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Stop Wasting Money On SEM: Know Your Customer To Know Your User

While it may seem obvious to many of us in the industry (The so-called veterans) it may not be that obvious to all.

That is, no matter what rankings you achieve or how much you are spending on your PPC in a month, you really should only consider one thing: Your customers. 100% of your efforts must revolve around who your customer is.

In this article I give some tips to ensure that your marketing campaign revolves around your customer.

While I was unable to attend Search Engine Strategies in New York this year (I went last year – it was an incredible experience) I was surprised and glad to hear that there was an over-riding theme coming out of the sessions both from the SEM's presenting as well as the engines.

That theme is user intent.

That means, one must understand what the user – their customer – wants when they visit the search engine and ultimately click on a search engine result whether it is paid or organic.

I started to think about my clients over the years and some of the things they have said when I ask them, "What are you looking for in this campaign?"

Many of the responses include: "I want to be number 1 for [insert keyword here]" or, "I need to lower my PPC costs by [insert value here]" or, "I need to beat my competitor [insert competitors name here]."

What is the most important element missing from these comments (and, I think, from many clients in general)?
The focus on the customer.

In the years I've been asking the question "what are you looking for in this campaign?" I think I can count on one hand how many people responded to my question above with, "I need to reach my target audience effectively."

While it is true that many companies are beginning to realize this now, it hasn't been that way for some time.

I think what is changing in today's world is that companies are beginning to realize that search is big business. As such, they have marketers interacting with SEM firms and not IT people. It is these marketing people who are asking the right questions or, in many cases, answering them the right way.

Here's an example: I recently sat in on a call with a client and one of the first things they said was, "We have devised seven unique personas for our site and need to target each one individually."

"What? You've already done the personas? We usually do those." But you know what? They did an incredible job. After reviewing their persona information, I could put a face to the persona. I knew what that person looked like, and what his or her intent was with the site.

And that is the most important thing to consider in today's SEM world – you **MUST** know who your customer is. You **MUST** understand their intent if you are going to succeed.

For example, if your customers tend to have completed the research stage and are in the buying stage, don't send them to a PPC landing page with product specs. Instead, send them to a landing page with pricing and shipping information.

Better yet, send them to the pricing/checkout page and give them free shipping! That will undoubtedly help encourage the sale.

Similarly, if you are finding a product specification page ranking highly for a purchase search term, try and find a better page to optimize for that term and de-optimize the product page so that the purchase page will rank higher.

This is where personas are extremely helpful. If you can put a face to your customer, you can determine their intent. And if you can determine their intent you can effectively create your entire marketing campaign around it.

Generally what you will find out, as you become more intimate with that persona, is that you probably don't need to rank #1 organically for a highly competitive term. You could probably get away with above the fold visibility and still make an impression.

Similarly, you will probably find that the knowledge of your target's intent can help you optimize your bidding strategies by cutting expensive terms, performing day parting, or whatever else you need to do to ensure that your site is visible to them at just the right time.

What many search engine marketers are learning is that the user's intent, derived from an accurate persona, is more valuable than anything.

It's more valuable than a #1 ranking. It's also more valuable than an expensive PPC term.

In fact, such knowledge will likely impact the terms you use altogether. While you may think that the searcher will use certain terms, in fact you may find that you are way off base.

But, it's not just search marketers concerned with intent. The search engines are also investing heavily in technology to help them figure out the intent of the searcher and serve the correct results.

For example, I could be searching for "Manhattan" and the search engine has to determine what my intent is. Am I looking for city information? Am I looking to find a hotel or book air travel? Or, do I merely want a drink recipe.

You see, simple terms like this can mean many things, therefore the search engines are trying to use their technology to figure out what the searcher wants.

And many times, when you perform a search and you see a PageRank 3 site outranking a PageRank 6 site, this is why. It is because the search engine has tried to determine that intent and is therefore trying to match the site that best suits that searcher.

But why would a search engine be so concerned about intent? It's quite simple. Right now most of us have Google set as our home page. But what does it take to switch that to MSN or Yahoo? A couple clicks of the mouse and you've just changed search results providers.

This is what scares the engines the most – that one of their competitors, or a completely new black horse, is going to come along and woo away users with technology that improves relevancy to the user.

So, if you are planning your SEM campaign for 2006, my opinion is go back to the drawing board. First, determine your goals. Then, determine who it is you are trying to reach and why they would want to use your product or service. If you can determine this intent then you can effectively craft an SEM campaign that will be both successful and cost effective.

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