

Measuring Success as an SEO

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"How do I know if my SEO campaign has been successful?"

I was asked this deceptively simple question the other day. I wasn't able to give the fullest response but considering the circumstances, I gave it a great effort.

It's mid-spring in Victoria and the golf courses are playable again so I joined a friend and a few of his acquaintances for a short round on Saturday. By the time we had gotten to the third tee-box, talk had turned to Google and eventually search engine marketing in general. That tends to happen around me for some reason.

This is not a golfing story but its kernel was found on a golf course and golf is a game that is rich with metaphor. Golf, like SEO, is a deceptively simple game. On the surface it is easy enough to understand but once you get involved, you learn there is always a lot more to learn.

Like search marketing, the golfer's goal appears simple. Top placement is measured by the lowest number and a 1, 2 or 3 looks amazing on anyone's scorecard. Fortunately, it is infinitely easier to score a 1 in SEO than it is to do so while golfing. Unfortunately, explaining success in the world of search marketing, over the course of 9-holes is hardly possible. As it is in golf, success in search marketing is a very subjective thing.

To put it in a simple sentence, success equates to meeting one's goals. What those goals are, and how they help you or your business achieve a greater objective is another matter.

Pure Rankings

The easiest way to measure success in SEO is still found in pure search engine rankings. Either the site appears in the Top10 listings under target keyword phrases, or it does not. Top10 rankings are what most SEO firms promise their clients.

While pure rankings are the easiest metric to measure, they are not necessarily the most accurate one. From rankings, we learn generally where a site appears from day to day but that's all. We can never be certain that the rankings we see or record are exactly the same as those seen by our clients who might be drawing results from a different server.

Pure rankings are often the first goal of most SEO campaigns however what happens after that goal is achieved is where most SEO firms really provide value for their clients.

Visitors

The second simplest measure of SEO success is found in the log-files kept by every Internet Service Provider. When someone visits a site, the host ISP records the visit in the log-file of that site. Those logs are available to the client and the client should make those logs available to the SEO.

If the SEO has achieved high rankings under relevant keywords or phrases, there should be a notable increase in visits recorded in the site logs. If there is not an increase, there is likely something wrong with the targeted keywords or with the listing as displayed on the search engines.

For new webmasters, it is important to note that a hit is not necessarily a visit. The ISP presents both as stats. A hit is a record of a file being drawn from the server (often, several files are put together to make a standard HTML page). A visit is an actual entity (live or electronic) coming to the site.

An increase in visitors is the second basic goal for an SEO. In reality, the client might think they are only paying for strong rankings. Even if Top10 rankings are the agreed upon goal, the client is really paying for more visitors. That is what they expect to reap from their investment and, more often than not, that is exactly what they get. The question then becomes, what does one do when visitors come calling?

Conversions

Websites that rank well in the major search engines tend to draw far more traffic than websites that do not. SEOs, if successful, make client websites easier to find and therefore far more visible. Drawing traffic immediately opens an important question. Once you have it, what do you do with it?

Conversions are the most important metric to measure the success of an SEO campaign and conversions come from planning.

Experienced SEOs appreciate the value of strategic marketing planning. It is important for us to know that our clients have a long-term plan. If they don't we are happy to help them come up with one or to refer them to an expert who can. A good website marketing plan looks at how live-visitors will act while visiting the site.

Goal-Orientated Conversions

The object is to actively direct site visitors towards a goal of some sort or another. For some cases, that goal is a sale. In others it is the provision of information, the acquisition of email addresses or other contact information.

As a metric, visitor/site conversions are far more valuable. Conversions are the measurement of completed goals and good SEOs know how to help increase goal-orientated conversions.

Keyword conversions

Some keywords or keyword phrases will convert better than others. Even if one set of keywords or keyword phrases tends to draw more search-traffic, those words might not lead to successful site conversions.

When faced with a question about increased traffic that does not lead to increased conversions, we tend to first look at the keywords used to generate that traffic. Some words will obviously have a different effect on the searcher than others and might influence the course of their visit. For SEOs, watching how your counterparts dealing with PPC keyword buys can help provide clues to winning keyword combinations.

On-Site conversions

The greatest influencer of how a visitor acts when on a site is, of course, the site itself. Websites that convert well tend to be laid-out in a way that actively encourages site visitors to move from one section of a site to another.

The same principle that applies to moving spiders applies to moving live visitors. A good SEO makes site transit simple for spiders and intuitive for live visitors.

Sales

Ultimately, for our clients at least, conversions are supposed to lead to a sale. Great placements and excellent conversions are useless for the website owner who can't put food on their table. Sales are an important metric to measure the success of any advertising campaign against but, it is important to note that measuring the effectiveness of your SEO by online sales is a false metric.

The vast majority of actual sales happen offline. Take the travel industry for example. With the exception of the larger businesses operating in travel and tourism, most actual transactions will take place in person or over the telephone. I might book and pay for an airline ticket online but am much more likely to pay for my accommodation and all meals at the time of purchase. A similar transaction cycle happens in the fashion and clothing sectors. People research their clothing purchases online and buy them in a store. If your actual sales are up, chances are your website marketing efforts are at least partially responsible. If not, you should look at all facets of marketing and presentation, including the SEO efforts.

Return on Investment

By far, the most realistic metric to measure any advertising campaign against is return on investment. The basic question here is, am I making more money after investing in search advertising than I was before. If the answer is yes, chances are the search marketing component in your overall advertising mix is working well.

For me, the return on my investment of time and energy on Saturday morning has been excellent. Not only did I improve my game and meet a couple friendly business contacts, I was given a deceptively simple question to deal with.

Golf is a game of personal honesty. For a good search marketer, so is SEO. In order to enjoy success on the search engines, a fair degree of personal honesty is invaluable. Some campaigns will succeed where others fail. Some will only meet a few of their greater goals while others will ace them every time. Overall, measuring success can be boiled down to one basic but deceptively simple question, "Was it worth all the effort?" For our clients at least, the answer is, far more often than not, a resounding "Yes!"