

OWNING THE SERP IN 2011 IS MORE THAN JUST INTEGRATING YOUR SEO & PPC

By Nick Beck, Managing Director, Tug

Written for SES magazine, February 2011

Integrated Search Marketing used to just be about making sure you had complementary SEO & PPC campaigns for brand and non-brand terms. With the further fragmentation of online channels, as well as the addition of new search engine initiatives and the emergence in importance of product feeds, up to the hour online PR, social media... Integrated SEM means much, much more in 2011.

A famous study in 2007 by iCrossing & Nielsen proved that visibility in the paid and natural listings for the same keywords, increased consumer awareness as well as clicks and conversions. Highlights from the report demonstrated that:

- A brand in both Natural & Paid results attracts 92% of the clicks
- Actions are lifted by 45%
- Orders are lifted by 45%
- Page views are lifted by 44%
- Visitors are increased by 41%
- Time on site is lifted by 40%

Even in 2011 these sound like awesome figures and are only being attained by the most sophisticated brands. Despite the study way back in 2007 many brands are still not integrating their SEO and PPC campaign effectively. The following are the basics that need to be considered when integrating your campaigns:

- Identify your high performance paid keywords - begin optimising for these in natural search
- Identify your high performance natural keywords - ensure that these terms are added to paid campaigns
- Increase natural presence; decrease paid spend over time, depending on objectives.
- Address multiple search intentions between paid and natural listings – create a messaging matrix comparing SEO meta and PPC ad copy for different searches. Give each channel a different messaging objective eg. PPC price focused – SEO emotive
- Have visibility in both or lose clicks to the competition

However, due to Google's universal search there is now more than just website links and PPC ads on a SERP. There are maps, videos, images, up to date news, even tweets. There is much more to coordinate now than ever before if you want to own the SERP for brand and non-brand terms, and gain visibility in front of your prospects and customers.

Owning the SERP for your brand terms

Top position in the sponsored listings for your brand term is easy to secure and is best practice. Even when you have top position in the Natural listing there are two good reasons to pay for a PPC ad on Google: 1. With a good quality score, site-links allow you to deep link to chosen pages within your site and gives you more visibility on the SERP 2. Brand clicks are your cheapest and highest converting so why would you risk cutting the budget?

Top position in the natural listings is also typically easy to secure for your brand and domain. Take advantage of this and ensure that the message in your meta is on brand and on message, and has a call to action if you want a click. Sites with more authority will also have deep links to important pages within their natural listing, as chosen by the engine. If there are deep links not appearing that are necessary to your prospects' consumer journeys, put them in your brand PPC ad.

After these positions, a brand needs a solid reputation management strategy to own the rest of the natural listings. This of course is much easier to control for brands that are less well known, and less written about by 3rd parties and individuals.

Your first port of call is your brand site. Aim to occupy another two additional positions with links to top-level pages other than your homepage. High traffic pages will typically gain positions. Build these into the top level of your site when planning your information architecture. Optimise and build authority to these pages through link building.

News, articles and whitepapers distributed widely and linked back to your site will also gain positions on the first page for brand searches. Ensure that you are distributing and emphasising positive articles, which complement the other message across the SERP. Fresh news will gain top positions faster – paid as well as free PR distribution sites can help here. Listing in Google news is a sure fire way to take another spot. Tweets are also appearing in the top third of the results page – another good reason for a social media strategy.

Company Blogs are important mouthpieces for your brand. They are also an essential element in a good SEO programme. Your company blog, if kept up to date, should also gain a position on page one. Stories or posts of high authority on other blogs and forums can also be part of your strategy.

Images, video even power point presentations can be tagged and distributed through traditional link building methods. These will display if popular, widely distributed and relevant to the search.

Profiles across established business directories also carry weight. As do traditional directory submissions, which will list for smaller brands. Social media profiles are a great new way to own another spot on the SERP. Coca-cola has a fan page on Facebook listed on the 1st page of Google – why don't you?

Owning the SERP for your non-brand terms

It is much harder to own the SERP for non-brand terms. You can always pay for one position in the sponsored links. Remember that top position is not always the best – often a lower position will get you a good conversion rate at a much lower cost than top position. However if you want to make an impact, you can't beat the top spot.

So the strategy is not to get all the spots but to get as many as you can and as high up as you can, for as many competitive keywords as you can. The click through rate for each position on the natural listings of the SERP changes by vertical and can be affected by big brand listings. However, typically top position gets around 40%, second position around 15% -20% and third position about 10% of

clicks and then it drops dramatically as you go down the page. Very few consumers move on to the next page unless it's a very high interest category.

To fight for these positions you can use tools from the arsenal suggested above for brand terms. If you have relevant content related to the non-brand term on more than one page of your site, try to build equity to both of these to gain more than one spot in the natural listings.

In addition, product feeds and comparison sites are good tools if you are in retail. A recent search for 'sofa' on Google.co.uk showed that M&S had a listing in PPC, the natural listings with a good authority category page and a product from their shopping feed in the top third of the page. That's three links out of a total of twenty. I honestly didn't know that M&S carried sofas – if they want to change that perception they are going about it the right way.

For our client Legoland Discovery Centres, we have used local business ads, PPC and optimised pages on their local and .com domains to gain four positions on the SERP for 'freizeitpark' (theme park) in Germany.

There are now lots of different tools that can be used to gain visibility in the search engines. Make sure that you and your agency are making the best of them. Ask yourself, what is your brand's search engine footprint for each targeted keyword? Decide how you can best own the SERP for each of these, and thus more search engine real estate than your competitors.