

The Changing Facets of the SEO Business

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

The word "change" has over a dozen definitions, at least according to my electronic source at [Princeton University](#). Aside from the various nouns describing what is literally cold and hard cash, my preferred use of the word is as a verb. The following definition caught my eye this morning. It applies itself quite well to a situation facing most, if not all, established SEO shops.

(v) **change**, [alter](#), [modify](#) (cause to change; make different; cause a transformation) *"The advent of the automobile may have altered the growth pattern of the city"*

As the automobile became the primary mode of transportation in modern urban environments, it caused great change in the way cities were built and the way we live together as a society. An invention, the car, prompted innovation, wider roads and distant suburbs. The metaphor provides a historic marker for market-forces forcing evolution within the SEO sector.

Over the past twelve months, the word change has been a mantra in the research section of StepForth's business. We have structured our staff in such a way as to provide our team with a diversity of viewpoints from my "bird's eye view" to our Senior SEO, Scott's, "reality of the trenches", and all points between. When those varying viewpoints intersect, as they often do, we know we are thinking on the right track. Similarly, we learn a lot from sharing with others in the SEO and SEM industry.

Two key topics that tend to dominate the R&D portion of our formal staff meetings and many informal discussions amongst staff members are usability and consultation. Not surprisingly, they also tend to be discussed frequently on various SEO or SEM related forums.

The first factor is website, document, or file **usability**. Usability is a big word that covers many aspects of design and development. From an SEO perspective, the concept of usability covers three distinct areas, search engine friendly site architecture, human-friendly layout, and well-written, optimized site content.

Most of the websites, files or documents that pass across our monitors do not meet any of the three basic criteria mentioned above. As search engines become more sophisticated and the competition for Top10 placements gets harder every day, usability concerns are a growing problem for us. While many of the sites we see might look good, the reality is they are not properly structured for search engine spiders or for intuitive human navigation.

In order to meet the obvious need for search engine friendly site design and human-friendly layout, without losing focus on the SEO work we do best, StepForth has created a new division of the company, [Pure Ignition](#), dedicated to search-ready design and user-intuitive layout.

The addition of a search focused web design firm to our corporate family allows us to bring our services to another, much needed level without sacrificing or threatening our core SEO competencies.

Headed by Senior Web Developer, Mark Johnstone, Pure Ignition is our way of trying to bridge a “quality gap” in site design. Mark has worked with StepForth Placement for about three years, starting as an assistant SEO and eventually rising to be VP of Operations in the management of the firm. He had been a site designer for several years before taking a position with StepForth.

Having helped manage our business through the past eighteen months of growth and industry upheaval, Mark has seen and experienced all facets of the operation. Most importantly to the development of Pure Ignition, Mark served as the chair, or facilitator, at many of the staff meetings held at StepForth where he heard and/or dealt with issues presented by the other staff. He is well versed in what the SEO staff needs to see included in a file, document or website.

“I see the biggest challenge in balancing architecture, content and accessibility,” Mark said over a coffee break yesterday. “I like the idea of separating SEO from site construction or reconstruction because I think any designer or SEO that pretends to be everything for everyone is basing their services on their egos. The work-load is just too big now.”

In that spirit, we believe that by building a hand-tooled Design and SEO assembly line of sorts, we will be better able to meet the needs of a broader range of clients. By integrating services between the search marketing division and the new search-focused design division of our company, we expect to deliver a far greater volume of work at relatively lower costs to the involvement of third party developers.

Before Pure Ignition was formed, our SEO staff had limited options. Our clients would have to rework their websites or we would have to do it ourselves. Neither option is particularly attractive and both present added costs to clients, often resulting in third party fees. Needless to say, the curative prescription our SEO or sales staff would offer was often too expensive for many to pursue. Hopefully, we can ratchet those added costs down while providing more speed, inter-office communication and over-all efficiency.

Another reason the firm has generated a design division is because we simply don't like to turn away good business. It runs contrary to the most sensible sides of our selves as successful persons of business. Since the autumn of 2004, we have had to turn away so many potential clients due to irreconcilable site design issues it is almost tragically funny.

Almost... We are a business after all. So are the sites we had to turn away. We've been around the block as a company and as individuals and, like all businesses, have seen and experienced our share of economic brutality. It's ugly eh? Lot's of good people get ripped off and by the time they come to us for search engine optimization, there's little we can do to help them. Life is very real, even in the virtual world. We strive to offer our clients some form of security in the design, and promotion loop. That's the greater purpose to Pure Ignition.

That brings us to the second key change we see in our business of running a boutique SEO/SEM firm. We are doing a lot more consultation than we ever have before.

The commercial Internet has been here for more than a decade. Most businesses have established and evolved IT departments or they have an outsourced vendor for IT services. Now that search engines have become so important to their business and to their competitors, they have positions dedicated to online marketing. They love to learn and strategize, and by happy coincidence, we love to strategize and make suggestions.

The market for SEO consultation has gotten so busy that our CEO, Ross Dunn now focuses over a third of his time providing direct consultation services.

One of the things that makes consultation different from hands-on SEO is that your suggestions are being applied and worked on by other people. Using an array of website analytics, a good SEO consultant should be able to provide a working map of suggested changes and offer solid reasons for making the suggestions.

In some ways, it is also like taking a leap of faith. Really experienced SEOs talk about a feeling they get when they know they have the right balance on a page. Jill Whalen once described it as the [SEO Zen Factor](#). When you have the right mix on a page or document, you simply know you've got it.

The business of search engine optimization has changed a lot over last four years with the greatest changes seen in the last six months. We know the environment is only going to be changing faster in the near future so we too are making some significant changes in preparation as well as in reaction to market forces. Pure Ignition is now open for business, putting the entire firm in a far better placement moving into the future.