

## **Searching for a Career – Eight Skills for Entry into SEM**

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I have recently learned that students as young as grade 6 and 7 are being pressured to declare career interests in order to best direct the limited public education resources after years of funding cut-backs. I don't recall that sort of pressure in school twenty years ago. I completed my schooling in the days before the Internet existed in the public realm. Things seemed a little less focused back then though I must admit the core curriculum placed in front of today's students is much more challenging than those placed in front of my generation. There is simply far more knowledge to share today than there was when I was a public school student, especially in math and the myriad science-based specializations.

Personally, I couldn't imagine making such a difficult life decision so early on, before many even know what an independent life is like. Given the sad fact that for the vast majority of us, adult life does not often mimic Hollywood and most of the time it is not very glamorous, the best advice is to adopt a career that is bound to keep things interesting. While I did not choose this career as much as it seems to have chosen me, I have an almost certain faith that my decision to work in search engine marketing will prove to be the best one I could have possibly made. Students from a wide range of academic disciplines can forge a rewarding career somewhere in search marketing. Not only is there rarely a dull moment, the trajectory of the entire sector is pointed in the right direction with a seemingly unlimited ceiling.

Entry into the search marketing sector is still fairly simple especially as the field is growing so rapidly. There are however a few basic skills required beyond knowing one's way around Dreamweaver.

Eight skills needed for entry into the SEO or SEM sector. (Ed. Note: In order of Jim's perceived level of importance.)

First of all, this might seem a bit basic but knowing how computers work is fairly important. Believe it or not, most SEM firms are small businesses and don't have a maintenance department. As with other small businesses, the staff is forced to wear two or more hats and some of the staff will double as the IT department from time to time. The person who knows how to network the computers, build and maintain a central file server, troubleshoot anything, and keep the Internet and Intranet connections constant is always a highly valued team-member.

Second, good search marketers are comfortable working with a wide range of software in order to perform a wide range of services on a client's website or account. In their first week, new SEO or SEM practitioners will be asked to work with spreadsheets, spider tracers, rank checking tools, client management tools, bid management tools, and other pieces of software designed specifically for the search marketing industry. The ability to intuitively work one's way through new pieces of software is highly valued by employers in the search marketing industry.

Third, search marketers should have a slightly better than average command of the English language, even if they are marketing to non-English speaking users. English is the unofficial language of the Internet and the unofficial language of global business. Code is programmed using English language commands and the vast majority of discussion surrounding search, search engines and the search

marketing industry is conducted in English. Seasoned search engine optimizers understand that SEO relies on well written page and document content. Being able to produce dozens of pages of original, well written content per day is a highly valued skill among search marketers. Being able to write short, concise product descriptions and headlines is also important for creating and tweaking PPC ad-copy. It should be noted that other languages will become much more prevalent on the Internet over time.

Fourth, a person looking for an entry level position in search marketing should possess well developed interpersonal skills. Even if the majority of SEOs spend most of their time staring at their monitors, the best SEOs and SEMs make the time to discuss technique and campaign progress with their clients. Discussing search marketing with clients often takes a great deal of clarity and patience, especially considering most clients have different knowledge and expectations around the search marketing industry. The ability to simplify, explain, educate, gently correct and comfort clients is critical for success and sustained sanity in this industry.

Fifth, a strong working knowledge of how ISPs work is important. Search marketers spend a good deal of time interacting with their clients' Internet Service Providers. One of the hallmarks of a well thought through search engine marketing plan is a quick assessment of the host server and how the site is set up. Being able to talk-tech with the client's ISP is critical when you need them to install software or modify the client's account in one way or another.

Sixth, search engine marketers need to have and maintain a high level of web design skills. There are a number of obvious reasons web design skills are important for search marketers. In the course of a year, most SEOs make on-site alterations to dozens of different websites, each of which pose unique challenges in one way or another. SEOs must be able to approach a wide variety of sites, styles and programming languages with confidence while working under the weight of knowing that mistakes are rarely forgiven and never overlooked in this environment. SEOs and SEMs have to be able to develop or customize landing pages for certain aspects of various campaigns. There are also times when SEOs need to communicate with the original site designer. Speaking the same technical language as the site designer helps work through whatever issues might arise when providing a third party service. Though it is sixth on this list, a strong background in web design is one of the most crucial skill sets to cultivate.

Seventh, search engine marketers need to be able to think like traditional marketers. While we work in a technical environment and thought of more as techies, advertising and marketing are the heart and soul of our industry. The clients who hire us expect us to provide top-notch marketing advice in relation to the search engine medium. This means SEOs and SEMs must have a basic to advanced understanding of traditional marketing, sales and advertising.

Eighth, search engine marketers need to be efficient researchers. In the course of a year, most search marketers will be required to become instant experts in a number of fields, some of which they might never have previously considered. Throughout my career I have had to study such diverse topics as artificial sports surfacing, real estate in Virginia, South African tourism, aromatherapy, the production of steel buildings, the history of home heating products, and the technical specifications regarding dozens of different outboard boat motors. In order to properly serve clients, a good SEO or SEM takes the time to learn as much as possible about their products or services. At the same time, if an SEO or SEM is good, chances are they have a number of clients to learn about within very short time periods. Developing and fostering research skills will go a long way to building a successful career.

There are obviously more skills required for a long-term career in search marketing but if students today cultivate the eight mentioned above, they will find themselves on much stronger footing when it comes



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time to apply and interview for jobs in the field. One of the most compelling reasons to cultivate a career in the search industry is that it provides a front row view of the immense economic and intellectual forces that are rapidly changing the ways the world works. Over the past decade, the Internet has rewired the planet, allowing skilled workers from any part of the globe to participate in an economic system that can stretch anywhere wires, radio or satellite signals do. Google, Microsoft and Yahoo are literally changing the ways we communicate and these changes are coming more rapidly and affecting more people than any other evolution in human history. In one short decade, we have seen the major search engines replace venerable institutions and communications networks that served countless generations before ours. This is the ground floor; the elevator can only go up.

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