

January 4, 2006

State of Search Marketing 2006

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

Happy New Year everyone! After a two-week slowdown, the North American business world is gearing up to its general terminal velocity. In the high-tech environment we work in, terminal velocity often appears to approach the speed of light. Being human beings however, we are not capable of moving as fast as light. Our working environment moves or changes faster than we can possibly keep up with.

Last year (2005 for those who've already forgotten) was all about change and, aside from the obvious fact that everything in search is going to be or has already been affected, 2006 will be no different. After a full year of rapid changes, many search marketers might be excused for using an excessive variety of four-letter words however, there is one four-letter "F" word that aptly describes the environmental forecast for 2006. "[FLUX](#)" (Any definition displayed on linked page will do. For minutes of fun try mixing and matching them.). Flux is rapidly becoming my favourite four-letter "F" word, replacing the much maligned word, "Free".

Given the complexity of the sector, perhaps a few simple words such as "free" might be a good starting point. For the vast majority of users, search is popular application that is offered for free. All costs are borne by the search engines, which charge advertising fees to advertisers of all shapes and sizes. Access to all content shown by the major search engines, regardless of whether any fees are in any way attached, has remained free for search engine users, over the years. With the advent of pay-for-download entertainment content such as music and movie files, the major search engines are going to take the subtle step from being public information resources to becoming private participants in the information-as-entertainment industry.

Free has always been a widely misused word in relation to the Internet. Nothing comes for free in this environment. The simple fact you are currently reading this article is being recorded by more machines than either of us realize. That information is extremely valuable and has been collected for years. This is the year we are going to get a limited taste of the true power of personal information processing. More on that in a few paragraphs but first...

What we are witnessing is the ability of the major search engines to consolidate the major facets of commercial information distribution into a massive but nifty package delivered at the speed of light. Remember the 1980's when networked computers eliminated file clerks and the middle management that ran them? The transit of the search engines from public resource to commercial players is going to be noticeable and highly disruptive. Lots of sales, marketing and distribution folks are likely to lose their jobs because of this consolidation but for them the writing has been in the source-code for several years. Over the next twelve months expect to see a lot more references to proprietary content appear on each of the major search engines.

Google is going to work with AOL, giving it access to content from the world's largest information creation-distribution machine, Time Warner. MSN and NBC have a long-standing working relationship with each other. Until recently the two co-owned the struggling MSNBC network. [MSN's interest](#) was bought by NBC-Universal two days before Christmas though its parent company Microsoft retains equal

ownership in the network with NBC. Yahoo is also offering TV content from CBS, along with music content. All are thinking about getting into feature movie distribution with plenty of rumours circulating.

Today, be glad you never got the chance to work on Madison Ave. or in any other facet of the infotainment distribution industry. While those currently there are making scads of money, 2005 was the watershed year after which everything flows in another direction. Unless one had the sense to buy [Lloyd Braun](#), 2006 is going to be the year of the immaculate resume. I don't think we're going Hollywood anymore Toto.

That's not to say the dedication to providing clear and representative organic results is going to slip in any way. The Internet will always remain a highly intelligent space where users have remarkable control over community values and standards. If Google, Yahoo, MSN or Ask were to salt their organic results with their own commercial content, the backlash would (one hopes) be beyond enormous. What is going to happen though is an erosion of core-mission thinking by the major search engines when it comes to branding, marketing and energy.

How this shift happens exactly and what it means to the greater culture remains to be seen. The baby steps have been taken and the machine is ready to run. The big question for search marketers and their clients is what does this mean for webmasters and small business advertisers? It means the bar has been raised substantially.

Search is a far more serious business environment on every level than ever before. Just a few short years ago, search was described as the quiet equalizer for smaller business advertisers but over the past twelve months, search has become the mainstream method of finding new information and accessing previously viewed information. A long-term habit of searchers is to remember keyword phrases instead of URLs, basically using the search engines like a filing cabinet. This habit continues to be exhibited by search users but, as finding information via search engines displaces traditional telephone directories, classified ads and TV/radio commercials, a smaller number of businesses stand to benefit. In other words, demand far outstrips supply and the competition to rank in the Top10 is more intense than ever.

Webmasters and search marketers have a lot more to think about as user-experience is becoming as important as the content the users are experiencing. Search marketing is going to require a greater degree of website maintenance than ever before and in many cases will likely require site-makeovers. Again, this isn't Kansas anymore. Search is rapidly becoming the most competitive advertising arena and merchants both large and small who wish to compete effectively need to develop the tools and assets, or have those tools developed for them. The days of the relatively free ride are ending and your websites now need to be thought of as productions, not as brochures.

Every website is different and therefore has unique needs. There are a number of general elements all sites share though, the first being the fact they are public documents. Anyone can see them regardless of whether they are attractive or unappealing. Your index page is very much like your storefront and is visible to anyone who happens to be passing by. Obviously, you want as many passers by as possible to come into your store and buy something. It helps if they are interested in the merchandise you have to offer. What you need to do is find a good way to funnel them into and through your store in order to maximize their chances to purchase something. Think about that next time you look at your index page and then apply a similar line of thought as you navigate through your website. While you do that, keep in mind that GoogleBot, Yahoo's Slurp, MSNBot and other search spiders are judging the site (in part) by its navigation and how live-visitors use navigation options.

Another thing merchants think about is getting customers to come back again and again. Repeat customers are much less expensive to cultivate and often easier to please than new customers are. The longer they browse, the more likely they are to buy something. The more interesting, esthetically pleasing the store is, the longer they will browse. The longer they browse through your cyber-store, the more documents visitors look at making the site rank better in the electronic eyes of the spiders.

Search-spiders are like the eyes of elephants and as every child knows, elephants never forget a thing. The search engines know practically everything there is to know about your website and the documents contained within. They even know who likes your site enough to visit it on a regular basis. That knowledge, combined with the personal information we all give search engines as we use them will be harnessed this year in many ways.

For some search engine users, their own search history will determine some of the references that appear in the search engine results. Obviously commercial content such as advertising generated by AdWords or Yahoo Search Marketing is already being served specifically to users with known interests. It is a widely held assumption that personalization will have an affect on the organic search results viewed by an increasing number of search engine users in 2006.

Lastly, search engine users and advertisers should learn to use and develop information for a number of search-related genres such as blogs, image search and business-sector related networking tools. This is going to be increasingly important even though some of the current genres will change over time or become obsolete. Search marketing is not only about being found on the results pages anymore. It is about being found, period. In an increasingly complex and competitive environment, websites and the folks promoting and maintaining them need to use as many relevant tools to communicate their message, or risk being lost in the static energy missed by rapid eye movement.

Welcome to the emerging new world of search. 2006 is going to be another year of transition but at least we have a better idea exactly where this transit system is going.