



What Every Event Marketer Should Know About:

Using Search Engine Marketing Programs to Build Conference and Event Attendance

Overview of Search Engine Marketing

Search Engine Marketing (SEM) as an industry is experiencing mercurial growth, yet is still in a maturing stage as a method for driving targeted traffic to consumer or business-to-business websites. The fast-paced growth of the SEM industry has led some to believe that it will soon eclipse other online advertising methods.

SEM is an integrated direct marketing discipline that builds on the more technical practice called Search Engine Optimization (SEO) -- the techniques by which a company designs, writes and codes its website in order to place higher in organic (non-paid) searches on Google, Yahoo! and other search engines. SEM techniques and practices typically include pay-per-click (PPC) advertising, paid inclusion (an advertising program where web pages are guaranteed to be included in a search engine's index in exchange for payment) and link popularity campaigns.

SEM and Event Marketing

SEM is well suited to the needs of organizations that hold and promote conferences and events. SEM practices, once implemented, create a mechanism that autonomously drives targeted traffic to specific pages of a website promoting a conference or event. Once the initial steps have been taken to get an SEM program up and running, monthly maintenance and monitoring does not necessarily require large time commitments or large budgets to maximize an initial investment -- an important benefit for corporation as well as nonprofit organizations that often have limited resources and are staffed by volunteers. In addition, SEM has proven to be a cost-effective alternative when compared to other direct marketing practices. Research by the investment firm Piper Jaffray reports that SEM is, on average, more cost-effective in terms of cost-per-lead (at \$.045) than standard direct marketing practices such as email (\$0.55), banner ads (\$2.00) and direct mail (\$9.94).

According to Marla Carlton, president of Specto Design, a web design and search engine marketing firm, "The goal for any event marketer considering an SEM campaign should be to increase the targeted traffic to your event or conference website, to improve the conversion rate of that traffic (e.g. visitors registering for a conference or requesting information), and to have your website become part of an integrated online community that shares similar values, lifestyles and interests that are inherently expressed and embodied in your conference or event's subject matter."

Keywords: Discovering the Natural Language of Your Customers

The first and most important step in implementing a SEM campaign is the research, selection and validation of keywords and phrases that reflect your organization's core values or business activities. SEM professionals refer to keywords as "the natural language" of potential customers. When a person enters a word or phrase into a search engine, they are declaring, "This is what I am interested in." An effective SEM campaign anticipates and responds to the natural language of customers, zeroing in on specific words and phrases that potential customers are likely to be searching for online.

Once your initial list of keywords has been selected, each word should be tested for viability and potential effectiveness. You must make sure enough people are actually searching on the words and phrases you are considering using and determine if you can afford to pursue words that are competitively bid on. Once tested and validated, your key words will need to be repeated within the text on relevant pages of your organization's website and in parts of the HTML code of those pages (Meta tags, alt tags and page titles). In practice this means editing the text on specific web pages to include certain keywords. Typically a keyword needs to be used a minimum of three times in the content of a page, depending on its length. Once you have optimized your web pages, they can be submitted to the search engines and directories.

Here's a practical example that illustrates how an event marketer might choose keywords and phrases to optimize a website for improved search engine results: An organization that holds an annual conference on marketing to the "baby boomer" generation wants to increase traffic to its conference website. The organization's event marketers begin by choosing and testing keywords like "baby boomer trends" and "marketing to boomers". If research indicates these to be viable terms to pursue (it often happens that words and phrases that seem obvious turn out to be the least effective ones), the event marketer then embeds the keywords into the copy and code of relevant pages on the website.

These keywords, once optimized on the website and used in conjunction with other techniques like pay-per-click advertising, will begin to improve the placement of the organization's website in search engine results. The improved search results will drive more targeted traffic to the organization's site. Event marketers must decide what ranking in search results they want their site to receive. Highly competitive consumer goods often require that their sites rank # 1, 2 or 3 in search results. For other types of businesses, ranking in the top 10 is acceptable. Research indicates that search engine users rarely look beyond the third page of results.

Pay-Per-Click Advertising

Search engine users are likely familiar with the pay-per-click (PPC) advertisements that appear in the right-hand margin of the search results page (for example, AdWords on Google). PPC ads can be a helpful shortcut that gets searchers to the information they are looking for more quickly and directly. This type of advertising is also available on Overture and many of the second-tier search engines. Overture can display ads across their network, which includes sites like Yahoo!, MSN and AltaVista. The simple premise of this type of advertising is that you compete with other organizations by bidding for ad position. The marketer declares what they are willing to spend per click. A marketer can set bids for each keyword, or a single bid can be set for all keywords.

Imagine that the "baby boomer" conference event marketer mentioned previously began a Google AdWord campaign with the following keywords:

1. Baby Boomers
2. Baby Boomers trends
3. Marketing to Baby Boomers
4. Marketing to seniors
5. Baby boomers age range
6. Baby boomers generation
7. Baby boomer marketing
8. Baby boomers statistics
9. Characteristics of Baby Boomers
10. Who are Baby Boomers

When someone enters one of these keyword phrases, for example, “baby boomer marketing,” the following ad is triggered on the Google search results page:



The ad for the *Baby Boomer Marketing Conference* places second on the first page of organic search results when the search term “baby boomer marketing” is entered on Google.

Some of the selected keywords will be more competitively bid on than others, driving the cost-per-click higher for those words. Your list of keywords can be adjusted as click-through rates begin to indicate which ones are performing best. Campaigns can be segmented and multiple ads deployed across selected search engines to extend your reach across the Internet. New visitors arriving at your organization’s conference website through PPC ads will be fairly well qualified. The path these new visitors take through your conference site should be analyzed and their conversion rates tracked. The event marketer must define, based on the nature of the event, conference or services they provide, what constitutes a conversion. Examples of conversions would be a new paid event registration, a request for more information or a newsletter subscription sign-up.

Link Popularity: Integrating Your Site with an Online Community

“Link popularity” refers to how “popular” a website is – that is, how many other web pages are linking to your website. Measuring and managing link popularity is another important search engine optimization technique that improves traffic to your organization’s website as well as its ranking in organic search results. To maximize link popularity, event marketers should develop “link alliances” with other organizations whose sites target an audience with similar values and interests. Links that bring increased traffic to your website can include pay-per-click (PPC) ads and website URLs placed on complementary organizations that link back to your event or conference site.

Through a strong link popularity strategy, you can build a relationship with complementary online communities. Overture will distribute your PPC ads to sites that are relevant to your keywords. Yahoo! has services where you can list events in a directory for a specific period of time.

Be aware that a link popularity strategy does not simply mean obtaining as many links as possible. The quality of the links is more important than the quantity of links. Quality, as always is the case with on-line marketing, means “clicks”. The more clicks through to your site, the better your long-term rankings will be with both the search engines and directories.

Advantages of SEM Programs

The advantages of SEM should be compelling to any event marketer. SEM offers a cost-effective way to drive targeted traffic to your dedicated conference website year-round that will help build awareness of an event or conference and of your organization's services and values.

SEM programs take a little time and dedication to set up, but once going they are fairly easy to monitor. The key is to find the right vendor to help you get started. A good SEM vendor will provide keyword search ranking reports and can set up a bid management system for ads placed on Overture to make sure you are not overpaying for clicks to your site.

Once you are up and running, you can use your web traffic analysis program (NetTracker, TM for example) to create custom reports on the pay-per-per-click traffic that arrives at your site. SEM marketing offers a flexible and adaptable solution for any organization. As you start to see results and analyze your reports, you can add more SEM activities to fine-tune a campaign as your budgets permit.

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