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Search Engine Strategies Conference 2006

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Attending a Search Engine Strategies Conference has been likened to having an encyclopedia downloaded into your mind in two or three intense days of concentrated information sessions. For long term SEOs and SEMs, a SES conference is a chance to catch up with colleagues and exchange gossip, information and collegiate humour.

Traveling across the continent to get to the conference can be tiring. My parents live in Toronto so I am fortunate enough to have a place to stay complete with home cooked meals and the security of sleeping in a familiar bed. Given the tenor of the conference and the exhaustion of jet-lag, staying at my parents' place is more than helpful.

The travel, the weather, the dial-up access at my parents' place and my state of physical exhaustion wouldn't be so bad if the amenities at the conference were as perfect as they have been in previous years. As I was to discover, they are not.

SES Toronto – Day 1

The conference has moved locations. It is still being held at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre however the venue has changed from the spacious south building to the smaller basement of the north building. The rooms are smaller and more spread out. The exhibit hall is much smaller than the one in the south building as well. It appears there are fewer booths than in previous years. That sad fact will likely cut into my quest for the gaudiest booth bling, forcing me to actually think about shopping for my colleagues at Christmas.

The greatest flaw I've found is a lack of public WiFi anywhere near the conference area. There is actually a very strong wireless connection in the Metro Toronto Convention Centre but Incisive Media, the new sponsor of the conference, has not paid for attendees to access it and a log-in and password is required.

That puts me back to wardriving for a steady wireless connection. I did find one good hotspot up in a café above the convention centre but it is too far away from the convention site for practical purposes. There are several other WiFi networks present in range of my computer however they are all secure and inaccessible without a password. There is a Linux World conference happening in another set of rooms just down the hall. Perhaps I can get someone from that conference to give me access to their WiFi network. If all else fails, there is still the media and speakers room which is conveniently located down a very long corridor, about a quarter kilometer away from the rest of the show.

Regardless of any inconvenience or exhaustion, it is a pleasure and a privilege to be here. I really enjoy the people in this industry. They are as clever as they are smart and to a person, they are all very, very smart.

Danny Sullivan opened the conference with his annual keynote address. The room he is speaking in was packed with the standing room crowd spilling out into the hallway. I was unable to actually hear Danny speak but should be able to get time with him later and will be able to read the coverage from [Barry Swartz](#) and the Search Engine Watch team covering the event.

Unfortunately, (or fortunately, depending on how one looks at it), I wasn't able to attend the "Search Marketing in Canada" session because I was busy meeting with a number of other established Canadian SEMs who wanted to talk about building our businesses by focusing on our Canadian identity and cooperating with each other to handle massive and bilingual accounts. The person presenting the idea to the rest of us makes a number of good points and has a great track record in the Canadian search marketing scene. He also went out of his way to get each of us together in the same room for this meeting. Though the proposal poses tough challenges and risks, I am excited about the prospect of expanding our networks and growing our businesses.

I have a number of other opportunities to pursue over the next 48-hours, buoyed by the good vibes I feel from the first. Our meeting ended just before the morning sessions did so I had a few minutes to stalk my way around the conference hall. Here are a few short observations.

First of all, this year the SES Conference looks smaller but has larger attendance numbers. It seems there are more folks here but less space.

Next, there are a lot more women here than in previous years. Having worked in tech for the better part of a decade, I am used to attending conferences with higher concentrations of testosterone. A better gender balance is obviously a welcome indicator in the industry. I'll have to remember to ask a few American and European SEOs if similar gender balance is present in the industries in their countries.

Third, there are far more sessions about SEO this year than in previous years. Search engine optimization is regaining a lot of the respect it lost to PPC over the past four years. As an added point, thus far I have met a lot more new SEOs than I had in previous years.

Like last year, the talk about search engine optimization leans heavily towards white-hat practices with several strident warnings against search engine spam. The SES shows have gathered criticism from a notable segment of the SEO community over the years but, building on my experience today and at last year's Toronto show, much of that critique seems unwarranted. The line on spam this year is similar to last year... Don't do it.

One critique of the SES format is there are a number of sessions, seminars and press conferences that overlap each other. For instance, I could attend the Search Behavior Research session or I could sit in on the Search Term Research and Targeting session, both of which would interest me. I settle for the former, wishing I could also attend the latter. I face an even tougher decision in a few hours when I need to decide between Ad Agencies and Search, Writing for Search Engines, and RSS, Blogs and Search Marketing. Those sessions start at 4:30. At 5:00, there is a press conference on a new SEO certification program being held by the Society of Internet Professionals. Having no idea which to choose from, I suspect I am going to fall back on Barry's coverage, wishing I could be in three places at the same time.

That is where I find myself at 3:30PM on the first day of SES. It appears I am going to have to elbow my way into the Google party tonight as they have apparently only invited a small, select group of advertisers to their party.

SES Toronto – Day 2

I made it into the Google party last night and got to bed somewhere around 3AM. A monstrous hangover is an inauspicious way to start the day, especially with the knowledge that I need to be up, dressed and

downtown by 8:45AM. My contribution to the conference was sitting on the site clinic panel with Jake Baillie (TrueLocal), Christine Churchill (KeyRelevance), Kashual Kurapati (Ask.Com) and Ian McAnerin. We are all professionals here. It doesn't matter how much one's head hurts, the show must go on.

Site clinics are always fun. A room full of people fills a fishbowl full of business cards from which the example sites are drawn. There is no way of really knowing what is going to come at you until the site is shown or a question posed. With no possibility of preparation, panel members need to think on their feet and be ready to back up their statements with concrete information. We only had an hour and a half to cover as many sites as possible. I think we managed to rip apart five unique sites before the two minute warning was given.

Opening the session, each panelist takes a few minutes to introduce themselves with me going last. "Please remember friends", I added, "It's not personal, it's only technology." Some of the sites are bound to be awful, some are bound to be great. Nobody knows until the cards are drawn.

Two observations from the site clinic I participated in. First of all, webmasters are learning SEO. Many of the basic mistakes new webmasters used to regularly make did not appear as frequently and the knowledge level in the room was higher than any of us on the panel expected. That in itself is a good thing but a little education can often be a dangerous thing, especially in search marketing. Another observation I made is how strange it is for someone to come to a site clinic, putting their site under a professional microscope and then having the boldness to question the suggestions made by my fellow panelists and myself. It was only one person but he took about a third of the session.

I have two more seminars to attend before the conference ends this evening. I will be checking out the Measuring Success and Shopping Search sessions. After that, I will be attending a news conference, dinner, and the conference after party held by Andrew Goodman and PageZero.