hen Barbara Coll decided to leave a thriving career in Web analytics in 1998, she headed instead to search engine marketing—except there wasn’t yet a phrase for it. Coll simply focused on driving low-cost, high-quality traffic to Web sites.

Over the course of the next decade, Coll—who in 2002 founded the global nonprofit Search Engine Marketing Professionals Organization to promote education and awareness—says she has yet to face a dull day at work. “Ten years ago, I was optimizing a Web site,” she says. “Today, I’m optimizing content the client might not have control over—forums, community sites, YouTube. We’re worried about content that’s spread out across networks now.” Search, she says, is more fun than ever.

**PAY PER CLICK VERSUS SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION**

With the economy in a downturn, search marketing experts are seeing an upturn in search engine optimization. (See graphic, “Budgeting for Search,” page 38.) And yet Web analytics solution provider Omniture claims that its average client saw a reduction of at least 10 percent in this space between March 2008 and March 2009. That makes sense—after all, once you’ve made the initial investments to get your Web site SEO-friendly, it’s essentially free traffic. The ever-increasing drive for results, however, means marketers today have less patience. Traffic alone doesn’t mean what it once did—marketers are being pressured to show conversions.
In a fierce competition for millions of eyeballs that are just a click away from leaving, search engine marketing (SEM) can be a tough game. Leigh McMillan, senior vice president of marketing at advertising company Marchex, suggests optimizing a portion of your SEM on specific conversion events, such as calls to the company. Customer calls, she says, have an average rate of conversion 10 times higher than just clicks on a Web site.

Moreover, McMillan suggests involvement in a blend of local directories, vertical Web sites, and, increasingly, mobile. Consumers use search engines to start their research, then frequently move to vertical Web sites such as GlobalSpec, a search engine for the industrial vertical, for deeper information and, finally, directories and mobile search to find information on how to contact a business. (Mobile poses entirely new challenges, with applications such as UrbanSpoon essentially taking keywords out of the picture and relying instead on geography.)

According to Josh Himwich, director of e-commerce operations at Diapers.com, if you’re not going to be in the top 10 listings for a business-critical keyword, SEO isn’t worth the effort. In that case, he says, the pay-per-click (PPC) option makes more sense. Appearing in the top three results of an organic search, he contends, is more valuable than a PPC ad, but PPC is likely to be more successful than an organic eighth-, ninth-, or 10th-place result. (See “The Basics of PPC and SEO,” below, for a side-by-side comparison.)

The average person clicks on 1.2 pages when performing a search, according to comScore. “The consumer mindset is, ‘I do a search, I’m not going to click around that much,’” says Jack Flanagan, comScore’s executive vice president. In usability tests conducted by ratings and reviews platform provider PowerReviews, Web-visitor behavior typically occurs from top to bottom, scanning for familiar names and bold words that match the search terms. Only then does the visitor read meta descriptions.

The best results, from a search engine marketing perspective, come from a hybrid of both PPC and SEO strategies. Though Diapers.com is the top result in organic search on the term “diapers,” it’s also number one in PPC, too. “We’re trying to block out our competitors,” Himwich explains. “We don’t want them to have a spot we should have.” The strategy’s working. According to the latest available rankings on Hitwise, more than 30 percent of all searches for the term “diapers” land on Diapers.com, compared to the roughly 4 percent of clicks that head off to e-commerce giant Amazon.com. “We don’t even want to cede that [much],” he says. “When you own something like that, you want to own it in every way you can.” (For more on Diapers.com’s SEO efforts, see our case study on page 44.)

A persistent challenge is understanding how search engines work. “It’s a chess match between the SEO gurus trying to figure out the algorithm and Google, who’s constantly tweaking [it] to make sure they’re delivering the best possible results to the end user,” says A.J. Kohn, owner of SEO consultancy Blind Five Year
Old and vice president of online marketing at Caring.com. In the most fundamental sense, SEO comes down to trust and authority. As such, the more you play by the rules and stop chasing the algorithm, the fewer the fluctuations you experience. Even so, Google still continues to battle those trying to cheat the system. (See “Bad and Ugly SEO,” page 40.)

Google tracks every click made on its search engine results and those actions contribute to how the engine defines the quality of a link. If a user, for instance, clicks on a link only to click back a few seconds later to find another result, or refine the search term, the search engine assumes the link wasn’t helpful. Kohn refers to this behavior as “pogo-sticking.” The higher the pogo-sticking rate, the less relevant the site is recognized as being over time.

Google’s actions aren’t nearly as ominous as they seem. Experts agree that what the search engines are out to achieve is ultimately in the users’ best interests. Consumers aren’t likely to stop using Google just because the results are too accurate. The better the results, the more visitors will come back, and the more ads that will be clicked. It’s a relatively simple equation, despite the enigmatic façade.

In the same respect, the only way Google can serve up the best content is if it knows exactly what your content is about. Kohn practices a search philosophy based on the idea that search engines are (as his firm’s name suggests) blind five-year-olds. “They don’t care how pretty the site is,” he says. “Tell it a few times, and if you want it to go somewhere next, make that perfectly clear.” Googlebots aren’t interested in wit and irony, and neither are your visitors when they’re searching for the solution to a problem.

If you’re thinking about SEO—and you certainly should be—then you should focus on the keywords you want your product or content to show up under. Kohn analogizes the structure of a Web page to that of a library book. “If you have some double entendre title that no one understands,” he says, “it will never be checked out for that topic.”

COMPROMISE
Planning the format and content of a Web page requires a strategic balance between what you want to promote to customers and what you need to enhance your search engine strategy.

Diapers.com understands that a link titled “Pampers” would be the most search engine–friendly, but would mean nothing to the customer. Instead, the link is named “View all Pampers.” On the other hand, Himwich admits that SEO-friendly content isn’t always equally consumer-friendly. On the product toolbar of Diapers.com’s home page, for example—see the screenshot below—“Toys and Books” used to be called “Playtime.” “We were trying to communicate an emotion to the customer,” Himwich says. Unfortunately, emotion isn’t SEO-friendly—and so it ultimately got scrapped. Still, categories such as “Clean Home” and “Green Baby” have stayed for practical reasons, despite their low correlation to SEO.

No man is an island, especially on the Web. Building links is critical to building credibility both on and off your site. When promoting a certain product, have more links pointed to that item. When you want to disseminate information, create something of value that will prompt others to link to it. “Links are tied very closely to content,” says Lee Odden, chief executive officer of agency TopRank Online Marketing. “If content is worth linking to, then people will link to it.” The key is letting them know it exists, which is where social networking steps in.

THE MARKETING/TECHNOLOGY GAP
In a survey of 224 direct marketers during the third quarter of 2008, Forrester Research Principal Analyst Suresh Vittal...
found that only 20 percent of marketers ranked their technology departments as their most competent partners.

Not surprisingly, the disconnect between the two departments persists online. Internally, the primary challenge is determining who owns the Web page: The technology department? The Web designers? The search marketer?

Bill Mungovan, director of product marketing at Omniture, says that his marketing clients are demanding more control over their Web pages. Marketers are inserting themselves into the technology space, he says, because their bottom lines depend on it.

Coll says, however, that search marketers aren’t alone in their frustration over Web design. SEM is just one component of the site’s objectives and of the overall business processes. The Web site should be the fruit of a collaborative effort between all departments, including sales and customer service. Coll says that most companies she works with opt for a distributed arrangement: An in-house marketing expert ensures the corporate Web site shows up in search results and a third-party authority helps overcome the internal politics.

SEO AS A BUSINESS STRATEGY

The most common problem in SEO is rooted in the fact that it’s often overlooked when people are in the process of building their Web sites. Far too many sites are constrained by an intricate content management system where the search engine has to go through multiple folders before finding the content. It’s not unheard of for a site to undergo an entire redesign—and if you’re starting out fresh, opt for a flat architecture that helps the engines crawl through your content more quickly.

Whether you’re starting out or overhauling your entire site, there’s no escaping the fact that the heavy lifting of SEO has to come first. There are three audiences that must be catered to in a good search strategy: the consumer, the content creator, and the search engine. Most forget that final component. “It’s like going to a baseball game in your underwear with half your team,” Top-Rank’s Odden says. “You’re not preparing a site that could generate revenue.” For this reason, Odden advises bringing a consultant in early to set you on the right track.

Once you’re past architecting the site, the next hurdle “is integrating it with your business processes,” says Sarabjit Singh, vice president of product development and strategy of specialized search engine GlobalSpec. The Web site is rapidly becoming the storefront. Any content about or related to your business can cause a spike in your search results.

Selecting the right keywords for your business must be the very first step. During the keyword-analysis process, Coll and her team run through a list of at least 30 resources in order to determine what words a company should best optimize for. (See sidebar, “5 Resources for Determining Your Best Keywords,” above.)

It’s important to remember that a large part of defining the right terms comes from the human aspect. Taking an honest and realistic approach to selecting your keywords will save everyone a lot of wasted time and energy. “If you’re bidding on cars,” Coll says, “you’d better be Cars.com.”

**5 Resources for Determining Your Best Keywords**

- Talk to executive management
- Talk to the product managers who own the product messaging
- Keyword expansion tools such as the keyword expansion feature in AdWords Editor
- Word tracker tools that suggest relevant keywords for your site
- Research on how the Webosphere is talking about your brand and products (e.g., blogs, comments, forums)

Source: Barbara Coll

**Bad and Ugly SEO**

- The creation of a “micronet.” To goose search results (and, theoretically, sales), people (e.g., affiliates) have been known to create thousands of otherwise useless sites that are all linked to each other and emphasize one keyword. It takes up space and doesn’t add any value to the Web.

- The tendency to think, “If it works a little, it works a lot.” Some will hide multiple keywords on a Web page by, for example, using a white font on a white background.

- Inducing hordes of people to link to you or buying links regardless of relevance. The search engines prefer links that grow organically and will recognize if you’ve gotten a sudden influx.

- Click fraud in paid search. Some reports indicate that one-third of clicks on paid search are fraudulent—the result of developers creating bots to click on competitors’ ads, raising those competitors’ costs.

Sources: Barbara Coll, Heather Lutze, A.J. Kohn
Heather Lutze, author of the SEM book *The Findability Formula*, emphasizes the need to focus on exactly how customers are searching before doing anything, whether it’s titling a blogpost, press release, or Web site. “Most people orient from the ego,” Lutze says. “They come up with a fun, catchy title and don’t think it needs to get found on the search engine.”

It’s important to remember that it takes time to set up SEM—and even longer to reap its benefits. SEO is never just about one thing. What it comes down to, Lutze says, is a competition to become the “least imperfect.”

When GlobalSpec began focusing on its SEO strategy nine years ago, it hired an outside consultant. “We went through a steep learning curve,” Singh says. After a year, it became clear that SEO was critical to the business, which led GlobalSpec to opt for an in-house team solely dedicated to SEO and SEM operations.

As with any strategy, search marketing cannot operate successfully in a silo. According to a January 2009 study by comScore, 67 percent of respondents indicated that search engines were slightly or very important sites they used when shopping in the previous three months. Moreover, a 2007 comScore study indicated that while 7 percent of sales take place online, 89 percent of consumers research online. Chief marketing officers will need to see how SEO influences activity both on and off the site and how every marketing channel influences the others.

Because of this, Coll says, tracking is perhaps one of the most difficult tasks in SEO. “You need to have a chart that shows the spending and events going on in a company that maps everything together,” she says.

Thanks to the emerging and evolving social Web, the keywords your brand is associated with may not overlap with any of the ones you purchased. Brand monitoring today goes far beyond typing “your company sucks” in a search engine query. User-generated comments, blogposts, and links to content all show up in search engine results. The more popular they are, the higher they’re ranked.

As part of the SEO and public relations strategy, companies need to monitor how the brand names and executive names rank in regular search results, as well as monitoring all other media assets that are indexable.

Universal search is delivering more variety to today’s informationally glutinous customer, from product results and news to images and videos. “The goal is to get you to an answer as quick as possible,” Mungovan says. “If natural results are getting pushed down because there are pictures and maps on the page, then [companies] are going to want to get in the pictures and maps.”

Typically, however, Web developers aren’t concerned with the brand and therefore don’t consider that online assets will be searched and discovered. Every piece of content put online, Odden says, is an opportunity to reinforce the brand. With social media, brands can monitor

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A Blog Takes Aim at an Exact Target

With Compendium Blogware, email marketing software provider ExactTarget has turned its blog into a robust marketing strategy.

When ExactTarget began its corporate blog, the company started out using TypePad, the popular blogging software from Six Apart. At the time, only four people—the chief executive officer, two vice presidents, and a director—were regular contributors, but ExactTarget envisioned a greater role for its blog, and eventually looked to Compendium Blogware.

The software now organizes blogposts into “pages” based on content rather than author, explains Chris Baggott, Compendium’s cofounder and chief executive officer. What’s more, the title of each “page” matches a specific keyword phrase that improves search engine results. Since implementing Compendium in June 2008, ExactTarget’s keyword-focused blogs have increased blog traffic tenfold—and the number of unique visitors between mid-March and mid-April 2009 topped 8,000, according to Jeffrey K. Rohrs, ExactTarget’s vice president of marketing. The original quartet of corporate bloggers has expanded to more than 25 employees, and the designers, developers, and marketers involved have made the blog a place where, as Rohrs puts it, the “strategic and tactical, promotional and practical commingle.” And because bloggers write in their own styles, the blog matches real-world consumer phraseology. For instance, bloggers may use “email” or “e-mail,” which reflects searchers’ own inconsistencies.

Internally, the blog has generated a stronger corporate spirit as more employees get involved in creating relevant and useful content. “We’re actually seeing blogger-employees become more self-assured and assertive within the organization,” Rohrs says. In elevating these formerly “untapped voices,” he says, ExactTarget anticipates continued growth from a content and marketing perspective, with additional plans to enhance the look and feel of the blog and to bring in Web analytics to better mine the data.

the conversations and resolve problems before they get caught in the groundswell and gain traction on the search engines.

Comcast, for example, still suffers from the existence of the infamous video “A Comcast Technician Sleeping On My Couch,” which continues to land on the first page of search engine results for “comcast”—though that’s an improvement from what had been a top-five ranking. “Most [companies] that have the worst search-reputation issues—some justified, some not—happened a while ago but they’re not fixed,” Odden says. Visitors, however, likely can’t determine the age of the offending content, and thus, perpetuate the negative reputation.

SOCIAL SEARCH

As marketers and the social media players attempt to construct a value proposition around the wealth of data in social networks, for the most part, search in social media is in its infancy. (For more on social media and CRM, see our June issue.)

“The connection is still pretty loose,” Mungovan says, adding that clients aren’t connecting PPC or SEO to social media, but more-sophisticated agencies are using mass channels such as Twitter to drive up search traffic. Moreover, social promotes awareness around your content or products and subsequently increases links connecting to your site.

At this point, search in social media is still very much a monitoring mechanism. Sites such as Twitter, Flanagan says, are “free, open forums for open, quick communications…it’s like a big focus group.” What will come next is a method for mining that information.

Radian6, a provider of social media measurement platforms, aims to help companies identify the top conversations taking place around a brand or campaign, including the top keywords. With that knowledge, social monitoring enables marketers to optimize keyword buys and SEO activities with real-time feedback. The solution isn’t, however, meant to directly orchestrate the changes to your search marketing.

There is buzz around the idea of real-time search, primarily through Twitter. Some even suggest that the upset may one day topple Google. Asked if he sees that happening, Kohn responds, “Not in this lifetime.” By analyzing the two channels, Kohn has found that, in a comparison study of the top 100 searches on any given day, results from Google are consistently better than those found on Twitter.

“If there’s a hurricane or a terrorist attack—something ephemeral in nature—Twitter might be [helpful], but that’s not the majority of your searches,” Kohn says. “Your searches are not of an ephemeral nature if you’re looking for a product.” Moreover, he adds, why trust random individuals when Google has already filtered all the trusted sources for you?

Besides, Google also claims to be evolving towards real-time results. During the Beijing Olympics in August 2008, for example, Google had a running medal count for the major countries. And Kohn says he relies on Google to keep tabs on the Masters Golf Tournament as it plays out. In this respect, Twitter has a rich stream of what’s going on, Kohn says, but it also has a lot of duplication. “It’s more likely to run at the bottom of a news channel and nothing more.”

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