With the proliferation of search-oriented online content providers such as AOL, Yahoo!, Demand Media, and About.com, internet users are increasingly likely to find that most of the general searches they do return results from these SEO-oriented content creators. Whether this is a good or a bad thing from the user perspective remains to be seen—and opinions vary—but one thing is certain: Competing with these search-result-savvy content providers can present challenges for traditional publishing companies and enterprises that hope to increase their rank on search engines to attract visitors to their own sites.

Most general searches these days result in a high percentage of results that reflect domains such as About, eHow.com, Suite101.com, Examiner.com, etc.; all are examples of sites whose content is created by literally thousands of contributors hired to create content to appeal to the masses.

Why? It’s a combination of the sheer volume of information owned and controlled by these sites and the power of SEO (search engine optimization). The content game—once dominated by traditional publishers—is increasingly something organizations of all types are participating in. It is also something that traditional search companies such as Yahoo! and Google are moving into full force. Thus, search and content are becoming more and more intertwined.

SATISFYING SEARCHERS

Information search results were once almost solely the purview of name brand content companies. Today, however, top results (which may in fact be quite useful results) often come from cryptic sources, and information sources are not always immediately apparent. Demand Media, for instance, purchased Cracked.com in 2006, and its writers regularly provide content for the “Top 10” lists that appear prominently on Cracked’s homepage, with no mention of Demand Media to
be found. Other content providers such as Associated Content provide a myriad of sources with content that may or may not be exclusive, meaning that web searchers have the potential to find the same information, from all of these aggregators, in multiple places. That said, previously unknown brands are becoming increasingly well-known, for example, About and eHow.

Brand name or not, sourced or not, the value of the content is in the eye of the consumer.

Giovanni Calabro, VP of user experience at Siteworx, notes that casual internet searchers are happy if the content that comes back to them eventually leads to the information they're looking for. He doesn’t believe that they pay much attention to the source of that content. “If I’m looking for Lindsey Lohan, for example, if whatever comes back leads me to content about her, I’m happy. I don’t know if they’re going to sense that content as being generic or not. They’re looking for something so general, it doesn’t matter where they’re receiving it from.”

The good news, at least for now, is that the rise of companies such as Demand Media and eHow only reinforces the fact that there’s plenty of content demand and room for many content sources on the web. The trick, of course, is that everyone wants to sit at the top of that ever-valuable results list.

FROM GENERAL TO SPECIFIC, AND EVERYWHERE IN BETWEEN

Content providers such as Demand Media are, not surprisingly, attempting to feed the growing demand for content from websites hoping to draw eyeballs that attract advertisers. The company creates inexpensive content and sells it to companies that want content to make their sites more attractive via search engine results. In fact, article titles are literally driven by actual searches performed by content consumers, which Demand Media believes promotes the creation of content that aligns with consumer interests.

This turns the traditional search ranking model on its head, in that popular content used to rise in the results as users found it, mentioned it, linked to it, etc. Organizations approaching content in this way are concerned about drawing traffic to their sites to boost their business, whether the business model is focused on revenue generated through advertisers or through online sales. It appears that there’s ample opportunity for a multitude of approaches, according to industry experts—as long as optimizing for search is in some way a key part of the plan.

“Yes, AOL and others will have high overall page rank, and you’re likely not going to be able to compete with them there,” according to Mike Jacobs, chief services officer of IMARKETING LTD. However, he adds, “you don’t have to.” Search engines, he says, are looking for quality and relevant content. “Having content specific to a search is just as important as overall page rank to Google, and arguably more so.

“One site can’t be all things to all people, and Google knows this. AOL Seed and Demand [Media] will segment their content over multiple domains to a point but can’t have the laser-focus of
an organization with a dedicated site,” Jacobs says. His advice: “Don’t try and be all things to all people, but [be] the expert in your area. Be the definitive source on the specific niche you’re targeting. Don’t go too wide, or you’ll just start to look like a lesser version of the goliaths you’re competing with.”

Companies hoping to increase their search rankings need to adhere to the basics, says Calabro, who stresses that SEO is still a very important part of any web strategy. However, he finds that SEO tends to bore most companies. “They say ‘we’ve done the SEO thing.’ But I can guarantee they haven’t,” he says. “If you’re not search engine optimized, you have a problem.”

Danielle Leitch, EVP of strategy for MoreVisibility, agrees. “SEO should always be the first focus,” she says. The competition “can be overcome if a company puts a good plan in place and then acts on it,” she says. “The challenge is really determining [the competition’s] strategy.” And, as others point out, businesses have always faced the challenge of competing with businesses that have access to more resources. The challenge is the same. It’s just the playing field that has changed.

**NICHE MARKETING GENERATES RESULTS**

David Saries is an SEO expert with Dun & Bradstreet (D&B). It’s really no different than the traditional marketing environment that businesses have always competed in, says Saries. Just as small retail stores go up against big box retailers and often succeed, online marketers can effectively compete against the content providers that are pumping out massive amounts of content, he says. They can use the differentiators they have to drive traffic to their sites. Saries tells of an engineer he used to work with who now makes custom guitars and lives in San Jose, Calif. “He ships his guitars all around the country and perhaps the world,” says Saries. “It’s a very specific type of instrument that you’re not just going to walk into any music store and buy.”

Businesses will always have to compete with the Walmarts, the Walgreens, and the Barnes & Nobles around every corner, he says. Those that can successfully identify and leverage their unique differentiators that will appeal directly to a specific, target audience will be successful. These are the same differentiators, he notes, that they would have used in a Yellow Pages ad or a brochure or in talking to customers, but they now use them in an online context.

“To the extent that businesses can understand that and be more specific in their content and the pages they’re creating on their websites, they will be found,” he says. And there are a number of successful online businesses that have found that they can do just that by targeting a narrow niche and delivering specific content that appeals to that niche.

Bruce Kasanoff, co-founder of Draw the Dog, a website that was introduced in late 2009 that is based on a user-generated content model, is one example. “Never go head to head with a giant,” says Kasanoff. “Kick him in the knee, run between his legs, and hit him from behind.” On Drawthedog.com, unique cartoons are created on a daily basis. The cartoons are based on photos and stories about dogs that are contributed by visitors to the site. The site is growing fast, says Kasanoff, and it’s not solely because of SEO.

“We pay attention to SEO, but it’s not where we get our traffic,” he says. Traffic to the site has been built primarily by reaching out individually to dog rescue groups with win-win propositions, he says. “They pass the word about us, and we donate lots of art they can use to raise money for their nonprofit activities. These groups power our growth, and leveraging them requires building one-to-one relationships, something machines suck at.” In addition to these partnerships, word of mouth is generated through the contributions of the users. “Every cartoon we create is inspired by stories or photos dog owners send us,” says Kasanoff. “We make dogs famous, and every time we publish a new cartoon inspired by a dog, the owner emails, Facebooks, etc., everyone they know.”

For Kasanoff, success has been achieved through a narrow focus—the creation of relationships with site visitors who can actually become part of the site’s content and are eager to share it as well as partnerships with organizations that can help to spread the word about the site. Identifying a specific target

While in the past, niche sites focused on hiring subject matter experts to create content, sites such as eHow leverage enthusiasts’ willingness to write and consumers’ desire to find the answer to a question to supply low-cost content that meets a certain demand.
market, clearly understanding the market and what needs and interests its members have, and leveraging partnerships are all basic marketing strategies that have worked for marketers for years. The good news is that these techniques can work online as well.

One misstep that some online marketers make is focusing on a market that is too broad. While some are interested in attracting a national following, others can and should be satisfied to draw from their local market area or from a narrow national market as Kasanoff has done. Once that narrow market has been defined, the next step becomes determining how that market is most likely to attempt to reach out to find you while online.

With this tactic, specificity is key. It’s the little things that matter, says Saries. Getting specific can generate results for businesses, he says. “AOL or Demand tend to have more generic articles or videos on some topic such as how to paddle a canoe. However, a local canoe rental business might specifically serve particular rivers or lakes that can allow them to stand out in geo-based searches or appear in local review sites such as Yelp,” he says.

LONG TAIL AND UNIVERSAL SEARCH

Just because you can reach the masses online doesn’t mean that you need to, or should even want to. More is not always better.

Frank Dale, VP of Compendium Blogware, focuses on the “long tail search” in his work with clients. Long tail searches are simply those that are based on longer search phrases: “size 11 red men’s Nike running shoes +California” versus “running shoes,” for instance.

Saries agrees that long tail search holds promise for organizations trying to drive traffic with content as well as traditional content providers. Importantly, he notes, search engines are finding that users are using longer, more specific search phrases to find detailed answers. “By targeting the specific terms most related to a business’

Draw the Dog “pays attention to SEO,” but the majority of site traffic has been built by reaching out individually to dog rescue groups with win-win propositions.
The thing on the horizon right now is universal search, according to More Visibility’s Leitch. Search engines are going to be “relying heavily on universal search, which will provide users with a combination of results. When you type a word in a search box, you’ll see blogs, news, tweets, images, and videos.” This, she says, means that, more than ever, site owners will need to make sure that they’re managing all of their digital assets, not just text, to maximize their presence online. In other words, businesses will want to think about all of the various ways they can get information out on the web, beyond their website. This might include YouTube, paid advertising, social media, article placement, and news release placement.

Inbound links present another opportunity, says IMARKETING’s Jacobs, who notes that traditional content providers have an edge here. “Many other quality content sites won’t want to link to a monolith like AOL,” he says. “You want links from quality sites relevant to the topic area and, hopefully, referencing the topic in their anchor text.” In addition, he suggests, “encourage them to go deep, linking to deep site pages to really help push those pages to the top.”

All of this can seem a bit overwhelming, but “it’s not rocket science,” asserts D&B’s Saries, who recommends that businesses interested in expanding their online presence begin by taking advantage of the many sources of information that are readily available, often at no cost. “Google publishes information on SEO tactics, and they have a blog for webmasters that can help you understand some key metrics. They have a whole video series on YouTube that you can watch and tutorials on how to use a free tool like Google Analytics to better understand your market.”

Leitch advises website owners to decide which particular tactics are best for them and to not worry about gaining a presence across all channels. “You’re not going to be successful if you spread yourself too thin,” she says. “Having a plan of attack is important. Instead of trying to juggle one or more blogs, use press releases, post on YouTube, and use LinkedIn and Facebook; pick what’s likely to be most effective for your business and the community your company is trying to talk to,” she says.

A good starting place to develop that focus is to get a handle on how traffic is currently coming to their site, says Saries. “Start to see who’s visiting your site, how they’re getting there, when they come. Then, you can go further and further to say ‘they’re coming from Facebook or Twitter or Yahoo Search, or maybe from a local directory.’” This information can provide good direction in terms of where to focus additional efforts to draw traffic to the site, he says.

And, Jacobs adds, take advantage of the opportunity to learn from the behemoths. “Learn from the big boys, and don’t repeat their mistakes,” he says. “Let them spend the big dollars testing. See what they’re doing, see what works and what doesn’t, and modify your strategy accordingly.” In the end, though, he stresses focus on quality. “Better content will get you more readers, more links, and more activity, and the search engines will notice.”

Yes, the massive content providers such as AOL and Demand Media are online presences to be reckoned with. However, there remains an insatiable demand for a wide range of content—to inform complex decision making, to form relationships with organizations, to entertain, to answer immediate questions, and more. So there is room for content producers of all types. Yet this newfound focus on search-driven content production shines a spotlight on the importance of search in the content industry, reinforcing the increasing power of search in the content business.