

## **The First SEO Republic Forumed**

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To phrase it in as juvenile a way as I possibly can, I think search engine spam sucks. I think the use of, and subsequent macho bragging about, spammy SEO techniques is detrimental to the SEO/SEM industry as a whole. I have a number of reasons for staking this position, none of which I intend to outline below. I have an even greater concern surrounding spam, search engines, and the nature of the SEO/SEM sector I wish to write about today.

Like thousands of other SEO practitioners, I have been quietly monitoring a raging debate that has crossed several SEO/SEM related forums over the past week. While this debate rears its head from time to time, it remains unsettled and as it continues to unfold becomes more and more unsettling. Given that they differ in tone from forum to forum, there are actually several debates taking place but all seem to have one thing in common, a lack of civility towards other views and a decreasing level of common sense.

As stated a few sentences ago, I have a number of problems with SEO spam. Instead of launching into a tirade against spam and the scammers who slam engines with it, I think I'll set another course. You see I am not sure if I am the best judge of what is and what is not spam. I have an extensive background in SEO but as a critic of another artist's work, I only know what I like and what I don't like.

My biggest problem with SEO spam is that while I may have opinions on what is and what is not spam, those opinions are purely subjective as there are no industry-wide definitions or guidelines. While several points of agreement exist and the major search engines provide written guidelines to reference, there actually isn't a well-defined outline of what constitutes search engine spam. Along with many others I've spoken or communicated with, I think there should be.

One might think that someone would have written something definitive by now. The SEO/SEM industry is almost as old as the commercial Internet itself. After watching a number of "professionals" I otherwise tend to respect gnaw the intellectual marrow from each other's bones this week, I remember why most SEOs just want to avoid the subject altogether.

### **Back to where we started**

The Internet is an evolving medium. Those of us who work certain segments of that evolving medium tend to form into communities by using the medium to communicate with each other. In the strangest ways, some of us even see the effects of our ideas spread widely across the multiple communities that are ultimately made up of core web-workers. Along with general and advanced tips and information, we share interest in each other's development. People get to know people and thus socio-professional networks are formed. These networks are important. In the SEO/SEM industry, the five or six major forums represent the nearest approximation to self-regulatory entities in the sector. Without any actual power of sanction, these forums often exert the blunt force of intense peer-pressure.

Most of the time, the system worked pretty well. The forums provided a space to educate each other and new comers to the industry. They offered a place for folks working a world away from each other to

virtually meet. In many ways, the openness of the forums led to the demystification of SEO and is partially responsible for the subsequent inclusion of SEO in business marketing plans.

The forums also played a major part in controlling the spread of spammy techniques. Reps from the major search engines lurk in the various forums to learn more about what SEOs are up to. The vast majority of responsible SEOs would choose not to discuss spamming or even do it on behalf of their clients as they wouldn't want to risk others talking about it. In two widely reported cases last year, Google assigned penalties against firms from Nevada and California based in part on forum discussions.

In previous years, Google was basically the search monoculture. Now that Yahoo, MSN and Ask have found their way into search-user's consciousness, SEO technique has become a lot more complicated than it was just a few years ago. With the emergence of the multi-spider search sphere, along with the traditional weight Google (and now Yahoo) places on links and the growth of the affiliate marketing industry, much of the new wave of black-hat technique is driven by the evolution of the search environment.

As the search engine environment has changed so radically over the last year, a strange but assumably natural evolution is taking place in the forums. These days, the forums are lining up like the horseshoe shaped congress that constituted the first republic of France. There is a forum to the [right](#) that takes an increasingly hard stand on search engine guidelines, a few right-of-center white hat forums, the largest and most widely known one in the [middle](#), and a few on the left ranging from the [established radicals](#) to the [new radicals](#). This new arrangement seems to mirror current political trends in the polarization between various forums and the acidic relationships they share in the industry. Basically, the forums have become ugly and highly political and are no longer inviting crossover discussion as they did in previous years. In effect, the SEO/SEM community seems to be losing itself in ideology.

This, my friends and colleagues is dangerous territory for us to collectively tread. What may seem like a fun flame fest in the moment is producing negative repercussions that will linger long after this round of slap down is over.

### **Future Tense?**

So, where do we go from here? The past week has seen friendships strained and in some cases broken. A wide chasm has opened between some members of different forums and I fear that gap will further hinder the evolution of our sector. As I have written at least twenty times this year, the Internet and the search engines are changing and becoming far more corporate and mainstream. The force of that evolution is going to force major change in the SEO/SEM sector in the coming months and years. It will also force changes in the ways potential clients think about search marketing vendors. I strongly believe one or more representative bodies will form to create and re-enforce advertising standards in our sector. It is very important to all of us that those bodies come from within the sector itself and that they are representative of all opinions on search marketing, including those of the new radicals.

Where the sector goes from there is anyone's guess but from where I am sitting, the obvious model for a representative congress of SEOs is found in western democratic history and is manifesting itself in the search engine marketing forums themselves.

Perhaps groups like SEMPO and the various SMA initiatives, along with moderators of each of the various forums represent the collective leadership of the industry. If that is so, that leadership needs to learn to work together to pull the various ends of the horseshoe into the powerful marketing industry we should all feel proud and privileged to work in.

