

It's time to redefine SEO

By Kathleen Fealy

In June, the IAB Search Marketing Barometer 2010 found that search is still largely confined to specialists. According to the report, 60 percent of brands stated that those outside the wider digital team did not have a strong enough appreciation of how search can build a business. By contrast, respondents stated that they understood PPC (78 percent) and SEO (75 percent) very well, and more than half of brands claimed to know how to use newer tools such as universal search, social search, mobile, and search retargeting.

This study — combined with my experiences working with small and medium-sized business owners — illustrates a crucial misconception that is still too prevalent in our industry, among IT professionals, and in the business world. Search engine optimization (SEO) is perceived as it was in the beginning: It involves a website and a website alone.

It's not seen as an integral part of the overall organic search process, and search's potential for building a business is limited by misperceptions and mystification.

SEO is complicated

In a recent business publication that serves the New York tri-state area's small and mid-size business market, Robert Levin wrote the article "Is SEO Overrated?" It stated "that for most small businesses, SEO may not be as crucial to success as it's often implied. SEO is complicated, and Google is always changing the rules."

eMarketer's "March 2009: Search Optimization Versus Paid Search" report stated, "Marketers sometimes find the SEO process complex. Many call it a 'black-box' technique, since optimization requires deciphering the hidden ranking algorithms of search engines."

SEO needs to become demystified for better adaptation by businesses of all sizes. It's perceived as a process and not as a practice that involves marketing, usability, and branding.

From baby steps

The Search Engine Marketing Professional Organization (SEMPO) defines search engine optimization as "the process

of editing a web site's content and code in order to improve visibility within one or more search engines." This is a viable strategy and grew quickly to include link-building as part of the process. But consider the phrase, search engine optimization. The phrase is not website optimization, though that is part of SEO.

Becoming fully-developed

SEO needs to reflect what its name says — search engine optimization. Improving visibility within one or more search engines involves various strategies now, not just websites.

Before universal search, being on the first page of a search engine, organically, meant being one of 10 websites. That rarely happens today, since results are pulled from various sources such as social media with real-time search, video, press releases, news, and local search.

Search and its role in business is evolving. Mobile is beginning to make its mark, and businesses are realizing the value of social search. All of these strategies affect how a company, not just a site, is seen in the search engines. SEO should be about optimizing the visibility in all of organic search.

The new SEO: More fulfilling, forward-thinking, and understood

Integration and strategy are key components to building search and especially search engine optimization's role and credibility. The best business practices are demystified. It doesn't mean they are easy. Take customer service as an example. Businesses understand sales and marketing. They want conversions, be it sales, calls, sign-ups, or donations. These are concrete — not abstract concepts.

The IAB report stated that "businesses don't have a strong enough appreciation of how search can build a business." If that is true, search professionals need to see this as a wake-up call. Search, especially SEO and all of its related counterparts, need to be more easily understood by businesses to play a larger part in their overall strategies for success.

As search professionals, it's easy to

believe that we've educated business people on the benefits of search and what search engine optimization is. However, sometimes the messages of "it's complicated" and "the rules keep changing" are the perception.

Working with many small to medium-size businesses, the message is clear. Many are afraid of SEO and don't trust it. As with any young industry, there are people who take advantage of others and this has hurt the industry as a whole. By expanding the concept of SEO to include the integration of all aspects of natural search, a more solid foundation can be applied — one of overall marketing and customer relations.

Redefining the role of SEO means:

- Utilizing a process for the strategic implementation of site optimization; video, image, and news optimization; social media; mobile; etc.
- Developing strategies and communicating those throughout the company and particularly to those involved in marketing, sales, and customer relations.
- Tying strategies into a company's objectives, such as sales, improved customer service, brand recognition, reputation management, lead generation, or a combination of these.
- Employing usability as a key component in all aspects of organic search. Usability and SEO have always been intertwined, and as search evolves, it will continue to play a role as evidenced by personalized search and recent changes in results being delivered by the search engines. Relevant results rely on relevant customer expectations.

It's time. For SEO to grow and to be valued, it needs to be better understood. It needs to reflect its name in all of organic search, not just websites. ■

SEO is a process — not a practice — that involves marketing, usability, and branding.



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