

COURTING SPIDERS: A PRIMER ON SEM

By Nicole Barker



Googlebot, crawlers and spiders. If you're serious about Internet marketing, then you want to attract as many creepy crawlies as possible.

It all begins with a consumer who is looking for something. She turns to the Internet, chooses a search engine, and types in her request. There are three leading search engines: Google, Yahoo and MSN. You and your competitors will be vying to position your casino "above the fold." Without scrolling further than the first few hits, potential consumers are looking for relevant answers to their inquisitive minds. Through search engine marketing, you are looking to land on top. Or are you?

Welcome to the world of search engine marketing (SEM). You may or may not be proud of your website, but your presence means nothing if no one can find you. But ironically, you may not want just anyone to find you. Search engine marketing is not only aimed to connect the consumer to relevant topics, but it's also designed to connect you to willing buyers.

Creepy Crawlies

Search engines build complex algorithms to index the content posted on the Internet. Your website is constantly being evaluated for the quality of its contents. Is the information that you provide current? What key topics do you cover? How thorough is the information that you provide? Can one navigate easily from topic to topic and page to page? All this and more is evaluated when search engines "index" a website. Web gurus refer to the complex and proprietary algorithms used by search engines as Googlebots, crawlers or spiders. The laws of attraction for these creepy crawlies change constantly. It's a game between the search engines and Web developers to outsmart one another. Just when a Web developer has posted the perfect site to attract the most spiders, the algorithm that ranks its quality changes. Because the algorithms change, the onus is on the Web developers and content providers to spend their resources on providing the most up-to-date and relevant information, instead of on the perfect combination of keywords to lead eager consumers down irrelevant paths.

Websites are rewarded for their content. There are two ways in which a website is ranked for its relevance to a particular keyword search: paid search results and organic search results.

Paid Search Results

Paid search results are the entries that a consumer sees in the shaded box at the top and along the right side of her screen after she has entered a keyword into a search engine. The entries in the shaded box have been paid for. Type in a keyword, click on an entry in the shaded box, and the link will lead you to the highest bidder for that keyword. Here's the twist: Search engines aren't dumb. Rankings in the shaded area are based upon a quality score that calculates the amount bid for a keyword and the relevance of the indexed content posted to the bidding website. Let's say two companies are competing for the same keyword. Dunkin' Donuts and Weight Watchers both want to bid for "doughnut." It may take Weight Watchers \$5 to win the top paid position and Dunkin' Donuts 50 cents. Why? Because one site is about doughnuts and the other is about those with doughnut-loving problems. The search engine keyword bidding process can sniff this one out all the way down the block.

Paid searches begin with silent auction bids for the keywords associated with your site. More specifically, you may bid for a keyword and connect it to a landing page within your site. That landing page might be your home page, your reservations page or another page of topical interest. It's your choice where to put your money to direct consumer interest.

According to Jon Morris, CEO of Rise Interactive, a leading provider of SEM services: "Search engine marketing efforts give you the most qualified traffic that you can find. Using paid searches, a company can start with a small budget to bid on keywords, and then test everything. It's a direct marketer's dream."

The bids can be qualified by time of day, tailored to the search engines that match the target consumer, and qualified by the words that should not be associated with your site. If I were to buy a word for www.BarkerEnterprisesInc.com, I might consider bidding on "Barker" and "casino marketing" during business hours to get potential clients to click-through to my home page. I would negatively select "Bob" and "game show" in order to avoid those who are looking for *The Price is Right*. Thankfully, I only pay the search engine provider when a consumer clicks-through to my Web page, not for the number of times an impression is made. An impression is made when my site is listed in the shaded area of the results page. A charge is only made when a customer clicks on the text link in the shaded area. It's my responsibility to only bid for relevant keywords for landing pages on my site that will efficiently lead my potential customer to a purchase decision.

Organic Search Results

Spiders like fresh content. Below the shaded box, you will find the organic results to a keyword search. According to the spiders, the links appear according to the most relevant and content-rich sites associated with a consumer's keyword search. There are several ways to optimize your website in order to make it relevant and content rich.

First, a website needs to be "linkworthy." This is a popularity contest. The more websites that use similar keywords and link to your site, the more popular you are. In SEM, this is called link building. You can pay an SEM service to post links to your sites on free and paid directories. The value of these links is measured by the traffic that is generated as well as the relevancy of the directory that is linking to you.

The second tool in organic or natural search engine optimization (SEO) is the posting of a site map. A site map helps readers and spiders navigate your site. It serves as a table of contents for your content. No

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reader should be more than two or three links from your home page. Nothing is more frustrating for a consumer than hitting a dead end during a Web search. Likewise, spiders will stop indexing a site if the information is buried too deep.

The third step in organic SEO is to focus on content. Link explanatory PDFs to your site so your reader can learn more about topics of interest. Post news and provide other types of real-time information. Many websites in the hospitality industry post local weather reports, provide interactive maps and driving directions, and offer the ability to book room reservations online.

To test these concepts, type the keyword "Hilton" into the Google search engine. The results may differ regionally, but this hospitalier will most likely be ranked at the top of the shaded area of paid results and at the top of the organic search. Go to www.hilton.com and there will be tools to help you find the Hilton hotel nearest to your destination of choice, check your rewards status, and research travel specials. From any page, you can navigate back to the home page, call a 1-800 number, or refine your search using Hilton's internal search engine.

Additionally, refining the keywords that you use in your title tags and meta descriptions is yet another component to improving your placement in organic search engine results. This has to do with the underlying architecture of your website. Each landing page within your website can be labeled with a title tag and a meta description. The title tag labels each page of a site. When an impression is made, the meta description gives a brief description of your landing page. When spiders match a keyword search to your landing page, the title tag generally serves as the textual link with the meta description listed below it. Search engine optimization consultants can help you label your content effectively. However, it's one thing to label your content, but it's another to deliver on what you promise.

The goal is to use keywords associated with your products and services within the content of your website. However, overuse the keywords and the spiders will shun you. Remember that there are reputable content providers and there are loathsome content providers. Search engines continuously evolve to distinguish between the two. Title tags and meta descriptions refer to the keywords that you use to describe the pages and the content of your website and each landing page. This is a quick reference for spiders to index your site. Stay true to the keywords that you choose to describe yourself, or the spiders will sense incompatibility and downgrade your ranking.

Measuring Success

This is a metric-rich environment. You can measure your click-through return on investment as you are charged for the keywords that you have bid upon. Continuous improvement is always an option. Evaluate your cost per acquisition if you are trying to drive traffic through paid searches. Perhaps there are keywords that are more suited to your consumers. Bidding on the keyword "casino" may command a high price. Many entities like you would like to rank highly using that keyword. Using a general and popular word may also result in a high number of impressions and a high number of paid clicks, linking many consumers to your site. However, if these consumers are not profitable, then greater traffic is not your goal. Your goal is to drive traffic to your site using the most relevant keywords at the right time of day, using the most appropriate search engines.

If you aim to drive traffic to your website to build brand familiarity, you can immediately evaluate your cost per acquisition. If you are looking for consumers to sign up for e-mail announcements, make hotel reservations, or to receive more information about signing up for a loyalty card, you will need to dig deeper.

Once a consumer has landed on your website, you can track her path from page to page. How much time did she spend on each page?

Where did she go next? What led her to a purchase decision or to leave your site? This is where conversion rates come in. Are you able to shorten the distance between the time when a consumer lands on your site and either a purchase decision or a commitment for ongoing interaction is made? A website needs to be coded properly in order for you to be able to track a consumer's path.

In a white paper posted to the magazine *BtoB's* website, we can see the power of tracking customer interest at the granular level. Trends in SEM point to the definition of a "Digital Body Language." Follow your potential consumer's path from keyword choice to the navigation of your website, to the content she chooses to download, and you can learn about her behavior, what she values and what she chooses to ignore. Recency, frequency and click stream data are all tools in SEM to monitor the concerns and motivations of your potential consumers before they even walk in the door.

Going Forward

Design your website and add content dependent on a set menu of expectations. An informational website posts content that answers questions about your casino. Brand awareness is at the top of most marketers' lists of SEM expectations. However, we live in a much more dynamic environment where consumers expect more.

It's wise to work with a Web developer and content providers who can build a website for you that drives your potential customers to a purchase decision or an ongoing relationship with your products and services. Your website is not a one-dimensional business card; it ultimately defines your credibility as a products and services provider, and with a little help, it can drive revenue.

Morris suggests that companies that are new to SEM begin with a small budget for paid search. Approach it as you would your advertising spend. Instantly, one can test what is driving traffic and delivering a compelling return on investment. Second, apply that knowledge to organic SEO. Your website and its architectural backbone is a form of public relations where it may take longer to see results. Once search engines have a chance to index your content, your presence on the Internet as measured by site visits and click-throughs will change.

The Search Engine Marketing Professional Organization (SEMPO) published profound results in its 2007 State of the Market survey: Spending on SEM continues to increase at the expense of print magazine advertising, website development and other marketing functions.

The threat of constrained marketing budgets shows a shift toward increasingly measurable marketing efforts like SEM. While consumers look to the Web to help make their pre-purchase or selection decisions, there is a lag in the sophistication of how companies are responding to this kind of interactive demand. It may not be a question of whether you choose to court creepy crawlies using SEM—your consumers are already demanding it.



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