

SEO Tips in a Sea of Change – Advanced SEO 2006

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Waves of change have cascaded over the search marketing sector in the past year prompting changes in the methods, business and practice of search engine optimization. Though many things have been altered, expanded or otherwise modified, the general search engine market share has not. Google remains the most popular search engine and continues to drive more traffic than the other search engines combined. Another thing that has not changed is the greater volume of site traffic generated by organic search placement over any other form on online advertising.

There are six or seven advanced public search engines out there but the vast majority of SEO attention is naturally given to Google. Many of the tips offered in this piece, while useful at the other search engines, are written with Google in mind. We are also thinking about alternative file formats and other ways visitors might find websites aside from pure-search.

The most visible changes can be seen in the variety of search formats and in search results returned by the major search engines but the greatest changes are taking place in the philosophies and practices of search engine optimizers. As the search environment has changed, so too have the techniques and tools used by search marketers. More time is focused on improving website content and navigation in order to appeal both live-visitors and search spiders. There are also new metrics measuring the success of a search marketing campaign, all of which are far more complicated than simple search engine rankings.

Since the introduction of the Jagger Update at Google, we have been doing a number of things slightly differently and have updated expectations of our clients and ourselves.

Organic search engine placement now requires a lot more work on our part and on the part of our clients or their webmasters. Content needs to be updated regularly, navigation simplified and shared analysis of on-site traffic is increasingly important. Top10 websites, especially around their main entry points, have become production pieces requiring a greater degree of strategic planning than the general, annually updated brochure sites do. Creation of that content needs to be considered a standing business expense though that expense should be more than made up for in long-term advertising savings.

Along with that greater effort, we strongly advise our clients to integrate their PPC campaigns with their SEO campaigns though, not necessarily in the hands of the same person. SEO and PPC are two unique arms of search engine marketing. Many SEOs spread their time crafting both paid and organic campaigns for clients though each requires unique and highly developed skill sets. PPC offers guaranteed placements for a fee but require greater attention and monitoring, along with different levels of analysis. We have set caps on the number of PPC campaigns we can run in conjunction with organic placement campaigns and have taken measures to outsource via recommendation any overload. The key here is to have the PPC and the organic SEO teams working together on several aspects of the client's web documents.

That said, we need to stop thinking of search engines as the main show in website marketing. This might sound like a self-defeating statement coming from a search engine optimization specialist however search, as a tool, is no longer confined to the search engines as we know them. Think about paid-ad generating site visits from a third-party website. The transactions that brought the visitors were not

conducted on a search engine, but one or more search engines, in conjunction with that third-party website facilitated them.

Now, think about social commentary and viral marketing. Internet users, as is true with most of us offline, tend to rely on first-person recommendations. I tell a friend about a service that worked particularly well for me. They try that service and tell their friends as well. It works that way with almost any industry from restaurants to airlines, moving companies and magazines. Now, try to imagine your personal network of friends and contacts. How many of them know each other or might connect through a third or fourth party?

Imagine the impact of giving users the ability to tag their search experience with comments. During the Christmas sales rush, Yahoo Shopping experimented with user-compiled shopping lists, sort of a global gift-guide that used social networking and comment tagging to cross-reference for search results. (If you are interested in Stereo Speakers, you might also be interested in StacyB's Audiophile Shopping List.) Yahoo's Flickr photo sharing service has seen amazing growth through global networks of friends exchanging images they have tagged with their comments.

Similarly, the appearance of Blogs has substantially expanded the online marketing environment. It is estimated that by the year 2010, there might be as many as one billion Blogs published online. While most are personal diaries, blogs appear to have lasted long enough to be more than a fad and are evolving rapidly as users learn to modify and improve on them.

Businesses are increasingly turning to Blogs to communicate with customers or to respond to inquiries. Newsgathering organizations are using Blogs to fill the gap between TV broadcast and the Internet by posting everything from breaking news, information podcasts, video clips, and reporter's notebooks to recipe ideas, shopping tips and paid-search advertising.

There are two major advantages Blogs offer search marketers. The ability to link Blog entries together to form an information-thread network provides search marketers with a number of tools beyond the improvement of the knowledge base. We are able to help clients establish communications centers from which they can link to information supplied by suppliers, distributors and clients on their websites or blogs. An important goal for search marketers is to help our clients provide users with a clear path to information they need. Clear paths tend to get followed by many people, a trait today's search spiders look and account for. Blogs, if maintained properly can be an important component in a winning website structure. The second important feature of Blogs is RSS, real simple syndication. Anyone who expresses interest can subscribe to your blog, getting instant notification of updates or messages.

Search is going to be a facet of all information applications and many electronic appliances moving forward into the next decade. The major search engines are each working to make deals with the major appliance and electronics manufacturers in order to provide search results to users in planes, trains and all automobiles, along with your kitchen, living room, mobile phone and quite possibly to display screens appearing in shopping carts.

In other words, search will be a greater part of our daily lives, which brings us back to search engine optimization for websites. That's still important, even if the traditional search engine rankings pages are less important.

Building a good website structure is critical. Search engines have changed radically over the past ten years to the point that we are now in a period of what appears to be constant change and evolution. The most important elements of SEO today, more important than writing the perfect keyword enriched title tag, are ease of navigation, clarity of purpose, and relevant links (think of links as information-threads). Keywords are important; make no mistake about that but search engines have moved far beyond simple keyword/context measurements.

Search engines have significantly improved their ranking algorithms over the past two years and in particular, the past few months. From the earliest years until about five years ago, search engines looked for keywords in several areas or elements of a website, including incoming and outgoing links. Rankings were determined by the arrangement of keywords and the number of incidents of those keywords found on or around the site.

For the past five years, Google has set the standards SEOs work to achieve but over the last six months, those standards have subtly changed and will continue to change long into the foreseeable future. What made Google different five years ago was their method of using a standard keyword based spider that also factored in the number of incoming links to each site. That led to a number of techniques based around making artificial link-densities by creating link-networks, portal sites and other tricks aimed at gaming Google. After a series of algorithm updates aimed primarily at preventing "black-hat" manipulation of its rankings, Google has moved well past the basic premise of PageRank and its simple, democratic explanation.

We believe the Jagger Update is only one of many algorithm shifts that are leading Google away from pure link-context to include shared incidents of semantic intention found between linked documents.

Where we used to look at a website as a collection of similar documents, often of a common file type, found within a distinct URL, we are now examining far more complex layers of differing web-documents strung between several URLs. Again, think of links between documents as information threads being followed by the spiders. As much as possible, these threads should be more than useful links between relevant sites, they should help complete whatever story the live-user is experiencing. Your site visitors are looking for something, at least, that's what Google, Yahoo and the rest want to think. Google is especially interested in how visitors use your site, how often they return and how often they use links leaving your site.

Google has just reopened Google Analytics on a limited, invitation basis. Overwhelmed by massive user-interest when it released its modified Urchin site-statistics program, Google Analytics provides a detailed look at how visitors use your site. We are strongly urging clients to sign up for Google Analytics as it becomes available and will be offering assistance interpreting data extracted. One of the features of the free software package is the integration of AdWords/AdSense support showing how your ad campaigns are performing and how ads displayed on your site are doing.

While Google is making it easier for search marketers and advertisers, its goal is obviously to make itself more money by increasing click-through rates while collecting user data from the millions of websites signing up with the service. It has also provided SEOs with a dashboard view of critical factors involved with how it ranks sites.

The practice of search engine optimization has in some ways become more difficult but in others, has actually gotten easier. SEO has come a long way since its early days in the mid 1990's. A decade ago, SEOs were considered secretive and manipulative cowboys, roughneck mercenaries who would (because

they could) do just about anything to get a site ranked in the Top10 on the major engines of the time. There were more search engines along with a variety of directories and spidered databases such as Inktomi that sold results to other engines.

This switch, combined with the rapid growth of the Web necessitated better search algorithms and a crackdown on manipulative search marketers. At the same time, the SEO and SEM sectors have seen tremendous growth due mostly to a shift towards paid-search marketing by major advertisers and the attendant growth of interest in Google, Yahoo and MSN. The search marketing sector has doubled or perhaps tripled in size in just twenty-four months as new practitioners were hired by established SEO firms or forming their own businesses. Many of those new practitioners have spent that time absorbing and adding to the huge volume of information that makes up the SEO sector's knowledge base.

Those SEOs are coming of age, professionally speaking, and are very good at what they do. Their skills are going to be an important asset to the sector in the coming year as the business of search expands way beyond the desktop and into everyday life. Change is good.