

Stats, Facts and Organic SEO

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Everybody loves lists and statistics. From the annual Top100 movies of all time lists to the Top10 cities in which to live, even the simplest comparative studies can captivate people and inform pop-culture opinions. Folks use lists to prove points, gauge their own successes and get a reckoning on what's going on around them. Our love of lists affects us in both profound and subtle ways. Today's search engine users have long been conditioned to believe that the stuff found at or near the top of a list ranks among the best of whatever vintage is being examined. After all, it was found at or near the top of a list that might contain over 1,000,000 other references. Now, many of those top listings were affected by another group of people who live for lists and statistics, search engine marketers.

SEOs and SEMs take great interest in a number of lists and statistics beyond the Top10 search rankings. One of the most helpful aspects of working on the Internet is the ease of compiling and tracking statistical data. It is relatively simple to find statistics on user numbers for the major search engines and for unique clients.

There are three types of stats that are relevant to a specific client. The first two sets are comprised of external factors and the third set is made up of client specific factors. The ability to combine information from all three areas into a coherent plan is arguably the greatest asset a professional search marketer offers his or her clients. While the information itself runs from the vague to the highly detailed, the compilation of all of it can provide a rich view with a complete background.

When looking at external factors that effect search marketing planning, statistics tend to fall into two general categories. The first describes the overall search environment and search related options available to the client. The second category describes the search environment in relation to the sector in which our client works. Internal stats are compiled with a view to understanding how our marketing plan is working based on the behaviours of visitors and search spiders.

The overall search environment changes from time to time. Knowing who is what and where in the search engine universe is important to knowing who will view your clients' messages. Some search engines drive more traffic than others do. Some appeal to different types of users. Each of the major search engines has a following though as statistics and common sense tell us, those who lead sometimes lose their followers.

Over the past four years, Google has dominated the search scene. Up until last year, Google fed results to most other search engines including Yahoo, which fed some results to MSN. This outward pollination of search results made Google responsible (directly or indirectly) for over 80% of search results worldwide. After Yahoo and MSN developed their own proprietary search tools, Google's influence dropped to 54% of search results as measured in the [May Nielson NetRatings](#) survey. Following this trend has led SEOs to start paying more attention to Yahoo and MSN both of which can deliver significant chunks of search engine traffic. [Search Engine Watch](#) regularly publishes stats about the major search engines.

All search marketers know there are several search tools delivering traffic to commercial websites. While Google is the largest of all, it is important to get placements across numerous search tools. Though there are hundreds, if not thousands of search tools working on the web right now, less than ten of them provide enough traffic to be considered statistically relevant to SEOs and SEMs.

In the organic listings field, there are four major search engines and about six minor ones. Google, Yahoo, MSN, and Ask Jeeves are considered the Big4 as they each have their own unique spiders and ranking algorithms. Following the Big4 are, AOL, Lycos, Netscape, AltaVista, FAST, and Excite. Each of the six smaller search tools mentioned above has some sort of loyal-user following though they are not nearly as popular as the Big4. A primary reason for this is the fact that the six smaller search tools are actually fed results from one or more of the Big4. This brings us to another interesting and essential list for search engine marketers, the Search Engine Relationship Chart. Search marketers need to know which search engines feed other search engines in order to know where to focus their energies for optimal results. One of the more popular versions of this list is found at the [IHelpYou SEO Forums](#).

Much like their human designers, the major search engines all sort of look alike. There might be variations in size; colour schemes, names and cultures but when one gets right down to it the various tools share a number of commonalities. The three largest, Google, Yahoo, and MSN are starting to treat their users like clients. Each employs user-loyalty as a marketing strategy with big-box e-mail, personalized user-account features and an increasing variety of digital entertainment products. Nothing comes for free online anymore. Anything offered for free comes at a hidden cost, often paid by allowing the engines to accumulate user-specific and general data by tracking users in one way or another. We already know Yahoo is targeting TV like entertainment options as a revenue generator and that Microsoft is targeting music. Google seems to be aiming at collecting data from its educated, middlebrow audience by offering access to literature, home movies and research materials. Every once in a while search marketers should take a leisurely exploration of the various search engine offerings to gauge opportunities based on the user-base each search engine is building.

There is a great deal more general information search markers like to know about. For instance, English continues to be the predominant language spoken on the web but that is slowly changing. Just less than two-thirds of web users speak language other than English. Users who speak English as their primary language accounted for 35.8% of the online population in March 2004. The second most used language is Chinese at 14.1%. Japanese is the third most used language online at 9.6% with Spanish (9.1%) and German (7.3%) in fourth and fifth. While it is impractical to expect search marketers to learn several different languages and cultural nuances, it is reasonable to assume that many Internet users in non-English speaking cultures can read and communicate in English. It is also reasonable to assume that more search-marketing firms are being established to serve non-English speaking markets.

Here is a good list of stats compiled by the Google directory.

http://www.google.com/Top/Computers/Internet/Statistics_and_Demographics/

Another component of the overall environment is user behaviours. There are similarities and differences between user behaviours based on the search engine they primarily use. Each search engine has a distinct base of users but users of all search engines do share common habits. The way they look at search results is fairly common across all engines for instance. The results pages of Google, MSN and Yahoo all look vaguely similar. While they each might use different colour schemes, the positioning of paid and organic results is almost exactly alike from one engine to another. Since search is primarily a text based medium, search engine users read results as one might read a commercial magazine or newspaper. They tend to skip the obvious advertising and focus on the content, in this case the organic

listings. We know this because of the exhaustive [Eye Tracking Study](#) conducted by Gord Hotchkiss of Enquiro.

The Eye Tracking study shows how search users work through information on a search engine results page and is the original source of the "[Golden Triangle](#)" theory held by many search marketers. The golden triangle is a reference to the area of the search results page seen most frequently by search engine users. Understanding Gord's findings is key to having a good grasp on how search users will perceive a clients' site when they see it appear on the results page.

The next level of external information of interest in relation to a specific campaign is easier to manage as it only covers the business or service sector the client comes from. When planning a search marketing campaign for the hypothetical Blue Widget Software Company from Walla Walla Washington, we need to know what the competitive environment is like. Knowing that Blue Widgets are one of the most popular hypothetical products to market, we expect the competition to be rather challenging. For SEOs and SEMs, competitive research is extremely important. The goal is to get first page listings at the major search engines for your clients and to prepare a paid-advertising campaign that provides a good return for their marketing money.

The first thing we do is go to Google, Yahoo, MSN and Ask Jeeves to find out how many other websites relating to the keyword phrase Blue Widgets appear in the four major indexes. Happily, we find that Google only lists about 336,000 sites associated with the phrase "Blue Widgets". Yahoo returns 427,000 results; Ask Jeeves shows 123,900 and MSN shows only 54,280. It shouldn't be too difficult to get a top ten with so few competitors.

But is a Top10 ranking under the keyword phrase "Blue Widgets" really the best target for our client's money? Once we start optimizing for specific keyword phrase targets, we have committed company time and client money towards a goal. We had best be sure that goal is the most effective for the client. To do this, we check a couple of simple sources. The first is the [Overture Keyword Suggestion](#) tool (OKS), now conveniently housed at Yahoo. The OKS offers a glimpse at how many searches were conducted for a specific keyword phrase on their network in the previous month by providing a list of related keyword searches. The next is the [WordTracker](#) tool, which shows us the relative popularity of general keywords and suggests more specific ones based on the number of times search engine users entered the words or phrases.

A search for Blue Widgets on the OKS shows that nobody used that phrase last month though 3330 searches did look for information on widgets. Similar results were found with a list generated by WordTracker. This steers us back to the client site to look for other keyword targets. Being the wise optimizers we are, we know that Widgets are mini-applications for the Mac OS so our search hypothetically moved to Mac related keywords and phrases and, of course, struck a virtual mother lode of keyword choices.

After identifying the strongest keyword targets, we become curious who the Top5 competitors are, and what they are doing to be there. This range of inquiry will move us from sector-specific to client site-specific research.

There are several factors influencing the organic placement of sites but they can be placed in four basic categories, Titles, tags, text and links. In order to perform a good competitive analysis, as well as to get a handle on what we'll need to do on our client's site, we look at several elements in these four basic

categories. Each search engine takes information from these categories though each treats that information slightly differently.

When examining a number of competing sites against a client's site, we look for similarities among the top ranking competitor sites, often to see if we've missed anything critical in our assumptions but also to see if those similarities contributed to their joint success on the search engines.

Onsite factors tend to be somewhat similar with keywords used in the titles and meta tags and sprinkled through the text of documents on the site. Frequently all top sites use keyword phrases as the anchor text of internal links. We are always curious to find the average number of times competitors use keywords on their documents or phrase links with keyword laced anchor text. This helps us decide how to write competitive copy for our clients.

Our greatest interest for both client and competitors is the number of incoming links and the quality of those links. To check links, we use a number of tools but the most realistic view can be gained from the search engines themselves. To find out how many links (and which links) Google sees pointed to a website, go to Google and type link: *www.domainname.com* into the search box. The number that appears near the top right hand corner of the monitor tells you the number of links Google recognizes. A quick and often random scan of those links can tell you how relevant they are.

One stat we are NOT particularly interested in is the PageRank score as shown by the Google Toolbar. While we have conditioned ourselves to read most algorithm related announcements from Google with extreme skepticism, we do believe them when they say that the PageRank score on the Google Toolbar is for entertainment rather than informative purposes only. It is amazing that some SEOs are still interested in PageRank and even more amazing that some have established continuing businesses based on selling links from high PR sites. (For those of you involved with an SEO selling links from High PR sites, take a few minutes to ask your current SEO to explain the relevance of PageRank and then phone a few others at random to see what they say. You might be unpleasantly surprised.)

Stats and provable facts are cool. Compiling them is hard work but once they are recorded, they provide an invaluable information resource that can grow as the campaign matures. Once an SEO starts keeping hard stats on the overall search environment and client sectors within the search environment, their own professional resource libraries expand quickly. At this stage of the search-marketing sector's growth, SEOs and SEMs are consultative advisors as much as they are hands-on technicians. Having the stats literally at your fingertips saves time in the long run and forms a foundation for a strong campaign.

Sources:

Stats from Search Engine Watch

Hitwise Search Engine Ratings

<http://searchenginewatch.com/reports/article.php/3099931>

Nielsen NetRatings Search Engine Ratings

<http://searchenginewatch.com/reports/article.php/2156451>

comScore Media Metrix Search Engine Rankings

<http://searchenginewatch.com/reports/article.php/2156431>

Stats from ClickZ

<http://www.clickz.com/stats/>

Search Engine Relationship Chart from IhelpYouServices.com/forums

<http://www.ihelpyou.com/search-engine-chart.html>

The Atlas of Cyberspace

<http://www.cybergeography.org/atlas/atlas.html>

Global Internet Languages (Global Reach, March 2004)

<http://www.glreach.com/globstats/index.php3>

Site-specific stats generated by server logs are highly informative, complimenting user and search engine and general specific stats generated by firms like Nielson NetRatings, ComScore and Hitwise. The numbers generated by stats help SEOs and SEMs craft marketing strategies for individual clients, all of whom require unique approaches.