so.