

Consumers Search Before Buying

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When hunting for stronger sales, it is wise to go where the game is. When the game gets very much smarter, wise hunters learn to adapt. - quote found inscribed in obscure cave formation near Fernwood BC.

As the oft' quoted phrase goes, "...the more things change, the more they stay the same." This phrase can be applied to the search engine marketing sector time and time again. Though several events in the business world of search attracted major media attention last week, interest in organic search has re-emerged among webmasters and search marketing agencies. Two years after the popularization of pay-per-click programs, advertisers are starting to form sophisticated strategies combining managed PPC campaigns and consistent organic placements.

Consumer behaviors are rapidly changing as buyers are researching their purchases online before spending their money. A recent study, "[Search Before the Purchase](#)" from DoubleClick and comScore Networks notes half of all online purchases are preceded by multiple product-specific searches. A similar tendency occurs in the brick and mortar retail world with consumers using search engines as product catalogs researching products, vendors and even the fastest routes before heading out to shop.

The study also offers a number of valuable insights into how consumers use search engines to research products they are interested in. Using a list of 30 sites from the Apparel, Computer Hardware, Sports/Fitness, and Travel industries, the researchers examined the habits of 1.5 million U.S. Internet users. It followed the long-term behaviors of identified people who made at least one purchase on one of the 30 sites in the survey. The findings will not surprise organic search engine marketers as they confirm the high value of strong search engine placement.

Know what your potential buyers want to know.

Keyword selection stands out as the most important point in the survey. On average, about 75% of pre-purchase search is conducted using generic terms. Only 18.1% - 28.5% of searchers looked for brand names. It is only when consumers are close to making a final purchase decision that they enter brand names into search engines.

Travel consumers tend to know what they want.

As part of their methodology, comScore looked at the number of searches conducted using generic terms and brand names and compared the results with the number of actual clicks those searches generated. While search users looking for travel information only typed brand names 21.2% of the time, they clicked on (eventually purchasing) brand name generated results 21.5% of the time, the lowest disparity between use of brand in search and actual clicks generated by brand-names.

Apparel buyers tend to think about clothes, a lot.

In the apparel sector, search engine users typed a brand name 27.5% of the time, clicking through an average of 32% of the time. Interestingly, a high degree of pre-purchase research is seen in the apparel sector often starting months before buying. Six to ten weeks before actually selecting a product, online shoppers start entering generic terms. As the weeks go by, they hone in on specific brand names and

brand items until they find exactly what they are looking for. Similar behaviors are shown in the three other sectors studied.

Immediate ROI is a poor way to gage success.

Much like television advertising, sales on search engines stem from effectively branding a product and putting that brand in front of consumers time and time again. According to the study, *"...most buyers complete their in-market search engine research two or more weeks before the make a purchase online."* The correct way to measure the success of an optimization campaign is heavily debated in the Search Engine Marketing community and centers around Return on Investment (ROI) vs. Top10 Placement. Many SEOs believe that the achievement of Top10 placements should be the reportable goal while others believe that ROI is the only relevant outcome. According to the results of the study, both are important with ROI (as assumed by clicks) directly related to consistent Top10 placements throughout the research/buying cycle.

Brand it and they will come.

Ultimately, search engine users are looking to make the smartest, most cost-effective purchase possible. The study proves what most SEOs have known for years, search users are increasingly savvy consumers. With a world wide web of information in front of them, search users are instantly accessing the information they feel the need to know before buying. While researching, they are going to come across several brand names, some more than others. The search world shares the rule of branding with other forms of traditional media. Regardless of how a search engine user sees your product name, the more often they see it, the better chance they will at least look at your products. As with the various traditional marketing vehicles, placement plays a large role in consumer confidence and loyalty. A product or brand reference that consistently appears in the Top10 organic results with corresponding PPC results and advertising on other relevant websites tends to sell best.

Perhaps the most interesting development in the world of search this week is a sense of a newly minted pattern developing in SEO/SEM techniques. The DoubleClick – comScore study is one of a growing number of papers showing the high value of organic results as part of an overall search marketing strategy. Today's search environment offers advertisers more options than any other medium that has ever existed. The success of a search marketing campaign is greatly enhanced with organic search engine placement but the end result comes down to how advertisers and their search marketers uses the increasing number of tools at their disposal.