

Emergency Marketing Response – SARS Outbreak and Toronto Based Clients

By Jim Hedger, Manager of SEO, [StepForth Search Engine Placement Inc.](#)

The panic was real. Even before the World Health Organization issued its now rescinded advisory against unnecessary travel to Toronto, the media had hyped fears of SARS into plague-like proportions leading to significant declines in tourism and travel to Toronto. Conventions were cancelled, hotel rooms left vacant and empty seats at Jays games told the story of millions of dollars suddenly withdrawn from the downtown economy. Businesses based on providing services to tourists or other businesses experienced an immediate loss of revenue and are expecting to continue losing money until public perceptions change and visitors return to the city.

StepForth has two clients from the Toronto region that depend on tourism and travel to Toronto. Both [Escape Tours](#) and [Parris Concierge](#) are small businesses, employing a total of six full time staff and less than ten part time staff. Neither company can afford a large advertising budget and neither company could afford to sit still while the economic foundation of their businesses collapsed beneath their feet.

Fortunately, these clients know each other and have done business together on several occasions in the past. When Katherine Parris called StepForth early into the crisis, we immediately recommended a solution that would potentially benefit both businesses while distancing them from keyword phrases that mentioned the word "Toronto".

The first part of our solution was to suggest that the two businesses start working closer together by sharing client lists, helping each other generate leads, and increasing the number cross-referrals between the companies. For us, this was the easy part. The more difficult part would be to position the two companies high on search engines for keyword phrases that had no reference to the city of Toronto. That required a little more than just good thoughts, it required good, hard work.

Escape Tours is a small but busy company offering personalized tours of Toronto and the surrounding areas. As each tour is designed to meet the needs of specific clients, Escape Tours offers trips to several other areas around Ontario and Quebec. Having benefited for almost a year from Top10 listings under the keyword phrase "Toronto Tours", Escape Tours owner Aurelija was starting to worry that people would not be interested in taking tours of a city that had been (wrongly) fingered as the leading distribution point for SARS. Realizing that one of Toronto's attractions is also the world's longest continuous road, (Yonge Street) we recommended the business begin to promote tourism destinations outside of the Toronto area. A quick reoptimization effort on a Friday evening resulted in a number of rapid gains at Google under keyword phrases relating to other tourism destinations Escape Tours could serve. While it is still too early to determine if this effort has helped the core business, we are happy to report that our client is now in the Top20 under keyword phrases that do not relate to Toronto, while retaining her already strong placements under keyword phrases that do relate to Toronto.

Parris Concierge was a more difficult challenge. Run by Katherine Parris, Parris Concierge offers a wide array of services to the business community and their guests. Having strong listings at Overture and Google under a wide variety of Toronto related keyword phrases had proven to be extremely beneficial to the company as Toronto is the hub of business and communications in Canada. After hearing of two major professional conventions withdrawing their plans to hold their meetings in Toronto, Katherine also began to worry about the economic underpinnings of her business. To redefine the focus of Katherine's search engine promotion, we had to examine other facets of her business and try to determine what

other services she might offer and where the client base would come from. After studying different client needs with Katherine, we decided to focus on services in Toronto but to find a number of keyword phrases that could be used that did not reflect Toronto. With a 5-Million person potential market, the thinking is that by offering services people need on a daily basis or for special occasions, Katherine should be able to bridge the gap until such time as prosperity returns to the Toronto tourism scene.

It is still too early to fully judge the results of these campaigns. We have successfully placed the clients' websites in the Top10 under keyword phrases that are not directly associated with the city name, "Toronto", ironically, achieving these results just after the WHO rescinded its warning on travel to Toronto. While keyword phrases such as "Kingston Tours", "Ottawa Tours", and even "Montreal Tours" are not as heavily searched as our original target phrase, "Toronto Tours", it is our expectation that Escape will see more business from these other keyword phrases than they would from the now-tainted original. As for Parris Concierge, business is business and the need for Katherine's services will most likely bounce back fairly quickly as Toronto is the sixth largest city in North America and the business center of Canada. Just in case, we achieved Top10 placements under several other keyword phrases relating to services Parris Concierge can facilitate but not related to the city of Toronto. Perhaps the best measure of success is that both Escape Tours and Toronto Concierge report that the phones are ringing again, but how many of these inquiries will pan out to be paying clients will not be known for several weeks.