



Evaluating Your (And Your Competitors') Overall SEM Presence

By Gary Angel
President & Chief Technology Officer

7430 Redwood Blvd.
Novato, CA 94945
(800) 763-2821

Evaluating Your (And Your Competitors') Overall SEM Presence

Ever wonder how you stack up against your competition when it comes to Search Engine Marketing? Ever wonder if they are buying words you aren't? What their bidding strategies are? What ads they attach to various types of words? How much they spend?

Of course you have!

Knowing what your competition is up to isn't just idle curiosity. From a SEM perspective, it can help you identify gaps in your own program, bidding opportunities, SEO flaws and techniques, new advertising approaches and even gaps in your competitors programs that can be exploited. It can also help a SEM Manager let people in his or her own organization know how their budget stacks up in the industry and how much bang-for-the-buck they are getting.

From a broader perspective, understanding the competition's SEM program can help your company understand the strengths, branding-focus, interests, short-term focus and tactics of your competitors. It's the kind of knowledge that isn't necessarily quantifiable in value but can be priceless in the right hands.

"But wait a minute," you are probably saying. "That kind of information isn't available anywhere." Actually, it is. But getting it out and putting it together is no simple task!

To do it, you have to begin in a most unlikely place: keyword discovery. Why? Because you can't you use your buy to evaluate your competitors' buy. Instead, you need a comprehensive list of words that includes what you're buying and what they are buying. It's true, you can't get that list directly. But if you have a comprehensive list you can work backward to find out who is buying what.

To achieve a comprehensive word-list, we built an automated process that scans web properties for a client, his top competitors and a range of related industry sites. From those scans, a list of every likely relevant word and phrase is produced by comparing the usage of words on various properties with common web English. This approach yields a vast array of search-terms ranked according to their overall relevance to the industry, the client and each competitor.

Once the comprehensive keyword list is produced, the fun part begins. First, the tool scans top search engines to get the top organic and paid domains for every relevant word. It even captures the current ad for the word. For a typical word list, it will capture more than thirty thousand individual domains. It can then automatically eliminate specialized domains that aren't relevant to competitive



analysis (e.g. domains like eBay, Biz-Rate - that are categorized by type in our libraries).

Next, the tool evaluates which domains appear most frequently for the relevant words. It does this using a variety of algorithms including frequency of presence, rank of presence, and frequency and rank weighted by relevance and by actual search usage. Naturally, it does this for both Paid and Organic placements.

The result is a comprehensive view of how various SEM programs stack up in a specific industry:

Site URL	Overall Rating	Unranked Rating	Organic Rating	Paid Rating
www.for1031.com	22.48	31.75	3.27	4.50
www.bog1031.com	18.99	18.77	13.91	1.63
www.Bayview1031.com	16.77	19.75	0.20	3.71
www.diversifiedexchange.com	14.89	19.99	16.01	0.24
www.1031x.com	13.45	14.24	17.03	-0.30
www.1031-nms-properties.com	12.41	9.71	13.13	0.30
www.1031solutions.com	11.99	15.22	-0.44	2.69
infobeagle.com	11.81	23.06	-0.44	2.64
dir.yahoo.com	11.26	8.73	14.28	-0.30
www.FinanceListings.net	10.61	19.14	-0.44	2.36
www.arrow1031.com	9.73	8.97	12.35	-0.30
www.realtyxchangers.com	9.71	7.13	12.32	-0.30
www.1031TaxSavings.com	9.37	12.65	-0.44	2.06
www.TheTaxDictionary.com	8.73	12.16	-0.44	1.90
homebuying.about.com	8.68	5.30	11.03	-0.30
www.realtor.org	8.33	10.69	10.58	-0.30

It is quite difficult (and somewhat subjective) to compare Organic vs. Paid programs, so we like to evaluate each independently as well as produce a comprehensive rating. The comprehensive rating weights each appearance by search position - and gives equal weight to PPC and Organic. For an industry like web analytics, there are quite a few players in the space - so it's important to realize that even though we've excerpted only the first page of results that this report spans every site returned by key search engines for the most relevant words. It isn't unusual for that number (sites evaluated) to be in the thousands. Typically, only about the top 100 or so are of interest. But there is nothing unusual in having a client that isn't in the top 100 ratings - so the exhaustive approach is often handy.

One of the best things about the evaluations is that they can prevent a sense of complacency by organizations that are either aggressive buyers or search engine



optimizers. Across various search engines, the ratio of organic to paid clicks ranges from 70-30 to 40-60 - meaning that no serious SEM program can afford to ignore either.

To give a sense of how different the ratings are, let's sort by Organic position only:

The screenshot shows the Semphonic 'Industry SEM Rating' report. The 'Sort' dropdown is set to 'Organic Only Rating'. The table lists 20 sites with their Overall, Unweighted, Organic, and Paid ratings. A green callout box highlights the top of the table with the text: 'Most strong SEO Sites aren't also strong PPC players.'

Site URL	Overall Rating	Unweighted Rating	Organic Rating	Paid Rating
www.1031x.com	13.45	14.24	17.03	-0.30
www.diversifiedexchange.com	14.89	19.99	16.01	0.24
dir.yahoo.com	11.26	8.73	14.28	-0.30
www.big1031.com	18.99	18.77	9.91	1.63
www.1031-rrn-properties.com	12.41	9.71	13.13	0.20
www.amer1031.com	9.73		12.95	-0.30
www.realtyexchangers.com			12.32	-0.30
homebuying.about.com			11.03	-0.30
www.realtor.org			10.58	-0.30
www.bpx.com	7.74	7.62	9.84	-0.30
www.aplexchange.com	7.55	6.89	9.60	-0.30
www.ci-ri.net	6.83	6.40	8.83	-0.30
www.1031exchangeop@ms.com	8.22	3.83	8.43	0.09
recenter.tamu.edu	6.41	4.81	8.17	-0.30
www.aac1031.com	6.20	9.45	7.90	-0.30
www.cityfeet.com	6.14	4.07	7.82	-0.30

It's interesting to see that among the top 20 sites by Organic rating, only two are also highly rated PPC programs. This underscores the fact that many companies with aggressive PPC programs simply don't do the job they should with SEO - and perhaps vice versa.

In our experience, the best Search Engine Marketers consistently do a good job across both these spaces. However, a good marketer on a constrained budget may have little choice but to concentrate on organic positioning and abandon PPC efforts. It's for this reason that Organic ratings often show smaller companies as well as industry sites (natural candidates for high Organic ratings but unlikely to pursue PPC at all).

Sorting by PPC program is equally revealing. Naturally, the PPC programs tend to be dominated by the major players in an industry - and in that respect are usually less surprising than Organic results. In addition, it's important to realize that PPC commitments and rotations can change with lightning speed - so this report has to be treated as a snapshot to be viewed in an historical context.



Address: http://localhost/crusher/reports.aspx?rpt=IndustrySEM

semphonic

Collect Optimize **Report** Administration

Industry SEM Rating Sort: Paid Only Rating Page 1 of 112

Site URL	Overall Rating	Unweighted Rating	Organic Rating	Paid Rating
www.fort1031.com	22.48	31.75	3.27	4.50
www.Bayview1031.com	16.77	19.75	0.20	3.71
www.1031solutions.com	11.99	15.22	-0.44	2.69
infobeagle.com	11.81	23.08	-0.44	2.84
www.FinanceListings.net	10.61	19.14	-0.44	2.36
www.1031TaxSavings.com	9.37	12.65	-0.44	2.06
www.TheTaxDictionary.com	8.73	12.16	-0.44	1.90
www.big1031.com	18.99	13.91	13.91	1.63
www.1031america.com		0.30	1.14	
1031AdvisorsUSA.com		-0.44	1.10	
www.Nationwide1031.com		-0.44	0.86	
www.1031cinwest.com	4.41	1.73	-0.21	0.84
www.naexchange.com	4.58	3.58	0.50	0.73
www.4rps1031.com	3.43	5.54	-0.44	0.63
www.verstasstrategies.com	3.10	3.71	-0.44	0.55
www.Titanhf.com/1031	2.51	3.95	-0.44	0.43

Even among serious PPC Players there are dramatic differences in rating.

Even with these caveats, this type of reporting is a tremendous opportunity to get a sense for how a PPC program stacks up to the competition.


This sort of knowledge is powerful in and of itself. It can help a SEM Manager make a case for better SEO or PPC efforts - or just prove what a great job is already being done. But it doesn't necessarily provide a roadmap about what to change if your SEM program isn't the best.

Fortunately, that information exists too.

The One-to-One competitive view shown below offers a wealth of insight for tuning a Search Engine Marketing program. It displays the entire universe of relevant words (we've just extracted one page) - and shows how various competitors score in terms of both organic and paid placement.

This view immediately highlights a number of critical issues including: SEO gaps, PPC opportunities, and branding issues.

Address: http://localhost/crusher/reports.aspx?rpt=OneOnOne



Collect Optimize **Report** Administration

One on One Competitive Page 1 of 472

Site 1: www.1031-exchangeoptions.com Site 2: www.diversifiedexchange.com

Word or Phrase	Score	Organic Site 1	Site 2	Paid Site 1	Site 2
FREE EXCHANGE 1031	2.23				
1-031 EXCHANGE	2.23		6	26	4
COMPLETE 1031 EXCHANGE	2.23		22	3	
REAL ESTATE	2.23				
1-031	2.18		7		5
EXCHANGE	1.93				
EXCHANGE 1031	1.82				
PROPERTY 1031 EXCHANGE	1.77				
INVESTMENTS 1031 EXCHANGE	1.68		1		
INVESTMENT EXCHANGE 1031	1.67		10		
COMMON 1031 EXCHANGE	1.67		1	4	
ESTATE EXCHANGE 1031	1.65				
TEAM 1031 EXCHANGE	1.59			1	
EXCHANGE 1031 TAX	1.54				
EXCHANGES 1031 EXCHANGE	1.52		10		
IRS 1031 EXCHANGE	1.50				

Annotations in image:
 - "SEO Gap" points to the "Score" column.
 - "Potential opportunities" points to the "Organic Site 1" column.
 - "Potential opportunities" points to the "Site 2" column.
 - "Potential opportunities" points to the "Paid Site 1" column.
 - "Potential opportunities" points to the "Site 2" column.

Places where your competition is buying and you aren't represent possible holes in your PPC program. High usage words that are in your space but aren't being purchased by you or your competitors offer PPC growth opportunities. Seeing organic gaps provides direct feedback to your SEO program - especially in cases where you are competing with competitors in the PPC space for those search terms.

This form of head-to-head view is also great for understanding the branding focus from each of your competitors. Word buys often reflect more about what an organization thinks of itself than how customers are actually searching.

In a similar vein, we produce this report below - which turns out be quite useful in a number of different ways. Creative optimization is one of the most important aspects of good SEM management. It's a place you need to spend as much time as possible. But it's also a process that can be difficult to tackle and hard to evaluate in terms of how you compare to your real competition.

Seeing all of your competitor's creatives can really jump start the creative optimization process. But it is almost impossible - by hand - to track down all of the different creatives that are in use. This report does just that. It saves every creative it finds from among your top 100+ competitors and allows you to quickly understand what they say and offer. It can even highlight new creatives going into rotation - so you can respond immediately instead of months after the fact.



The SE Marketplace has been likened more than once to the Old West - and just like Dodge City it's a lot easier stay alive when you know what the competition is up to, who's behind your back and how your draw compares!

