

Shifting Search's Black Sheep: How to Propel SEO to the Head of the Marketing Herd

by Gary Angel

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is the black sheep in the online marketing herd. Its basic principles, its practice and its economics are all significantly different than pretty much any other marketing channel. One might almost compare it to Public Relations – since with SEO you are essentially competing for eyeballs in a free marketspace. But unlike PR, SEO is a heavily technical discipline – one where a deep understanding of the complex ranking algorithms used by engines like Google and MS Search are the essential ingredients.

One of the most frustrating aspects of SEO is that it is, in many respects, deeply stupid. When a user types “marketing” into Google (a query that will return something like one billion entries), it's absurd to think that any search engine can possibly pick a “best fit.” Absurd because the task is inherently impossible – there is no best fit. And while the problem is most obvious for the broadest terms, it exists at every level of specificity. Take the key term in our (Semphonics) industry – web analytics.

When a user enters web analytics should they get the site of a web analytics software package, a web analytics consultancy, a web analytics association or a web analytics blog? And between software sites, all of which are essentially 100% about web analytics, how would it be possible to choose between WebSideStory, Omniture and Webtrends (or a half-dozen other vendors)?

It isn't possible. But the static nature of the returned search page places an enormous value on being in the top position – more, for example, than in the phone book when the alphabetical listing places some premium on being named triple-A but not nearly as much as the top position in an engine.

I think this is going to change dramatically in the next couple of years. The Search Engines are going to have to deliver results in a much richer – Ajax driven fashion. When your search results can be instantly sorted, filtered and categorized, being number one on return is going to be mean much, much less. So I think in couple of years the practice of SEO is going to look more like the rest of marketing. It will be easy to get included in a germane result set. And marketers will have to focus on making their listing as attractive as possible. That should be an improvement in every respect.

But at the moment, the technical discipline of SEO is still very much with us. And since it's with us, it's important to do it as well as possible.

In Search Engine Marketing, doing something well is always ultimately about your ability to measure and tune your results. And in this respect, at least, our black sheep runs with the flock.

Yes, measurement. SEO and measurement haven't exactly been soulmates. But SEO will reward disciplined measurement just as much – perhaps even more – than PPC.

Measure for Problems

So many people get lost in the nitty-gritty of SEO or intimidated by its intricacies that they miss the big picture staring them in the face. The first place to start when measuring your SEO traffic is to look at the overall organic traffic on your site by search engine. For most sites we work with (classic BtoC eCommerce), Google is going to be the dominant organic traffic source – typically sourcing anywhere from around fifty-percent to as much as seventy or eighty-percent of organic traffic. Yahoo is usually the next largest organic traffic source – typically pushing somewhere between 15-30% of traffic. MS Search is usually number three – with numbers ranging from nearly equivalent to Yahoo to percentages as small as 1-2%. Ask is the most common fourth source – typically with volumes about half of Microsoft.

I've expressed these as wide ranges because almost every site will show a different mix. But it's useful to know the general expected ranges so that you can quickly place your site in comparison. That will give you a good idea of where you have opportunities by engine. If your Google results account for 95% of total organic volume, then you need to concentrate on optimizing for Yahoo, Microsoft and other engines. If Google is sending you less volume than Yahoo, then you've got a serious Google problem.

In the main, we find that companies discover issues with Yahoo and Microsoft. These engines aren't as exhaustive in their coverage as Google, are less commonly optimized for, and are defeated by a wider variety of spidering issues. If you find that your site is under-represented in one or more engines, that provides you with direction both where to look and, in some cases, what kind of problems to look for.

Measure for Opportunities

Looking at the ratio of organic traffic by engine can yield SEO directions, and so, too, can looking at the organic entry rate for pages and content areas on your site. Most web analytic tools will let you track the number of page views, the number of entries (sessions that started on that page) and the number of entries by source – in particular, we're interested in organic search traffic. Pages that are heavily trafficked on a site but that receive a very small percentage of entries may represent SEO holes – places that search engines have a hard time reaching.

Common reasons for SEO holes include Search-based and Database-driven content, complex URL structures and unusual access paths (via Flash for example). It's often extremely useful to look at groups of pages (content areas) on your site instead of single pages. Particularly when you focus on pages accessed via database lookup or search, each single page may have too little volume to register. But the pages in sum may account for a very large number of page views. And if you can open up access to this content via Search Engines, you can often get a very big, very easy win.

Measure for Success

It may not always be a common practice in PPC, but it is at least common wisdom that you should measure for success not traffic. Alas, SEO as a discipline has yet to see the light. Many organizations don't even track SEO by traffic. Instead, they focus entirely on artificial measurements like the number of search terms on the first page.

This type of analysis is pernicious – and invariably results in severe mis-allocation of effort. Yes, it is true that the job of the SEO firm is improve the placement of your search listings. But the key question is which terms and where. It's usually your job to tell the SEO experts what to optimize for – so make sure you've thought through what you are telling them. It isn't unusual to find that having top ten placement on a hundred low-traffic words is worth much less than having #1 placement on a really important search term. If your SEO firm is allowed to measure their success by the number of search terms on page #1 from a big list of terms, then you'll almost certainly be encouraging them to focus on the wrong terms.

But even measuring organic traffic as the ultimate measure of success is a bad idea. Like PPC terms, SEO terms will vary widely in their level of pre-qualification. Not all traffic is equal. In fact, we've frequently measured pre-qualification at one or even two orders of magnitude difference between search terms. That means that a term can be sending 50 times less traffic than another term and still be more valuable!

Where appropriate, you should measure SEO traffic all the way to conversion. Unfortunately, that isn't always either possible or appropriate. Volumes on many search terms are too low to measure versus Conversion with any level of statistical confidence. And, of course, many sites don't even have clear conversions on their site. The solution is one I've talked about before – using conversion proxies to measure level of engagement. You can measure how deeply visitors engaged with your site based on the search term they entered from – and use that measure to help tune your SEO efforts.

Measure for Competitive Advantage

Measurement is all about context. How good should your organic placements be? That's a difficult question to answer in the abstract. And in the real world, it's simply impossible for many companies to be #1 on key listings. So it's important to be able to compare how you fare when stacked up against the competition. Tools like WebPosition Gold and CampaignTracker and services like Hitwise and CTSE make it possible for you to track how your placement compares to the competition – both at one single time and over a period of months.

These tools will tell you which words your competitors are highly placed on – and which words they aren't. They'll also let you track across a wide range of words how many times you and your key competitors are highly ranked.

By monitoring this across category and over time, you have an excellent way to benchmark yourself and your SEO effort versus the competition. Remember, this isn't a replacement for measuring vs. success. It may be that your competition is creaming you on words that you've found out don't really matter! But measuring your overall placements versus the competition is a great way to help you figure out much upside you have in your SEO program and also to spot potential optimization points you might have missed.

Measure for Discipline

Organizations have struggled to understand SEO. They've struggled to deploy it. And they've struggled mightily to integrate it into their ongoing business processes. That's a

shame, because however irrational current SEO requirements are, SEO is also an essential ingredient in capturing prospects on the web. Integrating measurement into your SEO program can help an organization get a much better handle on how to drive an engagement and how to think about the potential and upside of SEO. SEO may still be the black sheep in the online marketing world – but with careful measurement – it can be a mighty valuable member of the herd .