

NeoSEO, Optimization in The Emerging Search Sphere

By Jim Hedger, StepForth News Editor, [StepForth Placement Inc.](#)

About ten years ago my brother and I ventured to the Edge of the World. It is located a few hundred kilometers (120mi) northwest of Thunder Bay Ontario. The Edge of the World is a high cliff near the hundredth meridian, the place where the expansive flatlands, the prairies are said to begin. It marks the point where the Canadian Shield gives way to the endless grasslands and presents a vista that stretches as far as the eye can see.

From where I was standing, about two hundred meters (500') above the cliff base, eternity was a forest full of uniquely distinct trees. What is not apparent to observers standing hundreds of feet above the great forest is the action happening below the canopy. Underneath the treetops, the forest is full of life. It is an intricate network of sustentation that grows and germinates itself season after season after season.

The search engine optimization and marketing sector is rapidly approaching a similar place where the forest has become an infinite collection of pre-tagged trees. It is relatively easy to find relevant information in the first ten results at MSN, Yahoo, Ask or Google but there are often thousands of advertisers competing for the same keyword targets, each of which expect tangible guarantees their dollars will produce positive results. The rules of survival in the forest are changing quickly. There are a lot more creatures looking for food but at the same time, there are several new ways to find it, or even better, have it find you.

Many SEOs risk losing sight of the forest by only seeing the trees and not changing their outlook and expanding their skill-sets. The same can be said for small to medium advertisers who have become dependent on the paid search medium. The cutting edge of online advertising has moved well beyond the cliff face at the Edge of the World and has discovered that the world is suddenly much bigger and more connected.

The role of the search engine optimizer has changed dramatically in a very short period of time. The changes to the profession are so overwhelming I think a new chapter in the collective meme of SEO tradition is being written, the emergence of the NeoSEO.

Traditionally, search engine optimizers have operated much like hired hunter-gatherers. The professional SEO ventured into the forest on behalf of his or her clients, tracking and nailing Top10 results across all the major hunting grounds. With less competition, larger available keyword inventories and fewer options for searchers, positive results were very easy to achieve.

Today, the one-person SEO shop is a rarity as there are literally hundreds of minute tasks and several different skill-sets associated with the success of a strategic search marketing campaign. As the margins for most SEO shops are so low, they need to take on a number of clients in order to expand, thus necessitating the separation of administration, sales and actual technical production. Real business requires the diligence of corporate bureaucracy and the expansion of the search sphere necessitates specialization in specific forms of search engine marketing.

Fortunately for the traditional SEO shop, everything begins and ends with the basic rules of search engine optimization. In other words, the skill-sets developed for organic SEO are the same ones needed to form the new knowledge base, which is the product we offer our clients. Though the search sphere has expanded enormously over the past year, a number of basic SEO tenets apply to every search marketing platform. Words and word association will continue to be the basis of search but, (and it's a pretty big but), the tools people use find information, the variety of information they can access, the ways in which they use words to describe their queries, and the ways in which search datacenters relate to those words, have changed.

Searchers are approaching the Internet with a more sophisticated set of skills and options to choose from. As the mass culture begins to understand and demystify the Internet, search and information retrieval has become a multi-faceted sector no longer dominated by just Google alone.

While Google itself remains the dominant search engine, Internet users are starting to migrate to online communities such as those found at MySpace, craigslist, Orkut, Myweb and ezboard. Each of these emerging community networks provides search options for users and each offers forms of online advertising. With MySpace seeing nearly twice the daily traffic Google does, it is obvious the search sphere is no longer the exclusive domain of the search engines. Search engine optimizers need to be able to help their clients establish accounts, set profiles and manage advertising in these emerging areas. Words and word association are the essential skills needed, along with knowledge relevant to local search.

Regardless of how the searchers try to access it, they are all looking for the same thing, information. The major search engines and a number of smaller vertical search tools are capable of sorting and ranking information expressed in multiple formats. The variety of information available to the searching public is unprecedented rivaled only by the number of multimedia editing tools available for content creators. Information, or content, is being expressed and received in the form of text messages, video, audio, and still-imagery.

For SEOs, making that information available to the various search engines, spiders and bots trying to find it requires learning about tagging, linking, and blogging. It is also important to know enough about the content-creation process to understand what your clients are dealing with at any given stage of your relationship. Barry Schwartz from Search Engine Round Table provides a good, point-form coverage of today's SES session, "[SEM Via Communities, Wikipedia & Tagging](#)". There's a lot of interesting information in those points.

One of the most important, basic SEO skills is keyword research and by extension, word association. Knowing what words searchers are most likely to use when looking for your client's product or service, and then being able to find a few dozen other keyword combinations describing those products or services, is the mark of a brilliant SEO. Oddly enough, search queries appear to be going three ways, short, long, and multilingual.

In an online world increasingly influenced by micro-devices such as Blackberrys or cell-phone text messaging, a number of people are using a form of shorthand writing that often cuts out vowels, or replaces word-sounds with numbers. Search engine optimizers should expect and plan for increased use of abbreviated forms of language.

On the opposite end of the scale, search engine users are starting to be a little more specific in their queries. One of the old-school SEO techniques is the use of multiple two-keyword phrases placed

judiciously throughout the titles, metas, text and links. If done properly, these two-word phrases could be mixed and matched to produce several combinations of relevant phrases that searchers might use.

Today, searchers are being far more precise when describing the information they are looking for. Instead of entering a simple query such as "artificial turf", a groundskeeper might enter "artificial turf for high school baseball". Similarly, instead of entering "wholesale notions", a quilting store might look for specific supplies by entering, "wholesale notions, markers, pens, pencils". Starting with two word phrases, three to five word strings can be extrapolated and optimized for.

SEOs should also be aware of the advances in natural language search and be able to provide multilingual optimization services directly or by reference. The Internet reaches around the world and while English remains the most-used language, business and connections can be made in many languages.

Words are just words, or so they might say, but words carry meanings that vary and they might mean something one day and nothing the next, and figuring it out is what Google does best. Well, maybe not best but, along with competitors Ask, MSN and Yahoo, they do a pretty good job of figuring out what each of their hundreds of millions of daily users are looking for.

As the Internet and its users have grown and become more sophisticated, so to have the search engine algorithms, especially at Yahoo and Google. The major search engines track every word that moves across their datacenters, looking for relationships between queries, words found in documents, and the ways those queries evolve over time. When a spider examines one document, it also examines everything linked to that document. It's rather like a hall of mirrors with each successive document leading to more links for the spider to follow.

Finding a way to mentally or automatically track how words relate to each other from document to document in a series of links is already an important skill for high-level SEOs and link brokers. As content on the web becomes more connected (think about the MP3 files found on MySpace profiles or podcasts embedded in personal or professional blogs), SEOs will need to advise and guide their clients through the forest of words, finding trails that lead to the roots, the canopy and the other flora and fauna surrounding them.

There are other skill sets necessary to speak the new language of SEO. While having well developed website design skills has always been a pre-requisite, an understanding of web analytics and site-user tracking is needed to inform decisions made during the SEO process. Making the site accessible and usable is important for moving visitors and spiders through the site efficiently. SEOs should also continue to learn as much as they possibly can about how their clients' Internet Service Providers set up their servers.

If the traditional SEO acted much like a hunter-gatherer, today's NeoSEO acts more as an advisor, often performing along side other site contributors. There are often many participants involved with an active website, most of which rarely think about the marketing end of things. As the numbers of file types and search venues increase, SEO consultancy, and the provision of direct services recommended during the consultancy has to work efficiently with the other active site contributors. StepForth's CEO, Ross Dunn spends much of his time communicating between various arms of our client's online businesses, acting as coach and sometimes as quarterback to move the team towards the goals he and the client articulate.

Today's SEO is far different from those of yesteryear. Those still standing on the cliff, facing the Edge of the World need to think about their descent into the living forest. While the view from above is breathtaking for all the trees, the real action is in the forest itself.