

The Simple Way to Beat Your Competitors

By [Ross Dunn](#), CEO, [StepForth Search Engine Placement Inc.](#)

Why reinvent the wheel? We have all heard this statement time and time again, and all too often it is from an annoying critic or a cheesy salesperson. In the case of Internet Marketing, however, it doesn't seem so silly since there are not many reliable options for keeping up to date with the latest techniques. After all, you could spend hours in SEO forums, read the plethora of do-it-yourself books and you could still end up with dated material or suggestions that don't apply to your industry niche... or both! So what is the answer? Look for examples of companies that are currently successful and find out why they are! This can be easier said than done; however, there are definitely some tricks of the SEO trade that can make this type of analysis easier. Since competitive analysis is a major portion of my job as CEO at StepForth Search Engine Placement, I have developed enough knowledge out of my research to provide my clients with enough information to make a serious dent in the competition. Now I am going to share with you an outline of how to do your own competitive analysis and how to understand it. This will only provide the basic data, however, I assure you that the following tips will provide you with the information to take more informed decisions with your search engine campaign.

To begin you must choose a viable competitor. Many of you may already have a clear idea of who your competitors are which will make this simpler. If you don't, then run searches for your most important keyword phrases on Google (or the search engine of concern) while noting any competitors who appear more than once. With luck you will have quickly identified your competitor(s) of choice to move onto the actual analysis.

If You Can't Beat Them... Improve on Them!

This competitive analysis will require 4 stages of research; position reporting, search engine saturation, design critique, and link popularity research.

Stage 1: Position Reporting

Now that you know who your competitor is it is time to really get an idea how well they are doing! First write down the first 30 major keywords and phrases that appear in the Meta tags found in the Source (select "View Source" from 'View' in Internet Explorer) of the competitor's Home Page. Now take that list and go to Google and type in each query to see if the competitor has top rankings anywhere within the Top20. I recommend using Excel to document this, it will make analysis easier.

After you have compiled the results note which of the phrases are continually appearing in the Top20. 10 to 1 the rankings will all contain a similar keyword or variation. Now you know what the main keyword targets are for your competitor's Home Page! To further discriminate their most valued phrase, just look at their Title tag. Often it will include at least one incidence of their core target Keyphrase.

This is a huge advantage because now you have the key to unraveling their marketing tactics. This can be compared to being given a decryption key to read a document... now you just have to read it and understand what you are seeing.

Stage 2: Search Engine Saturation

Just how much of the competitor's web site has been indexed (read and included) by the search engines? This question is important because the degree of saturation plays an important role in Google's algorithm. To put it very simply the more pages your site has indexed, the better your chances for top ranking.

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To obtain this important statistic, type in the following syntax in Google's search bar:
"site:www.competitorswebsite.com"

Stage 3: Design Critique

This is the most technical stage of all and it will likely require a great deal of time but you will be amazed by the benefits. This stage demands that you consider the method of design, layout and navigation for the competitor's site. In most cases when reviewing each element of their site you will find telltale signs of optimization such as:

1. The first text seen by the search engines is a well-worded description of their web site and it will be created using one or more of the Keyphrases you identified earlier.
2. There will be a navigation menu in text format so that search engines can easily spider their site.
3. The links to pages within the web site from the text menu will be created using a Keyphrase relevant to the destination page. This adds significant credibility to the destination page and the site as a whole.
4. Alt Tags have been added to linked images or complex navigation menus. The Alt Tags will be short, and optimized using the Keyphrases for the destination page.
5. The Title Tag will be short but carefully targeted to obtain rankings for their core Keyphrase.
6. There will be a good balance of body text to images on the page; this denotes a careful optimization of the balance of words versus Keyphrases within the written text.
7. Incidences of important Keyphrases within the written text will be linked to internal pages within the site. Such links are called "inline text links" and can significantly bolster the relevance of both the page with the outbound link and the destination page (as long as it properly reflects the topic that was linked to it)
8. The site will often include a very simple and carefully optimized sitemap accessible from any position within the web site.

While considering these techniques, carefully note any these elements that appear to be present. Remember we are trying to find the 'mix' that your competitor is utilizing so that you can consider implementing the same while improving upon it.

Stage 4: Link Popularity

"How many pages are linking to your competitor's web site? How many are their own pages?"

Link Popularity (LP) is a crucial consideration when analyzing a competitor. Essentially LP has the power to make or break a web site. The more links pointing to a web site from other related web sites, the more credibility Google perceives the site to have. In this case, the method for basically analyzing the LP of your competitor is to simply type in the following:

"link:www.competitorswebsite.com"

What you will likely end up with is a number of external sites linking to your competitor along with many of their own pages showing up as well. In this case it is important to consider just how many of the pages are actually their own. I have seen incidences where nearly 75% of all pages were their own! This is a symbol of the search engine friendliness of their web site. Once you have a good idea of their external back links (links pointing to their site), consider contacting each of the sites and requesting a link from them. To do this you will require a links page within your web site where you can place reciprocal links to the agreeable link provider; this is generally expected by webmasters.

Summary

Now that you have identified the various techniques your competitor is using, try to incorporate the 'mix' into your current web site. Pay special attention to the Home Page and focus on these elements in this order of importance: Title Tag, optimization of the first text within your page, implementing a proper Description Tag, carefully remove all barriers to the Spider navigation of your site, and increase the incidences of the Keyphrase(s) within the written copy visible on your page.

By establishing the position of your competition and the techniques used, you should now have a much better concept of what works and what doesn't when obtaining rankings within your niche. If you have not found the information that you need or you wish to learn much more about your competition please don't hesitate to contact StepForth, our research services are designed to strip bare the techniques that your competitors are using. An advanced competitor analysis can make all the difference in the world for your web site and it will save you the money involved with repetitive SEO because you will know what works!