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Interviews

AARON MATTHEW WALL

Search Engine Optimization Book

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It is usually far easier to create an idea worth spreading than it is to spread an idea not worth spreading.

Disclaimer: Since search engines are constantly changing and keep their algorithms as closely guarded secrets, there is no way to know the exact algorithms at any given time. This information was compiled from my observations of search engines over the past few years. Hopefully part of what this book teaches you is how to make informed observations as things continue to change.

With enough experience and observation one can deduce patterns and figure out pieces of the puzzle. This guide was created to help you solve that puzzle in much the same way others have.

While following this guide should help improve your rankings, the author of this book shall not be held responsible for damages because of the use (or misuse) of this information.

Why All These Interviews?

O ne of my biggest advantages on the web is that I had almost zero business knowledge off the web before jumping on the web. This means that I had to learn the social network that is the web well enough to make up for all my other failures: no idea of how to run a business, no idea how to sell myself, no idea how to build brand, etc etc etc.

Having such a limited real world experience and being so young also means that I am likely to miss telling you some important ideas or concepts. What works for me may not work for you, and I might be ten times more successful than I am if I broadened my horizons and had experience in some other fields.

These interviews are of some of the most important voices in search. Some of them are my best mentors which have helped me more than anyone else, while others have years of experience more than I do and have worked on thousands of websites.

These interviews are from a wide variety of people, from the world's largest search spammers to small business owners that have built leading brands using almost nothing but the web these interviews should help broaden the perspective of this ebook.

Questions, Comments, & Concerns

Some of the terms might be a bit confusing to people new to the web. Some of the topics covered in some of these interviews might be a bit more advanced than what is needed for the average new webmaster. If you have any questions or would like to see me interview anyone in specific please let me know and I will try my best to accommodate your needs.

Best of luck with your sites,

-Aaron

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Shawn Hogan of Digital Point

S hawn Hogan is the founder of <u>Digital Point</u>, a high end software development company which also developed some of the best free SEO tools on the market and one of the most active SEO forums.

The reason I interviewed him is he built one of the largest and most scalable SEO communities and SEO toolsets as a side hobby project with a $0 marketing spend.

By making his tools and community free, open, and scalable he was able to extract greater value without needing to worry about how to profit from his efforts.

Interview

30 June 2005

What is your background and how & when did you get into the SEO scene?

I'm a developer. The main thing I like to do is develop things that are completely new ideas (preferably things that people tell me are impossible). My "real" work is developing high-end accounting/billing/business management software. For example:

<u>http://www.digitalpoint.com/products/isp/</u>

I'm not sure I would exactly say I'm in the "SEO scene" (I know maybe 4 people in the industry, I don't offer any services (SEO or otherwise), I don't go to trade shows/conferences, etc.)

I am usually pretty quick to discount Alexa, but when you are in the top 500 or so (like DigitalPoint.com is) that is impressive. Do you spend much on marketing your site, or does the traffic come through free referals?

I don't do any marketing for the site. It was less than 2 years ago when I first heard the term SEO or had any idea what search engine marketing was. And I

had a distinct advantage because when I first heard the term PageRank, my site was PR7 with a few hundred thousand links (natural links from people linking to my billing software or whatever other stuff).

For about a week I tested the AdWords CPM ads, and your site had at least 5 times as many ad displays as any of the other forums I advertised on. Does most of your traffic come from the forums or tools? Do you think the traffic is much higher because you offer both?

I think the forums are getting close to passing up the free tools in terms of raw traffic. Funny because the main reason I started the forum was so people would stop calling and emailing me for support on the free tools. :)

But the forum has a lot of content at this point, so I get ~10,000 unique visitors a day coming into the forum from random search engine searches, some of which convert into normal users, and some of those end up turning into users of the tools as well.

Your free SEO tools are flat out best of breed. Why did you create them? How did you know what the market wanted / needed? Are you surprised at how well people responded to any of the tools? Are you surprised at any tools that did not take off quickly?

The tools I create are really just for my own use to make my own life easier. I just decided to let other's use them. :) The first tool was the keyword tracker, which really was thrown together in a morning because I wanted it for myself:

http://forums.seochat.com/showthread.php?t=5281

Of course, I never expected the keyword tracker (or any of the others) to be so popular. I made it for myself, and thought maybe if I let others use it, maybe a few hundred others would use it (at the most), and now it's past 30,000 users tracking just under 750,000 keywords.

I'm not surprised people like the tools, but I am surprised how big they have gotten so quickly without any marketing what-so-ever on my part. I guess "If you build it, they will come." applies in this case. hehe

One thing that's really nice about having such a large active user base (from tools and forum) is now I can make something new, and instantly have a ton of users (the ad network for example was launched and was live on thousands of sites within a week with no outside marketing).

Your cooperative link network spread faster than any other SEO network I have ever seen. Does it still work well in most of the engines? Is there anything you would have done differently with it if you started it over today?

Well believe it or not, the intention of the ad network was never to be a link network. Some reading about what the intentions and purpose of it can be found here:

http://www.digitalpoint.com/tools/ad-network/history.html

And I would say more than half the new sites joining are joining for the traffic from the ads themselves and not the secondary benefit of links (it would be much more except my site happens to have a lot of SEOs on it, so...)

To further expand on the true advertising aspect of it, I added impression tracking charts per ad. And have been experimenting with some other stuff as well (geo-targetting end users down to the city level, etc.) Ultimately something like AdWords/AdSense (contextual advertising) that is completely free of charge would be nice.

Some SEO forums have a group voice, where they emphasize that it is ok to talk about this, you can't link to that, or wrong to talk about that. When I think of your forums I don't really notice that. I also notice that some people who were banned from other forums became contributors to Digital Point. Is that openness by accident, or did you intentionally design your forums that way?

It's intentional... Partially because I don't think a forum that censors things is worth much of anything, and partially because it's much less work for moderators/administrators to try to clear every little thing as "acceptable".

When you started your SEO forums what were the biggest pitfalls or problems? Did you run into any great surprises?

The biggest problem is that it grew so quickly I had to switch it off the server I put it on to a different one 45 days into it, but that's about it. I'm all about automating everything... the less need for humans, then better IMO. Things that can be automated (like signature guideline compliance) is done so with code rather than a crew of moderators reviewing everything. At this point I really only have one moderator, and that was mostly done because he happened to be in the forum a lot, so I just gave him the ability to move threads that were in the wrong forum and delete threads that were spam that he happened to run across.

Have plans to make any more cool SEO tools?

I never had "plans" for any of the others. They all went from a random idea to being live within 36 hours, so...

I'm sure there will be more tools, but I have to think of something else I
need/want for myself first. :)

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thanks for the interview Shawn. If you want to learn more about Shawn,
Digital Point, or his tools, here are some links:

- Digital Point
- Digital Point Forums
- Digital Point Keyword Tracker
- Digital Point Keyword Suggestion Tool
- Digital Point Cooperative Ad Network
- More SEO Tools

David Naylor

D Avid Naylor is one of the most recognized names in SEO. When I attended the 2005 New Orleans WebmasterWorld World of Search Conference Matt Cutts, a Google engineer, asked if any black hat SEOs were in the crowd. Dave was the only person to raise his hand. Dave goes by the name DaveN and is a moderator at WebmasterWorld and Search Engine Watch Forums.

I interviewed Dave because he is one of the most well known aggressive / black hat SEO experts in the world, and he is willing to share a bit more information than the average advanced webmaster.

Interview:

July 5, 2005

When did you get started with SEO?

I guess it was in 1998 when I got into the SEO field. I'd been doing database programming as an IT manager for another company when I was asked if I would create their intranet. I ended up changing jobs and working for a small ISP doing web design.

What got you started in the SEO field?

I realised that it was no point having a website if I couldn't be number one. After having many successes I decided that in 2003 I would buy the company out and put all of my efforts into my business.

I have had the pleasure of hanging around when you were chatting a few times, and felt like a sponge that just got dropped in water. Some of the ideas you come up with and some of the things you test are not things I would have thought of. Where & how do you get the ideas of what to test?

Come on Aaron you do yourself great injustice. Ideas come from speaking to people like yourself and other friends. Sometimes the simplest word can grow into a fantastic idea, but without the right people to bounce an idea backwards and forwards with, I guess I would be just another two bit SEO trying to make a living on the net.

When it comes to testing the ideas that I thing are viable we have a great in house team of programmers that just love to prove me wrong.

Some people take great pride in using "our proprietary methods..." whereas you seem to be a bit more open than most. As more people know about certain techniques they get abused beyond belief and search engines are more likely to close the loopholes. How do you strike a balance with what to share?

Trust is a binding factor here. I would share my last dollar with a close friend and ideas are much cheaper in my eyes. At the end of the day if it wasn't for the close community of friends I work with on a daily basis I guess I wouldn't be the success I am today.

Are any of the best SEO techniques ever disclosed in open forums?

Hell no!

After a period of time it gets to where many advanced people stop learning as much from forums. You still regularly help at multiple forums. Do you still find yourself learning from them, or do you do that for friendships & comrodery, or do you do it to give back?

To be honest I do it for friendship and camaraderie – and you never know when you might need their help one day. There are still things that I learn in a sense, or get an idea to test from the threads that people start. As a close friend of mine said to me, "…some day, and that day may never come, I may call upon you to do a service for me… ?" - I think he stole the lines but the sentiment is there anyway.

Some people want to rank for Viagra? Is it worth the effort? How can you tell whether or not it is worth the effort? What terms are the best terms to target?

In the Viagra market there is only one term – "Viagra". With Google's tools it is getting harder and harder not to spam. It's nice to be able to say that you rank for the keyword Viagra….it's one of those keywords along with poker and loans… you get the picture.

Hypothetical situation: My rankings just dove. What should I do? Do you set up test flags to help show you how algorithms change?

Basically we have lots of datasets that we capture from Google on a daily/weekly basis so we can see subtle changes. Things can get messed up with the updates. But I think one of my most valuable assets as an SEO is the ability to see a change without the use of the reports, by eye, quicker than most.

Have you ever been totally wiped out by an update?

Hell yeh!

How long did it take you to get ranking again? What general steps are involved in that?

We tend to run 2 or 3 different programs at a time and live by the sword, whether it be blog spamming, scraper sites, content driven sites or just plain old clean SEO sites. I'm a great believer that Google only want to kill one idea at a time, so there's never a massive loss of revenue.

Some people talk about domain names as though they are permanent and they only live with one. From having a few conversations I think you burn through a good number of them. How do you know when a domain has been penalized? Have you ever got a penalized site listed again? How hard is it to do?

Yeh, we've burnt a few in our time. If you're talking about client sites then penalisation reasons can usually be spotted and what mistakes have been made are changed. Most algorithmic penalties will be lifted by the algo once the problem has been rectified. On my "build & burn" domains there is only one type of penalty and that is hand removal and we live by the motto – keep walking and never look back!

Should most webmasters use aggressive techniques? How do you decide when to use what techniques?

No not at all, most webmasters could easily gain top rankings from just cleaning up their website, taking good on page SEO and good internal link structure. If aggressive techniques are to be used the webmaster must be fully aware that the domain name has now just become expendable. The only time you really need to use aggressive techniques are in the highly competitive PPC market (porn, pills & casino).

Should new conservative webmasters only work on one domain? What advantages are there to only using one? If they use multiple domain names what precautions are associated with that?

It depends what you mean by the question Aaron, if you mean using multiple domain names going to the same site or creating gateway pages on those domains then I think that a conservative webmaster should only work on one domain. The main advantage is being able to test and tweak until they have homed in on their SEO skills. Too many fingers in too many pies – something will get overcooked and burnt.

A while ago I think I remember you writing something about not linking to the homepage from sitewide page footers using the same text the home page is optimized for. I think you also mentioned something about overly aggressive

H1 tag usage causing flags or penalties of some sort. How do you know when certain techniques are deweighted or penalized?

Again it goes back to test data. It's easy to create 100 pages with different % weights on different pages and wait and see what gets ranked and what gets tanked.

Can search engines tell where a link was from and how to process it? Do you believe they give more or less weight to links from directories, links that are deemed natural & relevant, or links that are bought?

I can definitely say that search engines know if you're buying links or not, and yes search engines give less weight to links from certain areas on the internet. The way I always think about links is…
If it's really hard to get one link from a site then it's worth getting… if all you have to do it click a button to add your URL then don't you think it's pretty worthless (eg. Blogs, guestbooks, directories etc..)

Occasionally people mention things like Google's recent temporal patent, TrustRank, Hilltop, Topic Specific PageRank, Latent Semantic Indexing, etc. Do you think any of these types of algorithms are at play? Does the average webmaster or SEO need to worry about those kinds of algorithms?

I think to a certain degree that the search engines will test and play with certain things like HillTop and LSI, but it may be 12 months or longer before we see a true LSI type index. Too many webmasters and SEO's get carried away by PR which in my opinion is something that a webmaster will never see and toolbar PR is just for fun.

Do you find any public SEO tools useful? Or do you use all hand rolled stuff?

Yeh sure I do use public tools, but I tend not to use that many though. If I find one I like we will re-engineer it in house and slide it into our portfolio of tools.

Should the average person be automating their SEO process? What parts should they automate?

On SEO's automating their process I suppose it depends on how good they are at letting the search engine know what they are up to. Most scripts I've seen tend to leave a foot print of some kind but if I had to guess what tools SEO's should automate then perhaps, whether a link is a good/bad link, anchor text density, a good on page factor reporting system to mention a few.

Some industries are full of foul play, whereas others are fairly clean. How do you get an overview of an industry or term set prior to jumping in? Are there any underlying rules or tips for playing in infested waters?

I tend to jump in with both feet and see which SEO's start hitting my IM asking me what I'm doing. As for rules for playing in infested waters – there's no rules, the gloves come off and you come out fighting. As for tips – don't hold back… use every weapon in your arsenal. To me infested waters are much more challenging and exciting.

Is there any SEO technique that you think is future proof?

No, the search engines are always catching up.

How do you see SEO changing? How do you think SEO will look in 2 or 5 or 10 years? Will links still be exceptionally important? Will something else be more important? Do you see social or collaborative filtering picking up? Personalization?

I can see personalisation kicking in a lot more in the future. One of the most important things in this industry is information. If you can identify from the individuals what they searched for and can group them into sectors then if a doctor searches for Viagra chances are he's looking for medical research, if I'm looking for Viagra I'm looking for one of my sites, but if a 55 man is looking for Viagra he is probably looking for a supplier especially if he has a history of going to Viagra suppliers in the past.

SEO will become much darker as the search engines get cleverer, SEO's will have to adopt and adapt new techniques.

I noticed you have already spammed MY Google personalized search. How did you let Google know what I wanted? :)

That's dead easy – at the moment the personalisation search is very simplistic. It's all about setting trends and patterns. I just rang Google up and told them of course! :)

Thanks for the interview Dave. If you want to check out his latest tips and thoughts on search. His blog is located at <u>http://www.davidnaylor.co.uk/</u>

NFFC

I have been a long time fan of the mysterious NFFC. He makes rather witty posts on SEO forums and blogs and has a way of seeing the big picture in an industry where most people are overly short sighted and reactive.

NFFC is an ex WMW admin, the man who named the Google updates and one of the coconspirators behind SEO Roadshow [check out there new blog for updates about the event], and has probably helped me on the web more than any other person.

I interviewed him because all of the great advice he has gave me and his forward thinking holistic approach to SEO and running a web based business.

Interview

July 16, 2005

How & when did you get into search?

In to search itself 1995, the good old days of AltaVista [now that was a mans search engine!]. In to manipulating search engines for fun and profit late 1999.

What's with the nickname?

A very commonly asked question believe it or not. Some contend it is because I am a huge Mickey mouse fan (www.nffc.org), others that I am a farmer (www.nffc.net), the truth....well its not hard to work out, just answer this simple question. Which football club represents the City with the smallest population ever to win the European Cup?

How many times did you win the European Cup?

Not once but twice, back to back. Welling up thinking about it, that team could play in the snow and not leave a footprint.

I was told they used to be good but now their football team is bad, and they have huge deer. Is this true?

True, apart from the deer, but rule number 1, never ever give up. We will be back once again, stronger than ever.

Football is competitive. So is SEO. If a term is competitive does it mean there is money to be made there?

Yes and no. The pie may be bigger but realistically you may get a smaller piece of it. Having said that I have yet to meet a good SEO who cares about the money, the thrill is in the fight and the best fights are usually in the most competitive keyword spaces.

Its real simple, if you sell widgets you want to rank for the core term, remember what we deal in is marketing on demand, we need to deliver our message whenever, wherever and how ever the user requests it.

What tips and techniques do you have for finding profitable niches and ideas that work well on the web? Do they have to match your personality or interests, or can you make money off anything?

As [WebGurrilla](#) said on [Webmaster Radio.fm](#) just last night, for a project to interest him he has to like the people, like what *they* are offering, get a buzz of doing the work. I think that's the best way to work, to me SEO isn't a mechanical process its an emotional process and because if that I have to be fully committed.

Do you see SEO as a business model that scales, or works best with a few strong relationships?

I don't see any scaleabilty to be honest, the best service a client will get will be from "the proprietor" him/her self. Bringing in a bunch of marketing graduates won't improve the offering, it goes the other way. I have yet to see an SEO "scale" without falling to bits. Just look at WebSourced.

What was the worst mistake you made with a client?

Believing a single word they said.

I believe you moved away from SEO services and into doing SEO for yourself. What made you decide to do that? How did you find a merchant that you could partner up well with?

Well its a long story but to cut it short...I snagged a client, charged them $25,000 up front and did the work in a week. Boy did I think I was one smart cookie. By the years end they had done $5 million worth of business off that work, at that point I felt kinda dumb!

We don't partner with merchants, we form a business and source and/or manufacture the products themselves, the whole nine yards from raw materials to after sales service.

Odds are that if a person is going to hire an SEO they are not going to find someone like you. Can SEO be outsourced? What should people look for when hiring an SEO?

It's very tough out there for people looking for SEO's, the main reason being that most clients are lazy. There are not many businesses out there where the internet could not be playing a very significant role in their operations, they need to get with the program and put some work in researching.

Oddly enough not all SEO's go my route, some of the best guys like the lone wolf contracting life but the only way you are going to get one of those is by a referral. In short, if you don't know a good SEO it is very difficult to find one.

Does a business need to do well off the web to do well on the web? What are the biggest differences between doing business off the web and on the web?

I think its just a question of commitment, I used to say to brick and mortar business looking to go on the web "imagine you are opening a new real store, just give this "virtual" one 10% of the time, 10% of the investment and 100% of the commitment that you would a real store and you will be a huge success.

The biggest difference is that somebody with little money but lots of ambition can become a huge success, that's very difficult to do offline, increasingly difficult online but still just achievable nowdays.

Not too long ago I do not think I had much credibility. Then out of nowhere NickW posted a question wondered what people thought of my ebook. You said "I splashed out, well worth it" and then it seemed as though many people thought of me as good. How did you get that level of credibility? Why did you trust me & decide to help me?

I am not sure I have that level of credibility but I like to think I do what I say I'm going to do, we follow that through in the ecom business too.

Regarding the book, no doubt its a good book, but what came through to me was your "connection to the web". I think fewer and fewer people seem to LOVE the www these days, I got the love vibe from your book and that bodes well for the long term usefulness of it.

I used to sell my ebook at half of its current price. I did not want to raise it. You bitched at me until I did. Thanks for that, but why did you believe I should charge twice as much as I was?

People associated price with quality, it was a quality product and should have a higher price. The dumbest person in the world should be able to get a ROI at its current price, I still think its too cheap.

Sometimes you say some fairly forward looking stuff in the SEO forums or on instant messenger. How do you see search in such a forward looking manner, and how do you see it changing? Will it still be possible for me to sell this ebook in 5 years, or should I look for another business model? Will people new to the web be able to do SEO in 5 years? Or do you see SEO shifting from algorithm focus to focusing on human emotion and human interaction and holistic marketing?

Well I'm not one of the SEO is dead crowd for sure, personally I think it is stronger than ever. Maybe the SEO firm as a business model is under some pressure, but not SEO itself.

This is what I think, SEO is all about emotions, all about human interaction. People, search engineers even, try and force it into a numbers box.

Numbers, math and formulas are for people not smart enough to think in concepts.

If you worked at a search engine what are the biggest things you would change with how they evaluate link authority and overall search relevancy scores?

I would look to give good things a boost and stop focusing on finding bad things to penalise.

Many sites are constructed and then people wonder what sets them apart afterwards. How do you know when an idea fits the web? How do you develop a web friendly brand?

I think the best brands, the best sites have a large portion of their founders personality in them. Never be afraid to be yourself, after all there are 1/2 billion people on the www, not all of them have to agree with you. Concentrate on the ones that share your views, concentrate on making their experience the very best it can be, the rest forget them.

Or to put it another way, the best sites say - this is what we do, this is how we do it, if you don't like it go somewhere else.

Ultimately though I think it comes down to desire and the will to win. There was a post over at sew recently, some guy whining that he was getting beat silly in the serps by some old established sites. He was whining that they were

doing x and so was he, they were doing y and so was he, they were doing z and so was he.

He didn't have the right attitude to succeed on the web. When you go up against those big established sites you really have to be committed and go the extra mile. If you want to world champion you have to fight the best in their own back yard, its no use being as good or even a little better, you have to knock them spark out to get the decision.

Should most businesses have more than one website? If so what would be good reasons to run multiple sites, and also what problems do people run into when working on multiple sites?

I can only tell you what we do. We have less sites than we did 4 years ago and about 90% less than we planned for 4 years ago. I think a webmaster is faced with a much more challenging environment than they were a few years back, it would be wise to concentrate those limited resources.

Having said that marketing needs to play a big role in the decision making process. The muti-channel approach works well offline, it works even better online. The only thing I would say is if you can't sum up the differences in the sites in one sentence then maybe you should just have the one.

The days of greenwidgets.com redwidgets.com et al are long gone, for a serious internet business.

Long term viability...which is better, SEO or pay per click? and why? Should people do both?

Both for sure, remember we offer marketing on demand, a webmaster needs to be visible in every channel. All sites should at least start with some PPC, after all a 5 year old can grasp it.

Long term, you need to weave yourself into the fabric of the web, only SEO of the two choices will achieve that.

When I started I pretty much could not afford PPC. IMHO it is still possible to go without, but missing out on that fast market research is a heavy tax on your time to save a few cents.

Well, and don't think this too harsh, but if you can't beg steal or borrow a few $100 to buy an ebook and whilst learning start a small time PPC campaign then you have no place on the COMMERCIAL web.

What are the best web marketing avenues to rely on outside of search?

Friends.

What books would you recommend people new to the web read? What other things should new webmasters do before they launch and shortly after they launch their sites?

I think they should read as much as they can, I particularly like the dot com story books, some fascinating reads about ebay, amazon, boo.com can learn a lot through those. Your book would be on my list too of course. I think it also depends on what type of site it is, if its an ecom site for example, try and sell some stuff on ebay, get a feel for the customers and the demand/pricing levels for the product.

I am sorta surprised I got you to type all that. You usually tend to be able to say a bunch using very few words. Was there a book you read on that, or where did that ability come from?

It's natural.

Thanks for the interview NFFC.

If you would like to meet NFFC in person you may want to check out the free-form networking SEO Roadshow.

Dan Thies

Dan Thies is the founder of <u>SEO Research Labs</u>. He has written a couple books about search engine optimization, is known as **the** keyword guru, and also teaches beginner and advanced search engine optimization courses.

I wanted to interview him due to his strong keyword research brand, his knowledge of marketing, and because he is a fellow author of books on SEO.

Interview

July 16, 2005

How & when did you get into search?

I've been doing stuff on the Internet since before the web, newsgroups, email, that kind of thing. When the web started to gain steam, I got involved in building websites, promoting websites, and search became a pretty important factor in that by 1996. Turning into a "search engine guy" sort of happened by accident, I wanted to write a book, planned to do something on email marketing, but I had so many requests to do something on search engines, I figured I should get that out first, so put 5 chapters of email marketing gold on the shelf and banged out the first edition of SEO Fast Start over a couple months.

You and I both wrote fairly strong selling books about SEO? What did you think was the hardest part about writing an ebook and marketing it?

Writing it. For me, with SEO Fast Start, the hardest part was getting it down to the right size. I had set a target length of 80 pages, because you lose beginners with too much information. So most of what I wrote ended up in the "save for later" file.

Which actually turned out to be helpful, because it gave me a lot of fodder for writing ezine articles. When I started selling it, the site was new and had no search engine presence, so I had to promote it with other methods.

Since I already knew email marketing (better than I knew SEO at that point), it was pretty easy to create demand. Once people started reading it, I had testimonials and other things to use.

What were the biggest surprises that came out of writing books about SEO?

The biggest surprise was how much hostility came out of the SEO people. They didn't like my sales letter, and figured me for just another marketer. I had to do some things to make my point, like pushing my sales site up into the rankings for "search engine optimization," which was pretty easy to do, but the "optimized" copy didn't sell as well.

I have pretty good relationships with these folks now, but people like Alan Perkins and Jill Whalen were pretty dismissive in the beginning. About the only SEO person who gave me any encouragement back then was Mike Grehan, who was actually my first customer. He somehow found my site and bought my book before any of the articles had even been published.

You think *you* have your ear to the ground, but that guy has some kind of radar we'll never fully understand.

What marketing techniques have you found most effective? Are there any that you believe SEOs are relying too heavily upon? or are there some they are not looking at deeply enough?

Well, in terms of pure SEO, people don't use their own websites very well. Good structure, internal anchor text, content... and there seems to be a whole lot of money going into the most expensive forms of link building, instead of stuff that's easy, natural, and profitable. Writing and distributing articles, if you can find the audience by email and through content sites is an easy way to generate leads, sales, and links all at once.

People who are writing blogs instead of distributing content are relying on a very small subset of the web.

It seems to me that within that large number of SEO firms there are few that have strong brands. You seem to be one of the few in the SEO space who get branding. Where did you learn about branding? What has helped you develop a strong brand? What can SEO firms do to build strong brands & strong credibility?

SEO consultants, in particular the small firms, the one-person shops.... I've rarely seen a group of people with more talent going to waste, because they don't get marketing, they don't understand sales, they can't write proposals, they spend so much time chasing bad leads. If I had a dollar for every consultant who has asked for advice on how to get someone to spend $500 on SEO...

If $500 is an issue, you either have no credibility (because you haven't created it) or they just don't have any money. Most of the time, the budget is there, but the credibility isn't.

The coaching program I did earlier this year, the *original* idea was just to teach consultants how to consult, and how to sell their services.

What can SEO firms do to build strong brands & strong credibility?

I don't really want to talk much about branding, that's not much different from branding toothpaste. How do you want to position yourself and your company? Just decide, just do it, then start making that part of every message.

Credibility comes from two-way communication. Most consultants get very little information from new leads, never try to understand the prospect's business, and then deliver a generic proposal. When I did SEO consulting, my initial proposal was for (a fee) to perform a comprehensive business assessment and deliver recommendations.

Most of the time, their design firm or in house resources could handle most of the SEO work. So my job in writing proposals was to identify some business issues, speak to how those might be addressed, but be honest about it and say that we can not prescribe a solution until we do a real diagnosis.

I've seen a lot of losing proposals, and there's sort of a common theme, the initial proposal is something like "we'll optimize 50 pages, get you 100 links, and deliver ranking reports every month." But nothing about how they came up with 50 and 100, or why any of it is relevant to the prospect's business.

What are the marks of a good proposal? Are there any templates, books, or proposal software products you recommend?

Roger Parker's [Streetwise Relationship Marketing on the Internet](#) is a great book about understanding the market, and building a good website. That's important. [Tom Sant's book on winning proposals](#) is right on the money, and if you do a lot of proposals, Sant's [ProposalMaster](#) software is worth every penny.

The biggest mistake people make (other than proposals titled "Proposal") is that they don't speak to the prospect's business needs. Start with a summary page outlining what you understand about the prospect's business picture and what they need, THEN talk about how you can solve the problem.

People want to be understood. Demonstrate that you understand the prospect's internal picture, and it's a whole lot easier to explain why your solution will help.

There are like allegedly 34,000 SEO firms. I just made that number up, but there are a lot. Yet when I think keyword research usually I think Dan Thies, WordTracker, and that's about it. What made you decide to specialize in keyword research? Do you still see the need for generic full service SEO firms, or are people better off specializing?

One of the things I offered folks who bought my book was email support. I kept getting emails from folks asking if they could hire me to do the keyword research, because let's face it, that's a hard job for someone who only has one website. So when I did the 3rd edition update, I added an offer to 300 of the emails, to do a keyword report for something like $125. I got 120 clickthroughs and sold something like 40 reports.

So I knew there was a demand for it, and started building the team up. What surprised me was how many SEO consultants wanted to outsource to us. That's turned out to be a better market than individual webmasters, actually.

But it's been a long strange trip, from an online marketing generalist doing email campaigns, copywriting, conversion improvement, search engine optimization, and lots of stuff.... to being the "keyword guy." Which is why it was important to me to get something else out on the market, and that's how the SitePoint project came about.

I needed to let folks know that I do know a lot more than keywords.

So in that regard do you believe becoming the keyword guru has hurt or helped your ability to market broader things?

It hasn't really hurt, I mean it got me into a regular speaking opportunity at [Search Engine Strategies](), and I'm finally doing a session in San Jose that isn't about keywords. Keyword strategy is really important, and folks have been really lax about it, so I feel good about bringing more discipline to the discipline.

The other thing it's let me do is position myself as a researcher, so that a lot of folks will call me first when Google starts dancing around or something. [My paper on Topic Sensitive PageRank]() is still being downloaded and read every day - I wouldn't have had as much exposure for that if I didn't have a bunch of people in SEO who were already listening to me about keywords.

People I consider real experts, you know, they call me when they get confused so we can talk through stuff. Mostly because there's a good chance that whatever they need to check on, I've probably tested it, or I have data I can use to ask/answer questions.

Since you are the keyword guru :) where do you start the keyword research process? Do you have to understand the target customer, business, or business

model to do keyword research? Does extensive keyword research experience help you get by without needing to know the businesses as well?

You have to try to understand the business, the target customer, the products/applications. The more our clients can help us with that, the more focused our research can be, but you can actually build very broad lists without much knowledge.

At some point, before you start mapping search terms to content and writing PPC ads, you have to apply some domain specific knowledge using relevance to help identify the best search terms.

What are the biggest keyword research errors people make?

KEI is the biggest mistake in the history of SEO. So paying attention to KEI numbers is the biggest mistake you can make in keyword research.

What is KEI?

The biggest mistake in the history of SEO. ☺

It's a formula that some folks use to try to evaluate the usefulness of search terms, but it's a really stupid formula and utterly useless. There is no magic number.

Most folks doing their own keyword research utterly overlook the customer's side. What problems does the product solve, what applications does it have, how do they use it, why do they choose it over an alternative?

How does keyword research for pay per click different from keyword research for SEO?

Not as much as you might think. Yahoo/Overture 's PPC product doesn't consider singular and plural words to be different, but that doesn't make a difference in doing keyword discovery work for PPC. Mostly, if you do good work on the SEO side, you have something useful for the PPC side. The converse is not true.

Keyword *strategy* is different, because PPC lets you do different matching strategies, run different creatives and landing pages against different matches, run different bids at different matches, etc. I know that some folks take their maximum bid, and reduce it based on the relevance assessment they did for SEO. So if they're willing to pay a dollar for the best traffic, they might only bid 50 cents for a term that's half as relevant.

I like to use a lot of testing and feedback loops, so your SEO informs your PPC and your PPC informs your SEO. By doing both and being smart with analytics, you can do both better.

Are there any keyword research tools or keyword discovery techniques which most people do not know about, or are not fully taking advantage of?

Wordtracker's "other" tools are often ignored, like compressed multisearch, comprehensive search, etc. KeyWordDiscovery.com has a cool tool in the paid version that will spider a page, pull out all the possible search terms, and then sort it by the search counts, so you get actual search terms instead of the gibberish you usually get from keyword density analyzers.

SEMPhonic.com has a tool called MarketScan Analyzer that will spider a bunch of sites and come up with a giant list (tens of thousands) of possible search terms, and show you ads running against them on Adwords. That's cool, the lists are too big and full of junk to be practical at this point, so we're building a tool that will use the Wordtracker API to find the "real" search terms.

AdGooroo is pretty cool if you have a high volume market. Hitwise's Keyword Intelligence is a nice keyword discovery tool, but like AdGooroo they have a data set that's too small and too consumer focused to be completely useful. The Hitwise Search Intelligence service is very costly, but for about $30K per year you can see search terms that are driving traffic to a specific website.

GoodKeywords is a nice brainstorming tool, a little Windows app that's free. How's that for a list? Most folks don't know any more than the free tools. A lot of people do SEO based on the Yahoo/Overture suggestion tool, which is nuts because it doesn't preserve plurals, or the word order on multi-word search terms.

We use all of these tools, but at the end of the day we prefer the popularity data from Wordtracker over any other source.

Are there default modifier terms that people should look at to include or exclude from their keyword campaigns? Do lists like these exist anywhere on the web?

We've tried, but mostly what you find is that the useful words will show up in keyword research, using tools like the Wordtracker compressed multisearch.

I can give you a list of good negative matches: free. That's the list.

I remember you saying something in the Search Engine Watch forums about being able to turn traffic off. I don't think most SEO's ever mention that they wanted less traffic?

Well, I think it's important to recognize that SEO has risk associated with it. Not just that you might get banned, which is pretty hard to do, but that you might get more traffic than you can handle and not be able to turn it off. People went broke after the Florida update, because Google traffic had driven them to hire more people, get bigger warehouses, carry more inventory, etc.

If you do really well with SEO on Google, because of their incredible dominance, you can end up putting your business in a very risky position, because it can all go away tomorrow. That's why I tell everyone in our SEO classes to at least do some PPC, so they can test ads, and get ready for the day when it goes away.

For [SEO Research Labs,](#) our keyword research business is growing very quickly, and we may have to turn the PPC campaigns off while we're hiring and training a new person. I need to protect my existing clients first, before I worry about bringing in new clients. If I put more effort into SEO, it would be on parts of the business that can absorb the growth without as much risk.

I hate it when the high-and-mighty crowd will tell someone who's just lost their Google rankings that they shouldn't have put all of their eggs in one basket, because it doesn't matter how well diversified your marketing strategy is, nothing can compare to the firehose of traffic that Google represents. When it shuts off, it can be devastating, so my advice to most folks is to be very careful with what they target.

If you were starting in the search field from scratch today where would you start, and would you build the same type of business you currently run? If starting a niche one, is it best to target a front end service like keyword research or are there other niches that seem appealing? Are there many opportunities people are missing out on?

If I had to start today, I'd be doing what I'm doing now, but that's me. Link building is a field with a handful of professionals and a boatload of spammers, certainly ripe for someone to make a play there, but like writing a book on SEO, you have to find a way to rise above the noise. PPC campaigns are another opportunity, and of course conversion improvement is going to be huge.

We're looking at several areas for expansion, including content development and promotion, email marketing, conversion improvement, sales training for SEM consultants, creating a 'broker' type model, and some innovative approaches to PPC strategy and services that I think will be very well received.

One of the biggest complaints of mid-sized firms is that they can't bridge the gap between one person doing it all, to having account managers etc. - it's a big investment, so we're looking for opportunity within that gap.

Recently you have developed SEO classes. Who are the classes targeted at? How are they formatted? Approximately what do they cost? What is the hardest part about teaching them? Have any developments with the classes surprised you so far?

The classes are done via a conference call, with a web-based presentation. I do a 60-90 minute presentation in each session, then we do Q&A. That's worked

very well, it helps people avoid travel expenses, and they get to spread it out over several weeks so the information is easier to digest and act on.

The cool thing about using PowerPoint for the presentation is that I can distribute the deck as a PDF file before the class, so folks don't have to get online. We can also record the lecture as narration, and give people that presentation file - when they want to listen to a topic again, they just fire it up, go right to that slide, and listen.

The hard part is talking for two hours... but the feedback we get from the sessions is fantastic, and it's worth it to get an updated presentation on each topic. I've done the Advanced SEO class 4 times this year, so we can give folks the latest and greatest information every time, and let the past students have access to it without forcing them to take the class again.

We've got a new program now, which is a hands-on workshop, so I'm leveraging the class format in new ways, to let us take a small group through the SEO & PPC process step by step, hold their hand, give them homework, etc. It's 10 weeks, so we're doing a class session every other week, and I have a Q&A call during the off weeks when they will be doing their assignments.

With a small group like that, we can actually get each participant into a different strategy for link building, content, PPC, etc. and still support them as they go through it.

Thanks for the interview Dan.

If you would like to learn more about Dan or his SEO training courses check out [SEO Research Labs](#).

Peter Da Vanzo

I have been a long time fan of Peter Da Vanzo. When I initially created a blog, I did not know much about blogging, writing, or the web, but I did know that Peter D's Search Engine Blog was great writing.

I sorta tried to emulate him and a few other people until I started learning enough and being confident enough to post using my own voice, which I am still learning how to do.

I wanted to interview him for his strong original voice, his understanding of blogging, and his great understanding of the web as a whole.

Interview

July 20, 2005

Obligatory interview suck up question... You are one of my favorite bloggers. Where did you learn to blog from & what blogs do you draw inspiration from or consider must reads (particularly outside of the search community)?

Thanks for the compliment, Aaron, and thanks for inviting me to do an interview.

I drew inspiration from Dave Winer, Dave Weinberger, Jorn Barger and Jeffrey Zeldman. I like how they wrote in a informal, conversational style which was a style of commentary that had become rare on the web at the time. Much of the writing, outside the forums and newsgroups, had become corporate, formal and impersonal - Brochurespeak. Journalism.

The bloggers brought back the off-the-cuff spirit of the early web, I think.

Outside search, I recommend reading Scripting News, Scobelizer, Gaping Void, The Long Tail. I scan hundreds per day using Bloglines, so it really is difficult to pick favourites. The best thing I can recommend doing is use an aggregator such as Bloglines, if you're not doing so already. It makes research easy.

How & when did you get into search?

I guess I started off by spamming Infoseek, rather successfully I might add, in 1996! <laughs>. I didn't know there was such a thing as search engine optimisation then, I just thought I'd discovered a clever little hack - until Infoseek put a stop to instant updates. I got into search more formally in 2001 when I started working for an agency as an SEO. Like most, I learned on the job.

I still have a bunch to learn, but when I knew absolutely nothing I knew that following links would help show me patterns / social relationships. As far as search goes, SearchEngineWatch is pretty much king of linkage data, but when I was first trying to figure out the web I noticed SearchEngineBlog had links from a wide variety of sites as well. What makes a blog or a site linkable?

Seth Godin, who I know you're also a fan of Aaron, said "in order to stand out, be remarkable".To those unfamiliar with the book *The Purple Cow*, what Seth means by remarkable is "be worth remarking upon". Be unique. Offer insights that others don't. Be relevant. Be different. Avoid repeating what others are doing, avoid stating the obvious, avoid the same-old-same-old. I guess what I was doing was unique enough and interesting enough to be remarked upon. Of course, it's a lot harder now as the space is saturated, however if you write just one compelling, unique article on search, it is almost certain you'll get a link from every search blog on the planet. Such articles are scarce, and bloggers like to be first to point to something unique.

My advice to people who want to build linkable sites is to study public relations and marketing theory. The main aim is to get people talking *about* you (Jakob Nielsen is a master at this). The linking then takes care of itself.

Are blogs, as a concept, over hyped?

Almost certainly.

I think we're seeing a lot of over-heated blog consultants blowing a lot of hot air, especially in the corporate space. If you enjoy writing, it can be a good thing to do, as that enjoyment is probably the only thing that will get you through over time. I do question whether many corporate legal and PR teams can deal with the challenges blogs present, and once a blog becomes PR-speak, it is dead. There's an attention economy, and people are immune to the same-old fluff.

One example of a corporate blog done well is Scobleizer. The success of that blog is due to the personality behind it, and that blog has done more for Microsoft PR than anything I can remember. Robert's straight talking pays off. A unique human perspective from deep within the machine.

Luckily, I've been free of corporate constraint and have made some fantastic contacts, got invited to some great events, and drank a lot of great beer. Works for me :) A blog is just a format. It's the level of writing and the degree of community involvement that will set them apart.

Recently I made a post about blogs becoming the noise they once tried to replace. You also recently made a post about RSS burnout. It seems to me many of the channels merely duplicate one another. You seem to post a bit less frequently than some of the other blogs, and not duplicate as much as some of us other search bloggers do.
How do you decide when to post about something and when not to? Do you assume your readers also read any other channels, or do you try to cover everything big / important on your site?

Heh. I probably post less frequently out of laziness! <laughs>

What you're saying is true - there is a lot of repetition, and there is a lot of noise. If there is some uniqueness in what I do, it's probably because I post what interests me personally. Hopefully others find it interesting, too. That's what I liked about the early blogs such as [Robot Wisdom](). You could rely on the author to point to interesting stuff that you may not have found otherwise. Like a few friends chatting in the pub and sharing stories.

In that respect, I'm not a journalist and don't pretend to be. The best blogs aren't journalism. My favorite blogs offer a unique voice that exposes the failings, the prejudices, the leanings of the author, and offer a unique perspective. Also, if you use [Bloglines](), or one of the other aggregators, you can view the search blogs as a collective. They all contribute an angle, and between them, you get a great daily overview of search developments. There's no requirement for any one blog to be completist. They couldn't possibly be.

I met you in person a while ago and thought "damn, this guy sounds just like his blog!" Is that accidental or intentional? How did you get the voice to match so well?

Thanks, I'm glad to hear it (and it was great to meet you too, Aaron).

It sounds like a contradiction, especially in light of the previous question, but I did consciously try to write in my own voice. I say "try" because I had to unlearn the academic and corporate modes of writing that I had been used to, and I found that a very difficult thing to do when I started. I'm getting a better at doing that now, hopefully. I want to write how I speak, and to be honest.

The individual voice is unique, nobody can replicate it, and that isn't talked about enough by blog commentators/consultants/gurus. Blogs are more about tone than they are about content.

You recently moved from New Zealand to London. I think part of that was business related, but do you think people will still be able to run successful SEO consultancies from far corners of the globe? Can you truly understand local markets from a distance?

I've lived in London before, and I love the city, so it was part business, part lifestyle. However, it is true that it is harder to do business at a distance. I find a lot more happens when you meet people face to face. The internet doesn't change that fact. Depending upon the type of work you're engaged in (affiliate, for example), I think you can operate in local markets from a distance, but I think you're at a disadvantage to the people who are on the ground. There are also a lot of cultural nuances that are hard to pick up unless you're engaged in that society day in, day out.

Also, the beer is a lot better over here.

There are about a million SEO firms on the market, and the industry generally has a fairly bad reputation. How does a firm stick out? What are the best ways to build credibility in an industry where it is sorely lacking?

I guess every profession has circling sharks. I'm not certain the SEM market has a universally bad reputation, but I do think there is an awful lot of self-generated paranoia. It can be easy to get caught up in insignificant concerns at the expense of seeing the big picture, and I think the best way to see the big picture is to read widely. Read outside the search community in order to gain perspective. Marketing, PR, business theory - they all form part of the SEO/SEM world. Weekly discussion threads about the sky falling in aren't particularly useful. Every client I've had couldn't care less about the mechanics and the politics. What they do care about are tangible results.

Do you think it is possible for the industry as a whole to change it's image, or do you think the bad image will remain part of the business indefinitely? What ideas or opportunities could help change the image of the search community?

Sure an image can be changed. I think the search engines could do a lot more to legitimize the search marketing industry. The two sides need to find the common ground, define the benefits, and push those collectively. I think that's starting to happen more, especially in the PPC world. There are representative organisations starting up, and hopefully they will go on to provide a more collective voice than has existed in the past.

SEO services are not necessarily transparent, and guarantees are usually limited. Some people offer bogus SEO packages for $49.
With good SEO services lead prices can be delivered at well below their value. With that ability to deliver value cheaply many people don't look at SEO from a broad enough perspective, completely undervaluing & under pricing their SEO services. One of the things I really suck at is explaining the value of SEO.
How do you get prospective clients to see / understand the value of quality SEO services?

Good question, Aaron.

I think you've hit the nail on the head by focusing on the value proposition. That's also something I try to do, and yes, it can be difficult for clients to get their heads around it.

I found I made the biggest advances when I stopped talking about rankings, optimisation, tags etc and started talking the language of the PR and Marketing worlds. As I was dealing with marketing execs, this gave a point of reference (i.e. cost per acquisition, cost per lead, branding etc) and it was easier to present the value proposition. Of course, people buy services for different reasons, so the most important thing you can do is to understand the customer and what they want. For example, I had a banking client. Their cost per acquisition for a financial product was $72 through direct marketing channels, which they thought was too high. Using search marketing, we got that down to a few dollars. The comparison was stunning, and that was a language the direct marketing people at the bank understood.

The same goes for any SEO. Speak in the language that your customer understands. Find a gap in the market and fill it.

$49 spent on a marketing campaign? What would they get if they spent $49 having their house painted?

Many people who contact me have no business model and want to rely on under priced SEO services to make up for near infinite business model weaknesses and a lack of foresight in business planning. What percent of leads do you get that you would say have value or are worth pursuing? How do you get more quality leads while discouraging the bad ones?

I evaluate the business model and if I don't think I can add value, I say so.

There really are some terrible models out there that aren't going to work no matter what SEM campaign you bolt on - like the old saying goes - you can put lipstick on a pig, but it's still a pig. I've done a few jobs like that, we probably all have, but I don't enjoy them so I avoid them these days. I've scaled down the client side of late and am focusing on my own projects.

It's hard to find good clients, but when you find them, you cherish them :) I think [Greg Boser](#) said recently (and I'm paraphrasing here) you've got to love what *they* do, and I think that's very true.

SEO/SEM, done right, can be a very involved strategic process.

Search is much more complex than it was when I started a couple years ago. Do you see SEO services as a standalone business model that anyone can get into, or do you see algorithm advancement generally wiping out the opportunity for people new to the field?

I think SEO will naturally become part of the marketing world. That's been happening for a while now. As far as the algo goes, there's always the SEO's who love the thrill of the chase, and there will always be opportunities, but yes, I think the barrier has been raised. It's not as easy as it used to be, but that doesn't stop anyone setting themselves up as an SEO, just like anyone can set themselves up as a web designer.

Those who succeed will have the business acumen necessary to sustain the idea.

If you started an SEO business from scratch right now what niche would you go after and how would you market it? Are there any market opportunities that are currently being ignored?

The UK and European markets are interesting because they're a little behind the US in terms of adoption, so there seems to be a lot of opportunity emerging. China is very interesting for obvious reasons. I think we'll see a rebirth of the search verticals and portals.

The web has always been well suited to the niche player. If I started as an SEO now, I'd specialise and target one particular industry. Perhaps mix consulting with traffic generation and on-selling by way of portals, etc. Generally speaking, there will always be opportunities for people who understand people and their needs. That's how business works.

What are your favorite web related books & what topics outside of search do you think would be good for search marketers to spend time exploring?

Well, [SEObook](#) is a great read, and certainly one I'd recommend :) I like just about everything by [Seth Godin](#). [Tested Advertising Methods](#) by John Caples is an old direct marketing book, but still essential.

Anyone who is considering blogging should read [The Cluetrain Manifesto](#). Those interested in Marketing should read [Philip Kotler](#). I think the most important thing is to read often and read widely.

I recently have been introduced to and like the words bullocks, ish, and pants. What are your favorite British words?

Pants is a good one, eh. I also like Battlecruiser. You may have to look that one up ;)

Were any of these questions pure pants? ☺

Nope. They've been very difficult to answer! Thanks once again for the opportunity.

Thanks for the interview Peter D. If you would like to check out more of Peter D's wisdom and writings you can do so at Search Engine Blog.com. Also be sure to look at his killer cool logo. If you see him at a conference or out on town please buy him a beer.

Jason Duke

J ason Duke is a long time pal who gives me far more free advice than I deserve.

He collects a ton of data related to the architecture of the web and studies search results to learn how search results might change to help him stay at least one step ahead of the engines.

I interviewed him for his love of data, understanding of marketing, and forward thinking ideas.

Interview

July 27, 2005

How & when did you get into search?

A user, no more and no less. I started via the old BBS's and one of them had an internet connection and worked as a gateway. I am starting to feel old now.

A long time ago you bought my ebook and gave me some tips, but I had no idea who you were at the time. Later you became rather well known. What made you decide to remain obscure for a while and then later become well known?

I made no conscious decision, but I was happy sitting where I was doing what I was. I guess my exposure increased when I started to comment on papers such as Hilltop etc

PageRank PageRank PageRank. Hyped more than enough because it is easy to talk about, but what other algorithms or ideas do you believe Google layers on over the top of PageRank?

OHHH I could go on for a while, but rather than say specifics such as Hilltop, Local Rank etc, I'd suggest thinking laterally.

A patent may be applied for and granted, a paper may be written, and all of these I believe are clues. I doubt (and no one, absolutely NO ONE) Except

the engineers in the specific engine know for sure what the exact algorithms are.

I believe these are clues to what an engine may either be doing now, has been doing or may do in the future. Alternatively, I believe these are clues to what an engine may either be doing now, has been doing, or may do in the future, or they may be put out there for FUD reasons or to pre empt a competitor laying claim to an idea. IE - Restrictive patent application to protect a position and way of working.

To answer the question, I'd come back to the old saying, of "Teach a man to fish.......". If you understand what is happening in search generally, as well as what has happened historically, ask yourself the simple question: What would YOU do to increase relevancy, make the user experience better, or decrease the problems search faces?

Once you have an idea of the way they may be working then you understand the potential problem. Once you understand the problem you have an opportunity of delivering a potential answer. Keep doing that till there are no more problems and suddenly you know what you have to do to rank whenever and however you want.

It may be expensive at times. It may be hard work, but you have answers and that's important!

I remember right around the time when search engines partnered with blog software vendors to do their nofollow idea you offered to help solve the blog spam problems. Why did you do that? Why do you think the search engines were not interested in obtaining any feedback? Has their resolution solved the problems? or does it have other goals?

Nofollow and the way it was implemented in such short time, working together between search companies. software companies and users was a momentous achievement. Just getting those guys around the table to discuss a problem and collectively try to solve a problem was great.

Unfortunately I believe the problem (link spam) was one that was an indirect consequence of the search company's themselves or rather their reliance on links as a measure for ranking. links = ranks

Links were a PITA to get nicely, so getting them legally but in a socially irresponsible manner was easy. The problem became so huge that people moaned and moaned and moaned, and the blog voice was starting to get some prominence, so the engines had to be seen to be doing something.

I did NOT believe that no follow was a viable longer term solution for one simple reason: it required site owner interaction, they HAD to update their software.

The reality is that the majority of blogs and other Content management systems are NOT updated. (and on that note - How many other CMS companies, that were not blog related did you see around the table that day. If a site allows user interaction it is a link spam target. But that's for another discussion:))

A harder core spammer will look for links that last. A moderated, well managed blog will not keep the links as the owner will delete or manage them personally. It is the old blogs that will be targeted and no follow is not going to be deployed there as the software will not be updated.

The reason I said, "speak to me, I have an answer that will work" is simple: I spam. I am a poacher. I am a link hunter. I hate doing it, but I do it anyway when and where it is needed, where the competition demands it, and where it works.

The answers we had were to deliver an opportunity to remove the social problems of link spam, while still delivering quality in the SERPs and to do it algorithmically, so that it did NOT require site owners and webmasters to change their site, their software or the way they worked it worked on old bogs as well as new blogs etc.

It wouldn't affect my business as the competition and I would still have the same challenges to overcome. The difference would be that link spam wouldn't solve any of those challenges, and the social damage would diminish to a trickle and in time would disappear.

How do you remove the social problem from link spamming?

You either do away with the social groups, get rid of bloggers is one answer, I don't suggest that happens :) or you undertake other methods.

No follow was an attempt but it failed. Even the wikipedia believed in it, then changed their minds, and that was a political sidestep to the question the answer I think you want to hear I am afraid that I can't say at the moment for legal reasons.

That's good legal BTW, not bad legal :)

Does blog spam still work? Does signing guestbooks still work? Does forum spamming still work? If so, how long until they stop?

It all works to some degree or other in certain engines, although it does depend on the vertical market you are trying to optimise for.

Until it stops. Ask the engines ?

Does it work better is shady markets or clean ones? What risks are associated with blog spamming and the like?

Risks are multiple: social risks - you will be annoying people, and you may get pages and sites and IPs and subnets banned or penalised in the engines. There are almost definitely more risks, but the only ones that concern me are the social ones. I don't like death threats at the best of times :)

What socially responsible link building techniques are being underutilized across the board?

Think laterally. Does code give you links? Not in my opinion.

People do.

People make the decision to place a link on their pages to yours. Understand people, understand what makes them tick. Then look to get links through forming relationships. If more people did that then my job would be harder. Thankfully they don't :) overall anyway!

Are there any sites, books, or things, you recommend people see or do to better understand social networks and learning how to make people want to link at you? Does looking at search results tell you anything or?

Search results can tell you how other people think. That is not to say you can't think differently and win in the SERPs game and just for the record, when I said social networks I wasn't specifically speaking about sites such as Orkut, 360 etc.

I meant in the good old fashioned sense of REAL life people. Ones you meet on the street, chat to on the phone and maybe even send letters to :)

2 books I recommend: 1 is a sales book and 1 is a book about understanding people.

- *Selling to Win* by Richard Denny
- *Frogs into Princes* by Richard Butler and John Grinder

They are totally different , but equally important. Not only for helping to get links, but for the other part of running a successful online business converting a prospect into a customer.

Because without a sale, a good SERP ranking is nothing but a financial drain. All that traffic and no monetisation means cost.

So you think the real opportunity exists with those individuals who can understand people and bridge the divide between the web and the real world?

Simple answer is YES!

I heard you collect a ton of data?

I've heard similar but I am pretty sure there are search companies that collect more than me - Google and Yahoo for example :)

How do you view collecting data?

It is as important to me as a chisel is to a carpenter. I can't operate effectively without it. I can work without it, but I can't work efficiently. The more efficiently I work, the greater the results I get from every ounce of work that is put in.

What is important to collect?

Let's take a step back. Remember I said above about what the engines may do: look for the problems. It's the problems that are important, as without knowing the problem you'll never find an answer.

Well the data that the engines have that helps them deliver their solution delivers you a challenge. A problem, that problem is how do we overcome the NEW problem? That is in our way the data that is required is the right amount, and type of data to help you overcome that problem at that specific time.

In time you will find that new problems come up, and that to help find the answer you need to refer to data you already have, and slowly but surely you will need less NEW data than previously. When I say new I don't mean fresh. Freshness matters. I mean a new style or type of data.

Can you collect too much data?

Nope! :)

How long does it take you to figure out what they did when search algorithms change? If you are unsure of the change that was made what people do you listen to, trust, and chat with?

Here is a little *not so secret* secret. I try and preempt and understand what the engines may do in the future based on the ongoing research and analysis that we discussed about above.

Every time I do this I see new problems and each time I see a new problem I try to come up with an answer. Some of them are easy, some are nigh on impossible, but in time answers come.

Now when the engines make a change I do not know about it any quicker than anyone else (Search engine engineers excluded). I see the SERPS change the same as anyone else. Then I go through all that work I did and hope the answer is in there. Overall it has been there more often than not.

As to who I talk to: anyone and everyone. I would rather have 1 million different POV than 2, as 2 has a 1 in 2 chance of being right, easier to analyse for sure, but it's still only 2 hypothesis, whereas with 1 million hypothesis there is a much greater chance of the needle being in that haystack somewhere. If it's there I'll find it hopefully.

The forward thinking stuff you were talking about... does the average webmaster need to be exceptionally concerned with that? Or is that more for those in hyper competitive markets or those who primarily rely on selling search services?

If they want to work and dominate in the vertical market they operate in then Yes they should IMO. Running a business online is about RUNNING A BUSINESS. You'd want to know what is happening in your industry offline why is online any different ?

As to hyper competitive marketplaces, it's the same answer. It is simply that there may be more (sometimes less actually) to concern yourself with as to whether they have to. Ultimately that's a decision for the business owner.

It seems content remixing (mixed RSS spam, AdSense scrapers, etc) is becoming far more common and will be a huge problem unless search can make it less financially viable. Does & will it undermine search relevancy? How will they get around it?

Working on your example of scraped (and legitimate) feed re use then the engines already have the answer and have started to increase their knob to deploy it. it's a duplicate content problem. DaveN recently spoke about some of the consequences of this on his blog for example, as to whether it does undermine relevancy then my answer is a resounding YES.

How it gets remedied is a 2 fold question: How do the spammers (me included) remedy it, and how should the engines remedy it.

The engines need to develop (and we all know they already are) a better understanding of lingual complexities: sentence meanings and paragraph meanings rather than simply word association.

We can all put fancy names to it. C indexes LSI etc etc, but ultimately it is to build an artificial intelligence that understands the meaning of a set of words, paragraphs, pages and sites. The engines are moving closer to that nirvana.

As to the spammer, and how he defeats the problem of the engines understanding the meaning well we need to expand the problem a little further. Engines like the content to mean something for the terms but they want it to be unique to you. While the engines are unable to fully understand the true underlying lingual nuances of every language out there (let's not forget that the engines, engineers etc are generally based and operate in english speaking countries and generate most of their revenue from English speaking searchers) then you need to think what they can understand.

Once you've got that sorted you need to think how you may be "knocked down a peg or 2" in an overall score. Duplicate content comes to the fore here. So the answer to the problem is make your content non duplicated make it unique, UNIQIFY IT :)

Do you believe search companies have any moral obligation to help foster an atmosphere where people want to create quality information and it is easy to make information useful?

Moral obligation to the searchers definitely, but they also have an over riding moral obligation to their shareholders.

I believe that the shareholders will win out time and time again. If we accept capitalism (and I do) then the shareholder obligation will always win.

Is Google in error for allowing AdSense to fund so much information pollution?

I stand by my previous answer my lord.

Do they intentionally have low standards because they can sort out AdSense spam sites better than other algorithms do?

I can well believe it, and it would make sound commercial sense if they deployed that information, ensuring you have a market edge over your competition is not an issue for search but for business, as is ensuring revenues and income increase so that the shareholders continue to support the organisation as a whole.

Speaking of business, do you still take on clients? If so, how do you target them and what makes a client appealing as a prospect?

I don't (and haven't for some time) taken on clients in the traditional sense of SEO consultancy. We are in the fortunate position that we changed our business model to incorporate a share in the financial worth of work that we do. It's seen our revenue and profits climb quite well.

We don't go out looking for clients, but do investigate potential partners. We look at their business model, we look at the marketplace, both on and offline, we look at the margins, and maybe, just maybe if we like the look of those numbers and the work involved we partner with them to our mutual success.

When considering a business to partner with, how do you know if it is better to approach a business to partner with or use affiliate programs? Where do you grab your research data to tell you if the business models are decent on / off the web?

I get out a lot of old fashioned tools. Pen and paper, a calculator and a large spreadsheet.

How do you convert that demand into traffic? What keyword tools and ideas do you find especially useful?

I do the numbers :)

Where do you grab your research data to tell you if the business models are decent on / off the web?

I have a fair amount of data here that covers a large set of vertical markets. It helps me decide whether volume is there, user demographic behaviour and other business related information. Like I said before. It's just like a chisel to a carpenter, it doesn't do the work for me. It helps me do the work.

It's the same for keywords etc. I have similar (and sometimes the same) data as everyone else has available to them. I look at the marketplaces, do the hard hours in analysing it and make a decision. Admitidly my DB may be a little larger (OK, a few TB larger) than most, but it is still only a tool.

Can other webmasters wipe you out of search results? If so how common is it and in what fields does it occur?

Yup, you better believe it. I lose rankings regularly. It is as common as muck, but as part of that pro active work I spoke about before generally I don't lose enough to concern me or our clients.

We may lose position 7 then in the next update 7 will change and I lose position 3 to another site. Quite often I lose positions to myself.

Is it something the average webmaster should be concerned with? What can webmasters do to minimize the risks associated with others hijacking their sites?

In my opinion don't worry. Positions and SERPs change. Move on, get over it, get a new position. There are 10 on page 1, don't stop till you have them all.

Average new webmasters... DaveN stated something about hands in too many pies something gets overcooked. Should new webmasters go for all 10 ... or try to land 1 or 2 good ones?

I agree with Dave. Don't undertake more work than you can handle, but if you can honestly manage it then that's a different thing entirely.....

So if you still want to have as much real estate as possible and want to minimize the risks associated the obvious answer is to have others rank FOR you. How do you do that?

I agree, SEO is about ranking your page, but running a business online is maximising the routes of income. I specialise in SEO, but more importantly I run a business.

If I can't own the page and have every position from 1 - 100 then let's make sure I do my best to ensure that the positions that are there deliver some value (financial or otherwise) to me. Affiliate marketing helps.

If you have to compete with 9 other slots per page wouldn't it be better to have some (all?) of the other slots promoting you, your widget, your service and you at least earn a penny than nothing at all?

That nicely comes onto my controversial thinking about the so called 302 and other hijack issue you asked about before. I think the question was what can webmasters do to minimize the risks associated with others hijacking their sites? Firstly, I want to clarify something: the engines' do what they do how they do it, and me moaning and bitching about it isn't going to change it.

I like driving at 120mph along the M6 toll road (Nice fast clean road here in the UK), but if I get caught I know the police won't agree with my POV. The law says that I should not exceed 70mph. The laws in search are the algos the engines place. They may not be right, they are often far from perfect, but it's the stuff we have to work with.

If the algo says that a page, with a different domain to me deserves to rank higher than me then so be it. If that page redirects via a 302 meta refresh etc, then so be it. Personally I am over the moon normally, as these are NOT hijacks, these are bad algos. The reality is I still get the damn traffic so I am happy :)

The real problem occurs when and if (and there are NOT that many people actually doing this imo) the page cloaks a redirect to me when a spider comes along but serves their own content when a human comes along.

My belief is simple. Deal with it, like you would deal with any other page out there that outranks you.

Are search engines using user feedback to bias search results? How quickly do you see search engines using user feedback in the search results?

I think the greater question is are they using people, and the answer is yes. Many engines are EXTREMELY cash rich at the moment, and people are quite often cheaper than code. If it is in the engines interests to utilise outside contractors to help define relevancy, or if they decide to utilise spam reports etc, then it is simply one more challenge to overcome for those (me included) that want to rank.

If I was an engine I'd welcome the feedback! I am not saying I would trust it implicitly but I would definitely welcome it.

How do you see vertical / personal / mobile search changing the search landscape?

As to the speed of using it: I can say with utmost certainty it is happening now. Do you remember we spoke about understanding people before in the context of link building and sales conversion? Well let's flip the coin for a moment, and place ourselves in the position of the engine. If we lived in utopia then I would like to go to one engine and one engine only. I'd like to search there and know that whatever I search for it knows what context I mean it, and delivers relevant results back to me immediately.

Let's take the word cat for a moment, do I mean:

- the Unix command
- am I interested in felines?
- Or is it a synonym for explerlative and I mean something completely different?

All the results, whether they be technical, feline or porn are correct in the general terms, but they are not what I mean.

At the moment the engines will make a decision and show me results they generally feel are relevant, but I did have a choice? I could have gone to a vertically focused engine for the specific contextual meaning I was thinking when I typed cat, but that is a bodge, it is not a true answer.

While the major engines develop, test and deploy this greater understanding of what I PERSONALLY want I feel there is a marketplace for vertical, personal and niche engines, but once they move up a gear do I really want to go to one site to find information on one thing and change every time I want to undertake a different style of search ? No way!!!!

As search algorithms get more linguistically advanced (as you mentioned earlier) will page content become more important? What is the best way to structure a page and a site to do well in linguistically intelligent algorithms?

You know what, my answer is actually simple and please don't be shocked with it. Build content for people not engines, it's the same old thing that has been preached for millennia. Write (or get written, or acquire) unique content then optimise it according to basic and more advanced on page criteria you know what Aaron. People should read your book.

It has the perfect examples of methods of on page optimisation you can find and should always be incorporated into any SEO or other online marketing campaign.

The downsides are that unique content = time = money. There are some answers that aren't so clean. If you don't have the ability to get truly unique content, either by outsourcing or writing it yourself there is LOADS of content out there to be bought, any even more that is free. The downsides are the dupe content problem. Whether it be an Amazon feed or the entire Gutenberg project you can get volumous amounts at no charge and it is all duplicate content.

But if you have rights to the content or the content is free contractually for you to do with as you want then there are software tools ... the so called "Button Pushing".... that helps turn that dupe content into a unique position.

I run one that is free while we test it publicly (If Google can do Beta testing so can I!) at www.widgetbaiting.com. It has a few algorithms in there but ultimately it is a simple process. Dupe content in one end -> non dupe content out of the other. It works with feeds too at widgetbaiting.com/cgi-bin2/index.pl, but consider that Alpha quality.

On top of that think about good old fashioned white hat in general: can the engines find you? Is your site accessible to a spider? www.widgetsitemap.com is another freebie from us while we test it out that works with all the major engines out there, letting them know in a legitimate fashion as your site updates. It's an XML builder for Google, Yahoo and a thousand other engines too, all you have to do is build content that's it in plain simple aspects. Build content, the rest is get links. SEO 101 lesson over :)

SEO 909 is for us all individually to work out through understanding and undertaking the pro active work I spoke about before. Do the pro active work then be reactive, having the answers in front of you when an algo chance occurs.

With your widget sitemap do search engines look for footprints for things like that? Would you recommend using any automated product that could leave footprints or?

Only the engines know for sure, but there is no footprint other than having a feed on your server. That lists URLs on your site. It's to their specs, and is promoted by the engines. We build the Google defined XML for their new sitemap product in testing for Google, and RSS for other engines, and then it pings them: ie -lets them know it is live and has been updated.

Thanks for the interview Jason.

If you would like to learn more about Jason he is a frequent poster at ThreadWatch, has wrote multiple articles about Hilltop & LocalRank, and is the director of Strange Logic, one of the few internet marketing firms I recommend persuing a business relationship with.

Jim Boykin

J im Boykin is the founder of <u>WeBuildPages</u>, a well known and respected internet marketing and search engine optimization firm.

When I first got online and was trying to build links I kept running into his site over and over again. I quickly realized that Jim must be doing something right since he was everywhere and ranked well for a bunch of killer terms.

Jim is one of the few businesses I refer SEO leads to, so I wanted to ask him many questions about running and scaling an SEO company.

Interview

July 31, 2005

How & when did you get into search?

I got into search about 2 weeks after I'd been online, I'd just published <u>WeBuildPages.com</u> and someone in Atlanta GA (I'm NY) called and asked me to design a website. I asked how she found me and she said she searched <u>AltaVista</u> for "build web pages" and by luck, I was somewhere there. From that day on, I was all about search engines and trying to figure out how to rank at the top in them.

That was back in early 99.

Many of my friends have stated that they thought as SEO companies scaled out the service quality drops off sharply. What did you do to ensure that did not happen with We Build Pages? Do you fear growing beyond a certain size?

I hear ya! That's a great question. There are advantages in growing big, and advantages to keeping a small team. For the past 2 years we've had about 15 in house employees.

I like knowing my clients and knowing my employees, and knowing what my employees know. Our current team now has good experience and it took years to build that knowledge....last thing I'd ever want is some "so so

knowledgeable" person handling sales or projects, so getting 100 employees I can't see happing.

I already spend a lot of my time chatting with employees and training interns, and can't see hiring 100 employees and running around trying to train and manage all of them. Having 100 employees and thousands of clients would put me in asylum.

If we can't handle more business, then we tend to refer it out. We're also changing our biggest task of "link building" to selling reports on "what you need to do" for link building instead of taking on too many clients. Being small offers the biggest advantage in that we can adapt to change fast.

What tips do you have for recruiting, hiring, and training good workers? How do you know who is right for what SEO job?

ah..another great question.... I'll start by saying that I'm not an expert on hiring....some have worked, and some haven't, and there doesn't always seem to be a rhyme or reason. I've hired some with lots of experience who didn't work out, and I've hired some who knew very little about computers, but turned out to be great employees.

Some of my best employees started at very low wages when we were new, and over time have proved themselves and thier work. One of the biggest things I seek in employees is a willingness to learn, willingness to work, and dedication.

Training is another thing. I used to have people read for a week first, they'd have to read such works as: [Search Engine Fast Start](#) by Dan Thies, [Google Secrets](#) by Dan Sisson, [SEO Book](#) by Aaron Wall, and [Linking Matters](#) by Ken McGaffin.

Most people hired now are for specific roles so we don't make them experts on everything...just in their piece of the puzzle. Any one hired get's trained by the experienced person in that area, and I check in with them often too. I often explain to them how their piece fits in with what we're doing as a whole, and to see how they're doing and just to talk. Several hours of my day are spent bouncing around to everyone on our team helping and training and guiding.

Online who taught you the most about how to or how not to run an online business?

Here's some books that I can see their influences in how I try to manage and lead We Build Pages.

Lee Iacocca ([his biography](#)) taught me that you can "feel" what is wanted, and market the heck out of it. Also that you can take a lickin' and keep on ticken', and come out better than you ever were

Jack ([Jack Welch's bio](#)) taught me that you can streamline processes by making people better, and that if someone's got to go, let them go (I used to wait too long to let people go). I know a lot quicker now if someone "has what it takes". We've created a tight good team now, but it took a few years to find the team we have now. Firing is never fun, but neither is keeping someone employed who's just sucking your income.

Trump ([The Art of the Deal](#)) taught me that if you work and network with the right people you can accomplish bigger things. Also nice that after that book he almost went under, but rose to become one of the most respected business men of all time.

[Ben and Jerry's the Inside Scoop](#), taught me that there's a market for being different and saying it's the best. Also I like that they were hippies who tried some crazy thinking outside the box and turned their Vermont restaurant into a world wide top of the line product.

I also get good advice from my father who was a manager, and coach for several years.

My main role is the "entrepreneur" here. I tend to be the one who thinks up new ideas and ways to do things. I'm pretty laid back as far as managers go....I've never yelled, and we're pretty casual...but I can fire like The Donald.

I notice you did not mention your schooling much there. Earlier you mentioned hunger being a good way to find workers. Does a college education help much, or is drive far more important?

I left school 15 years ago with 1 semester left for my BS in marketing, and am glad that my wife has stopped asking me to go back in get that piece of paper!

Since most of the work here isn't taught in any school or college, and education doesn't mean much to me. If they can do the work that's all that matters. Some high school drop out who wants to be the next [Danny Sullivan](#) would get hired faster than someone with a fancy degree.

Many of the best SEOs have decided to split away from client work to work on their own sites. Do you like client work more than affiliate work? How do they compare?

Right now a little over half the sites we work on are our own affiliate type websites, but most work goes into clients (they come first). I've thought about leaving the clients but money and commitment to them keeps me taking on clients.

I hope one day to be rich from our own affiliate projects, but that hasn't happed yet. And some clients I just can't see leaving. They've helped me and my business for years, so I'll continue to help them always.

What makes a good SEO client?

Good SEO clients for me tend to have either lots of knowledge and experience in this business, and understand what it is that we're doing. Or they put full faith in what we're doing.

I've turned to sending out client newsletter almost weekly to keep everyone tuned into what we're working on, and this helps keep our clients up to date.

Over the years you have seen algorithms (and search engines) come and go. What advice do you have for SEO companies to minimize the effects of large algorithm swings?

Think Natural....I've been on the ups and downs before, and the things that stick are the "real sites" that are Resources.

You have to turn your site into a resource and get Real Links from within your neighborhood. It's the hardest work in the world, but it's what the engines want, it's what ranks high and it's what'll stick tomorrow.

Every day I say a few times over the phone "It's Links Over Time - not tons of links at once", and "It's not the number of backlinks, it the position in the Neighborhood that matters." You've got to get links from the right places. Look at what the top sites have going for them...they look like resources...think like [Google Touchgraph](#).

I do miss the easy days of making a new site, buying thousands of links at once, and being on top after a google dance....ah those were the days...but they're gone and engines are getting smarter at finding what is a "resource", and so making good resource sies is what needs to be done today.

When I first started building links I noticed WeBuildPages was everywhere. How did you get your site out there so well? What link building techniques do you feel are under utilized?

Back then I think I was buying every link I could...I was a sheer PageRank addict (I'm off the PR now though). Funny, the most under utilized and best technique is to actually contact real sites with real offers for advertising space (links).

People are so stuck on ways to get links fast...press a button and whammo, 1000 backlinks...why not find that site that's in the top 10 for your phrase and isn't selling anything (a real resource).

Contact them and offer them $ for your ad. These people don't respond to link trade crap, and probably won't link to you unless you give them something. We often find great resource sites which are happy to give a tiny ad

for little $. Stop sending them your crappy link request, contact real sites and pay for your ad.

I mean related sites....people aren't contacting the real resources for links, we are.

Links and communities: how do you define a good link? How do you place your site in a good community?

Find who's linking to your competitors, and get links from them. We use one of our own tools to find them...think there's other tools on the market which do something like this, but ours looks at all the top sites and find where their backlinks are coming from and any site who is linking to 2 or more of the top sites are located in the community.

We also have an authority finder, similar to your [hub finder tool](#) which we use to find possible industry authority sites. This is the community and where you want links from. This is kinda old "forgotten" knowledge (replaced with push button link programs), but still work great.

We also analyze "who you link to" and try to optimize sites for linking to certain industry authorities and resources. The mix for a neighborhood is partly, who links to you, who links to those who link to you, what are the similar backlinks of those in the top to ([Google's "Similar Pages"](#)) and who you link out to.

I believe getting 100 links from outside the community are not worth as much as 10 links from within your community, so if you're seeking links, where do you want to put your efforts?

You created many SEO tools. How do you decide when to use one internally or open it up for public access?

If I think I'd get in trouble with an engine, or if I like the competitive advantage I keep them private. I totally enjoy giving away free SEO Tools, gets us some great natural backlinks from relevant places.

The best way to get links is not to have to ask for them.

One of the things that really has helped my sales is the lack of alternatives...just telling people here, buy the book. You guys have a much wider service variety than most search marketing firms. How do you target personality types and organize that much information? Do you feel your breath of offering hurts or helps your conversion rates?

After the Google Florida Update I thought we should offer a wide variety of services so we didn't have to depend on Google's mood for our future business plan.

That didn't work as most people whom contacted us just want SEO or Links, so after 6 months we went back to giving people what they seemed to want (SEO and links) so we started just focusing on just these tasks.

Now, 1 1/2 years later we're about to release a new site with a much wider variety of services. Check out our homepage in a few weeks and to see how our "targeting personality types" works with the new site and new services.

About every 6 months our site goes through major changes, which I think of as "beatle albums". This time we'll be offering more services to more types of people. I think we can give more people something to help them, even if it's reports and advice, where in the past we might have passed on those leads. Things like website design, PPC, and shopping feeds we offer on the site, but when we're contacted, we refer them out. We stick with SEO and link building (and few new services coming out in a few weeks).

I can't help but publish a page for a services and see if people want it. We wouldn't be in business today if we didn't try new things and see what people will buy for services. To be in business tomorrow you've got to always be trying new things. I know not all will stick, but am happy to see what does.

For the longest time I thought this in my head:
search = Google
links = WeBuildPages
rumor has it you may be creating content as well now?

Ok...yea, that's one of the new services. We had about 5,000 pages we needed written so we went through close to 100 writers. I was amazed at the quality of the work (all were USA citizens).

We have narrowed the writers down to about 25 of the best ones, and they're hungry to write content, so we're about to release that service. I think we can do it better and cheaper than any other company in the US I've seen selling content. Let's see if that service sticks. I hope it does!

What are your thoughts on cash flow and the SEO business model?

Have more coming in than goes out.

Thanks for the interview Jim.

If you would like to learn more about Jim or his SEO services check out [We Build Pages](#) today.

Nick Wilson

N ick Wilson is the owner / operator of the Threadwatch community. In less than a year he built it up from nothing to being one of the top dozen search industry news sites. Most of my questions revolve around how he did that, and building communities.

Interview

August 3, 2005

How & when did you get into search?

When i first realized my website wasn't showing for the terms i wanted it to. I cloaked it by USER_AGENT and went and dropped the url at WmW for opinions on the technique. Got edited, got some good advice, started reading, and haven't stopped yet.

For a long time you primarily relied on many spam techniques, and then later switched to running ThreadWatch (which is perhaps the cleanest search related site I have seen). Running rather clean or rather shady sites: which is harder, which is more profitable, and which gives you more satisfaction?

Clean sites are harder, dirty sites have been more profitable (so far), but clean sites are more satisfying. Currently i've been thinking hard on how to use some of those shady techniques to create genuinely useful sites for users, that'd be kind of fun, and perhaps the best of both worlds.

Many people who run sites like Threadwatch later create networks of various high margin channels that are marketed off the power of the main channel. Do you intend to create other websites / channels? If so will they be related to Threadwatch, and when will you know you are ready to create other channels?

Actually, i'm working on a spin-off site right now. The trouble is, i can't just create a VoIP channel, or similar - i have to be genuinely interested in the subject to put the amount of work necessary to be successful into it. I'm certainly ready to build other sites, but so far have found just one, possibly two subjects that interest me enough, AND will provide better ROI than the very general Threadwatch site.

As time has passed you have tried a few innovative advertising ideas on Threadwatch, however since you give so much away free and have many members who are unaffected by advertising (other than generally hating it) what have you found to be the most effective ways to profit from Threadwatch? Do you believe Threadwatch will be fully self funding, or do you think it helps you build social currency that you can profit from in other ways?

Much of the lack of success with ads at Threadwatch has come of me just not having enough time to go out there and get advertisers. The current system (http://www.threadwatch.org/about/advertising) is fantastic, and good value for advertisers, but it still needs pitching you know? I do believe Threadwatch will become profitable, i just doubt that will be this year, and yes, at this moment, I'm getting a lot of value out of the network of TW members. There are so many different skillsets at TW, the membership is grade A as far as that's concerned and i now know exactly who to talk to for almost any web-related task.

When you started Threadwatch I believe part of the initial quick rise was also due to tapping some of the resentment of WebmasterWorld. Do you think that helped draw over some of the core members? What did you do to help speed up the adoption and growth rate of ThreadWatch?

Not really, I think those members were already out of WmW, but they certainly wanted to vent a few frustrations with the place, and i did facilitate that somewhat. Threadwatch actually owes a great deal more to Doug Heil, if he wasn't such an insufferable tit, it wouldn't have been half as much fun in the beginning!

As far as growth rate, I did lots of stuff.
For example, when quoting someone from a forum thread, i'd pm that person, and give them the link. I commented on many blogs outside of the Search scope, used trackback to my advantage and generally posted in a style that no one else was doing at the time.

With Threadwatch I believe you have been more concerned with signal to noise than growth rate. Was thought given to the social construction of the software and layout to promote a high signal to noise ratio? What all have you done to filter noise and promote good conversations? How did you get the best parts of forums while limiting the worst parts?

Ruthless moderation. If it's shit, i nuke it.

Sometimes I find a scoop and you link over to my site. I get no comments, and then I go over to Threadwatch and learn about 10 interesting things related to the story over in your comments. How did you get those types of quality participants to Threadwatch and how do you keep them?

Luck. I think TW came at the right time, i think folks were bored with the "corporate suck up sites" afraid to say a word against Google and other corporations - TW isn't afraid of anything, except heights and daddy long legs of course, they do my head right in.

I don't think I have really seen you advertise anywhere, yet your site is probably already one of the top dozen most authoritative search sites. What sets your site apart to where it was able to gain that sort of authority so quickly?

As i said above, I think a large part is attitude - nobody else does what we do the way we do it, people seem to like that. But it's also about timely news, and not just Search news, we talk about things that are of more general interest to the Search community also. It all goes to make it a fun place to hang out i think.

Sometimes you and I have both been known to post some threads that had the main goal of being link bait. Even though some of them are noisy they are also highly entertaining. How do you know when the potential gain of a post outweighs any negatives surrounding it?

Instinct. It sounds daft, but i spend most of my day on TW, talking to TW members, i have a reasonably good grip on what I can and can't get away with because of that relationship. There are very few members that i've not spoken too personally, and a large number i speak to often. They're a cool bunch of people, and they're not afraid to tell me I'm being a twat when they think i am - to me, that's gold.

I was looking through some of your backlinks and saw linkage data from Slate, The Guardian, Slashdot, and many other high profile sites. What is the secret to be newsworthy or linkworthy? How are you able to curse more than I do and yet get so many more official type links than I do?

Firstly, I talked to a lot of these people, I commented on their blogs, spoke in email, and never once asked for a link. But it put me on the Guardian's radar for example. Slate probably picked up on us from the Guardian, and i've slashdotted TW myself twice heh! We've also had homepage links from Alexa, which was cool.

How do you keep your personality in a group driven site?

I post more than everyone else.

Group incentive: how do you create an environment where others will want to find and share tools, news, and information?

By providing tools, news and information. I love to post, many people do, i got up to around 5000 posts on WmW till Tabke started taking the piss, and quite a few hundred on SEW till one of their moderators made it impossible for me to continue participating. People like to post stuff, i just started it, the best posts don't really come from me, they come from the members. Grnidone had a great one on Copywriting recently for example, i'd never have thought to post something like that, but it was a cracking discussion.

Blogging and burnout: how do you continue to work so hard on Threadwatch without getting burned out? Do you take breaks?

I do now take most of the weekend off. I didn't in the beginning, as I wanted TW to never be more than a few hours without a fresh post, but now we've built a little momentum i like to hang out and do stuff with Robyn, play with the dogs, cat, chickens etc and generally take it easy. During the week though, my RSS reader is always running on a desktop. Like i said, i like to post.

Why are dogs better pets than cats?

Because dogs are totally devoted - and you can fight with them :) I do have a cat now though, and i love cats also. My ambition is to have a whole bunch more animals by this time next year. We're considering goats, maybe a third dog and ducks, sheep and pigs heh..

What tools have helped you be the first to get scoops? How do you find much of the news first?

Liferea RSS reader for Linux, the "suggest" link on the site and reading a HELL of a lot of blogs - and trying to find new ones all the time.

What tools have you moved away from since you first started Threadwatch?

Forums.

If you had to start Threadwatch from scratch is there anything you would do differently?

No, there's always room for improvement, but the whole thing has been a cool learning experience. Thanks in large part to member feedback i've learnt more about community, more about discussion and networking on TW than i could have ever learnt just by reading about it. Not to mention a shit load about SEO :)

--- If you would like to learn more about Nick check out Threadwatch.

Interview

9

Lots0

L ots0 is a well respected veteran in the SEO space. When I first got started in the SEO field Lots0 had a way of being blunt and dismissing many theories that made him one of the voices that was really worth listening to.

Interview

August 5, 2005

How & when did you get into search?

Back in 1995-6, I started my first website. It did not take me long to figure out I was getting most all of my traffic from the search engines, as soon as I figured that out my life as a SEO was on its way.

Did you ever do much client work? Do you still? If you did and moved away from it what made you shift away from it?

In the spring of 1998 I started working with my first paying SEO client. By 2000 I was overwhelmed with clients and by 2003 I had dropped most all of my clients.

I guess you could say that; I came, I saw and then I left...

The simple reason I dropped most of my clients; I did not need them. I found I could make more money (with less problems) without clients.

I believe when I spoke to you in the past you told me you competed in some of the more expensive and competitive markets. Sorta a broad question here, but how do SEO techniques differ in competitive and non competitive marketplaces?

I used to go for the high ticket items (kind of an ego thing), but lately I just go for the easy buck, there are so many of them just laying around, it seems a shame not to pick them up as I go along. But don't get me wrong, I still like a challenge once in a while.

To me the only difference between competitive and non-competitive is the amount of work I have to put in to get a page to rank.

How do you know if a site has been hijacked or whether ranking fluctuations were due to algorithm changes? How common is hijacking in competitive markets and less competitive markets? Is there any way to minimize the risks associated with other webmasters hurting your site?

Well it looks like we are done with the easy questions. ;-)

How to tell if a site has been hijacked: I assume that you mean the 302 redirect hijack that can be used only in google to steal Pagerank and position in the SERP.

The 302 Hijack is difficult to spot, it is kind of like a cricket at dusk, you can hear it, you know its there, but you just can't see it.

Usually, if it is an algo tweak it will effect more than just one site, you can usually go to one of the SEO forums and find an update thread where a bunch of folks are all moaning about there loss. If you are among several hundred other site owners that have been demoted it is a good bet it was an algo tweak and not a 302 hijack.

If however, your google traffic comes to a crashing halt (usually within 36 hours) but your rank checking software is showing that you still have your positions, you might want to take a closer look.

Protection from the 302 hijack - There may be some, but I don't know of any.

What helps a site rank well in local markets? Do you need to host locally to compete in competitive marketplaces?

A local IP (site hosted locally) does seem to help, but it is not the end all for local ranking.

If you want to rank locally, on-page is currently where it is at, address and complete international phone numbers on page are a must.

Disinformation and search engine representatives: do search engineers tell the truth? Do they aim to mislead? What helps you determine the motive behind their postings and what they mean?

Do search engineers tell the truth.. Well I think most people are as honest as they can be, including search folk.

I do know that some search folk look at the search results like a proud and concerned parent and are understandably protective of their "baby". Would you misdirect or obscure to protect your "baby"?

Does the Google Sandbox exist? Could you describe what change or phenomenon occurred with the Google algorithms to make people market the existence of that idea?

No Sandbox, No Sandbox, No Sandbox!

According to Dale Gribble(King of the Hill) a sand box is only 10% sand, the rest is a mishmash of vomit, feces, blood and urine.. and in this case a bunch of BS.

Now having said that, I have to say that there are a few people out there who's opinion I highly respect and who strongly believe that there is some sort of a 'sandbox effect' that delays the ranking a site for months.

I think it is easy to market the 'sandbox' as it is a simple (but wrong) explanation for the fact that some sites just don't rank well.

As an SEO working with a client, it is much easier to tell the client he/she is in the 'sandbox' than to try to explain...

A. All the linking structure and onpage SEO all needs to be revamped so the site will rank.

B. Why the SEO recommended the original linking structure and onpage in the first place and why it did not work as advertised.

Temporal effects: is domain aging or link aging important? Do you see it becoming important?

This is a hard one.

I think that domain age has a direct correlation with reputation (trust) as far as the search engines go. The longer a site has been online the better the SEs are able to 'jugde' the actions of the site.

In other words, if a site has been live for five years and this site has always linked and behaved well within the SE guidelines the SEs are able to verify that behavior with their own data and will/should assume that this type of behavior will be the norm in the future for this site and therefore this site should be 'trusted' more than a site that has no track record with the SEs or a record of disregarding the SE guidelines.

Can you build links too quickly? Is there a recommended rate to build them? Does that differ by marketplace or the quality / type of links you are building?

No! We often add tens of thousands of links to a page in just a few minutes. So far we have not gotten 'slapped around' for it yet by any of the Search

Engines. If we were to get hurt by doing this, you can bet your last penny that we would stop ASAP.

SEO & ethics: you have been one of the biggest debunkers of this marketing angle for me. Based on a few comments it seems you have a distaste for the SEO ethics crowd. Why do you have such a distaste for many people proclaiming to be "ethical" SEOs?

I was there when the first 'ethical' SEO poked his cowboy hat clad head out from under a rock.

I guess my distaste for the SEO 'ethics' crowd began because I knew the people involved before they became 'ethical' and I was part of original discussions(if you can call them that) about SEO 'ethics'.

I watched as a few SEOs who's business was not doing so well at the time spring to the SEO forefront as they proclaimed they were 'ethical' and all the other SEOs (that did not go along) were evil spammers. Once these self-named 'ethical' SEOs figured out they could get clients and a following of ditto heads by claiming they were 'ethical' they were off and running.

Fortunately, I think the 'ethical' SEO fad has about ran it course, it is fading fast as a marketing method.

Clients don't really care about being 'ethical' as defined by a big corporation like google(or some cowboy hat wearing SEO wannabe), clients care much more about conversions and issues directly related to their business.

On multiple occasions you mentioned that you had a not so pleasant experience with SearchKing. What happened, and what did you learn from it?

Here is a little SEO trivia for you: The 'ethical' SEO fad started because of law suit between searchking and google.

I was once a part of the Searchking "family", a Portal Partner. I even promoted SK and their products. At that time I considered Bob M. the owner of SK as a friend.

Then came Bob's idea to sell links based on pagerank, it was a truly brilliant cutting edge idea at the time. I should point out that Bob was not the first to think of this idea of selling links based on PR, he was just the first to go public with it.

Where things started to go wrong was when Bob decided to (against a LOT of advice not to) push his idea in Googles face.

The result of this public proclamation and public face rubbing was to have google completely bann all sites and domains associated with or hosted by SK. (google lashing out in anger is something too see, let me tell you.)

Then SK(Bob) sued google in US federal court, because of the banning, it was an ill thought out, badly conceived law suite based on faulty legal logic. It was doomed to fail - Bob knew this - he counted on it. Bob never had any intention of winning or even fighting the case, it was all just cheap advertisement to him. I did not know this at the time, I thought it was all legit, I even submitted an affidavit to the court in support of SK.

Most SK hosted sites were gone forever, not able to recover from a google bann.

Under public pressure and after three plus months, google reversed the bann on most, but not all of the the SK hosted domains. As far as I know the Bann still hangs over Search King.

I walked away from all this, seeing that all that google talk about 'doing no evil' was nothing but a pantload. I also learned a LOT about google by watching what they did and how they did it.

Quality links: is there such a thing as quality links? Can search engines tell the difference between quality and low quality links? If so, how do you determine the difference between quality and low quality links?

Yes there are quality links. You tell a quality link the same way you tell a quality site.

Can you rank for competitive terms using only low quality or automated links? If so, do you see this changing anytime soon?

No.

Do pages on important sites get a boost in relevancy for being part of an important site?

Not 'relevancy', pages from an established site are considered more 'important' by google than a page from a new site.

Can and should established sites be more aggressive with their SEO techniques?

Most of the time there is No need for them too.

Page and site theme: are they important to consider when building links from other sites?

If your main concern is SEO and traffic, no. If however, you are looking for conversions I think it is wise idea to keep to a theme.

Are there any low risk SEO techniques you think most webmasters are underutilizing?

Yup.
A lot of people still keep forgetting the basics; Keyword research, title tags, meta tags, clean code.

Why do the many of the best SEOs go by acronyms or nicknames?

Good last Question - When I first started SEO no one used their real names, everyone used acronyms. At first, I thought it was just an internet 'thing', but then I realized it was also for protection. There are way too many tin foil hat wearing folks out there.

Thanks for the interview Lots0.

Frank Watson

F rank Watson is a well known guru of pay per click marketing. He spends millions of dollars each year on pay per click and knows the ins and outs of the major pay per click players.

Interview

August 5, 2005

How & when did you get into search?

I have been working with improving various sites positions in the search engines since 1996. In those days I was working for mostly adult sites and there were a few guys who would try playing with on page factors and see what happened.

Is adult ahead of general SEO? If so, how far? What sites should people be reading for marketing adult ideas?

Adult used to be ahead of the curve when there were not as many restrictions and you could do all sorts of things without the possibility of getting banned.

It was black hat and tested methods mixed together. Right now the best place for adult seo is in the resource areas of the larger adult webmaster sites. There are articles in some of them that go back years.

I believe you head up both paid an organic search for a rather large company in a rather competitive field. How do you mix your time between the two?

The paid side gets more attention since it involves a much larger cost to the company. We see 75% of our 5 million plus monthly visitors from PPC and banners. Organic and bookmarked traffic is 25% and that is with us being on the front page for over 150 terms and number one for about 50. Being top through PPC gets us a tremendous amount of traffic - more than the number one listings in organic (though there are studies that say being in both improves those numbers).

We have two full time people and two part-time helping me with PPC etc.

Organic is important and something I keep up with personally and also have the help of the design/development people not directly beneath me. We try and set content management rules that reflect SEO rules which helps and I make changes but they are not as constant as PPC.

Yahoo! Search Marketing vs Google AdWords: what do you like and dislike about each system?

I like the absolute bid prices of Yahoo and the ability to bid gap. Google has rewards for better CTR so that works well for us. Google also allows you to AB test creatives and landing pages which is so much more advantageous than anything Yahoo has right now.

Are there flaws or fixes in either system that make it easier or harder to pull a decent ROI?

Yahoo because of it's bidding has quicker response time to bid changes but Google because of its pre editorial publishing rules allow quicker changes. Though the disabled terms etc. can be a bit of a nuisance.

Disabled terms will be going away with Google. How will that effect your PPC management style?

Well it means I do not have to get the 12 morning reports for the various accounts and hopefully will show that the terms I have wanted more access to were worth waiting for.

Right now I have people checking them in the morning first thing and then 30 minutes before they leave.

How do you segregate out a pay per click campaign in competitive markets? How do you segregate out a campaign in less competitive markets?

All PPC campaigns are measured by ROI so the differences in competitive and non-competitive markets are just volume and bid price generally. It all comes down to competing with the price more than other advertisers... obviously they impact the price but there is little you can do to get rid of them.

Are there keyword bid strategies and techniques that work well against not so bright competitors? What works well against sophisticated advertisers?

Yes the basics should be applied across the board but it is the less initiated that can be caught in bid gaps, or not know how to get better CTR by keyword inserting, or how to get disabled terms reactivated quickly etc. which allows you better access to the limited traffic.

The really naive do not use tracking, which is almost criminal.

Search engine owned tracking or spend automating products: worth using or not worth touching with a ten foot pole?

If you have a limited budget I would use it and spend more on the PPC. When you improve your budget it should have an allowance for tools. The autospends are a tough skill set and using one put out by an engine is a little like leaving the cat among the canaries.

How important is tracking? When should you use tracking URLs? When should you avoid them?

Tracking is THE most important aspect of any online advertising. Tagged urls have recently created some problems with the search engines indexing the links as the index page and dropping the real index page and all the inbound links etc that point to it. This is something that needs to be addressed, though companies like WebSideStory can do tracking without the tracking through javascript that grabs log file info.

If you are overseeing serious amounts of money and sites that also have good organic placement the tagless solution is solid. But there should never be no tracking.

What kind of PPC budget would you recommend most businesses set?

I think that 50% of anyone's advertising budget should be spent on PPC if not more. Since it truly is a zero sum game the increase in profits should be reinvested at a set percentage so the company can grow. This can be leveled off when the inventory falls off and the profits start to decrease. Since this can be done on a click by click basis you know when to cut it off.

Beginner, intermediate, to advanced...what tracking tools should I be using?

Beginner: start with the Google tool it is easy enough (but I say that as it will not cost anything) Intermediate I would say KeywordMax - and depending on the degree of analytics your site may needs this could be advanced level too.

Advanced I recommend WebSideStory as it gives you everything at a level that you can become overwhelmed with information and get sidetracked. You need a decent level of knowledge to take advantage of the higher level information - but even the low end etc. is suitable for the two other tools I mention as these companies are good about training and can get anyone up to speed.

Click fraud: overblown issue or spiraling out of control? What are the best ways to deter click fraud?

I think it is a serious issue that is being addressed as we go along.

Obviously you still make decisions on all numbers so you have to take that into the total and see if it is okay. If you can't get anywhere then you may only be able to get into PPC when the problem is fully ended... so you are free to help and keep it important. I have to look at what exists and how to make it work.

Deter ClickFraud? I think better reporting by the search engines... a telephone bill for clicks with IP addresses etc. could get companies working to rid the garbage. And jail time. Since it is serious theft.

Smaller pay per click engines: should I try them? If so, when?

Yes, if you do not take advantage of the small engines you allow competitors to get cheap traffic they can convert and reinvest the profits in the bigger engines. I would never let someone have that chance.

What small engines are worth trying? When should I try them?

SearchFeed, 7Search, Findology are good ones for us. Business.com, Enhance, Miva and Kanoodle have also been decent.

It does not take too much to copy the stuff you have at Overture and submit it to the smaller engines. You then just need to track and see what is working.

How sharply does traffic fall off from google to yahoo to the smaller engines?

The ratios between the big and small engines are between 50 to 100 to one. Google to say SearchFeed, Findology or 7Search gives us 100 times more traffic. Yahoo right now provides under half the traffic we get from Google - mainly due to hard editorial policies and the frustration of constantly battling with them - though recent changes with personnel may see that change.

But the cost per acquisition for the small engines is better believe it or not. Though some still have problems with Click Fraud, you get great response and refunds from the small guys.

Google and Yahoo conversion numbers are close and the small guys can be as much as 5-10 times less. It is a pity - I like the cheap converting stuff.

How sharply does click fraud change as you go from the larger to smaller engines?

Click fraud exists at all engines. The smaller guys can be beaten up more as they rely on constantly getting new publishers and some of them are going to cheat the system. The silly part is the greed of the cheaters - they come in and pound the small engines like they were Google and because they are small the jump in traffic is more obvious. If I get 500 more clicks from a small engine in

a day I know something is wrong. I get that from Yahoo and Google and I just figure a combination of news, CTR improvement etc. has occurred.

That is the hard thing. Google and Yahoo are being cheated - I get refunds all the time - but the sheer volume makes it tougher to see. We buy say over a million visitors a month from Google.

Content clicks: valuable or worthless? What does one need to do to effectively play the content market?

Content is now a lot better than it was. You need to write better creatives - in most cases clear calls to action but with good offers that will attract people to click in a non search situation. But the traffic is cheaper so it has been doing well for us over the past 12 months.

What type of words generally provide the best ROI?

The more specific the keyword the better the ROI. Three word and more phrases seem to work the best. While terms that are ambiguous always fail unless you use a large number of negatives to qualify them.

Conceptualizing keywords & consumers: most people think inside a narrow scope of keywords. How do you think outside those term sets? What tools on and off the web help you do that?

Obviously all the keyword suggestion tools help: [Yahoo Suggestion tool](#), [the Google one](#) now helps, and then there is the old staple: [WordTracker](#). You need to look beyond the obvious. The words used in banner ads in your vertical are a decent source some times. While reading the magazines and newspaper articles about your product can pull the occasional term. And you just have to get lucky.

Landing pages: what are some of the most common errors? What are some of the best ways to get a quick boost in conversion?

Overuse of the homepage as the landing page is an error many people are guilty of, even I do it when I do not have a specific page in mind. But the best landing pages are those that you custom develop to suit the keywords and push for the close.

ABC: Always Be Closing is an attitude that should be used when developing the creatives and the landing pages.

Lowering price or offering specials always provides a quick boost, but you have to move the prices back otherwise it becomes the new accepted price and you have to go lower the next time.

Being a large PPC spender sometimes you get to hear about products before others. What spend level do people need to get to in order to see some perks with the major engines?

I don't know what spend level warrants what. But, especially in the case of Google, the engines know that a friendly relationship improves spends. Even if you have a set budget, when deciding where to spend it you are always going to go with the friendly ones when there is a choice. Obviously ROI is the chief factor but at certain levels you are going to try new things with the company that you work with the best. Just like the casinos and any other business, meals and other "good customer" perks are part of doing smart business.

I have heard rumors that if you spend enough sometimes the wall between church and state comes down and the engines are a bit more receptive to SEO related questions? Is it hearsay or is there any truth to that?

The line between church and state has not been broached for me. I know some people can get things looked at, but I think that is more there is a problem and it would get addressed anyway, but it seems like better treatment since the person goes through someone they know as opposed to the email submittal process.

I have asked the people at the various engines questions but that is usually about what they know - they are not privy to the "secret formula" - they just have some knowledge of the industry from working in it. Besides I would much rather have help improving the PPC side than some small help with organic. There are literarily 10s of thousands of people working on developing methods for improving SEO. The PPC side is too often overlooked as a basic 'spend some advertising money' - which is fine by me.

Thanks for the interview Frank

If you would like to learn more about Frank he is a frequent poster at Search Engine Watch forums (as the moderator of Google AdWords and ROI Technologies), and runs an internet marketing consultancy at Smart Keywords.

Jason Lexell

J ason Lexell was one of my first SEO clients. Later he became a great friend and has helped me many times on many fronts. He specializes a good bit in email marketing and media sales, which are not my strong points.

Interview

September 23 , 2005

Banner ads…are they dead? Is there a way to make them useful again?

It's funny you say that. I read once in a book about copy writing that many people thought that "print was dead." No it's not dead. I think people like to call things they don't know how to use effectively dead. An example are the google ads.

You might say,,, "but these are text ads in highly relevant positions... they aren't banners!" Well, then make your banners occupy more relevant positions and make them look more like text. I've got banners that consistantly pull 2-3%. Anyone will tell you that's 10 times the average.

Blending banners & AdSense or making ads stick out: what techniques have you found have helped you to get the highest CTR and earnings on your ads?

In sticking with the banner ads, I've found the best approach is to get rid of the flashing, blinking annoying garbage we've come to associate with banner ads... Give them a an offer that is HIGHLY relevant to the sites topic.

For example... if you wanted to sell your ebook on SEO book... You could do some involved blinking banner with many stages of animation (spend a lot in the process) or you could create an ad that said something like "Learn The Top 10 Mistakes to Avoid In Search Marketing..." [click here]

Peope are there to learn... so they would click... you would then deliver on your promise by talking about the mistakes people commonly make... and you'd then sequay into "if you'd like to learn more helpful tips like these... check out my affordaby-priced ebook."

You've made an offer... with a banner... but it the power was in the copy you used... using a banner gif allows you to track views/clicks and manage you inventory.

I remember when i first got in the business. People were buying banner impressions like crazy... essentially what you had were several well-funded companies who just got on the internet. they had kids just out of school doing the media planning in a media they had no experience with... nobody was measuring conversions.... It didn't matter, remember the old mentality? "Who cares about sales and revenues, it's the Internet! Yay!"

They would create goofy ads that got almost no clicks... but they didn't care... then one day the investors got tired of dumping money into these companies.... the bubble burst and the banner ad got a lot of blame.

Clean plain design or graphic intense design. Which works best in ad sales? When is one better than the other?

Simple design works best I've found. The more you can make it look like the rest of the site's copy the better. As soon as you start using lots of graphics etc.. you turn people off because it becomes obvious you are a banner.

Here are the two things people hate the most about banners...

1. they are annoying (the way most people create them)
2. they attempte to distract you and take you away from what you are looking for or learning.

part two is really an issue of positioning.

Where are the best places to position an ad?

Great question. I actually like the bottom of a page. I know that on longer pages you might get scewed numbers because it will get loaded, even though some people don't make it to the bottom of the page... but it's at the end of an article or something that i'm most susceptable to being taken somewhere else.

1/3 of the way down your screen in as close to your content is another hot spot. Most people make the mistake of positioning their ads at the very very top of a page. Positioning on the periphery is a dead give-away that you are an advertisement... plus you'll get scrolled off the screen when the user needs to make room for more content.

Earlier you talked abut the biggest mistakes others made with ads. What are the biggest mistakes you have made with them?

I've made many...I think you have to be conscious of tone. For example... if you are promoting a very conservative B2B company through an advertisement, you may want to be careful of writing your banner ad copy using a lot of hype. In the beginning I ignored this.

Also, you want the page you send your visitors to to actually deliver. It's easy to obsess about click through rate... remember it doesn't matter if you can trick

someone into visiting your page by misleading them... anyone can learn to do that. You need to deliver so they take the action you desire.

Speaking of being conscience of tone…signing on publishing partners: how do you tell a person they could be making more money from their site without offending them? How do you find the right publishing partners? Do you have to have an IN inside the market? How do you break into a new market?

When you say publishing partners, do you mean locations for your ads?

I mean u sell ad space for Efunda (which was one of the sites profiled in the first Google AdSense webinar). Do u do that for many sites?

A few. We are focusing on growing that part of our business, but in order to get online advertising to work effectively you need to be highly consultative. This approach takes longer because you can't just sign up advertisers, you need to watch over their campaign and offer feedback on their creative when necessary.

I don't have an IN in the publishing market. I think it pays to focus on a market segment. Having a small group of sites in one market segment, can help you to attract other publishers and gives you a more compelling offering to advertisers. If they can trust your brand, they know that if you bring them a smaller website they might not have heard of... that it's got something going for it.

You never make any money on the first ad sale.

In order to really earn strong revenue you must make sure your advertisers are getting good results. chasing new advertisers all the time is no way to live. :)

Keeping the clients on board: …so they set up a campaign and it outright sucks. You do a few tweaks after they say they want to quit, and suddenly you are getting another Christmas card every year. What are the common mistakes people make in converting traffic into leads? How do you make them more open to suggestion?

It's not uncommon for the advertiser to be very skepticle of you when you begin working with them. Ad sales people in general promise the world. I work hard to show them i'm not like most other ad sales people by

1. helping them with creative for free
2. offering advice and feedback, for free. Sometimes i even give advertising for free.

See, ad inventory is like fruit. After it expires it's worth nothing. So if you have some unsold inventory, give it away to an advertiser that you think you can develop a relationship with and show them how you perform. They will compare you to the other publishers they are using and you let that do the talking... before you know it, you are in their marketing budget each quarter.

Lots of upfront work...

Picking up large clients: I noticed you worked for some companies like SolidWorks, ThomasNet, & MfgQuote. What are some winning strategies to get the lead? What are the keys to closing?

Step one: look for who is spending money on advertising. Visit sites similar in nature to the ones you are representing. Contact the company and introduce yourself.

You don't say... "hi i'm john doe, (stranger) from XYZ (corp you've never heard of...."

instead say "Hi my name is John and the reason I'm calling you is because i represent a large highly-targeted group of (insert demographic here). Is this a target you'd be interested in reaching?"

You don' need an in... you make that your in. Call back... email... follow up.

I do often offer free advertising when i can.

Nobody opens up my emails. Is email dead or how can I improve the open rates?

Ha. It's still possible to get people to open your emails. It really depends on the environment... is it a newsletter? a business proposition to another company?

Both. :) Can u run through each?

OK. Here's huge mistake i see newsletters make... it's why even though i sign up for them enthusiastically, i hardly ever read them...

Their subject lines are b-o-r-i-n-g...

Bait me! Don't just say "Billy's Business Tips Vol. 1 Issue 16." What the heck does that tell me?

I've got an overflowing inbox and all that tells me is that billy wrote another newsletter. It's probably good... I might eventually read it.... but then... i end up deleting it...

Instead tell me Billy, what are you talking about today and why should i care?

- 7 Ways to Cut Your Business Costs Now.
- Billy to Google: "Dance with me?"

You get the idea... I really can't stand those generic subject lines...

If you want to read compelling copy, go to a magazine stand at borders... There you see dozens (possibly hundreds) of mags competing for your attention. Same

with newspapers, read the headlines. There must be an immediate benefit to me opening your email or forget it.

Now... I don't do a lot of emailing strangers. Most my business is sending an email to companies that I want to do business with on a one-by-one basis. Often they will not reply to the first email. So you send a second... You apologize for being a pest and let them know you know they're busy but that you really want to talk to them. See... spammers don't do that. They just hit you with the same garbage again and again making it easy to delete and ignore. A follow up message says "yes i'm for real."

Some of your industry specific sites are far more profitable than the rest of them. Why? What is the difference between them?

That is a great question. I know what their ad revenue is from us.. but knowing their profitability is something I can only guess. I would say though... that the real performers are very open to feedback and suggestion... they absorb it like sponges.

The ones that are stuck will respond, "yeah we know our site is confusing, but if the visitors really want the info they'll take the time to find it." No joke.

People tend to have a comfort zone for how much they want to know about something. It's like someone at a gym, some people will want to trim 10 pounds and be happy, others want to look like a body builder.. those that have a bigger vision continue to work out harder and grow... It's the same in business. Often in the case of these small businesses the owners limit the growth to what they are comfortable with in terms of income. When they reach that point, they stop learning. The massive super stars on the web are always learning and push through their limitations

I see many sites staying small because they are comfortable and happy being that way.

Profiting from a site… is it more important to have a ton of content or to be hyper targeted?

It's great to be both! Being hyper-targeted on the web is a huge asset. The jury is still out on whether it's better to have a few highly-targeted sites, or one mother of all sites. I think a few targeted sites is the strategy I tend to favor.

Nothing beats targeting on the web.

Most SEO related leads that I have seen are not sites worth working for. Qualifying leads: how do you ensure the leads you sell are leads worth buying?

People will naturally surf a site first to get what info they can about something. If they still contact you, I've found they are relatively targeted. But I also work in targeted areas... I wouldn't touch mortgage or gambling as areas. Too much competition...

So how do you get an overview of competion? Or is it more of a feeling thing?

I run some searches on the web to see who's bidding on keywords and what results are coming up. If it's dominated by slick looking sites doing a lot of things right... I move on to scout another market segment.

Pay per click advertising: what terms drive leads with value? What terms just drive cash out of the bank account?

It really depends. That's actually a book in itself. I would say... the more specific the term the better. I actually saw a graph at a seminar which correlated the length of the keyword phrase to the conversion success, meaning the more specific the better. Makes sense.

Some of the clicks you buy are in industries where others are paying $10 - $20 a click for similar terms that would not be targeted for your needs. How do grab that sub niche traffic cheaply with all the more expensive PPC traffic around it?

Well, i have some software clients where this is an issue...The idea is to buy on the periphery. I can't go into to much strategy detail here. Let's just say we have to get creative.

How often do you have to revisit your bid strategies on niche sites vs sites in competitive fields?

It really depends on the client or the site. Some clients want to be in the top 3 for certain words. If the activity is heavy... then you have to regularly log in and update your bids to keep them there. Now we're getting into your territory. If you've got a better way you can tell me.

Back to your territory...what is your favorite part about Florida's glorious humidity?

Well... you don't feel guilty about hybernating in doors all summer on the computer. :)

Other than in pools of sweat, do you swim much (in the ocean perhaps)? Have you ever been stung by a jellyfish?

No sir... and yes sir...

I **hate** jelly fish.

I used to like swimming in the ocean a lot more. As a grown up, I now listen too much to shark attack stories.

Pluggity plug plug plug… you wrote a few guides on landing pages, killer creatives, email subject lines, etc etc etc… What all topics did you cover & where can I find them?

Landing pages is almost finished. I'll have it posted at my site soon to be launched www.jasonlexell.com. You can find the others there too.

Interview

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Eurotrash

J an Duffy King, also known as Eurotrash, is one of my favorite guys to chat to at the SEO conferences. He has done quite a number of different things on & off the web. In a previous life he was an entertainment journalist, and he now consults on site architecture and runs a rather fun & interesting political blog.

Interview

October 1, 2005

Did Eurotrash the tv show steal their name from you, or was it the other way round?

I was in America at the time and the president of my client used to call myself and an Irish guy who worked for her "Eurotrash" in an affectionate type way. When it came to me incorporating I decided to use the name eurotrash. I was on the phone with a niece and she told me that there was a TV show in the UK just started called Eurotrash and it was on Channel 4.

I emailed Channel 4, and told them that I was going to register the domain. Nobody got back to me after a couple of weeks so I registered it and went on my happy little way. Then in Jan 2000 Rapido TV who are the producers of the show contacted me and asked me if I would sell them the domain. I said possibly and gave an approximate figure. The didn't like my number so they took me to WIPO. The whole story is on http://arbiter.wipo.int/domains/decisions/html/2000/d2000-0449.html. What it did do is give me shedloads of publicity, even the BBC covered it.

As an end to the story, I sent them over a case of "eurotrash.com" wine by FedEx. The bastards sent it back unopened on my FedEx account number - so in the end I suppose they screwed me.

What did you do prior to getting into SEO?

I don't really see myself as a SEOer per se. We really consult on information architecture and what to do with the information but of course, today, a lot of that has to take SEO into consideration. Immediately prior to working in this field, I spent 2 years on a Kibbutz in Northern Israel where I was the barman in their hotel bar. Before that I was in Seattle as a helicopter pilot and leading up to that I was a Music & Entertainments Journalist with the UK's Daily Mirror.

Prior to life on the outside, I was a Pongo in Air Force talk. Wherever the Army goes, the pong goes - I was in the Army.

How did you evolve into the modern day SEO?

Back when we started doing this in 1993/4 our only client was the biggest American industrial publisher of print publications who wanted to go electronic. At first we worked on CD-ROMs and then quickly progressed to the internet. When we started working for their international division which had publications around the world in 10 languages including the two-byte character languages that was where we really had to look at making sure that our web content got into search engines.

We worked on the specifying and building of the first multilingual searchable database website on the internet (American Export Register) in 6 languages which fairly quickly went to 10. We didn't speak the languages but we knew about search engines at the time, had a good idea how they worked. To do a huge global campaign to tell the world about this multilingual website serving them would have been prohibitively expensive. So when we were getting the translations done for our CD-ROM and website we started including meta tags which were written in English then culturally translated into the other languages. We also made sure that there was a fair bit of our ancillary information that was kept outside of the database so that engines could pick that stuff up. It was extremely successful for us and our clients. From then onwards, before anything went on to the internet for any of our clients then SEO was a factor and getting those three stars all over the place on Infoseek was great to see. I don't think it was called SEO in those days.

What is worn under the customary Scottish kilt?

The men should all know this because if they have been standing next to a guy in the toilet who is wearing a kilt and he hasn't shaken enough, then the drips on the floor will make it obvious. So I suppose the answer, for the ladies is, you don't wear anything under a kilt. But I do advise ladies to lift and check, just to make sure.

There is a newfangled kilt type thing called the Breacan. This is a lightweight kilt which can be worn in less formal occasions like rugby matches, traveling to New York or attending SEO piss-ups in various haunts around the world. I usually wear boxers underneath this because it is so light that it doesn't take a lot of wind to show your credentials and I don't think my credentials are good enough.

For the American's among us, I would like to point out that the pattern on a kilt is a tartan, it is not a plaid. A plaid is something that is slung over your shoulder and attached with a pin/badge. I have a plaid in the Dress Wallace tartan and have 2 kilts in Hunting Wallace tartan one of which is now too small for me and 2 Breacans. The Breacans are in the Leith tartan and the Black Watch tartan.

The word incredible can have at least two different meanings. One related to wow - let me comment on that, while the other one could mean not

credible. When you were a reporter how do you determine if you can trust a source?

Good question. Unfortunately, I was a music and entertainments journalist on a tabloid type newspaper (although it wasn't as tabloidy as it is today - in my day, the dolly birds in the Mirror had to wear a bra). There's not much credibility in that whole sphere of operations. Basically all our information came from record companies, TV companies, film companies, PR companies, production companies and promoters. My writing was as credible as they told me, or indeed as credible as my expenses at the end of the month.

Strangely, since getting into the blogging stuff on EdSucks then credibility has played a huge part. At EdSucks we get about 70-90 emails a day mostly from someone who wants us to look into a Councilor, MP, MSP or some official department. Sometimes they send us accounts, spreadsheets, minutes etc. Most of these come from anonymous sources (although I do take their IP address) so it is difficult to know just how credible a lot of them are.

As a reporter what things made you lean toward some sources and away from others?

As a reporter in the field of music and entertainment a credible source is a member of the entertainment industry who is plugging an act. You always pick who is the favorite flavor of the month. If you have room for other stuff, it all depends on what is in the mail. I remember once when Spandau Ballet released the "True" album, the record company sent out a huge box with a really cool beautiful leather jacket with the "True" symbol embroidered on the left breast and something on the back which I can't remember, 3 signed copies of the album and an invite to the launch party on Adnan Kashoggi's yacht which was moored at the time in London. Pretty much that album was the one that got blanket coverage that week not only in the Mirror but also in every other newspaper and magazine in the country.

If you are doing real journalism you have to research your sources and know your sources very well. Sources are built up sometimes over years. I worked in the same office for a while with the investigative journalist John Pilger. He has been doing real journalism since the Vietnam days and is a hero of mine. His job was way different than mine. His sources were high placed, mostly anonymous to all but him, in governments and probably the military. His two-page articles would take weeks and even months to research and write.

When you are gathering sources you have to take into account why those people want to become sources, are they using you to their own ends and if they are is OK because of the story. On the blogging thing I was caught out by someone sending me a property deed for a Councilor's house that said he bought it for GBP 6,007. I thought it was a marvelous scoop and I immediately blogged it and then got on the phone to the local newspaper. It later turns out that the deed that was sent to me, was only for the land and the Councilor's lawyer faxed over to the newspaper two title deeds, one for the land and one for the house. That is very strange in Scotland. However, the newspaper never ran with the story and I sort of apologized on the

blog. Only last week did I find out that I was totally set up and one of the local Labour Party organizations planted the info with someone whom they knew would send it to us and they then found out who their leak was.

When I was paid to be a journalist my sources were very different. It would mostly be a 10-30 minute interview, quick scan of the record company press release, quick scan of what the other publications were saying and have something knocked out in half an hour. Then spend another 10-20 minutes to rewrite it for some teenage magazines to get some freelancer money.

As a blogger what things made you lean toward some sources and away from others?

As a blogger, I tend to take stories from anyone except politicians. I remember you were with me in Edinburgh and I was on the phone with one and I think you gathered that I was not too enamored with them. The best stories come to me from the people on the lowest rung on the ladder. They don't seem to be worried about falling off as much as the ones on top or indeed the ones a couple of rungs up who think they are at the top.

Sometimes, to cover my ass and to keep my lawyer off my back, I have to ask for further information and possibly documentation on some of the stuff I get sent. If I have the gut feeling that I am right, I will normally go with it. A lot of it is down to gut feeling. I have about 4 stories at the moment that I believe will make national press in Scotland when I publish - it's just that there are too many loose ends and my gut feeling is to try and tie those up before publication.

What are the most common things you see bloggers and webmasters doing to undermine their credibility or prevent other bloggers & media members from wanting to cite them?

I don't know if I see to many bloggers preventing other bloggers or media wanting to cite them. Basically if it is published on a blog or a website then it is there to be cited. Sure, you have to make sure to follow the fair use policy but I would think that most bloggers want to be cited by someone else.

With regards to credibility. It is the same in the blogosphere as it is in the real world. If you are credible people will come to your site, they will cite you and it is them that will give you the credibility. **You cannot give yourself credibility that is something that is gifted from others.**

I also believe that you can be both credible and 'incredible'. Bill Clinton's credibility was shot when he said "I did not have sexual relations with that woman" but overall as America's first black president (my wife's words, not mine) he did a fairly good job for America on foreign and domestic policy throughout his reign and I think his credibility as a worthwhile president remains intact. Rev. Dubya of the Church of the Latter-Day Morons is quite a different subject and I believe that he wishes all his brothers and sisters here in

Scotland his prayerfulness and condolence now in his time of despair. I am sure he will send his congruity to us in his hour of need.

What tips work well for getting bloggers to link up? What works well for getting journalists to link?

We go back to credible and incredible. If you are credible and others link to you then that is a good thing. Most bloggers will link to their peers if they think their work is credible and relevant. They will also link to work that they think is not credible at all, pointing out the fact. If the person who links saying that the link is not credible, is more credible than the target, then that blog becomes less credible. There is a story about this SEO firm who sued this guy with a blog and it did them no good at all.....

To get journalists to link to your blog is less easy. There are so many blogs about so many things that it is impossible for journalists to keep up with every source that they would like to. It is really up to the blogger to keep up with the journalists. If you are doing a post/article and you think it merits coverage in the mainstream media you have to play it exactly like a PR company would with their clients.

You will pick the right journalist with the right beat on the right publication. You will know his/her writing style and what peaks there interest. You will email them with the story in a way that, if they want to, they can copy and paste into their system. You will try to ensure that if you are quoted you are quoted in the way that is good for you - give them a list of quotes from you. You must always remember that the journalist will have or will find other sources to tell the other side of the story and you will have done your homework so you know pretty much what the other side of the story is and how the other side will react.

If a journalist does a story on you, your blog or your website, whether it be good or bad, you will learn a lot from it.

Who on the web is really good at making sure they get cited when they should? Any particular tips to what you think they do really well to get cited?

My blog is very parochial. It is only about Edinburgh and the politicians who screw the city. I do get mentioned on some other political blogs in the UK but I don't have anywhere near enough time to keep it as cutting edge as I would like to.

In the SEO field Nick at Threadwatch does well in citations in the blogosphere as does Danny at SEW and indeed yourself. There are also many others including Jeremy Zawodny and now Matt Cutts in the search engine arena.

Jason Calacanis, Nick Denton, and Pud Kaplan all do well in the technology arena and in the political arena in the US Al Franken, Arianna Huffington, and Andrew Sullivan seem to make the press a lot but it seems that Matt Drudge has dropped almost out of sight but then again I was there earlier today and clicked on a link "Florida tourists warned that locals could shoot them.... "and the link went back to the Scotsman.

As a web author do you know what posts are going to get mainstream press coverage prior to making them? Are there good ways to ensure stories get covered and spun the way you like?

As a web author you bloody hope that they all make the mainstream press. Like I said above, know the journalist, beat, publication and you will pretty much know what will make it - you should contact them. It seems like I have answered the second part above.

Are there any good books or tips to reading the bias of journalists or finding ones that would be likely to cite a certain type of story?

If you are writing yourself and reading yourself, I think you will soon get to know what the journalists are looking for. We are not always like you and go straight for the Wall Street Journal. Some of us start small and go for local or specialist publications.

Another way to help yourself is to offer to write stuff for local or smaller publications. If your local newspaper does nothing about SEO or technical stuff and you think you have some knowledge then get on the phone to the assistant editor or editor depending on the size of the publication.

If a local or smaller publication has written something that is factually incorrect then write a letter to the letters page pointing out the facts on your blog. Try not to upset them too much but at least you will get the journalists into your blog.

One thing I did a while back when researching a post I was doing an a Scottish Socialist Party candidate in the General Election. I ended up a Scottish Socialist Youth forum and saw that they were even more mouthy than me. So I went in their forum anonymously and dissed by blog saying that it was a load of crap. Within hours, there were posts saying I didn't know what I was talking about and that my blog was really good. That was fun.

The minute you start punting a press release to a journalist/publication you become a salesperson. You are selling that product/service/story. You write the initial press release and make sure you have every contact method included, you make a list of publications/journalists you want to contact.

You then take to the phones. You call the addressee, you tell them about what you are punting and ask them whether you can send them a press release explaining it in more detail. You ask whether they would be interested in using it, if not is there someone else at their publication, if not can they recommend another publication/person. Journalists on the same beat all know and read each other. On that first phone call you should get some idea whether they are going to go for it or not.

Send them the press release written for them. Include some of the stuff you discussed on the phone that is maybe not in the original release that they seemed more interested in. After you have sent the press release, give it a while depending

whether it is a daily, weekly, monthly and then call the journo back to ask whether they got the information, is there anything that needs more clarification, is there any other information they need, do they need any other quotes that would help them in their story.

Then go down to the next journalist/publication. After a while you will know exactly what journalists to call first.

Do you have any good tips on finding what stories media members could be looking for?

Journalists cover their beats on a daily basis. If you have something that is relevant to their beat, call them up and tell them about it. Don't tell them too much on the phone because you want to make sure you get your side in writing - "why don't you visit my blog at.... Or "why don't I just email you some stuff".

What is the best way to get an in with journalist? How does one introduce themselves? Do you have to read and learn the journalist first?

It definitely helps to read and learn the journalist as I have said above. The best way, without doubt to get in with a journalist is to buy them copious amounts of alcohol, maybe take them out to lunch or dinner and give them something for free. I've been in journalists houses, the ashtrays, the towels, the robes, sometimes the lamps and in one case a portable TV and a pile of old books from a lounge have all come from hotels. Journalists want free stuff and lots of it. What they don't use, they give as Christmas presents to their family.

Introductions really depend on the journalist - some you can phone up right at their desk and some have assistants who deflect all calls unless you are a big shot. When speaking to them about a subject make sure you know what you are talking about and make it interesting enough for them to listen. Always intentionally leave obvious questions so that the journalist can ask you and in turn you make yourself appear more knowledgeable.

When talking to journalists what are the biggest mistakes most people make? What do they say that they shouldn't? What do they not say when they should? How do you know if you can trust a journalist?

I am not sure if people make mistakes speaking to journalists. Make what you are trying to get over interesting because the journalist has to make it interesting for his bosses before it gets into the paper. Don't let out too much until you see if it is going for print but give enough interesting stuff to make it to print.

The trust issue is difficult because they are all human beings and all different. Most journos will take your story and take one from your enemy tomorrow and that is OK. There are some journalists that can only be trusted when they are in their coffin (and make sure that all those screws go all the way in) - most of those end up working for politicians in the press offices - the really bad ones get a job on Fox News Channel.

How many Dutch backpackers are in South America right now?

There will probably be about 73, 2 waiting at airports to go home and one being robbed in Lima. They will be carrying the South American Handbook in English and when they have a problem and go into a Dutch consulate, trade mission or embassy to get information. The person behind the counter will pick up a copy of the Sud Amerikaanse Reisgids and answer their question and they will be pissed off that they bought the wrong book.

What makes you an expert on Edinburgh's political scene?

The really funny thing is I am not an expert and no where near. At the last elections, although I could go to the local paper and do searches on candidates I wouldn't know if the story was a good or bad one about the candidate, whether they were opening a building or speaking on something I support. I wanted to find out all the bad things on the candidates before voting because I had read the stuff previously.

The idea behind EdSucks was that I could basically file all the bad stories on Councilors, MPs and MSPs for future reference. It would also be helpful to voters so that they could go to one site and click on the slimeball's name, sorry politician's name and find out the bad stories. Nobody else had done it so, you download Wordpress and start.

What surprises have come out of running Edinburgh sucks?

In the beginning, it was taking a look at the two local paper on the web, finding the bad ones about politicians and doing a little blurb and quote from the paper. Nice and easy taking between 15-30 mins a day. Now, about 6 months later, it could be a full time job. It takes a lot longer because of the amount of email we get and now because pretty much every Councilor visits the site about 3 times a week they are all very careful what they say to the press in case "it'll bloody end up on that Edinburgh Sucks". I have been reliably informed that Councilors actually say "that'll be on Edinburgh Sucks tomorrow". The first surprise is how big it has got and how much time it could take to keep going. It actually could be a full time job.

The second surprise is that for the last few weeks I have been swamped with my real job actually earning money. Unfortunately EdSucks has suffered because of it. The huge surprise is that although there has been up to a week without a post the visits didn't drop at all.

Who is the worst member of Edinburgh's parliament? Why are they so evil?

Parliament is for Scotland and the Parliament building is in Edinburgh, Edinburgh has the Council. Edinburgh's worst Councilor has got to be the Council Leader, Teflon Don Anderson. He is a baldy four-eyed coot who lies as much as the rest of them but just looks awfully shifty and he keeps saying in the press, on radio and on TV that it is "sad" that I do EdSucks without doing anything to change it. As far as the worst member of Scotland's parliament it must be the Justice Minister and the First Minister because they are both nothing but lying heavy-handed thugs.

How do you warp people's faces in the pictures on your site?

I use a little java applet built on the old Goo program called Qgoo v1.2 and it can be downloaded here: http://javaboutique.internet.com/QGoo/

Do you ever worry that your reviews of the politicians may end up making them more defensive to where some important issues are avoided? Where do you draw the line?

I don't draw a line except to try to keep me out of court. Nothing about what I write about politicians, no matter how bad bothers me. They put themselves up to be shot down when they stood for election. I put myself up when I started EdSucks. It's them or me.

Do you think many community members in various areas will be able to create sites similar to Edinburgh Sucks?

One thing that is on the cards is doing an install of everything that is on EdSucks. I have tried various plug-ins, some work for me and some don't. I was hoping by the end of the year to try and make that available.

If you had to redue one thing with Edinburgh Sucks what would it be?

I would have either did my own style or got someone to do one specifically for EdSucks. If there's anyone out there willing to help, you know where you can get me.

Opps, was not trying to get so political ;) What is your favorite search spam technique which most people do not view as search spam?

I don't use it, but the press release thing is beginning to get out of control. Being a former journalist it is strange to see the things that SEO companies will put out as press releases and of course they are advising

I am surprised the porn industry don't start using them to announce each and every copulation as it is happening live on their sites.

Fun interview Jan. If you like this interview consider visiting Eurotrash.com or Edinburgh Sucks.com

Matt Cutts

M att Cutts is a well known Google software engineer. Although he has worked on a variety of projects within the company, to webmasters he is known as an official voice of Google who communicates regularly with the webmaster community.

As of writing this, I also believe that Matt is largely responsible for helping to ensure Google's search quality. Matt has a personal blog at http://www.mattcutts.com/blog/

Interview

October 9, 2005

How and when did you get into search?

I got into search in 1999. I was working on my Ph.D. at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (go Tarheels!). The computer science department there makes you take two outside classes, so I took classes from the Information and Library Science department about search engines. It turned out that search engines were really exciting stuff: term frequency times inverse document frequency and all that stuff. During the whole class, I found myself scribbling fun ideas to try in the margins of my notes. I was hooked.

Is all SEO spam?

Absolutely not--I need to do a post about this on my blog sometime. Lots and lots of search engine optimization is white-hat and not spam at all. Things like making a site more crawlable, tweaking the words on a site based on what users type in or what you see in your server logs, and gathering links by coming up with creative ideas or services that make people link to you naturally. To me (and Google), spam is search engine optimization that is outside our quality guidelines--things like hidden text, hidden links, doorway pages filled with gibberish words that do a sneaky JavaScript redirect, and so on.

Personally, I have a theory that some spammers want everyone practicing solid, common-sense SEO to believe that they're spamming, or that everyone is a black hat. To me, that fails at first blush; was I a spammer for changing the word "howto" on a page to "how to," because more people type it the second way? Of course not. I have a similar theory about doing spam reports--why would someone

who claims that they will use any trick in the book whatsoever then turn around and try to convince people not to do spam reports? Those two beliefs ("I'll do anything to get ahead in rankings" and "Don't report a competing site that is using spam tactics") aren't especially consistent. There's a lot more nuance that I'd like to go into sometime, but I'll throw those points out there for people to discuss. :)

What do you think of tomatoes? Have you ever been spammed by a waiter offering them?

Your readers will need some background on this one. :) The last time Aaron and I ate together, our table received unsolicited tomatoes. It was down at the WMW Pubcon in New Orleans, and it turns out that a couple webmasters sent the tomato dish over as an appetizer. It was very thoughtful, but a little surreal. One quick thing I'd like to mention: if you're sending a reinclusion request to Google, please don't send us cookies, pens, chocolate, etc. It doesn't happen often, and we'd rather not get them. We don't want any appearance of doing a favor for a gift, plus the "do you think these cookies are safe to eat?" jokes get old after a while. :)

Some SEO firms cold call saying they can rank people in first place. Can they guarantee this?

Not on Google. No one can guarantee this, not even Google, since our ranking algorithms are often updated. I've seen scams where the "#1 placement" is really buying ads. I've seen scams where the "keywords" that they sell are really for people who have scumware hidden in their browser. I've seen stuff where the guaranteed keywords are 5-6 word phrases that only have nine results, and no one would ever really type that really long, specific phrase. I've seen situations where the guarantee is that they'll try to get a #1 spot, and if they don't, then they'll try again. Cold calling and cold emailing is a bad sign in the first place, frankly. So I'd be skeptical of that in the extreme, and read the fine print carefully.

As a search engineer who knows search algorithms inside out, what would you personally look for when hiring an SEO?

References, probably. Proven success with clients who are willing to show their results. An emphasis on crawlability/site architecture is a plus. Experience with both SEO and PPC. Good industry knowledge and contacts. Probably a track record with at least one medium to large company, to show that they can work with marketing/PR/corpcomm as well. Creativity in terms of finding a hook that propelled one of their other clients in terms of buzz or blogosphere attention. If they've been around for a while, that's a plus. They should be willing to explain what they do, and make the explanation clear enough that you can follow it. There are a lot of great SEOs out there, but if I were hiring one for my most important site, I'd be pretty conservative.

Do you think there will ever become a time when Google will recommend certain SEO services or products outside of things related to AdWords?

It wouldn't surprise me if it happened some day, but probably not really soon. One thing about being a certified Google Advertising Professional (GAP) is that we ask you to follow Google's quality guidelines in regular SEO practices. If you look at the GAP program, I think that's worked out pretty well so far. But because of the difficulty of knowing that a specific person/company is abiding by those guidelines, I wouldn't expect it in the short-term.

When people aim to extract many alternate meanings out of your words, and everyone and their dog has a blog about search or Google how do you interact with the public so much without it backfiring often?

It's true that I think more these days about how someone could interpret what I'm saying. I've learned that it's usually a bad idea to talk/post when I'm angry, and that making promises about the future (e.g. when something might or might not launch) is dumb. Sometimes I still do it, but at least I know when I'm doing something stupid. I like having a blog so that if the Red Herring picks a quote of mine that sounds weird, I can give more background.

What is your favorite spider?

Googlebot is a fine little fellow, but my sentimental favorite was probably Grub (now a part of LookSmart). It was a distributed crawler that let anyone run a client and crawl pages. I thought that was a neat idea. Very spammable in some way unless you're careful, but a neat idea nonetheless. But if you pay attention to bandwidth pricing, a distributed crawl causes a few extra headaches that probably aren't worth it. If you're talking non-computer spiders, I'd have to go with Anansi (with a shout out to Neil Gaiman for stopping by Google :)

What do you think of Big.com?

I think it's a cool idea that doesn't take a lot of work to implement. Kudos to them. In terms of viral buzz and creativity, I have to give props to http://www.milliondollarhomepage.com/ though. The laptop I'm typing this on has 1.47M pixels, but it never occurred to me to sell the pixels for $1 apiece in blocks of 100. Of course, I hope that the people buying pixels don't assume that those pixels will flow PageRank. :)

As a person who probably gets hours of email every day what tips do you have for keeping a tidy inbox and fast email processing?

Ach. I could still use some help keeping my email under control. I still use mutt--I haven't made the webmail leap yet. A few things that help me:

- aggressively procmail/filter out mailing lists and stuff you don't need to reply to

- try to spend blocks of time away from email or you'll spend the whole day responding to it

- make sure your mail client can show you threads on the same topic

- I color-code my emails:

    - white: to me, and from a Googler

    - green: cc'ed to me, and from a Googler

    - blue: I'm nowhere in the to/cc lines, and from a Googler

    - yellow: from outside Google

    - That lets me prioritize a little better.

Mike Grehan wrote an article about the rich get richer effect of sites ranking at the top of the search results. Does Google counteract this? If yes, how so?

We try to. A non-trivial fraction of our time is spent thinking about how to return the right sites for queries, and small or mom-and-pop sites are a large part of that. It's a real challenge when some of these sites have one or two (or zero!) links to them. At this point, when I go on a trip or visit a street arts fair, I end up writing down 3-4 urls each time, so I can go back to Google and see whether the sites will come up in Google. I carry a hipster PDA (a little notebook from Office Max that costs like $1.09) so that I can write down stuff when I'm away from a computer.

If search engines give people whatever they want, does the effect of acting as an oracle of information hurt society as much as it helps it, since search services passively (and perhaps even actively as search personalization improves) reinforce our worldviews?

As far as self-reinforcement, I think that Google News does a good job of showing opinions from a diversity of sources. And I do think diversity can be important in search results as well. But I think the larger question is not just worldview-reinforcement, but what people do with knowledge. Do a Google search for [computer scientist as toolsmith]. I was lucky enough to spend some time with Fred Brooks at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and my take on this was strongly influenced by his keynote at SIGGRAPH several years ago. If you enjoyed his book The Mythical Man Month, you should read the article [PDF]. One notable quote is "a toolmaker succeeds as, and only as, the users of his tool succeed with his aid." I think you have to have a fundamental belief that people will benefit from the ability to amplify their intelligence with better access to information.

When you guys change your business models or market focus it has a profound effect on what publishing business models are functional. What are the biggest changes and surprises to the structure of the web you have seen due to changes in your business model or algorithms?

I think someone who has a niche hobby has a better chance of being able to write or blog about that hobby, which is a big change from a few years ago. That's not as much of a surprise--the hope was that AdSense would allow good content to be created and monetized. What recently surprised me was the "13 startups in 90 minutes" panel at Web 2.0. I was struck by how many tiny companies were able to put AdSense on a site to defray their costs. Let me see if I get the list right. Zvents.com had AdSense. RealTravel had AdSense. I believe Wink had AdSense. Probably 1-2 more. It was a huge surprise to me, and I think it's fantastic. If AdSense means that more startups can come to market, that's great for everybody.

When you guys roll out new algorithms, filters, and patches some good sites end up getting filtered out with the bad. Do you pre-test most of the algorithms prior to launching them? How do you know how strongly to apply filters? By default do you usually lean on one side or the other and then tweak your way back?

We always put algorithmic changes into our test harnesses to poke and prod in lots of different ways. But you also have to be adaptive. If someone in the outside world notices an issue after a launch that you didn't notice, it's important to take that feedback and act on it, and also to try to improve the testing procedure to cover that in the future. We usually have a pretty strong sense of whether something will be a large-impact launch or not. But you can't completely avoid having a large impact with a launch. An example might be if you're replacing a large subsystem in the crawl-index-serve pipeline. We continually go back and improve or replace sections of our system. Sometimes the results can't be bit-for-bit compatible in output, so you have to do the best you can. Update Fritz in 2003 is the canonical example of that; you can't go from a batch-based search engine to an incrementally-updated search engine without some visible impact. To answer your last question, I personally lean toward softer launches; webmasters never need any extra stress. But sometimes launches can't be made completely soft or invisible, as I mentioned.

As a webmaster how do I minimize the chances that my site may be the baby thrown out with the bathwater in the updates?

Make a great site, and try to make sure that site is recognized and thus earns organic links. To be safe, pick a stranger and ask them whether the site is great--sometimes you'll be surprised. If Google doesn't return a reputable, great site for a query, then we're going to be working to figure out why and fix it.

Do you like volley ball?

I do! When I have the free time, I usually play roller hockey though. A friend talked me into wearing a pedometer, and I want to dunk that thing into the sink sometimes. 10K steps a day is hard for a computer geek without much free time.

Graph theory vs social networking vs buzz marketing: which of them is most important for a new webmaster to study? What resources would you recommend for learning about each of them?

I'd study buzz marketing. If you capture the fancy of the web, you won't need to worry about graph theory--you'll get links on your own. Plus, once you know what a clique is in graph theory, you can never go back. Instead of asking "does this link make sense for my users?" you'll be wondering "Am I too close to a clique?" and that's just not healthy. :) Other people could provide better resources than me, but The Tipping Point and Freakonomics are good reads.

If a person wanted to learn IR what books and papers would you consider vital?

I would read:

- Modern Information Retrieval

- Managing Gigabytes

- Readings in Information Retrieval

- plus the Google papers on PageRank, The Anatomy of a Large-Scale Hypertextual Web Search Engine [PDF], Mapreduce, Digital Image Processing and GFS.

but mainly: just freaking write one. Get a CD with SIGGRAPH papers or IEEE papers or pull down the ODP or whatever, convert the PDFs to text, process the documents to compute term frequency for each word, then try to write a scorer. Google provided a CD with a ton of .edu pages a while back for one of our programming contests. Find that CD and write a search engine. Start small if you need to, but write some kind of search and try it and use it and tweak it when it doesn't work, and in a month or two you'll be a an on-page zen scorer and know how to write relevant documents. Then take another month or two and write a crawler. It's hard, but it's not magic and you'll learn a ton.

In "The Anatomy of a Large-Scale Hypertextual Web Search Engine" it was written, "We expect that advertising funded search engines will be inherently biased towards the advertisers and away from the needs of the consumers." What have you done to ensure you minimize advertiser bias?

We make sure that our ads are clearly marked and separate from our search results. We don't allow any pay-for-inclusion in our organic results. And if an advertiser is spamming our index, we still take action.

I originally started a service-selling site and then later sort of stopped selling services and started blogging. An interview with you will likely go on that static site and is likely to be a well linked page, but my blog is by far the more popular of the two sites. Am I effectively hurting my end rankings by splitting up the content?

I don't think that's ultimately hurting your end rankings much. There's always going to be people who do some attribution by linking to your main seobook.com page, and some people that link directly to a post or to your blog--and some people that do both, because they're different urls. So having a primary service that's off the main page can sometimes even help a little bit. I think you'll get the same total number of links (or even a little more if they link to the root and the blog or specific post). After that, it's up to you how to handle that with internal linkage.

What would be the best ways to integrate the link popularity?

I think having a main site with a large feature like a blog somewhere near the main page is actually a pretty good structure. If you run a blog, it's good to spend some effort to have one main url for each post so that there's a single well-known permalink. I haven't been as nitpicky about that on my own site, but if you do SEO for a living I'd pay a little more attention to that.

When does it make sense to use one site or multiple domains?

If you're a whitehat, I'd almost always go for one site. Promoting multiple sites and keeping them distinct is a lot more of a challenge.

In the past I teased you about creating a Google hedge fund, using search demand related AI to automate stock, bond, & commodity orders. What prevents you guys from doing something like that?

We've joked about that internally too. Anything we do has to protect our users' privacy and abide by our privacy policy. Plus there's a lot of things still waiting to be done: new types of data to searches, and ways to help users create/organize/use their information, and those projects are going to be a bigger help for our users (in my opinion).

If search becomes a nearly winner-take-all game, and Google out executes its competitors, how can you prevent that market position from eventually causing bad things to happen years and years after you, Mr Page, Mr Brin, & Mr Schmidt are no longer around?

I think you have to get Google's core values deep into our corporate DNA. You have to make sure each new Googler understands the importance of our users' trust. And ideally the company can make public promises (e.g. Google does not do pop-up ads) which act as guides for future behavior. And you need to listen to your users. I hope we get even better at that last one; handling the scale of communications is hard but important.

From your mission page: "Google's mission is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful." You guys have already helped make storage free and fairly limitless in size (Gmail & Blogger). Do you think Google will eventually be able to provide free access to information (ie: like a free ISP)?

I have no clue. I just try to make search quality better. You'd have set up an interview with some kind of product manager-ish person, not an engineer. :)

If I bought a domain that was already listed in DMOZ and looked like it had a clean history but found that it was banned from Google what should I do?

File a reinclusion request. DMOZ does a pretty fair job of pruning stale domains in lots of instances.

If I got a site banned what is the procedure to get it re indexed?

This is boilerplate that we're sending out to some site owners as a pilot program if we detect spam, but it's the most current info:
"If you wish to be reincluded, please correct or remove all pages that are outside our quality guidelines. When you are ready, please submit a reinclusion request at
http://www.google.com/support/bin/request.py

You can select "I'm a webmaster inquiring about my website" and then "Why my site disappeared from the search results or dropped in ranking," click Continue, and then make sure to type "Reinclusion Request" in the Subject: line of the resulting form."

If that procedure changes, I'll blog it.

Do most sites that ask for a reinclusion get reincluded? If not, what are the common problems?

We don't discuss the reinclusion ratio, but if you're a mom/pop site with a single domain compared to an SEO site that had industrial-strength spam, I would request the reinclusion. Check your own site for spam before you request reinclusion! Look for hidden text on the home page. Do a site: query and check a

few random pages. If you were doing a weird link scheme, stop it. That's the biggest problem we run into--the site isn't really cleaned up.

Eventually there will come a time when SEO will be too hard to attempt to teach and traditional SEO will likely no longer be a viable and profitable business model for many SEOs. Knowing what you know about SEOs, how would you suggest they could leverage their experience into other fields? What other fields do you think would be good for SEOs to go into?

If you're creative, I'd look at the marketing/buzz aspect of things. A person who is savvy about marketing will often have a good leg up on interactions with people. If you are a talented backend person, there's a ton of neat start-ups right now. 2-3 people in different places can collaborate on some nice stuff. If you're a button-pusher, I'd try to diversify that skillset. ;)

What is your favorite Stones song?

Probably "Wild Horses." But the interesting thing is that I'm not really that much of a Stones fan. When they start playing The Who songs at the intro to CSI and CSI: Miami--that's some good stuff.

What does it feel like being the Mick Jagger of Search?

Honestly, there's a ton of people at Google who work to improve our quality and tackle spam, so it's a little arbitrary to call out one person when there's so many people working hard on search. That got put into perspective for me when a friend told his Mom the "Mick Jagger of Search" thing, and the Mom said "Who is Mick Jagger?" :)

What are the biggest SEO-related changes you can forecast for the upcoming year? ;)

If you're doing whitehat SEO, the same principles will apply going forward: make a great site (e.g. that provides a useful service or relevant information) and think of creative ways for people to find out about it. But spamming attempts in six months or a year from now will not be the same, just as spam attempts today are quite different from a year or 15 months ago. I think the lifetime of off-topic spam in search engines will continue to drop.

What is the most evil thing Google has ever done?

Oy, saving the stinger for the last question, eh? Sneaky, sneaky. :) I don't agree with every single decision ever made at Google, but I think overall we've made good choices for our users and that the world is a better place for Google's influence. I think the flip side of the "don't be evil" core value is that people tend to judge Google against ideal behavior instead of against our competition. That can be frustrating sometimes when it feels like we get dinged for something that is not a Google-only issue, but in general it's good because we have to set a high bar for ourselves. I'm proud of what we've done, but I think there's still room for us to do

more as an advocate for our users. Does "needing to do even more for our users" count close enough to evil?

If you would like to read the latest on Gadgets, Google, & SEO check out Matt's blog.

Thanks again Matt.

Andy Hagans

A ndy Hagans is a well known link builder and blogging mogul. He believes in running exceptionally efficient businesses and outsourcing what can be outsourced.

His personal site selling link building services is located at AndyHagans.com and he also blogs at Performancing.com and LinkBuildingBlog.com.

Interview

November 08 , 2005

So what got you started on the web?

Back in high school I got interested in the Web for the same reasons we all do. It's a great time waster, and a lot more interactive than TV. I bought an HTML for dummies book and read it in a day.

My first major site was about the Harry Potter movies, it was actually pretty successful and heavily trafficked. Of course, it was online at the time when online advertising plummeted, so it only made me about $1.25 CPM.

What got you into search? I believe you got hired at Text Link Ads in large part because I blogged about you. How did you quickly go from HTML for Dummies to someone I kept running into?

I guess that was an evolution over several years. In fact, for a few years I didn't do any web sites (around when I started college). I only got back into them two or three years ago, and that's when I got into SEO. At that point it was a matter of writing a decent article on a niche SEO topic (link building) and getting it published by a few prominent SEO sites. Then I had the street cred to bug you on IM :-) Of course you were one of my mentors in SEO, and a large part of that is due to how open and accessible you are on your web site.

What color is your hat?

My hat color fluctuates. On Monday mornings it tends to be white, whereas on a late Thursday night it's probably a dark shade of gray. I have a little saying: "Pick the right hat for the job".

I noticed great ROI from the effort spent when I used to publish a good number of articles. Some sites did not seem too willing to publish my stuff until AFTER I was a paid advertiser. From what I have seen you have quickly got published at many sites, some of which I will likely never get published at. What tips do you have for finding places to syndicate articles to? How do you know what articles to write for which people? How do you ensure they are likely to publish them?

Picking a good article topic is very similar to picking a good niche for a web site. It is made much, much easier if you pick a unique topic (preferably that hasn't been done), and if you pick a topic that people actually are hungry to know more about. For instance, my second article was on VIsion-based Page Segmentation and link building. No one had really discussed how VIPS could affect active link building, so it was easy for me to be the number one guy for that topic -- I was the ONLY guy for that topic!

It also helps, of course, to write about something controversial (link baiting). But I think you or Nick W would know more about that!

Can anyone write articles? Some people fear rejection, etc. What tips would you offer them to help get past that?

Rejection and mistakes are part of the path to success. They aren't a bad thing, they can be very helpful! Throw your insecurities to the wind, write an article, get rejected, and try to learn why. Then write another one.

How do you determine what articles are best for specific sources vs ones to submit to article banks?

In general, a quality article will get the most value for you if you manually submit it to a few reputable industry sites. Sometimes though your niche will not even have sites that accept article submissions! In that case you can submit to the better article sites (like Ezinearticles) and still get some good value.

Do ghost writers work? Can you buy articles from article banks? Or is it best if you write your own?

Ghostwriters can definitely work well if you're strapped for time. That said, if your personal reputation is on the line, never outsource it.

Do you think links from similar content pages count less? If not will they ever?

Sometimes duplicate article syndications get placed in the supplemental index. But if I remember correctly, Google has stated that being in the supplemental index does not affect a page's PageRank. Based on this, I think it is likely that Google's link algorithms and duplicate content filters are applied separately.

Lets talk bagpipes. My step dad is no good at them. Where should he go to learn?

He definitely needs an instructor. Bagpipes are one thing you cannot teach yourself. Otherwise you're going to be screwing up your taorluaths and lemluaths and not even know it!

Outsourcing and you. You run a pretty well known blog on the subject. Have you done much with outsourcing?

You're talking at the king of outsourcing. I'm of the opinion that an entrepreneur should only work when their labor has a very high value add. Everything else, send it to someone who can do it better, cheaper, and faster. Specialization is what makes our economy so efficient, so why fight it?

So yes, to answer your question, I outsource a ton of work and jobs, and I will continue to do this in the future. It truly is a global economy.

What were the best surprises and worst surprises with outsourcing? What tips would you have for minimizing risks and maximizing profit potential?

The best surprises happen when you find someone who is reliable and talented. The worst surprises happen when you find someone who is not talented and who steals your money. The best way to minimize risk is to make very small deals with several providers, and then make larger deals with the ones who come through.

If we're talking SEO, web design, or web development, many of them will not come through for you. But when you find a firm or person who does, treat them well and take care of them, because a good relationship with them can make a great (and profitable) asset to your business.

On many fronts I think outsourcing has a negative connotation similar to SEO. Some people have a sense of nationalistic pride and spew random hate speech at people who outsource. Why do you think they feel that way? Do you feel you pay fairly?

First, let me tackle the "nationalistic" front. It all comes down to this: I don't favor Americans, or Englishmen, or Sri Lankans over any other type of people. It irks me that people feel their own countrymen "deserve" jobs anymore than their counterparts 13 timezones over. I am looking for the best person for the job, and the buck stops there. Frankly, all the whining and complaining Americans do makes me less likely to want to hire them!

In reference to pay rates: I do believe I pay a fair wage. Of course, when outsourcing, the point is to save money on wages. One of the things my partners and I routinely look at are average wage figures and purchasing power parity stats for whatever countries we outsource to -- we want to make sure we're paying well above average wages. Firstly, this helps you sleep better at night. More than that, though, better pay helps you get higher quality people.

Actually it's more than just researching wages -- we have to remember to give the Diwali bonus, for instance, rather than the standard Christmas bonus :)

Running blog channels: how do you find the right topics? Do you look at demand? Competition? What is the primary criteria for starting a new channel?

All of the above. Demand for the content is important, and so is competition... you don't want to be one of ten thousand guys all chasing the same dollar bill. But the ultimate figure I look at is the Overture bid, plain and simple. If AdSense is going to be your main revenue stream, why not make sure the cards are in your favor?

How often should people publish to a blog? How can you tell if a topic needs frequent publishing or infrequent coverage?

It's pretty hard to get a blog to do well with infrequent posting. The only people who pull that off either have extremely good content, or are leveraging an existing base of people interested in their site (like Whitepace, for instance, who have both). But if you're new to the game, my advice is to post early, and post often. It's spider food.

Do you have to coach the bloggers on what you are looking for? What common errors are recurring amongst your writers?

The most common errors are just what you would think: spelling, grammar, code, and occasionally, insufficient attribution. These are all things you would expect from someone who is new to blogging. If they're smart, they can pick it up in a week or two (with a bit of patient coaching). Of course, I'm not known for my patience, but that's why I have a partner... he's a "people person".

Link trading: waste of time or a necessity?

Reciprocal links are still a great marketing method, if you are trading links with highly relevant, quality sites. Of course, 99% of link trades do not fit those criteria.

AdSense optimization tips: what do people screw up the most? What works the best?

I think most people go wrong because they add AdSense as an afterthought. When I design a site, or write specs for its design, the AdSense placement is one of the core requirements of the design. As a result, the AdSense is prominent, and it naturally 'fits' into the design -- it was designed that way! It is much harder to add AdSense after you design a site and get high CTR and avoid looking cluttered. Kind of similar to SEO, I suppose; it's much better to do it in the beginning.

Hagans and haggis. Sounds similar. Looks, well...your thoughts on the delectable dish?

Well as you know, I'm all about the Scots (and the Scotch!) But I can't lie, I still haven't brought myself to taste the stuff. Scottish breakfast... now we're talking!

Thanks for the interview Andy.

Andy Hagans lives and breathes SEO, link building, and blogs. When he isn't working at his own link building firm or for Text Link Ads, you can find him putzing about on his pet project: The Uganda Conflict Action Network.

Greg Harnett

G reg runs the BOTW directory, which is one of the oldest and highest quality general web directories. He also runs some travel related websites and a small blog network.

Interview

11 December 2005

You recently added a blogs directory to BOTW. What are your favorite blogs?

We launched the BOTW Blog Directory at PubCon, Vegas. We worked on transitioning it for a couple of months, and decided that PubCon would be an ideal place to launch the new product. We had previously maintained the blog listings in their own category within the BOTW Directory, but we felt that blogs as a medium were distinct enough that they warranted a separate structure. Additionally, the search functionality of the Blog Directory (release date Jan 1) is a tag driven, post search, while the search at BOTW Directory is a site and description based algorithm. So, they needed to stand apart.

My favorite (outside of ones we own) business blogs are some of the industry standards - threadwatch, matt cutts, jeremy zawondy. On a personal side, my current feeds include: ZNet Blogs , WatchBlog, - mostly political and activist blogs.

You said you run a good number of commercial sites. Do you still submit new sites to directories? About how many general directories do you submit them to? What directories would you especially recommend webmasters submit their sites to?

We own some travel sites via another company. Most of these sites were built and SEO'd in 1999 - 2000 and are already listed in all of the directories that they need to be - BOTW, Yahoo, DMOZ, Looksmart, Microsoft's bCentral, and Business.com (when applicable). My recommendation to webmasters would be to evaluate the directory that you are contemplating submitting to. My main criteria would be: age of the directory, quality of sites listed within relevant categories, number of categories and listings per category (there should be ample subcategories, and not just long lists of sites in top level categories), potential traffic, and a general sense of quality.

DMOZ: vital or past it's prime?

The demise of DMOZ has been cried since the beginning of the project. DMOZ remains the top directory - numero uno. Though they have flaws, who amongst us doesn't? They are a group of volunteers who care very deeply about the project they are involved with, and the vast majority of them are concerned with quality and relevancy above all else. Vital - no. A webmaster can surely succeed without a DMOZ listing. Past it's prime - maybe. DMOZ once controlled AOL search, when showing in AOL search could really bring traffic. As long as search spam exists, DMOZ will serve a very important function.

How much of a role should directory links play in the link profile of a website? Does this change from industry to industry and by how competitive an industry is?

Directory links should play a minimal role in the link profile of a successful SEO'd website - only a handful of what should be hundreds or thousands of links. While directory links can prove to be a boon to your marketing efforts, they should by no means be more than a small fraction of your links, regardless of your industry.

What categories do you tend to see the most submissions in?

The majority of the commercial submissions tend to fall into either the Business or Shopping branches. The non-commercial submissions tend to submit more widely throughout the directory, with higher concentrations in Society and Recreation. We have seen a trend in webmasters submitting their sites more and more to the Regional branch - not too surprising with the current industry-wide push of local search.

What categories get surprisingly few submissions?

Surprisingly, adult submissions. Though the Adult branch is not visible off the index, we do a pretty good job of promoting it, and the Adult categories have the highest amount of traffic of any categories in the directory. Knowing the competitive nature of the adult website landscape, I would expect adult submissions to constitute a higher portion of our overall submissions than they currently do.

Does most of BOTW's traffic come from search engines? How do you lock in users and grow the audience?

Yes - a majority of our traffic is driven by the popular search engines - roughly 60%. We have a lot of categories that pull top 5, top 10 across the major engines, and that helps to drive a decent amount of traffic to related categories. We strive to provide users with relevant, quality content for the subject matter they are interested in. Our team of editors add sites throughout the day, scouring the internet looking for quality relevant sites to add to BOTW categories - in fact, over 95% of the sites listed within BOTW were added in this manner. Our search functionality gets stronger with each site added, and we continue to add new

products and services to our offerings. We feel that this combination will enable us to grow our user base in perpetuity.

Directories and scalability...How do you ensure sites do not do a bait and switch after you accepted their site?

We actually re-review the sites. That is why we have the annually recurring review fee. We take some heat at times for our annually recurring model, but we have always stood by it as a testament to quality. The annual review process by our editorial team helps us to keep the bait and switch to a minimum, and maintain the high quality of the directory. Of course, we know the opportunity for manipulation is available, so editors manually check categories frequently. To make certain that all links are working, we have internal spiders crawling the site daily looking for link rot, 404s, etc...

Directories and scalability...Some categories have more value than others. How did you chose your price points & why not charge a wide variety of prices?

More value for who - the webmaster or the user? For us, each category has the same value, and needs to provide unique content, relevant to the subject matter. We are not charging for links - we are charging for an expedited review of whether or not your site is eligible for listing within the BOTW Directory. Our price points reflect the value that we feel a listing in a quality, eleven year-old directory provides - that and what the market will bear.

In this post http://www.martinibuster.net/2005/11/link-development-is-dead.html Martinibuster talks about avoiding known SEO hotspots, such as doing things like submitting your sites to directories. Do you feel some directories are better than others? How do you think the search engines distinguish between what links to trust and which ones to not trust? What do you do to put BOTW in that trusted group and keep it out of the bad group?

As I often do, I would agree here with Martinibuster that a webmaster would be wise to stay away from known hotspots and potential trouble zones. And yes, some directories are indeed better than others. If I were a webmaster looking to submit to directories, I would be very selective. If you have any doubt about the credibility of the directory, pass on it. Come back six months later, and reevaluate.

Search engines are getting smarter by the day - I could throw out any number of guesses at what they think, but the simple fact is, I do not know. Of course I am concerned with it, but we stay focused on providing the user with the best experience we can, and let the search engines do what they may. We are very cautious about our online advertising buys, and as such, only advertise in relevant areas that we feel will bring the most relevant traffic. It has gotten a little scary buying online advertising these days, and we tend to err on the side of caution.

Niche directories vs general directories: where is their greater value for webmasters to submit their sites to?

The directory industry need not be a zero sum game, and typically it isn't. For us, that is a nice change from the travel industry. In the travel space, if somebody buys a room from Expedia for next Friday, they are not buying one from me. In the directory industry, just because somebody submits their site to a niche directory, doesn't mean that they shouldn't, or can't submit to a general directory. If it is a monetary issue, I would tell the webmaster to evaluate what he/she feels will bring the best ROI, and submit accordingly. Typically though, a webmaster should identify all the quality directories, both general and niche, that meet his criteria and submit to them all.

I heard there was a bet associated with the BOTW t-shirts I see everyone wearing. Is this true?

I can neither confirm nor deny the existence of any bets associated with the BOTW t-shirts ;) People sure do love wearing them though. Best marketing dollars we ever spent...

The fox on the BOTW website looks cool. Why isn't he on any of the t-shirts?

Nuggs is the fox - the site mascot. Inspired by the use of Mozzie throughout DMOZ. We thought it would be a great way to lighten up the pages a little bit, and he gives the directory a personality of its own now. He hasn't made it onto any of the shirts yet, but you may see him on one soon.

In many ways I see the search business model teaching web users to trust links less by teaching publishers to blend ads as content. How do you see that effecting the directory business model going forward?

When you blur the line between which sites are advertisers and which are not, everybody loses. That line is increasingly getting smaller and smaller. Luckily, I don't think it will have a material effect of BOTW users, as there is clear labeling of sponsored sites vs directory listings throughout our properties. I think directory owners, and others in the search industry, would be wise to follow suit.

I tend to think directories helping structure the web are to some extent being replaced by wikis and blogs. Do you see your directory one day changing shape from the well known link description link description format to add other features?

Though there are no plans in the immediate future for any substantial changes to the BOTW directory structure and/or format, we are of course open to various options in the years to come. Blogs and wikis are fantastic, and certainly serve their own purposes. We are involved in the blog space with our BOTW Blog directory (http://blogs.botw.org), as well as BOTW Media (http://botwmedia.com) - a publishing network of 20+ blogs authored by subject matter experts from around the world. We plan on additional expansion into the blog space, and we have our

pokers in the wiki fire. We are well positioned to capitalize on the changes in the industry. We work diligently to keep BOTW well positioned to capitalize on the changes and constant evolution within the search industry.

What do you do when people pay to submit low quality sites?

If sites do not meet the minimum site guidelines, we reject them. When somebody pays for a review and the site is rejected, they then have 30 days to correct the problem. If the problem is rectified we are happy to include the listing. If the problem remains, or if the alternative site submission does not meet the guidelines, the site does not get a listing. Period.

I am sitting to your left playing Blackjack and a new deck starts. Double my opening bid, go cheap, or all in?

Go cheap - on a new deck you have no history, nothing to judge by. But is sure is fun to say "All In"!

Thanks Greg.

Read the [BOTW Blog](#) to keep up with Greg and the [BOTW](#) crew.

Lee Odden

L ee Odden is a well known blogger, SEO and public relations guru. He writes the <u>TopRank Online Marketing Blog</u>, runs the <u>TopRank SEO firm</u>, and is an owner of the <u>public relations firm Misukanis & Odden</u>.

Interview

February 15 , 2006

So I see you at conferences and you are almost always chipper. How do you run a business and not get behind or bogged down when you start doing time intensive things outside of your core business?

I enjoy getting out to conferences and meeting up with online friends in person so I guess that puts me in a good mood. Also, for some reason whenever I go to a conference there's a pile of new project inquiries when I get back. That's a good thing right?

The nice thing about having a talented group of people on our team is that it frees me up to do things like blogging, writing articles, working with associations like the <u>DMA SEMC</u> and <u>MIMA</u>, and attending conferences like <u>Search Engine Strategies</u>. I do a lot of blogging at off hours when things have quieted down for the day and the kids are asleep. I also take advantage of software tools to make organizing information and the practice of blogging more efficient.

I know many people in the SEO industry. Almost everyone who seems well known has at least one person who hates them. You are one of the rare people who are well known and hated by nobody (that I know of at least). How did you do that?

I suppose if you look hard enough you'll find some one! My main reason for working in this industry is because I really enjoy search marketing. It's always changing and can be challenging. Within certain SEO groups, forums and blogs, there's a sense of "co-opetition" where direct competitors will share information (to some degree) and have a sincere interest in the success of the industry. I share that perspective so maybe people don't see me or my firm as a threat. Also, when prospective companies call us and ask about other SEO firms, I never bash them, I compliment them. Heck, I don't need to - we get several inquiries for proposals every day. I suppose it doesn't hurt that we refer a lot of business as well.

You seem to post on quite a wide range of sites. How do you know when it makes sense to post to each channel?

Me? Ha, you are a pro at posting at multiple sites and if I ever do half as well as you, I'll be satisfied. I get a little overly ambitious on blogging actually. I try to focus on SEO related subjects at my primary blog Online Marketing Blog. I also contribute to Lockergnome.com and Search Engine Smarts. For blogging related topics, I focus on Business Blog Consulting.

How did you become an author for so many different sites?

Social networking and following my interests pretty much. I started my own blog as a way to manage articles and topics of interest to me. Then I started sharing with co-workers and then started using it as a marketing tool for TopRank. A friend of mine, Rok Hrastnik writes for Lockergnome and I thought it would be a good idea to see if Chris Pirillo would want to create an Internet Marketing channel there. The AllBusiness.com blog is an opportunity for me to provide information about SEO to small businesses, plus John Jantsch was there. I didn't want to mix too much blogging related content with my SEO blog, so the Business Blog Consulting site is a perfect outlet for that. I had met Rick Bruner at Ad:Tech and when Paul Chaney wanted to revive that site, I was happy to sign on.

You run a PR company and an SEO company. Going forward do you see them merging?

There is a lot of crossover, that's for sure. We share a number of back office resources and we're doing more and more cross-training on the technologies and tactics that allow search engine optimization and public relations to compliment each other. Our PR firm, has typically provided offline marketing services and media relations consulting. TopRank is all about organic search engine optimization. However, our PR staff are becoming particularly talented at using online channels to help clients achieve their publicity and communications goals. Blogs, RSS, and news search SEO are now a daily part of both businesses, so maybe someday it would make sense to merge.

What is your favorite service to use for submitting press releases?

For public relations clients, most of the productive distribution of press releases is manually to individual journalists along with a relevant and personalized pitch. There are other things we do to get their attention, but the basic method of promoting client news is to research target publications and their editorial calendars and then pitch our clients accordingly. We'll include a press release and a link to an online media kit that's really a blog so it's easy for journalists to subscribe to our clients' news feeds. We also send releases out through PRNewswire and PRWeb.

For SEO client promotion, we often use PRWeb, PR.com and sometimes PRLeap or PRZoom. Here's an article listing a number of resources for submitting press releases.

Matt Cutts sometimes talks about I wouldn't expect this type of link or that type of link to count. When you send out a press release what tips do you have on how to ensure it counts? How do you get press releases to lead to secondary links and media coverage?

Sending out a press release with anchor text links has little value for SEO, but it does help clickthroughs. The releases that get the most links offer the kind of content that is similar to blog posts that get the most trackbacks. Relevant, humorous, particularly useful, timely information. Basically, the releases that are most "newsworthy" get the most links.

Expecting media coverage solely from distributing press releases through a wire service is a crap-shoot. Sure, if you send out a release through a secondary wire service for a big consumer brand name company, it's going to get lots of play. But that's because of the brand as much or more than the news. Providing journalists with credible, compelling story angles is the key to getting media coverage. News organizations are cutting staff left and right and many do not have the resources to pick and choose stories and sources as they used to. They're being asked to do more with less.

That's why more publications are interviewing less and accepting contributed articles more. As a result, a few years ago we adjusted our press release strategy away from relying wholesale distribution and focus more on making sure our clients' news is where increasing numbers of journalists are looking: RSS Feeds, blog/RSS search engines, news search engines and blogs.

Lets say I want you to cover my stuff in your magazine...what is the ideal Lee Odden approach?

Magazines typically plan stories far in advance and make that schedule available as an editorial calendar. Research the calendar for a planned story that matches your topic and make a corresponding pitch. With magazines you can also be a great resource by offering a pre-written article, or contributed article based on a planned or un-planned story.

Lets say I want you to cover my stuff on your blog...what is the difference in the approach?

With blogs, there is no planned story calendar outside of the pre-defined categories of the blog. Most bloggers like be first, so sending bloggers an email the night before a news release is distributed isn't a bad idea - no embargo either. Sending a press release to a blogger a week before the release goes out with an embargo is annoying as hell.

A great pitch is where someone has obviously read some of what the blogger has written in the past, then craft a personal email that is relevant and that gets to the point. Personally, I like a link to the press release which I will point to from a blog post, not the entire release within the email.

Should people new to the industry sell discount SEO services? What are the best ways to get people to see the full value of quality SEO services?

For people who wake up one day and say, "I think I'm going to do SEO", I suppose they don't have a choice. Prospective clients who call and start out by saying, "How much do you charge?" or "What are your packages?" are a little harder to serve because they want to buy on price. They think SEO is a commodity.

Selling SEO is no different than most other consulting services. It's important to listen to what the client's real problem is and to make thoughtful and realistic recommendations. Talking about meta tags, links and rankings is a distraction from the real problem to be solved: increased sales. No matter what, at the end of the day, everyone has to be accountable to the bottom line. It doesn't have to be "sales" necessarily, but some measure of success that drives the organization to exist. Getting people to see the full value of SEO services often means a discussion of many things other than SEO tactics.

You mentioned having a niche blog that was doing rather well financially. What topic does it cover? How did you market it? Were you surprised by the results?

I started a blog about a car I bought last summer. I was researching accessories and modifications and used the blog to organize them. The car was a brand new model and was winning design awards left and right. I didn't do much really. I checked some backlinks to the few other blogs on the same topic and asked for links where it was relevant. I made sure to link out to the best quality sites on the topic and limited that to 6 or 7. I collected resources on several posts, link bait I guess, and posted to a few forums when people were asking where to find certain things, a link to my corresponding collection of links, photos, etc. I threw in a little tagging and bookmarking too. At first I made a few posts per week and just wrote whatever came up making sure to use keywords in the post titles and to always link out on each post to relevant resources. I now track trends in keyword phrases as an RSS feed and also look at keyword referrer info once in a while to guide new post topics.

The revenue from the site pays me about $350 - $400 per hour of effort. I have no complaints. Then main thing is, I started it out of a sincere interest in the topic and am just using my knowledge of SEO to help it along a little. :) Now I just need to start ten more......

How many twins live in the twin cities?

Two?

What blogs do you subscribe to that you think I do not read?

That's an interesting question Aaron and I cannot imagine any blogs that you don't read! Maybe marketersstudio.com or kraneland.com?

Thanks for the interview Lee. If you want to learn more about Lee [check out his blog](#).

Seth Godin

Seth Godin is one the most well recognized names in marketing. He has [spoke at Google](#), wrote 7 best selling marketing books, and [writes one of my favorite blogs](#). Seth also created [Squidoo](#), a site focused on helping people quickly access information.

Interview

In [Purple Cow](#) (one of my favorite books) you stress the importance of being remarkable. How does that relate to linking or internet marketing? Can a company succeed on the web without being remarkable? What should I do if my business or field generally is not remarkable?

By remarkable, I mean only, "worth making a remark about". So, if you want your idea to spread online, you only have three choices:

a. buy a lot of ads.

b. do really good SEO so that people who have already decided to search for what you have, find you

c. have the community that knows about you tell their friends, their blog readers, etc.

C, naturally, is a neat way to get to B. That's part of the genius of Google... that being remarkable is the easiest way to improve you Google ranking.

If what you sell is boring, it's probably because your organization WANTS it to be. Which is fine, but then you shouldn't expect fast growth or high Google ranking most of the time. They can make coffee and charity and political candidates interesting. Only by treating what you do as a commodity do you make it a commodity.

In [All Marketers are Liars](#) you stress the importance of telling authentic stories. What are the easiest ways to judge how authentic a story is? How can you tell if outsiders perceive the story the same way as you do?

Authentic means that it's real, it's true, it holds up to scrutiny.

It means you don't have to check a script before you make a decision. Nice people do nice things, so if your story is "we're nice", it's a good idea to hire nice people!

And yes, of course, people are going to misunderstand your story. Happens all the time. But if you tell it long enough and consistently enough and in all the right places, sooner or later, your authentic story will sink in.

When I tell people to be remarkable I often link at Purple Cow. When I tell people to sell a story that helps build their brand I often link at All Marketers are Liars. Like your books, many of your blog posts also seem like they are very good at sticking to a single topic, and are very easy to understand. How do you know when something is a blog post, an ebook, or a physical book? What do you think about when writing, or what things do you think about that help keep your narratives and blog posts so well focused and easy to understand?

This is a great question. It deserves a great answer. I don't have one. For me, alas, it's intuitive. I worry that if I studied it, it would disappear.

When should a new author consider getting a book physically published?

A published book tells a story before it's even opened. A published book is about credibility and portability and substance. So, if you need those things--if it will help your idea, or your career, or help you to reach people in a different way, then yes, do it. But be prepared for it to take a year or more, and to not make you any money at all. (Not the book part, anyway).

I believe that in most cases, for most people, it's not necessary.

I also believe that in most cases, for most authors, a "real" publisher is not worth the hassle. It's very easy to 'self publish' a book that looks and feels just like a traditional one, and to sell it on Amazon just like a traditional one.

I think you were a book publisher before you became a well known author. What sparked you to change course?

Actually, I was a successful book packager and an occasional and failed book publisher.

Publishing is truly difficult. It's about taking financial risks in a fundamentally broken business. Packaging, on the other hand, is a fantastic gig and I commend it to anyone who is creative and sleepless.

Some of your blog posts have been fairly critical of the SEO industry. I tend to think of SEO as being as much about viral marketing and creating and spreading good ideas as it is about gaming engines. What causes you to believe in and understand viral marketing so well without having much faith in SEO?

We have a semantic difference here. What you describe is totally in line with my thinking. I have never criticized that. My criticism has been reserved for two sides of one coin:

a. lazy companies that think they can buy web traffic by tricking search engines into sending them more traffic than they "deserve" by modifying sentences or code of their site without changing anything else, and

b. companies that will take money from these sites in order to do some mysterious thing for them.

Basically, I'm pushing people to dig deep, to work hard, to make stuff worth linking to.

SEO, as an industry, seems to have a bit of a black eye. I think part of that comes from many people not learning about SEO until a scammer posing as an SEO contacts them. I also think many people who sell high end consulting services make more by claiming that others are unethical, etc. Is there an easy way to fix the industry reputation problem? Or is it just something that is part of the game?

I agree with you 100%. I think the good guys should change the name of what they do. Traffic Leverage or Engines of Revenue.

As much as SEO is about gaming engines, for most companies it is more about ensuring the right contents are indexed and the wrong ones are not. How can the image of SEO be shifted from blog comment spammers, guestbook spammers and the like to people who help make content accessible?

The challenge here is the game itself. As long as we define the game as doing something to a site that makes it worse for a human and better for a computer, it's always going to be dicey. I visited a site today that rents vacation homes. It was superclear from reading it that they had rewritten their site to be engine friendly. I have no idea if that part was successful, but I'm certain that it wasn't working on the humans.

What is your favorite marketing related book that you are 99%+ certain I have never read?

The Republic of Tea, now out of print, but findable.

What is the best marketed candy bar in the world?

This is hard because if you mean "more than 20 years old" then it's got to be Hershey, because they had a remarkable product decades ago, they went to TV early and often at just the right time and they have great distribution today.

But of course, it's not the best marketed TODAY. If they keep up what they're doing, it'll just slide away.

So, what's the best marketed bar today? Well, if I describe "best" as fast-growing without a lot of investment (read: profitable) it might be Scharffen Berger. It might be Vosges, even though I don't know how to pronounce it.

What type of people should have a blog?

People who

a. have an idea they want to spread

b. have an idea worth spreading

c. are willing to tell the truth

and

d. are willing to do in consistently, over time.

What type of people should not have a blog?

People who need to be in control over the flow of ideas, who are impatient and not willing to stick with it, and who can't tell a story. Those and the ones that try to sell us a line of bs.

What is Squidoo? How does it differ from other content management or information retrieval systems, like blogs or search engines, for example?

[Squidoo](#) is a user-generated card catalog, a bunch of signposts in close proximity to each other, a way to find a few handpicked matches, not a million. Squidoo for the lensmaster is a place to point to your blog or your company or your organization. It's a place to assemble RSS feeds and links and stuff to buy. It's a cheap and fast way to increase links to sites that ought to get them.

For a surfer, it's more direct, more trusted and easier than a search engine in some ways. It's a place to start, a place to leave, and easy directory.

And for me, it's a way to raise a lot (I hope) of money for charity.

What are 3 things I should do differently on SeoBook.com to make it a better website?

It's a great website. Everyone should read your book. I did. I'm glad I did. I'm jealous of your site.

Wow! thanks for that Seth. What are the biggest errors you tend to run into with most ecommerce websites?

They're selfish. They don't reflect the user experience. They're too slow. They're no fun. They don't get permission to followup. They're still no fun.

How does online marketing differ from offline marketing?

How much time do you have?

Offline, you get one conversation with a homogeneous and anonymous world.

Online, you get thousands of conversations with people you can learn about.

Search engines [teach publishers to blend contextual ads in content](#) **to gain higher clickthrough rates. Do you eventually see people trusting link citations less, and perhaps growing to ignore them like banner ads? In margin based industries how does one remain profitable without blending when the blend can increase income per pageview by 300%?**

Do you mean how will media companies make more money by integrating the ads? I think they shouldn't. The yellow pages and google adwords are both the greatest ad mediums ever because every person using them KNOWS that they are ads. So advertisers get productive traffic. You can goose income for a while, but soon, advertisers will be able to tell the difference.

Earlier you hinted that publishing might be a flawed business model. If publishers are losing out to independant types how do they stay relevant if they typically are not allowed to be as biased or opinionated, and do not integrate ads as heavily as some independant publishers?

Book publishing is in trouble for a different reason (actually, more than one).

The guaranteed return policy at bookstores means that most, almost all, books lose money the glut (175,000 titles a year) of new titles makes it the noisiest market in the world and the big authors get huge advances, sucking much of the profit out.

There are doubtless very profitable niches, but the mainstream guys have troubles...

What's so good about Pop Tarts?

I haven't had one in forever, but I remember them being gooey, crisp, sweet, crunchy, soft, hot and proustian, all at once.

And then once, I ate six and had to stop, forever.

If I wanted to learn more about Seth Godin where do I go?

www.squidoo.com/seth

Kim Krause Berg

Kim Krause Berg is a usability guru who provides usability consulting, blogs about usability, and helps maintain the Cre8asiteforums community.

Interview

July 16, 2005

How long have you been a blogger?

Since July 2002, one month before Cre8asiteforums went live. My friend, Bill Slawski, had one and his enthusiasm and support gave me the incentive to try it. I started with two blogs, one for SEO news and another one for personal stuff. I removed the personal one quickly after realizing talking about myself was too depressing.

My SEO news buddies then were Andy Beal, Peter DaVanzo and Kalena Jordan. We were considerate of each other, so there was very little news overlap or stealing of stories. When other SEO news blogs poured in, I was ready to begin branching off into the field I was moving into, which is usability. Now I blog about both topics. I write for two other blogs besides mine - SERoundtable and Cre8tive Flow when I can squish out the time.

Which blogs do you find most interesting and / or inspirational?

SEOMoz is the one I visit every day. It's never boring. I hate to be bored. Jeff Zeldman writes creative post titles that lure me in like fishing from the creek. I always visit because I'm afraid I might miss something special, such as the birthday post he recently wrote to his late mother. His blog is an example of a Christmas stocking blog. There's always the promise of finding something in there to play with.

I like good teaching blogs, like 456 Berea Street and some of the larger blogs with staffs that supply a constant supply of research and articles, such as Putting People First and Boxes and Arrows. As you can see, I'm a boring bloggee. I read blogs to learn something, rather than be entertained. If I can be entertained, while I'm devouring research, all the better.

I scan about 150 blogs on an almost daily basis. If I know the person personally, as in someone from the SEO industry, I monitor their blog as if I'm waiting for a telephone call from them. I also hunt for examples of blogs that represent a segment of blogging, such as corporate blogging. For that, I like [Debbie Weil's Blogwrite for CEO's](#) . I'm not a regular at women-only blogs, though [Blogher](#) is a dynamite blog when I want a gender fix and [LipSticking](#) because of the honest writing. I don't have time for blogs outside my work interests, and yet when one of my favorite bloggers sets off on a tangent and goes off topic, I'm hanging on their every word.

I like bloggers who talk to me, not at me.

In the blog usability review you mentioned human emotional connection: What blogs do you see that do it well?

Very few. I have two memorable examples of how powerful the human connection is with blogs and how it's the best marketing tool of all.

I came upon two blogs that blew me away while aimlessly roaming around places like Technorati and Bloglines. Both initially caught me with their post title that appeared in the feed. Both had a first sentence that forced me in, against my will. The first blog example turned out to be a hilarious story written by a NYC male escort who had a disastrous date who happened to not be a client. She was such a screamer and so loud he was terrified he'd be ejected from his apartment complex due to the noise. What made this so fun wasn't the story as much as how well it was told in the blog.

The other find was more amazing because the post title was simple, and yet I was compelled to click on it. It turned out to be this searing, touching piece written by a father whose little girl had just died. I was an emotional wreck when I finished reading it. So much so that I had to write about it in mine. "[The Extreme Human Power Behind Blogs Is Not For Sale](#)" It had a true impact on readers. Even now, as I re-visit the post that I found "[Dear Elena](#)" I get choked up.

Blogs unite the humanity of us. Even business and corporate blogs. It can be pleasant to discover the CEO who has feelings or business that has time to talk to us. Not every blog wants to reach out for a group hug, but I have a soft spot for those that do. Web sites can be empty holes on the Internet, where you wonder where their people went.

Is an emotional connection more of a requirement with blogging than other types of web publishing?

No. I look for the emotional connection on all sites I evaluate. We're social creatures. We're translating this to the Web in many ways, like MySpace and Linked in. The latter is dry and as thrilling as a rolodex until you start reading what people have to say about people they've worked with. Humans are the ones with the credit cards, not search engine bots. Humans go to the Internet when they're lonely. Political blogs thrive on the emotional connection. Character blogs may be failing,

however, because of their nature. One of the actors from the TV Show "Invasion" had a blog, written from the perspective of his character. The blog has been removed. Steve Rubel notes the demise of other character blogs, saying, "Character blogs are a waste of time because a character is not and never will be human - unless it's Pinocchio."

What types of blogs are ok to host on free blog hosting servers like Blogspot? When should a business decide it is worth it to place a blog on their own site?

For credibility, I support blogs with their own domain. However! Credibility and authenticity can be just as well displayed on free-hosted software. One example is one my new favorites, Rosie Sherry. I think she's awesome in that she's a woman in QA who blogs, so I have someone I can relate to. But, she writes clearly and has earned my loyalty, not because of her blog host, but because of the quality of her blog.

Businesses who want to blog need to consider their target reader and interests. I like Target, but doubt I'd ever want to read a blog by them. Businesses need to carefully consider who they let author their blog as well. A poorly presented and written blog can drive people away. People can spot a huge ego for miles away. Check motives.

What are the biggest usability errors that seem to be built into most blogs or blogging platforms?

The number one usability error bloggers make is not explaining to the reader who you are and why you have a blog. If you are a Splogger, admit you're only purpose is to steal other content. (Just kidding.)

The second biggest is poor planning and pathetic software that makes poor planning possible. Archives and search are my pet peeves, especially for established blogs. Good bloggers wrote GREAT STUFF 8 months ago, but good luck trying to find it. Categories and tagging are band-aids. No solutions are universal for all blog software, and therefore, not accessible to all bloggers. Instead of putting a map to my house online, I wish Google had worked on Blogger's archives and blog search problems. (By the way, their map is wrong.)

Does design play a key roll in blog usability?

Yes. If readers can't use it (find old posts, fill out comments) or read it (i.e. small font, doesn't render in Firefox), they may not return. How many blogs blow up in handheld devices? User centered design requirements shouldn't end as soon as the site is called "a blog". The same user interface problems that are seen in web sites are seen in blogs.

Design for revenue is being explored now as blogs participate more and more in the realm of ecommerce and marketing. The million dollar question is "Can we be paid to share information?" Sure. I'd buy a book from someone who has a blog that teaches me and keeps me informed. I figure their book is probably good too.

How profitable are blogs with auto-ripped off content packed with Google Ads? We're exploring this too, unfortunately.

Are the default templates usable? When should a blogger consider professional design services?

Templates are excellent places to start with. This is both a curse and a blessing. It's a blessing because new bloggers can get a feel for the whole blog thing, the secret code, how to post, how to put up ads, etc. A curse because you no longer need to hire a webmaster. You can just go get a free blog template to sell your beaded toe rings, and keep an ongoing dialog going about the next big bead fad (just to be able to say its still a blog.)

Corporate and business blogs will be considering brand and identity. For example, Cre8asiteforums has a blog that is moving to a new home and new software. The blog staff has changed how it looks and is re-working the purpose for having a blog. (Why would forums have a blog?) It is intended to look like it belongs to the forum but is not smothered by it. This has taken a staff of designers, writers, programmers, arguers, artists, and someone to make sure the blog editor doesn't quit in sheer frustration. (It's not me. I get to watch.) We did start with a template offered up by Wordpress, but in the end, it will be our own look and feel.

My own blog is based on a template that I destroyed after years of playing in the code and I have no idea what the original template used to look like.

I would recommend professional help if changing an established blog. This is because there is a history there to consider, including back links, feeds, and readership based on the status quo. One of my longtime favorite sites had a re-do and I'm bummed because they said goodbye to the liveliness and humor the old one had. Was this a conscious business decision or an oversight?

You mentioned some of my offers (like the newsletter offer) were a bit weak in nature. Do you think it is easy to mix commerce and blogging? Are there any friction points? If so, how do bloggers typically mess this up?

This is something I know you care a lot about. It's also new, this idea of mixing business with blogging. The kinks aren't worked out. Performancing.com is one such site that is willing to keep looking at this, even the mistakes. Problogger covers making money with blogs extensively.

When blogging and business combine, the reason for the blog has immediately changed. It's morphed into a sales tool and already being exploited to death with splogs and auto-generated theme-blogs.

Bloggers mess up by deceiving their readers.

With Seobook, I suggested offering regular readers a choice of whether to get the version with the big book ad in the middle (first timers), or a version that is just posts (those who bought the book or decided not to and don't want to be bombarded with the ad every time they come to read your blog.) However, the no-

ad version can still convert by prompts like "Have you read my book?" or "If you're on this site, you may have read my book. Here's how to tell others about it" or "I wrote about this in my book" inside a blog post on a particular topic and you present a non-invasive link. In other words, you have a product and there's no reason to ignore it just because you are "a blogger". You are a blogger with a book for sale, and services to promote.

I look for these 6 points on every blog start page: who, where, what, why, when and how. There are different ways to answer these questions but they must appear quickly and be forthright and visible. Tell me how long you've been blogging, and this may influence your credibility. Show me the blogs you link to, why you blog, what you blog about and when you think you might not be blogging for awhile. Communicate. If someone puts up five blogs, on different themes, and can honestly write original posts for all of them, they're likely not from the planet Earth, and definitely not married with children. Those bloggers are doing this because of the ads stuck on these blogs, and heck, if they keep writing really good stuff, who cares?

The mistake is not being original and doing it for the supposed revenue. I'd like to see bloggers earn their revenue with clever blogs worth reading. If they sell something I want, I'll buy from them. Many bloggers are book writers and a blog is perfect for marketing their knowledge and style. They do need to be considerate for those who aren't coming for the book (or any product/service), however. These are the user centered design issues bloggers now face as they move into the competitive mainstream.

The inline ads on my site are probably a bit aggressive and annoy repeat visitors. Are there other ways that would be easy to add a call to action without lowering the conversion rate?

I'd like to see some programming genius's come up with ways to tick them off. To pursue blog commerce, we need more options in blog software. For example, in my blog, inline ads repeat down the page. I don't want that, but don't know how to turn if off. Other blogs have the same problem, and its compounded with ads in their feeds. This is, again, how ads got in the way of a good thing.

End user options like "View with ads", or not, is one of my dream ideas. "Skip to content" is the basis for this, only it would be "Skip to posts – no ads please". Can you just imagine what screen readers are reading back to their users, with all the ads mixed into blog entries?

Conversions are like sneaky word games. They rely on their relationship to the value proposition. It's easy to get distracted from the value proposition in a blog that's intent on telling stories or sharing news. It's easy to completely forget to put in call to action prompts, especially if you don't want to interrupt a great story. One word can make a difference between a click, or not. It's not the big bulky ad or the repeated text ad that grabs them. It's how you persuade them to try something for

free, or how your service will improve life for your reader. It's also when you tell them about your offer. Move ads around. Change ad sizes. Experiment with above the fold and below the fold, text ads or image. Avoid distractions. Build momentum but don't bombard. It's the same as any web site, but a blog with a following has to know when to stop selling and just sit quietly so visitors can read what you wrote.

You mentioned something about backwards vision in your review of my site. What is a backwards vision?

It's adapted from software testing practices like "backwards testing" and "requirements gathering". I look for several things.

1. If you took away all the fluff and stuff from the site, would I be able to still determine its purpose and/or the blog owner's priorities for the blog?

2. I report my first-time impressions on what I think the site's purpose and objectives are. I also report the market and reader I think the blog is targeting. If I am wrong or miss something the blogger thinks should be obvious, then the site didn't communicate properly to me what the site owner had wished it to. If I list things they didn't consider…well, I don't think that's ever happened.

3. The types of functional and non-functional elements the blog includes and how or if they support the blog's requirements. This includes "chicklets", plug-in applications and non-functional like legal items like a Creative Commons statement.

It's a discipline - one that bloggers may not have considered. Listing objectives and priorities for a blog is like laying the foundation. It's done before the information architecture stage. This list helps determine and narrow down blog requirements. Every element that is placed on the blog MUST be traceable to a requirement, which is traceable to a business or personal goal or set of priorities. If it does not connect, it is not offering support. If it can't be traced, it is a stray addition that causes risk to the design and in the longer term, success and life of the blog.

The functional and non-functional requirements should be traceable to blog priorities and goals. What sometimes happens is the blogger tosses in something because it seems cool to do. It should offer support, not serve as a distraction.

When does a blog start to need a privacy policy or a comments policy?

When it asks for anyone's name or email address, such as for comments or when it has any type of form that requests personal information.

What are your favorite usability books and resources?

All of them. Honestly, I read EVERYTHING. I'm shopping for a new bookshelf. To pick one? The Eisenberg's "Call to Action" book. For the web, Functioning Form. And UX matters. I read Jakob Nielsen's Alertbox, of course and I enjoy

Jared Spool and his staff's blog, UIE Brain Sparks. One more…Marketing Experiments blog. I like to read their latest findings.

What are the biggest differences between trying to improve the usability of a blog as compared to an ecommerce site?

The ecommerce site is about persuasion, creating desire and need. Some can influence decisions (Amazon is good at this.) The focus of this is usually lost in the design for blogs, or somewhere in the lack of understanding for how to market from blogs online. The blog is the wild child of the web family. It's still figuring out what its doing and it never intended to conform to anyone's standards. I can make suggestions for improving usability but I'm also well aware that the blog owner may not be interested. It's like talking to my own teenager. Same sort of resistance. Same "I already know what to do and don't need you." Sooner or later, they do.

What is the biggest surprise you came across while doing blog usability reviews?

How different blogs can be from each other and how compelling writing trumps bad design. Blog readers are patient, loyal and surprisingly tolerant. The second surprise is how many blog owners drank the funky kool-aid and thought blogging would be easy, or make them tons of money in a month. A usability review can offer reassurance that they are doing the right things and to be patient, or they are not doing the right things and let's fix that. Many people never considered they could set goals for their blog and guide their ship with a plan.

If I wanted to get a blog usability review how would I go about contacting you for one?

Send a limo to my house and take me to a health spa and we can chat during our massage. Or, visit Blog Usability Reviews to read more or order one. I also have a page called Blog Usability where I'm gathering resources to support bloggers interested in the usability side of blog life.

Thanks Kim :)

If you are thinking about improving the usability of your blog I highly recommend hiring Kim. Kim blogs on usability, SEO, and other related topics.

Interview

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Dan Kramer

Dan Kramer is a search engine optimization expert who [blogs about search](#) and created the popular cloaking software named [KloakIt](#).

Interview

July 10, 2006

How does cloaking work?

It is easiest to explain if you first understand exactly what cloaking is. Web page cloaking is the act of showing different content to different visitors based on some criterion, such as whether they are a search engine spider, or whether they are located in a particular country.

A cloaking program/script will look at a number of available pieces of information to determine the identity of a visitor: the IP address, the User-Agent string of the browser, the referring URL, all of which are contained in the HTTP headers of the request for the web page. The script will make a decision based on this information and serve the appropriate content to the visitor.

For SEO purposes, cloaking is done to serve optimized versions of web pages to search engine spiders and hide that optimized version from human visitors.

What are the risks associated with cloaking? What types of sites should consider cloaking?

Many search engines discourage the practice of cloaking. They threaten to penalize or ban those caught using cloaking techniques, so it is wise to plan a cloaking campaign carefully. I tell webmasters that if they are going to cloak, they should set up separate domains from their primary website and host the cloaked pages on those domains. That way, if their cloaked pages are penalized or banned, it will not affect their primary website.

The types of sites that successfully cloak fall into a couple of categories. First, you have those who are targeting a broad range of "long tail" keywords,

typically affiliate marketers and so on. They can use various cloaking software packages to easily create thousands of optimized pages which can rank well. Here, quantity is the key.

Next, you have those with websites that are difficult for search engines to index. Some people with Flash-based websites want to present search engine spiders with text versions of their sites that can be indexed, while still delivering the Flash version to human visitors to the same URL.

What is the difference between IP delivery and cloaking?

IP delivery is a type of cloaking. I mentioned above that there are several criteria by which a cloaking script judges the identity of a visitor. One of the most important is the IP address of the visitor.

Every computer on the internet is identified by its IP address. Lists are kept of the IP addresses of the various search engine spiders. When a cloaking script has a visitor, it looks at their IP address and compares it against its list of search engine spider IP addresses. If a match is found, it delivers up the optimized version of the web page. If no match is found, it delivers up the "landing page", which is meant for human eyes. Because the IP address is used to make the decision, it's called "IP delivery".

IP delivery is considered the best method of cloaking because of the difficulty involved in faking an IP address. There are other methods of cloaking, such as by User-Agent, which are not as secure. With User-Agent cloaking, the User-Agent string in the HTTP headers is compared against a list of search engine spider User-Agents. An example of a search engine spider User-Agent is

"Googlebot/2.1 (+http://www.googlebot.com/bot.html)".

The problem with User-Agent cloaking is that it is very easy to fake a User-Agent, so your competitor could easily decloak one of your pages by "spoofing" the User-Agent of his browser to make it match that of a search engine spider.

How hard is it to keep up with new IP addresses? Where can people look to find new IP addresses?

It's a chore the average webmaster probably wouldn't relish. There are always new IP addresses to add (the best cloaking software will do this automatically), and it is a never-ending task. First, you have to set up a network of bot-traps that notify you whenever a search engine spider visits one of your web pages. You can have a CGI script that does this for you, and possibly check the IP address against already known search engine spiders. Then, you can take the list of suspected spiders generated that way and do some manual checks to make sure the IP addresses are actually registered to search engine companies.

Also, you have to keep an eye out for new search engines... you would not believe how many new startup search engines there are every month.

Instead of doing it all yourself, you can get IP addresses from some resources that can be found on the web. I manage a [free public list of search engine spider IP addresses](). There are also some [commercial resources]() available (no affiliation with me). In addition to those lists, you can find breaking info at the [Search Engine Spider Identification Forum]() at WebmasterWorld.

Is cloaking ethical? Or as it relates to SEO is ethics typically a self serving word?

Some would say that cloaking is completely ethical, others disagree. Personally, my opinion is that if you own your website, you have the right to put whatever you like on it, as long as it is legal. You have the right to choose which content you display to any visitor. Cloaking for SEO purposes is done to increase the relevancy of search engine queries... who wants visitors that aren't interested in your site?

On the other hand, as you point out, the ethics of some SEOs are self serving. I do not approve of those who "page-jack" by stealing others content and cloaking it. Also, if you are trying to get rankings for one topic, and sending people to a completely unrelated web page, that is wrong in my book. Don't send kids looking for Disney characters to your porn site.

I have seen many garbage subdomains owning top 10 rankings for 10s to 100s of thousands of phrases in Google recently. Do you think this will last very long?

No, I don't. I believe this is due to an easily exploitable hole in Google's algorithm that really isn't related to cloaking, although I think some of these guys are using cloaking techniques as a traffic management tool. Google is already cleaning up a lot of those SERPs and will soon have it under control. The subdomain loophole will be closed soon.

How long does it usually take each of the engines to detect a site that is cloaking?

That's a question that isn't easily answered. The best answer is "it depends". I've had sites that have never been detected and are still going strong after five or six years. Others are banned after a few weeks. I think you will be banned quickly if you have a competitor who believes you might be cloaking and submits a spam report. Also, if you are creating a massive number of cloaked pages in a short period of time, I think this is a flag for search engines to investigate. Same goes for incoming links... try to get them in a "natural" looking progression.

What are the best ways to get a cloaked site deeply indexed quickly?

My first tip would be to have the pages located on a domain that is already indexed -- the older the better. Second, make sure the internal linking structure is adequate to the task of spidering all of the pages. Third, make sure incoming links from outside the domain link to both the index (home) cloaked page and to other "deep" cloaked pages.

As algorithms move more toward links and then perhaps more toward the social elements of the web do you see any social techniques replacing the effect of cloaking?

Cloaking is all about "on-page" optimizing. As links become more important to cracking the algorithms, the on-page factors decline in importance. The "new web" is focused on the social aspects of the web, with people critiquing others content, linking out, posting their comments, blogging, etc. The social web is all about links, and as links become more of a factor in rankings, the social aspects of the web become more important.

However, while what people say about your website will always be important, what your website actually says (the text indexed from your site) cannot be ignored. The on-page factors in rankings will never go away. I cannot envision "social techniques" (I guess we are talking about spamming Slashdot or Digg?) replacing on-page optimization, but it makes a hell of a supplement... the truly sophisticated spammer will make use of all the tools in his toolbox.

How does cloaking relate to poker? And can you cheat at online poker, or are you just head and shoulders above the rest of the SEO field?

Well, poker is a game of deception. As a pioneer in the cloaking field, I suppose I have picked up a knack for the art of lying through my teeth. In the first SEO Poker Tournament, everybody kept folding to my bluffs. While it is quite tempting to run poker bots and cheat, I find there is no need with my excellent poker skills. Having said all that, I quietly await the next tournament, where I'm sure I'll be soundly thrashed in the first few minutes ;)

How long do you think it will be before search engines can tell the difference between real page content and garbled markov chain driven content? Do you think it will be computationally worthwhile for them to look at that? Or can they leverage link authority and usage data to negate needing to look directly at readability as a datapoint?

I think they can tell now, if they want to devote the resources to it.

However, this type of processing is time/CPU intensive and I'm not sure they want to do it on a massive scale. I'm not going to blueprint the techniques they should use to pick which pages to analyze, but they will have to make some choices. Using link data to weed out pages they don't need to analyze would be nice, but in this age of rampant link selling, link authority may not be as reliable an indicator as they would like. Usage data may not be effective

because in order to get it, the page has to be indexed so they can track the clicks, defeating the purpose of spam elimination. There best bet would be to look at creation patterns... look to see which domains are creating content and gaining links at an unreasonable rate.

What is the most amount of money you have ever made from ranking for a misspelled word? And if you are bolder than I am, what word did you spell wrong so profitably?

I made a lot of money from ranking for the word "incorparating". This was waaay back in the day. I probably made (gross) in the high five figures a year for several years from that word. Unfortunately, either people became better spellers or search engines got smarter, because the traffic began declining for the word about four or five years ago.

If I wanted to start cloaking where is the best place to go, and what all should I know before I start? Can you offer SEO Book readers a coupon to get them started with KloakIt?

KloakIt is a great cloaking program for both beginners and advanced users, because it is easy to get running and extremely flexible and powerful. There is a forum for cloakers there where you can go for information and tips. I am also the moderator of the Cloaking Forum over at WebmasterWorld, and I welcome questions and comments there.

SEO Book readers can get a $15.00 discount of a single domain license of KloakIt by entering the coupon code "seobook" into the form on the KloakIt download page. I offer a satisfaction guarantee, and, should you decide to upgrade your license to an unlimited domains license, you can get credit for your original purchase towards the upgrade fee.

Please note that I am not being paid an affiliate commission for KloakIt downloads, and I have not deeply dug in to try out the software yet. I just get lots of cloaking questions and wanted to interview an expert on the topic, and since Dan is a cool guy I asked him.

Thanks for the interview Dan.

Bob Massa

B ob Massa is one of the oldest names in the field of search engine optimization. He founded SearchKing and has been building his reputation as a strong internet marketer for over a decade.

I wanted to interview him due to his blunt, eloquent, and unique writing style.

Interview

September 7, 2006

What is bathroom spamming? How does it apply to SEO?

It is difficult for me to answer that because I'm the guy who doesn't believe there is really such a thing as spamming. To me, it is just marketing.

I'm pretty sure you are referring to a thread at Threadwatch where I made a couple of comments about an article Jacob Nielsen had written referring to the effects search engines have on the web. In one of those comments I mentioned that I had been involved in a project where a webmaster had a new site and no budget for promotion. I had half jokingly suggested the only option available to a webmaster with no budget was to advertise his website in public restrooms by placing well-worded post-it notes. The webmaster wrote BEWARE www.his-site.com and was able to avoid what is referred to by many SEO's, (whatever that is), as the sandbox and start generating traffic very quickly.

In this context, bathroom spamming could also be taxi spamming or side of the bus spamming or running across a football field during a televised game with a url painted on your backside spamming or anything else that creates an interest in a specific website in a way that tells search engines that people are looking for a specific thing. The point of this particular discussion was that many SEO's, (whatever that is), tend to become so focused on following search engines that they forget search engines real job is to follow people. That by creating a demand by people, that causes search engines to "look" to satisfy that demand before their competitors do.

Did anyone see the Pontiac TV ads telling the public to search at Google?

TV spamming ?????

What is the current primary driver of search relevancy algorithms?

The same driver it has always been. Money.

Sorry I'm being a bit obtuse. I realize you mean programmatically. Not that it changes my answer but on to the other parts of your question.

Do you think usage data is already it, or will soon replace it? Why or why not? How do you see search relevancy algorithms changing in the next 5 to 10 years?

Usage data is not already IT and will not soon be IT. Why? Because, as it relates to relevancy, usage data is good and is and will be used to help but it alone is no better than keyword density or page rank. It will not make searches more relevant anymore so than the other factors.

As to the last part, I personally don't believe there is any such thing as relevancy algorithms. There is direct matches but to me, that is not relevancy. That is simply a matter of searching through large data sets for exact matches. For researching quotes, phone numbers, parts numbers and dates, exact match is all that matters and every database of any size has been doing that on the web since the early 90's. But for anything the least subjective, it is only perception. I believe relevancy is completely and totally subjective and what matters to algorithms is the PERCEPTION of relevancy. The marketing of algorithms as relevant is what puts engineers into Italian sports cars, not relevancy. So, as you can see, I do believe in ADVERTISING algorithms and I see usage data being used on a personal level a lot more as the data gathering gets faster, cheaper and hopefully better. But the better part is far less important than the faster and cheaper parts.

Do you believe it is cheaper for most marketers to try to influence search engines directly, or to aim to influence groups of people and individual topical authorities?

(Boy, I bet I catch hell for this one, you may get a little residual hell yourself just for letting me say it, but here it goes.)

I believe it is incredibly cheaper, faster, easier, more profitable, more stable and more reliable to try to influence people than search engines. Plus, influence people and the search engines follow, (see bathroom spamming above), but if you aim the other direction, the only chance you have of influencing people is IF they search the right way, IF the search engine puts it in front of them and IF the search engine doesn't move it.

That said, I do understand why many SEO's, (whatever that is), would disagree. To influence search engines, it is possible, to develop systems, procedures and programs that capitalize on the weaknesses of search engines enabling the industrious SEO, (whatever that is), who is in control of those systems, procedures and programs to virtually avoid any contact with people whatsoever. No sales, no customer service, no complaints. I can certainly see the appeal.

Are the business models of most large publishing companies screwed? Google seems to be making partnerships with a few of them? How can those not receiving kickbacks from Google compete with those that are?

Large publishing companies' business models are no more screwed than large oil companies, large grocery stores or large SEO firms, (whatever that is). In my opinion, all business models are screwed if the company, large or small, is not prepared to adapt to changes in the market and to take advantage of new technology as it becomes available. Keep in mind that would include Google too.

I don't see partnerships being made today as being much different than 100 years ago. What about those companies in the steel industry that did not partner with Andrew Carnegie or in the railroad business that did not partner with Vanderbilt? The companies that did not partner with those Googles of the day and survived,(granted there weren't many), did so by defining their purpose, implementing effective planning and providing a value rich service better than their competitors. I believe large publishing companies will do the same, with or without Google, by simply not clinging to tradition and assuming their power from the success of yesterday entitles them to success today.

The thing I feel is important is the question "WHY is Google partnering with large publishing companies?" Maybe because it is the publishing companies that actually have the content?

Google may have the technology to inventory and deliver, but inventory and deliver what? It's the publishing companies that actually have the writers that actually create the content that people want delivered. That is the asset the publishing companies have at least at this point. Of course Google has the money to create their own. They can hire writers as easily as the New Yorker, but that doesn't immediately give Google the clout, the respectability and the subscriber base that the New Yorker has spent many, many years building up. It just makes sense to me that Google would want to partner with some of the publishing companies to get the assets that simply hiring writers would not give without a lot of time and a lot of doing everything right.

That alone indicates an opportunity and a survivability with large publishing companies if they simply look to new ways of content inventory and delivery.

Are all humans biased?

Absolutely! It is at the very core of being a human.

Do all algorithms made by humans have biases to them?

Yes. One of the reasons I was able to succeed in the search engine placement game was because I could see beyond the programs and realize that the programs only did what a human told them to.

If you were a search engineer how would you ensure you minimized negative algorithmic biases while keeping the results relevant and maintaining your business model?

This is basically a three part question so I'll answer it in three parts.

First, I believe there is no such thing as negative biases, therefore there can be no algorithmic negative biases, at least not to the engineer. The only people who see a bias as negative is OTHER people. As humans we all justify what we do and feel. Even when we tell ourselves we are being fair and not allowing our own opinions to influence our decisions, we do. A search engineer is going to develop a mathematic algorithm the way he thinks is "right" according to the objectives he has set either by himself or by his employer. If you don't believe you have a negative bias, you can't minimize it.

Secondly, outside of exact textual or graphical matches, I believe relevancy is completely subjective. If you believe it is relevant, you are right. If you believe it is not, you are right. So, to an engineer, your algorithm is as relevant as you think it is.

Thirdly, maintaining your business model is relevant. You can not have relevancy without keeping your business model. I realize this is a little abstract, but if the business model becomes threatened at anytime, we simply alter our definition of relevancy and find other ways to measure it.

I was in a meeting once where everyone was discussing leading indicators. After about a half an hour of every leading indicator discussed pointing downward, the CEO literally looked across the table and told everyone we needed to find some leading indicators that worked.

So, the moral of the story is, if all our indicators are bad, obviously, we need some new indicators. I believe that philosophy is just as true with engineers. Maybe more so.

When is bias a bad thing?

When your bias conflicts with mine.

When is bias a good thing?

When your bias agrees with mine.

Is relevancy based on anything more than perception?

To marketing people, it is based on size, speed, number of occurrences of matching characters, proximity to the start of a document, bolded characters and on and on ad nauseam, but the real answer is ----- No.

If search algorithms get to know who we are on a personal level how do you prevent them from exploiting your psychological faults as highly commercial opportunities?

The thing you're missing here is, exploiting your psychological faults could be the very definition of highly commercial opportunities. You don't prevent it. That is the point.

We all have needs that we acquire things for. Protection from the cold, sustenance when we're hungry and water when we're thirsty, BUT, no one is wanting to track your email, search history and IM's to find out when you want a drink of water. They want to track that stuff to discover your desires, not needs. Desires are driven by what could be termed by some as psychological faults. You know, the wanting to keep up with the Joneses, the "do these pants make me look fat", the, "I bet I could get women talking to me if I was driving THAT car", that kind of stuff. What are those things? Psychological virtues?

If search engines act as oracles and have some self reinforcing element to them how would one see around their own personal biases when they are frequently reinforced by the ways they use language, the biases of others who use the same language, and machines that reinforce their world views?

Well, I'm not sure what language we're speaking here. I think this question somehow relates to the last question about algorithms getting to know who we are personally, so I'll answer it from that perspective.

First of all, I think seeing search engines as oracles is WAAAYYYYY over the top. A search engine is just a machine. An ad delivery machine. The only way it reinforces itself is by tracking what ads it shows compared to which gets clicked on more and through that process "learns" to show ads more likely to get clicked on more often. Is that a self reinforcing oracle or an emotionless money machine with no conscience whatsoever?

The biases presented by a search engine that tracks personal info on you is going be dictated by ads. It will tell you what it thinks you will think is relevant IF it sees you clicking on more of what it wants you to click on.

Secondly, we don't try to "see around" our biases. Our biases are what makes us right. Biases are what forms our own ideas of ethics, morals and right from wrong. An extreme example would be religious fanatics. They don't see themselves as terrorists, they see themselves as defenders of the truth, crusaders for God and warrior in a holy war.

Our biases are formed by our environment and language is a part of that. But, regardless of the language, what alters our perception is what we agree with and what we don't. That is why, with any language a search engine speaks, it is going to try to deliver to me what it thinks I will agree with and to you it will try to deliver what it thinks you will agree with.

That is the beauty of personalization in regards to search engines. It will help improve the perception of relevancy on an individual basis according to our own personal biases, which it has learned by watching, recording, analyzing and delivering based on what it thinks it finds.

You frequently highlight conversion and sales as being more important than traffic. Why?

To me, traffic without conversion is the epitome of futility.

What are the best ways to publish information such that it converts?

To be honest. Tell what it is, what it does for you and how to get it. Feature - Benefit - Call to action

What are the biggest things that hold back most webmasters?

I would have to say, smoking, junk food and lack of a satisfying social calendar.

Can Yahoo! or MSN compete with Google?

Absolutely! In my opinion public relations is really the only place where Google has them beat. Yahoo and MSN both have a LOT of features that could be argued are as good as many of Googles. But no one Yahoos their prospective girlfriend. No one MSN's their boyfriend, they Google them. I don't believe Y and M are getting their ass kicked by Page Rank, I think they are getting their ass kicked by the other PR. Public Relations and image enhancement. But of course, I'm the guy who doesn't believe there is such a thing as spam.

Will any new engine be able to beat Google the way Google beat AltaVista?

I believe Alta Vista beat themselves, but yes, Google can be beat just like any other business on any other day.

How do you see the search space changing in the next 5 to 10 years?

Personalization, community based and authority based trust rank, rich media and this typing thing has GOT to go!

I just spent a week in Amsterdam. What should I have done that I did not?

I don't know what you DID do but I would guess I should probably tell you the things that you should not have done that you did.

I hope you did catch the Van Gogh museum. Isn't it weird for a place that has so many coffee shops to not have better coffee? I wish I could be more help here. I've been to Amsterdam twice for several days at a time and while I'm sure I loved the experience, I can't really remember a whole lot about it.

The Van Gogh museum did rock. Some of his paintings were so amazing. I could see more emotion in the faces in his paintings than in most faces right after tragedy strikes. What will you be doing in 5 years?

I'm sure we will still be in the brokering and link/ad business. In fact, we have just hired two more customer service reps and start training them this coming Monday.

We've been doing content hosting and link acquisition now for several years and have an exclusive clientele that I don't see disappearing. We like that business and offsite optimization is certainly viable for the foreseeable future. I enjoy it.

It is profitable and doesn't take much effort on my part. Why would I retire from something like that? That is my business.

My passion is still topic specific search or more precisely, topic specific community building. There is such potential in that on so many levels I don't see me getting out of it in 5 years.

What are the biggest errors you have made on the web thusfar?

The biggest error I have made has been in falling into that trap that so many of my colleagues have. Thinking the program was more important than the people. I have hired more programmers than marketing people. I have put more into developing scripts that didn't work than I have in building an effective sales and customer support team. I have falsely thought I could handle all the advertising, marketing and sales myself when I should have been hiring people better qualified and let them do what they were good at it.

It is the people that matter not the programs, nothing sells itself and no man is an island. Those are things I've learned from my mistakes.

What will I be doing in 5 years?

If you don't stop spending all your money on the virtues of Amsterdam, sitting on a busy corner holding a "Will Spam for Food" sign would be my guess.

Seriously, you have displayed talent in communicating with the written word. You seem to have a flair for the dramatic which is a big help in link baiting of which you may hold the crown. I think maybe another book from you might be in the near future. Maybe Confessions of a Filthy Spammer or Death of a Guru, or even something as light as Quotes, Quips and Toons from the Dark Continent of SEO.

What are the biggest errors you have seen me make on the web thusfar?

While I admire and appreciate the hell out of you for not running adsense on TW, the thing that comes to mind is failing to effectively monetize TW and not doing more offsite content placement than link baiting.

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Thanks for the interview Bob.

Scott Smith: Caveman

Caveman is a popular personality on many SEO forums like WebmasterWorld. While being well known as a technical SEO Caveman also has a background rich in traditional offline marketing.

As a disclaimer, I have worked with and partnered with Caveman on numerous projects. I still would have wanted to interview him even if he and I did not work together because his unique view of the SEO world.

Interview

October 31, 2006

What is your background prior to getting into the SEM space?

Oh, you're start off by making me feel like a caveman huh? Lemme see, I spent 20 years in marketing at several large ad agencies in New York, working on a variety of very well known brands. As I got to thinking about my career, I was faced with the prospect of becoming a lifer in the ad world, because once you get into profit sharing you never leave. I couldn't see spending another 20 years doing the same work I'd already done for 20 years, so I off I went "in search of..."

In search of what?

Hehe, I didn't know really. Just something new and interesting. I was working on a book. I also like outdoor photography and won a big photo contest put on by Canon cameras [Aaron, can you insert my affiliate code there please?] ;), but photographers don't make much money so that dream didn't last long.

Anyway, I was researching a book project, and in the process, became completely mesmerized by the Web (that was back in 1998). Next thing you know, I was trying to figure out how to code a Web site. I'm still not very good at that. I don't think a single one of my sites actually validates. Shhh, don't tell anyone. Actually, a few of them do. You gotta watch out for footprints you know.

Now I run a bunch of Web sites and it's all great fun.

How do offline brand, marketing, and public relations experience relate to search marketing?

They are hugely related in my opinion. Classic marketing training and analysis teaches you to see things...connections and opportunities that are easily overlooked by others.

Web marketing is really no different from other kinds of marketing, conceptually - only the tactics and implementations are different. The engines are all about trying to show SERP's that best address the interests of the searcher. They use on-site and off-site data to sort out best pages to show, just like we do in the real world. For example, to choose a restaurant. I look for reviews (both professional and amateur, both of which are external to the restaurant), I consider how long the restaurant has been around and if it's busy most of the time. I ask personal friends. I look for signals of quality and reference, and context matters. It's very like how the algo's function.

So when I build a Web site, it's like building a good restaurant. You want a nice façade and lighting. Good recipes. Good ingredients. Good presentation. And you do what you can to get good reviews - like PR, talking to people, inviting VIP's, getting mentions in local gossip columns, whatever.

Gee, are we talking about search marketing or restaurants?

Not sure, but I'm getting hungry.

In my old advertising and marketing days, I'd always start by collecting deep knowledge of the product or service, and of the category. That included always trying the product for myself, or getting some I know and trust to try it.

Then I'd work with the brand marketing people to ensure that the product or service was up to snuff and functioning properly according to its goals, and that brand or line extensions were in place to address various users' needs or tastes.

We'd learn as much as possible about what the users think, and what they want. Car manufacturers can put all the technology they want into a car, but if a consumer wants a RED car and the manufacturer doesn't offer RED in that model, the sale is lost. You gotta know stuff like that. Knowing the category is essential to maximizing potential revenues and profits.

When, for example, you've got a real estate Web site, here's the question: Are you selling homes? Or are you selling status, comfort, the quality of local schools, a finished basement, proximity to the train station, or what?

Or, if you're selling VoIP, are you selling phone service or are you selling better ways to connect to friends.

If you understand the importance of knowing all this stuff, and make it your business to know the answers in your categories, it makes selling and positioning a brand within a Web site whole lot easier. Just like it makes creating great advertising easier. It informs everything you work on, from the name of the sited to the color of the site to the way the site is organized. All of which contribute to achieving the ultimate goals of search marketing.

And what are those in your opinion?

Increasing revenue and improving ROI.

So for you it's all about the understanding the customer, and profit?

No actually, hehe. I haven't even started talking about competition. That's a huge area. When you really learn a category, and learn what the consumers really want, and what sorts of decision trees they employ, it's tremendously helpful. What if, knowing all of that, you then see that some sites are completely missing certain important areas of appeal? Bam! New site idea.

And the Web is so great because site ideas and page ideas can get so granular that you can go after targets within targets within targets, and you have the option of doing that with one site or many.

Here's an easier one: What if you see a bunch of competition, and all of 'em are doing some things right, but not a one is doing it all right? That happens ALL THE TIME.

Do I need to be technical to be a good SEO? Do I need to be a good marketer to be a good SEO?

I dunno. You got any bagels? I'm still hungry.

C'mon now, answer the question.

I think that there are lots of ways to skin a cat. There are successful engineer/programmer types out there who've made a fortune with little or no knowledge of marketing.

Up until recently it was tougher for non-techies. But now, I'd say it's becoming easier for those who are savvy about marketing or promotion, as long as they have someone who can build an SEO-friendly site ... or at least avoid building an SEO-unfriendly site. Lots of those out there.

It also depends on if you're talking about smaller affiliate sites or bigger company/branded sites.

If you want to be really successful with the bigger stuff, I don't see how you do that in the future without strength in both tech and marketing.

You've almost got to understand Web site code, and at least the basics of search engine algo's. That doesn't mean you have to be an engineer but it sure requires a head for tech, or math, and algorithmic concepts. At the same time, it is a HUGE advantage to understand consumer marketing. You know, stuff like user behavior and motivation, decision trees, analytics, purchase cycles, buying patterns, brand development, price/value relationships. Just one major insight in any of those areas can dramatically grow revenues, especially on the Web, where opportunities are so plentiful.

And as far as Web sites go, rapid-fire communication strategies (in the way TV and print and billboard ads must grab you in seconds or lose you), ease of use and navigation, hierarchies of importance within a category, abandonment issues, conversion issues, etc.

Obviously, you can put sites up and make money without knowing much about any of that stuff. But those who know both tech and marketing have what I perceive to be an obvious advantage.

And as the Web grows up and the big money rolls in, man, you better have some kind of edge.

Speaking of which: As more of the offline brands aggressively move online how will that change the SEM space? Will individuals still be able to compete against major corporations with affiliate sites, personal blogs, etc.? Or will launching such sites be nothing more than a blissful excursion?

One thing it's been doing for a while now is pushing up PPC prices. The natural result of that is that companies who were scared or uncertain of organic search are getting more into it all the time. I can't attend a business event any more without hearing people talk about SEO or SEM.

As for smaller players competing, certainly there will always be some clever individuals getting rich. But, it's going to keep getting harder if you're a one-man-band. Small businesses on the other hand will always have an advantage or large companies, in some respects: Speed and nimbleness, local knowledge, face-to-face contact, high levels of expertise in niche markets (most of the world is niche markets you know). These will always be advantages for the little guy.

In the offline world, small business has always accounted for far more of GNP than big business. I think the number is something like 70% or 80% in favor of small business.

And getting back to the tech and marketing theme, little guys on the Web who know tech AND marketing will have the edge over those who don't. Same at all levels of competition. It's like a matrix, with size or lack of it on one axis and knowledge on the other. You can be large or small, but you the more knowledge you have, the better off you are.

Do you use any personal sites as practice for the game, or are all of your sites earners?

If there are ways to gain advantages then I use them. That applies to sites too.

Why would a successful affiliate marketing SEO consider working for SEO clients?

I give up. Why?

Umm, I mean, you.

Oh. Hehe. Well I don't think of myself as an affiliate marketer. Just a marketer whose focus for now is the Web.

The funny thing is, now that I've had a break from my old marketing career, I miss working with clients. And I rarely see a site that doesn't need both marketing and SEO help. Since I'm in a position to offer both in a highly integrated way, it seems like a good idea for me to do that. Plus, I'm a big believer in diversity, as long as you stay within your area of expertise.

You have often mentioned trying to position your site and brand near at least one authority in your vertical. What are some litmus tests for how easily you can align your site with existing sites? Which authoritative sites should you consider trying to align your site with?

I think it's critical. And it's one advantage that the smaller players are losing, which is a major failing of Google these days. But in a way the social Web is offsetting this I think. Anyway, yes, the SE's and especially Google are a lot about proximity to core sites. Read the papers on TrustRank and seed sites. You've got to get in with other sites that matter in your niche. And this gets back to an earlier question. Getting integrated into your category is a WHOLE LOT EASIER if you pay attention to two things: Site quality, and marketing of all kinds...social, viral, niche, PR, and basic branding even.

Do search engines try to match site profiles with sites in a category? How would that work, and what might they look for?

I don't know. Do you know?

Well, I have my thoughts, but this is your time.

Tell me your thoughts.

No?

Well, I think Google does what you're asking about, sorta. Actually let me say that we behave as though it's true, which is not at all the same thing. But sometimes it helps to draw conclusions, and then behave in accordance with an assumption, for simplicity's sake, if the assumptions lead a team to the place you want to go.

Let's take both technical and comparative approaches to it.

Technically the search engines have a number of tools at their disposal. I hate always saying this, but the caveat here is that I have no way of knowing what the SE's are really doing. I'm just offering educated guesses.

So, I'm of the opinion that Google use semantic analysis of a kind related to their CIRCA technology.

Ever noticed how sometimes, especially for newer sites, you can't rank for a main keyword but you can for secondary terms? Using semantic analysis, a phrase that is

used in all documents of a Web site could be filtered out from a sites pages for ranking purposes (or at least I assume so, having read the papers). So immediately that raises lots of possibilities. Let's say that you run a simple site about "hiking boots." If the site is rather "me too," and or doesn't have much link juice, Google may filter our "hiking boots" as a rankable phrase for that site, so you're only left with "small hiking boots" if you're lucky, or maybe only "small brown hiking boots."

But here is a second possibility. You have lots of link juice, and from other hiking boot sites, no less. Whoa. Now all the sudden, G starts ranking you on page three for "hiking boots." If you see that happen, you know you're in the game.

And just to stay on track, how does that relate to matching site profiles with a category?

Well, it doesn't exactly. But it does sorta. It relates to LocalRank. What if you don't have links from related sites, and as a result, maybe you don't get past the semantic filters.

But, that's not all. G knows that of the sites that rocket to the moon in terms of link pop right after launch, many are spam but some are not. So, how hard would it be to take a "cluster" of sites (read about LSI again if you don't know what that means) and associate that cluster with growth patterns, LocalRank patterns or any other number of patterns?

Answer? I have no idea. But it seems eminently logical to me.

Listen, part of search marketing is analyzing existing data and observations, and part of it is understanding the mindsets of the search engines and sussing out what they are likely thinking about. And this is also where my marketing side kicks in. Why wouldn't a site that really wants to rank just assume that everything just mentioned is true? What's the worst case? That you are wrong and kick the competitions' butts anyway? Hehe.

And here's a related question for you: What if the SE's are simply mimicking all that is there? What if it becomes a self-reinforcing circle, with the top sites holding all the power. Where does that lead you, in terms of finding an edge? Almost to the same place, that's where.

This line of thinking relates to Google's new customizable search product too, I think. They are very clever about getting people and sites to provide information on perceptions of quality. If you have top sites in a given vertical using Google's new customizable search engine on their own sites, and defining the search universe, now you've got trusted sites providing Google with mountains of new information about "best sites" out there. It scares me frankly.

What makes a page look overly optimized? What tools can you use to improve on page optimization without hurting the credibility or conversion potential of the site?

Hey man, I rely on you for what tools are best to use. But as far as sites or pages being overly optimized, I've been yelling about this issue in my role as a mod over at Webmaster World, pretty much since before Google's Florida update several years back. Actually I guess that means was yelling about it before being a mod. Whatever. If, for a given page, you line up your backlinks, title, description, H1, high level text and internal links against a single two word phrase, unless you've got major link juice, you're likely going to run into some trouble there.

The tricky thing is that, and the papers tend to confirm this, the way the algo's work is sorta like a point system. You can get positive points and negative points, and also yellow and red cards like in soccer. Very few things are absolute. So the SE's try to assign levels of probability to things they encounter and an easy way to do that is to assign positive and negative points and get a sort of overall score.

So, if your site or your page does some things that yield negative scores, your rankings can suffer to a large or small extent in the rankings, and you have no idea if you're just not ranking as well as you'd like, or if you're actually ranking less well than you should because of crossing one or more important lines ... infractions that creative negative points so to speak.

How important are unique page titles and Meta description tags? What type of sites should hand craft each? What types of sites can automate creating them via formulas? Where and when is duplication acceptable?

Ah, another pet peeve of mine. Everyone's running around these days saying that titles are still hugely important and that Meta descriptions don't matter much. Blech. Of course descriptions matter. Is it logical that author created titles are hugely important, and author created descriptions not at all? Not to me. Plus we see evidence that descriptions matter. Slight evidence, but evidence. And, we see a lot of evidence that getting them wrong can hurt you. The duplication and "over optimization" issues again.

But all that aside, people don't seem to get that these descriptions are used by the engines in the SERP's. Good descriptions affect click through's in positive ways. What else does a person need to know? It's so fundamental yet so many people dismiss them. It's beyond me.

No worries. Scott, you mentioned in [a recent interview on WebmasterRadio.FM with GoodROI](#) that you build links to achieve objectives. What are the important objects every Webmaster should consider when building links? What links should they wait to build? Which ones should they build right away?

Personally I think it depends on the site and the category. We build links to achieve a variety of objectives and it varies with the needs of the site. In most cases, getting more traffic is an important goal. So is developing a presence in key pockets of a category, sometimes. If you're building a brand, you lean one way, if you're really just going for traffic, you go another way. And if you simply want to build link juice

for a site, that implies yet another approach. This is such a huge topic it's hard for me to know how to summarize it very well.

One thing I do think is worth noting is the process and chronology of building links with respect to Google's so called "sandbox." Getting back to that question about does your site have to "look like" other sites in category, think about this. Google knows that different kinds of sites have different kinds of patterns. This applies to both site structure (an e-commerce site looks different from a directory site structurally), and link patterns (blogs launched by well known personalities have very different link accumulation patterns than new hobby sites launched by amateur hobbyists). It's also not hard to imagine that Google can cross-reference this sort of data. So, if a site displays a certain kind of link development pattern, which encompasses both speed and rate of accumulation, and nature of the linking sites and pages, it tells them a lot about what kind of site it might be, and how important or "trusted" the site might be.

So rather than spewing out lots of tactics, I encourage people to consider all of that and let that thinking lead them to developing strategies that make sense for the kind of site they want to have.

Do you ever see engines moving away from using linkage data as a core relevancy criteria? What other signals might they promote, and how are you preparing for future shifts?

Well again, that new customizable search functionality that Google just made available to sites might be viewed as a step away from links, although it's still a site voting mechanism. Then there has been all of the talk about toolbar data. I'm just not even close to convinced that it's very usable. There are so many ways click data can be interpreted. As just one overly simplistic example, if a user lands on a site and stays only a 12 seconds, and then moves on to another site, is that a bad site? Well, not if it was a brilliantly designed directory that solved the users needs that fast. Or, what if a very good site somehow lands in a stream of users that are all on drugs. Does the fact that they stay on each page for a long time mean the pages are great, or that the users can't see straight. I know, these are wacky examples, but to make a point. Hopefully anyway. Errr, maybe not.

As a self-professed algo junkie, how do you prevent yourself from excessively worrying about the effects of making small changes? How do you prevent over thinking yourself?

That's a great question. In my mind anyway. It's a personality defect of mine to get too into all of this sometimes. Hmmm, I think you knew that already didn't you?

What I try to do is get clear on the value and context of a given SEO/SEM element by scanning the marketplace and then doing some testing. But my rule of thumb is, I try to be 80% confident or more, and open to new information. I don't need to be right all the time. Just more often than not. It's like my basic approach to the algo's. I love looking at it all. Partly I enjoy the challenge of figuring it out, but it's mainly about business results. So, we develop our working assumptions,

and treat them like gospel until we see evidence that causes us to challenge our assumptions. And the truth is, I don't even care if I'm right. Only that my assumptions lead the sites to good places, and don't get me in trouble. That keeps me sane, more or less.

But it can get me in trouble. Before I was a mod at WebmasterWorld, I felt more free to throw out ideas and opinions without qualifying them as such. Partly I like to share my thinking and experience to help younger Webmasters, but also, tossing out points of view that are wrong is a great way to find out when you're way off base. Only now if I do that, I get a lot more snarky comments, so I'm a bit more careful about expressing opinions. But people would do well to remember that in search almost all of it is opinion, at best based on experience, observation and hopefully a little intelligence. The best thing for everyone is to get in there and get some experience of their own.

Thanks Scott, err, do you prefer "caveman"?

Either is fine. Hehe. Thanks Aaron.

Brian Clark: Copyblogger

B rian is a copywriting, blogging, and new media expert. He is the writer of the most recent SEO Book salesletter, and shares his thoughts on copywriting at http://www.copyblogger.com/

Interview

January 31, 2007

Is it possible to write great sales copy for something you are not interested in?

Certainly. Most copywriters do this, and they compensate by doing tons of research and putting themselves in the shoes of the prospective buyer. But I think it's always much easier to sell something you believe in and have a personal affinity for.

Is it more important to understand the audience, author, or product when writing sales copy?

Audience always comes first. While having a strong understanding of everything else is important too, missing the mark with the audience is the number one reason why copy fails or underperforms.

I have been told that traditionally red is a great headline color for headlines. Why did you opt for blue on my sales letter? What about the Georgia font?

Red headlines have been used quite a bit for several years, and the reason why is because they tested better. There's a growing backlash against a lot of copy elements that have been effective in the past, basically due to overuse and misuse. Plus, color and font selection are important to the overall impression you want to convey with your product and brand.

With SEO Book, I thought it was important that the sales letter have a more sophisticated presentation that matched the overall look of your site, as well as the stature your book has attained. You can't mix in testimonials from the likes of Wharton School and MBA-level professors and Seth Godin on a cheesy page that screams hype. SEO is moving away from an Internet marketing tactic and becoming a business essential, and the presentation of your sales page should mirror that respectability.

You broke my sales letter down into a letter and FAQs and also had a mini sales letter which people see if they click an early buy now link. What is the purpose of doing that, and what effect does it typically have on conversion?

The purpose of the "offer landing page" is simply to quickly communicate the full offer to those who clicked through early in the copy, and to reinforce the offer to those that went deeper in. Typically you'll have less people abandon the sale than if you sent them straight to a PayPal landing page.

How important are getting testimonials seen for making sales? What are the keys to getting them read?

Testimonials are crucial. They communicate crucial social proof of the value of your product and offer. However, just as with everything else, they have been abused and sometimes fabricated. I tried to tone down the presentation of the testimonials a bit, and chose people that had high credibility. We could probably test different approaches here, because it's a tricky area that is nonetheless vitally important to conversion.

Your blog is one of my favorite to read. Many longstanding copywriters have started blogging, but come off as boring. How did you grow your reach so quickly?

Well, by applying copywriting techniques to blogging, I accomplished two things. One, I created my own little unique niche by bringing a new approach to both copywriting and blogging, and two, I got a bunch of generous bloggers as readers who helped spread the word. I owe it all to them.

When blogging, how important is it to give the perception of being open? How important is it to be easy to identify with?

Blogging is a lot like real life, which I guess is why we call this social media. If you're not perceived as honest or worth associating with, people simply won't bother with you.

What is the difference between writing traditional copy, writing a blog, and writing for social media like Digg?

Well, they all have one thing in common—the content has to provide beneficial value to the reader or it will fail. Traditional copy is designed to sell, writing for Digg is for traffic and links, and blogging for business is a combination of both. Beneficial value comes first, but all three types of writing will be more effective the more you connect with the reader on a personal level. Conversational copywriting has been around for longer than people think—some of the old school copywriters of the early 20th Century were masters at it.

With so many people writing sensationalistic headlines for social media, do you think social media has much of a life left to it? Do you see many bloggers invariably undermining their credibility by trying to get noticed too much?

A good headline makes a promise to the reader that the content delivers. Blow that, and you'll damage your credibility. I mean, what's the point of writing an attention-grabbing headline if you can't follow through? Again, the competition for attention is increasing the quality of content overall, because quality content is what works. People who try to take shortcuts will fail.

When blogging, how do you balance writing for teaching vs writing for links vs writing for sales? Do you need to have much reach with a blog before you can have much an affect or significant profit?

Writing to teach can be writing for links and sales, if done correctly. As for reach vs. profit, it depends on what you're selling. A realtor with a killer blog only needs to attract two or three clients per month to make a nice six figure income in most markets. Selling low-priced widgets requires more volume, as do advertising business models.

How often should I consider writing or rewriting my sales letter? How do I test the effectiveness of a rewrite?

I would never suggest rewriting something just for the sake of it, if it's working. I was a bit perplexed by the recent copy overhaul to the 37signals home page. But it's important to keep your finger on the pulse of your market, so you can anticipate necessary changes before your sales slump. I think that's where we were with your old page.

Testing is crucial. You should test the new sales page against the old, and then also consider testing certain elements within the winning page to see if it can be further optimized for conversion.

Digital Ghost

Digital Ghost is the nickname of a friend of mine who is big into SEO, marketing, and linguistics. He tends to be a bit kurt, but that is one of the reasons he is so easy to like. He blogs at http://speakingfreely.wordpress.com/

Interview

December 16, 2006

Why the name DigitalGhost?

Two reasons. I was making money ghostwriting when the 'Digital Age' came into being. CompuServe, Prodigy, etc. Everyone chatting online seemed to be just phantoms on a screen. Digital ghosts if you will.

How did you get into SEO?

I was selling computers and a friend of mine created a website, which was back in the days when maybe one person in fifty had an email account, and he asked me to look at it. The site had been live for six months but it wasn't getting any traffic.

I noticed that the title for every page was new_page_1. I changed the titles to reflect what the page content was about, created a footer crammed with keywords for every page and boom. He started getting crazy amounts of traffic. Within a month I had 4 sites built and I was hooked. I quit selling computers three months later.

A woman that lived next door to me had a wine site and asked for help getting it to rank. She had a friend that had a site about 900 numbers, and he had a friend with a site about…

I was an SEO for almost two years before I knew what it was called.

Does SEO, as a field, have much life left in it?

Of course it does. Search technology is still in its infancy. As the technology improves SEOs will be needed to help business owners deal with the changes. I believe that the technology will reach the point where the demand for SEOs is greater than it is now; especially as fewer and fewer of the self-taught SEOs are able to keep up with the technology.

Jakob Nielsen recommended <u>using old words for findability</u>. As a marketer, what is more important: using old words, or being able to create neologisms?

Keep it simple. Know your market and know the language your market uses. Banking on your ability to successfully market a new word isn't a strategy; it's a shot in the dark.

Why is linguistics important to SEOs and other internet marketers?

Linguistics offers insight into how people think, how they choose words and phrases, word dependencies, syntax, semantics, structure etc. The science is integral in search engine algorithms.

Are search engines matching keywords or concepts? What is the difference between the two? How might a shift in this change the SEO process?

They're matching keywords. The keyword 'war' is quite simple, the concept of 'war' isn't currently understood by the major engines. I could write an entire site about WWII without mentioning "WWII" and the engines would never rank it for 'war' unless it acquired links with 'war' in anchor text.

How might it change the SEO process? SEOs rely on keywords because the algos rely on keywords.

What are the most important books you have read about language, thinking, or communication?

There aren't any single books that I feel are that important. A single idea, or several, contained within a book may be important but I think it is dangerous to assign too much importance to any one book. I place quite a bit of importance on reading many books and weighing the ideas found within them. I tend to think it is bullshit when someone says, 'that book changed my life'.

What other books significantly helped shape you?

Now we're getting somewhere. I remember reading Black Beauty by Anna Sewell and hating the kid that pulled wings off flies and threw stones at horses. Old Yeller taught me quite a bit about strength of character. Tom Sawyer and the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn taught me about friendship. Little Women, Little Men, Jo's Boys, all of them had lessons. Call of the Wild, The Sea Wolf, Burning Daylight, more lessons.

I think we learn the lessons that shape us the most when we're young. But most importantly, the latent lesson that I learned was, 'love words'. All of those authors taught that lesson, though I never saw it written.

What drinks have helped shape you? What is your favorite Tequila?

Well, beer has added about twenty pounds of shape. As for tequila, just about any Añejo works.

You recently posted about sensationalistic headlines which have nothing to do with the content of the post. As more publishers come online, search engines and efficient ad networks commodify many of them, and more people are fighting for a finite amount of attention, will the web devolve into a series of half thoughts marketed by sensationalistic headlines? Or what publishing business models do you see as sustainable?

The web is too large for any single bad practice to ruin it. Most of the web is nothing but half-assed thoughts now and people still find it useful. As the need for better technology grows it will be met. The 'cry wolf' headlines will meet the same fate as the little kid in the story.

As long as publishers focus on meeting their users' needs current models are sustainable. As soon as publishers shift the focus to their own needs they may as well quit. I can't count the times a site owner has said, 'I need more traffic'. How come they don't ask, 'What do my users need'?

What are your thoughts on tagging and the like? Will it make search any more relevant, or is it an over hyped fad?

Tagging hasn't helped relevance a bit that I can see. Self-governing systems typically end up as nothing more than a fuster-cluck. People that insist that the more people that use a self-governing system, the better the system will work, need to have the Pareto Principle etched into those rose colored glasses they're wearing.

How can social media and other popularity based metrics promote the creation of quality content while maintaining a reasonable signal to noise ratio?

Editing. It would help if people didn't equate 'more' to 'better'. Does Amazon need 600 book reviews for a single book? Does the world need 300 videos of people dropping Mentos into Diet Coke? You can increase the signal to noise ratio by limiting the number of people that can broadcast eh?

What is the difference between a horse and a donkey? Which animal is generally more entertaining?

A donkey is smaller than a horse and it has longer ears. Cross a mare, (female horse) with a Jack, (male donkey), and you get a Mule. Donkeys are more entertaining. They're like big dogs and they make excellent pets. Nothing in the world sounds like a donkey braying, except for the Jackass Penguin.

It seems Google in particular is placing a lot of weight on domain age and link authority related trust at the moment. Many people are leveraging this to spam Google via video hosting sites, social media sites, and attempts at mainstream media to get into consumer generated media. Where do you see Google going next with their algorithms?

Semantic search. Nofollow is a bust. They created this huge link mess with their damn green bar and an easily exploited algo, and then they tried to clean it up with something as pathetic as nofollow.

You post a lot about word and link relationships. How do people typically mess up internal linking?

By creating navigation that looks like a keyword list. By ignoring concepts and focusing on keywords. By thinking in terms of pages instead of thinking about an entire site. By neglecting in-context links.

As example, a client told me he had a site about "new and used trucks". According to his navigation text, his site was about truck accessories. Every truck model had 10-30 accessory links. Great text for accessories, poor text for trucks and he was wondering why he wasn't ranking for new/used/ trucks/ city/state.

Do you see search engines as moving beyond advertisement based business models? How might they change going forward?

No, it's easy, it's passive, and they have the whole world creating content they can slap ads on, why should they change?

Do you eventually see search engines as becoming more powerful than governments?

No, but I foresee governments using search engines to become more powerful.

How long might your current blog last?

No clue. Longevity isn't a good metric for quality though. Not that I'm saying I have a quality blog, but it's my blog. I can name some pretty pathetic directories that have been around for a long time. But I won't.

Danny just launched a new blog and it looks pretty damn good. So maybe the search engineers will learn that it's about relevancy, not domain age, link age, link authority or any of that other bullshit they throw out there to keep people distracted from the fact that it's all about what? Relevancy. Or is it the SEOs that keep throwing out dumb shit like "link age" for discussion? ;)

What are your favorite SEO Tools?

Whiteboards and a proprietary pattern analysis gizmo. SEO for Firefox is pretty damn good too.

What are your favorite non-SEO blogs?

Drivl is the only one I can think of at the moment. But I read a lot of online newspapers. Oh, and you can download the N.Y. Times reader now which makes reading the news a lot nicer.

Do you see a day when search moves past being primarily weighted on link authority?

Yes I do. Search engines like [Hakia](#) are already moving away from link-citation as the most important metric.

What might the next major metric be?

Wait for it… this is good… relevance. Yes. Relevance. Three thousand people linking to 'white' using 'black' as anchor text shouldn't make black rank for white. Relevancy isn't a popularity contest and I don't care what type of spin the Googlemeisters want to put on it.

What is the biggest piece of the concept relevancy that you think most SEOs overlook?

Not knowing when to quit. Carrying the concept relationship too far. For example, having a site about greeting cards, and creating a subdomain for birthday cake decorating and linking it from the 'birthday cards' section of the site. And then creating another sub for 'catering'. And since catering is 'related', may as well have a sub for 'entertainment'. Why not games? And toys? Toys can be... gifts... and damn near everything can be a gift so now the site has books, candles, ties, hats, pens, tools, Viagra, baldness cures and vacation packages.

SEOs have heard 'content is king' for so long that it's second nature to cover every possible phrase with a targeted page. Stop it already! Small, targeted sites do well too.

Frank Schilling

F rank Schilling is one of the most well known domain investors in the world. He blogs about domain names, advertising, and marketing at http://www.FrankSchilling.com/

Interview

May 17, 2007

What makes domain names so powerful from an investment standpoint?

Several things.. When you build on a domain name you are the master of your destiny because you are not beholden to anyone else's platform. It's the Internet comparison to owning the building vs. leasing from a landlord. Internet law is new and undefined. Google and Ebay can be brutal landlords changing rules or algorithms that put you back out on the street without notice. If you own a powerful generic name or name phrase; you will get internet traffic independent of what the search engines and auction marketplaces try to do to you.

Why are [secondary market] .com's typically so much more expensive than other extensions?

Dot com's are the most readily understood domain extension. They are so powerful even my daughter knows what they are (she's 3) .. Many people will simply append the subject matter they seek with ".com" in their address bar, expecting to find products and services that match the generic keywords they entered. That world-wide mindshare has been reinforced since the very beginnings of the Internet via trillions of dollars in collective global marketing and serve to create a premium value for the extension. The marketing that you, I and others have done, has served to make .com the first extension most of us try in the browser's address bar.

Have you ever sold a domain name for a loss?

No. Even names where folks scoffed saying I overpaid at the time, look cheap in hindsight.

What is the best domain you regret not purchasing?

Cameras.com sold for 1.5 million.. That was a really tasty one.. I chickened out over a million. Wish I could get in the Delorean and go back in time on that one. Also Food.com sold to the food network in a San Francisco bankruptcy court in 2003. it went for $300,000 ish .. I should have bid 500k back then.

Is it too late to get into domaining? If you were starting today which model would you go after? Would you try to buy a few strong domains or try to own a much larger portfolio of weaker ones?

I think there are so many untapped opportunities here.. Within a few years, hundreds of thousands globally are going to be directly employed in this industry. It is early not late. This is like California in the 1960's. -- yes, it's not the 1920's anymore, but there are still mountains of untapped opportunity. I would probably focus on buying and selling, flipping up and bootstrapping profits back into the business if I had to start today. Also SEO and PPC keyword arbitrage.

Are new heavily marketed extensions like .tv or .mobi a good opportunity?

Only to flip.. If you can get something good cheaply and sell it to somebody else then do it, but I am avoiding those extensions completely. I like .com, .net, .org and the CCtld of the Country you are in because the name spaces are established, the renewal fees are certain (consistent/predictable) and because that's where the organic, generic intent type-in traffic is.

What are your favorite cities to visit? How does real estate there compare with domain name prices?

I like Los Angles and Las Vegas a lot. It's funny because those cities real estate histories have parallels to the domain industry. In Southern California you have Irvine where one man basically acquired millions of acres through the early 1900's and then sold to a large corporation in the later 1900's. Today the seller looks like a fool because he sold so cheap when viewed against the development which has occurred in the surrounding area. Yet had he not sold, none of the roads, utilities, infrastructure would be there, so the area would not really be as valuable. So if there is a comparison between domains and real estate, I think "development naturally follows acquiring the land" and "prices increase as the people come in" are the two over-riding factors.

If I am planning on developing a site, and am working with a small budget, do you think it is better to buy the .com, or to buy a .net or .org and spend the difference on more marketing and development? What about country level domains?

I like Country Code domains in Countries that have even-handed registration rules which allow all all sorts registrants to invest and develop there. Country codes I like include .CA (Canada), .co.uk (UK), .de (Germany), .br (Brazil), .cn (China), .in (India). In many circumstances Country Codes are stronger than .com. There are a host of reasons for this including currency issues, language, nationalism. I would always try to get the .com because it helps you to build traffic outside of the search-

engines (everybody winds up at the .com eventually). I do like .nets and .orgs when they are priced low enough.

Years down the road when all the best names are gone and many of them are beyond the budgets of individuals and small businesses do you see outlier names like .info, .biz, or .cc getting any traction?

I do not.. I think it will be .com, .net, .org and the CC TLD of the Country Code you live in, ten years from now. If the Web extension gets approved, it could eventually unseat .net but it would take time to catch on. That forecast is assuming names get rolled out in their current way. The only other thing that could change destiny is the wholesale addition of hundreds of new extensions such as .GOOG, .MSN, .IBM, .YHOO, where every company got its own extension. It's problematic because corporate jealousy precludes adding just one or two.. and companies can barely manage their names, let alone an entire GTLD. It would take a generation to roll out and would ultimately strengthen .com relating to generic words such as Maps, Books, Shopping etc.. So while I find that kind of wholesale change revolutionary (ICANN and Verisign would resist it), it still 'could' happen.. and that would change to weaken .net and .org.

If I'm planning on developing a site when is it best to buy the core related keyword domain? When does it make more sense to create a unique word or add a common word like "hub" or "community" to the name to get an $8 domain name instead of spending thousands more for the exact match domain?

You can focus on building a great company without a great name. I like generic word +'hub' or 'web' or 'world' style domain names. But if you build the world's biggest ceiling fan company at fanhub.com and then you want to acquire ceilingfans.com .. it is going to get much more expensive as time goes by. Names like those are going to be worth millions one day, so the time to acquire them is when they seem cheapest and unimportant to you. That's always the best time to acquire great names btw.

Are there any good $8 domain names available right now?

Yes.. but mining for them is getting harder. I don't buy anything in the available space anymore.. haven't in a long time. Too time intensive and 'domain tasting' has creamed off most of the generic defensible undiscovered names.

How many ways do you categorize domains? What types of domains are the best from an investment perspective?

We have 60 main categories such as "cars" and then 1600 subcategories including "car accessories", "towing", "insurance" etc. The best domain-names are generic defensible keyword-style (one two and three word) phrases which get some trickle of organic generic-intent type-in traffic; for nothing more than the keyword-weight, gravity and resonance of the generic words that make up the domain name.

What are your favorite spots for buying domains right now? Which auction do you like the best? What changes would you like to see to how domain names are auctioned off?

We are going through a seasonal dry-spell at the moment.. There is still an annual echo effect of expiring domain names which results from the dot-com bust where millions of folks in 2001,2,3 let their domain names expire.. the expiring name echo-period runs from November through April, so we are in the quiet season at the moment. I like [Snapnames](), [Enom](), [BuyDomains](), [Godaddy](). The auctions are presently run by for-profit clearing houses which inject themselves between expiring names and bidder registrants. One day ICANN will probably get involved auctioning new names like the FCC does with reissued airwave licenses.

What percent of domain sales do you estimate are publicly known?

About 5%.. maybe less. I was at my daughter's friend's birthday party recently and the father of one of the children confided that he sold a terrible made up brand-like sounding name for $23,000 (it was either 23 or 33k.. can't quite recall) This guy was not a domainer.. you would never hear about the sale. I get folks from regular walks of life coming up to me all the time confiding that they are part time domainers.. These are folks who have never visited a domain chat room, have never visited another domain site. Their only connection to the industry is through their registrar. It is a billion dollar business.

Many domains tend to sell for a multiple of PPC earnings. In 10 years time do you think the baseline will move to some other metric?

It already has.. No good domain portfolio has changed hands since BuyDomains and that business would have sold for considerably more than the rumored amount had the company's former owner been engaged in selling advertising alone, vs selling his names. Prior to that there was 'Name Development's' sale to Marchex (Yun Ye transaction). No large, high-quality portfolios have changed hands since. Other sales have been smaller or split-portfolios consisting of good names interspersed with trademark issues. Individual names often sell for 100 years PPC.. No high quality domainer would dream of selling a portfolio worth potential billions to a third party for 10-12X PPC revenues. PPC is a flawed multiple because it works off a rev-share. If you buy a portfolio for 10X and it is on a 50/50 rev share (after "cost of services" through Google Adsense) that means you sold your portfolio for 5X what Google could make with it. Maybe 3X if you exclude the amount Google shaves for smart pricing. That is so insanely cheap. Only a fool would give names away like that. If I were selling I would pick a walk away number (the youtube style multiple) or I would sell names individually. The breakup value of large portfolios will be in the billions if they aren't already.

You have mentioned that you thought search was promoting too many anchor stores vs smaller boutique websites. Do you think this creates an opportunity for other search players or adds value to topical community resources? Do you see it becoming more or less profitable to make niche websites and domain names?

I think of every domain name as an alternative search engine under the keyword embodied within the name. Search-engines by their nature can only display 5 to 10 results above the fold. As markets get more competitive that 11th result will become a different website, with a greater frequency. It's always getting harder for search engines to rank the top results.. as that competition intensifies as domain implementations get better, the domain name becomes a more viable alternative browsing experience. It's going to become much more profitable to run boutiques that sell things in the years ahead because software, fulfillment, products are all becoming cheaper as marketing costs go up. A good domain name reduces your lifetime marketing costs and increases marketing opportunities.

Are you concerned with large web companies claiming certain websites and types of websites as being unsafe to end users?

It depends how far they take it. Clearly I'd be concerned if browsers incorrectly claimed that advertising was bad and tried to block all sites with ppc ads.. While that wouldn't impact my lifestyle it would stymie newcomers and limit folks abilities to browse the web. I think the browsers are already on thin ice with a lot of the error search stealing to the right of the dot.. type your favorite website with .xom or .con watch where you go, think about where you were 'intending' to go. That's stealing in the browser. It's unseemly to see that kind of conduct coming from a major US Corporation. I think in time there will be more freedom of navigation not less. Users (by their nature) want to be free. So to answer your question, there are probably too many sites with advertising on them for the browsers to do something draconian or to limit browsing freedoms. People would type in a website and say "the internet's broken, my browser won't let me go anywhere" .. too many sites would be impacted.

As the web gets more competitive, I believe any single sign of quality will likely have less of an overall effect on a website's position on the web. Do you believe that is true for domain names as well, or will everything being so gamed only increase the value of domain names?

I think probably the later.. Mark Twain said: "History doesn't repeat but it rhymes" .. The past may not be a true indication of the future, but domain names "are the Internet". You need a domain for email, in fact the only constant since the dawn of the commercial internet in 1993 (Netscape 1) has been the domain name. If you feel comfortable investing in 'anything' related to the Internet it should be a generic domain name.

What makes Riesling so good?

I was picking up dinner at www.pappagallo.ky they have this new house wine from Germany.. very light refreshing.. good lunch wine. Darn, can't remember the name… Maybe if it ended in .com! :)

Michael Mann

Michael Mann founded [BuyDomains](#), and numerous other companies through his [WashingtonVC](#) incubator. He also launched [Grassroots.org](#) and the Make Change! trust, and authored the popular ebook [Make Millions and Make Change!](#) for entrepreneurs and non-profits. After reading his book I asked him for an interview and he said sure.

Interview

July 5, 2007

Why is confidence so important when starting a business?

That is one of the ways we make our own luck, life is a self fulfilling prophecy. All leaders are believers, or there can be no "followers"/stakeholders, and therefore no competitive teams. All leaders who didn't believe turned out to be obsolete and the rest remained.

How do you balance confidence, ego, success, and drive while still having time for family life and charity work?

I don't balance it but people should.

Why is it so hard to create a business working part time?

Because your competitors work double time and they will have better information and ideas too, and take your customers, investors, and employees.

What made you appreciate the value of domain names so early on? How much more upside do you see in the domain market?

Someone offered me 25k for a domain that I had only paid $50 a year for, I was instantly sold. The domain "market" is really part of the overall Web 2.0/ecommerce market, which will boom indefinitely. Domains serve as company names and core ecommerce addresses – therefore any generic domain name that is high quality today will continue to rise in value. Names that are worthless today (the other 99%), will remain worthless.

For a new small business does it make more sense to focus on efficiency or scale?

Scale comes naturally to an efficient business following a plan and standard best practices. Attempting to scale without efficiency is a waste of resources.

What pieces are software are vital to helping you manage and grow your business?

SugarCRM, Salesforce.com, Yield Software, Apache, MS Office, Eudora (unsupported currently)

What books should every small business owner read?

Origin of Species, Darwin (is the essence of business fundamentals), Make Millions and Make Change, (an up and coming classic :), In Search of Excellence, Tom Peters, That Which You Are Seeking is Causing You to Seek, Cheri Huber (will help you manage success and charity work)

Does luck matter in business?

Not really, other than by birth. You make your own luck.

Why do you view obstacles as an asset?

Because all your competitors have the same ones. The more things to confuse them in dominating the market, the more things there are for you to understand and optimize. You are in the business of competing, you need items (obstacles) to compete on in order to express your superiority in the market.

Why should you start in a field that matches your experience and interests?

Because to win the long marathon you want to start better trained and miles ahead of the competitors if you have the chance.

When does it make sense to go high profile and when does it make sense to stay hidden?

When you have something to promote and when you have something confidential, respectively.

Your book said there is no reason to fear capitalism. You also support a lot of charities. Do you ever worry some business processes might have hidden costs? How do you stay so close to so many issues and stay upbeat?

Oy veh. Business process always have emerging unexpected costs, which is why you need a huge load of profit to pay for everything and need to be very efficient operationally. Close and upbeat?, I study, speak to lots of bright people, and take tea.

Market saturation tends to erode profit margins. What trends or signals make you avoid a market? What tells you when it is the right time to get in a market or to sell?

I only work in a few select complementary technology areas so I don't get diluted outside of my core competencies. Basically, have a plan and gut feeling when the stars are aligned.

Is the Internet making the typical model of business (employees in an office on certain set hours) irrelevant? What are the keys to keeping employees motivated and loyal, even if they are far away?

The market is international and therefore 24 hours, so hours are less important than doing a lot of them in an educated and motivated way. However, managing people is best done in person, not online for sure. People are motivated by working on a killer team, with a killer plan, and mostly bringing home the bacon. I like to hire only people who are so motivated and such high achievers and believers that they like equity or profit sharing to incentivize themselves even more than cash.

With the trends of cheaper technology, increasing communications, and globalization, do you think the Internet will end up causing a consolidation of wealth or will have the net effect of re-distributing it? Who stands to gain the most and who stands to lose the most?

The rich will get richer I'm sure unless and until they have programs to redistribute it like Grassroots.org and Make Change! Trust.

The Internet is making many things free, but many of them are free with hidden costs (such as destructively biased self serving advice). Do you think the move toward free will improve or decrease the quality of information being created?

Neither, its not really free, its ad supported, so ostensibly no different than pay content. To get better content pay more, like cash and not just "ad" viewing.

How do you determine how well you can trust something you find in the search results?

I search for consensus. Unfortunately a lot of what passes as consensus is just one site regurgitating bad data from another. But I look for confirmation from experts and trusted online sources for everything I read.

With the web people may be more able to form groups and take action quicker, but many people may fight so much for certain causes that they don't see the downsides of what they create. Will media and ad personalization end up having a net positive or negative effect on society?

Just positive. Groups online learn to police themselves over time, or people flock to the sites that do. There are a lot of useless and otherwise lame sites, but they are a reflection of what people want, just like stores in the offline world.

How many charities does Grassroots.org help?

800 and ultimately growing to 10,000 that are each saving $10,000 per year, for a net benefit of $100M per year to the charity community serving the poor, sick, uneducated and otherwise needy. Grassroots.org is one piece of our charity work, whereas Make Change! Trust supports dozens of other 501c3 organizations like Grassroots.org

What percent of time and profits should go to charity?

There is no ceiling. If you ask me you can go ahead and be Mother Theresa and give it all away. Or as much of each as you can handle.

How do you decide if a charity is deserving of help?

For MCT, usually we know them personally or by reputation. For Grassroots.org they have 501c3 certificates and fit in to certain broad categories that we support. About half of all 501c3s meet our criteria.

What market today is as good to invest in as the domain market was when you started building BuyDomains.com?

The domain market. The web site market. The SEO market. The hosted or downloaded software market. Most of the best new Internet stuff. And Apple. Google. Wal-Mart. Dell.

Danny Sullivan

Danny Sullivan is the leading journalist covering the search space. He literally has helped form and move the market, by <u>hosting search industry focused trade shows</u> and by <u>publishing news about search daily</u>.

Interview

July 31, 2007

What do you attribute your rapid increase in exposure and authority to?

That's a tough question, because I didn't feel I'd gained any massive new increase in authority, I suppose. I mean, I still get calls from reporters at about the same rate as always, and that's one measure of determining how much authority you might be seen as having, I suppose. I probably do have more exposure in the past few months about what I'm doing, and the answer for that is simple. I started a brand new web site, <u>Search Engine Land</u>, as well as an entire new company, <u>Third Door Media</u>. It disrupted a lot of things that I think people were used to, so there's some attention on what we're doing and how things will grow.

I didn't mean a massive new increase, but I didn't want to use the word old either. ;) Back when I was in high school, what did you do that made you the go to guy such that people like Page and Brin referenced your work over just about everyone else in the search engine space? If you were to start today do you think you could still acquire the kind of authority you currently have?

One advantage I had was being one of the first to recognize the importance of search engines and track them closely. Larry and Sergey cited me back then because practically no one was compiling this type of information about search engines. I thought they deserved much more love than they were getting. I always joke I'm glad I decided to write about search rather than "push," which was hot at the the time (though feeds did effectively take over from push, and they're pretty hot now).

Could I do that now? Sure, though I'd probably have to be much more focused. Look at Bill Slawski. He owns the search patents and research space, except when Gary Price grabs a moment and flexes his patent research muscles! Gord Hotchkiss said search behavior isn't getting love, so he dived in there. Those are just two examples where they've become such authorities that if I was asked about a topic in those particular areas, I would (and do) send people their way.

If I were doing this now from scratch, I'd like to think I'd look for that particular area that wasn't being covered -- or be able to spot an entirely new industry that's not getting the attention and tracking it should.

How have you been able to maintain at the top of the game for so long? Did you think you would still be at the top a search over a decade after you started tracking it?

I don't think I ever envisioned when I started that 10 years later, I'd still be doing it. I sort of figured when I announced I was leaving SEW last year that people might be saying, "Thanks, but probably time to see you go!" Maybe some were thinking it but didn't want to say! But instead, I got a lot of reaction from people who seemed to want me to continue doing what I'd been doing. That revitalized me. As for being at the top of the game, well, that's very kind of you to say. I guess it might be a combination of things. I tend to be cynical. I don't write about things just because they are new and shiny -- I write about stuff I think actually has legs. In terms of advice, I try to keep people focused on the long term strategies that will be successful. I really try to be fair in my writing -- that doesn't mean I'm not opinionated, but I'll try to show a variety of sides. I suppose more than anything, I really care about what I'm covering. It's not just a job. I don't start my day of thinking, "darn, have to write about search today." Instead, I still can't wait to see what's going on in an industry I love.

Does your background in journalism play a big role in how you report on search issues?

Sure, in the sense that I apply general interviewing skills, as well as trying to write in a style that explains stuff for both the fast reader and those who want to go more in depth.

You have been popular when much of the web was mostly newsletters, mostly forums, mostly blogs, and through the rise of social media. How do you see the web changing in the next 10 years?

Wow, 10 years is tough. Amazingly, email is still going -- as are email newsletters. I think they'll still be around. I'm sure there will be more audio and video content, and it might be that we have more applet-driving distribution. You content showing up within a smart TV box and so on. But who really knows!

As search companies swallow or influence more of the web, how do you decide if a story is search related or not?

Usually, a search related story is revolving around some type of expressed desire. Google's going to do banner ads? No one expresses a desire to see banners -- you just get them. Google's going to target banners using search history? That's search related! It's hard, because Google especially will do so many things -- and we're really try to focus just on search. But you have to touch on some other things. For example, if Google goes after wireless spectrum, that might not see like search. But

when you understand they want to reach mobile searchers more directly, then having a little background can help make that later search story more relevant.

What are the most common things that hold new bloggers back from getting exposure on high authority websites? What separates the experts, and the citation worthy, from the other channels?

That's tough. For me, it's probably that they don't say much. They point at a news story and give me no value add beyond what I can get at the story. Another problem are too many short tips that don't drill down into actual examples. At this point, I want fewer top whatever lists and more closer looks at how single tips actually play out. Mainly, it's expressing a unique and valuable viewpoint. I do see new bloggers doing that, and I love when I find those gems.

You recently moved from Search Engine Watch to Search Engine Land. I don't think I have ever seen a person change sites and have the shift go so smoothly (even when they use 301 redirects). What did you do to make the site shift go so well?

Well, it helped to have my team come with me! Barry's fantastic on the day-to-day blogging, plus we had our correspondents and Chris Sherman and Greg Sterling especially diving into articles. We also had a fresh start. There was no legacy of content to redesign or reposition. We just dived in and went into coverage, always knowing that in the middle of the year, our archives would have built out enough for the new Lands navigation that we launched to make sense.

You are universally known as one of the nicest guys in search. As your exposure increased what have been some of your key tips and tricks to remaining so accessible, keeping ego in check, and balancing work and play with family life?

I have a very narrow door frame that won't allow me to walk into my office with a big head! Seriously, I don't know. I try to treat people the way I would like to be treated, and especially online, constantly try to think how I'd interact with them if we were face to face. Plus, you do have to keep in mind that outside our industry, no one knows who's "big" or not anyway. Even in our industry, you've got so many new people that they don't know that you think you're supposed to be super hot! And if you think that, you're setting yourself up for a big disappointment. As for the balancing, I've been terrible at it this year, a consequence of bringing the new company up. But generally, I've long at least tried not to work on weekends. Get into that habit, and suddenly you realize the world keeps revolving even if you aren't at your computer 24/7.

Many of the most popular channels became so due to their edginess and/or bias. How does one create a Switzerland, and yet be able to build such a large audience?

I'd like to think that when so many people are shouting out, people do like to find a place that's not going for the hype or the edge but rather calmly laying out the facts

of what's going on. In the short term, that may mean you grow an audience more slowly than the hype approach. But in the long term, I think you may build an audience that finds you a consistent resource -- and thus tells others to come on over.

Which will have a larger impact on searchers and search marketers: personalization or universal search?

Universal search, if it continues as it has been going. Personalized search only alters a few listings. Universal search brings in new databases much more dramatically.

Why do doughnuts have holes in them? What is the best doughnut in the world?

The holes make it easier to eat certain kinds without having frosting get lost on your fingers. Ken Horton's Boston Cream is the best doughnut I've personally had, followed by Dunkin' Donuts Boston Creme, when they are fresh.

What story do you most regret publishing? What are the biggest stories you wish you had covered earlier that you didn't realize the importance of until much later?

I've written so many stories over the years, and nothing is leaping to mind as something I regret running. There are occasional stories where I regret taking a particular tone or not contacting someone first. David Berlind back in 2005 was pretty upset with a critique I did on his review of Google Alerts, and I later apologized for being too personalize in what I wrote. When the thing about Associated Content came out with Google's Tim Armstrong being connected, I regretted not having waited to ask him about it before writing. It might not have changed what I wrote, but it was fair to ask first. Especially with blogging, there can be a tendency to rush, and I have to resist that. As for the biggest story, probably not seeing the rise of YouTube early on. I heard about it, couldn't believe it was that popular when, of course, it was.

When I ran Threadwatch I deleted a story about a client's site, and saw another editor do the same. Do you get privy to search or search marketing information that you can't share? Have you ever not covered a story because someone asked you to not cover it?

I'm constantly briefed on a variety of things from various companies off-the-record that I can't share until a certain deadline or unless they give the nod. I can't think of someone asking me not to cover a story, but most of the PR people I deal with are far too savvy to ask directly like that. Instead, you might call them about something and they'll spin it as not that big of a deal. And honestly, sometimes it's not -- you think there's some major thing, and it turns out to have a logical explanation. I might then not do a story simply because it would make a small or non-issue into something bigger. But in plenty of cases, I'll still do a story, but at least I have an official explanation to go with it.

Have you ever cloaked a page? What is the shadiest thing you have ever marketed via search? Do you still do much search marketing on the sideline to test current search marketing theories?

Back in like 1998, I think I did a few "poor man's cloaking" pages, where I used a frame to list the same content that my client had in images. I simply couldn't get the site changed, and Excite in particular wanted text. It wasn't misleading in my view and might not have even been against the guidelines back then. Plus, I didn't inhale. As for shady stuff, I never took on any shady clients. And no, I don't do stuff on the side. Ages ago, I had to decide if I was going to run a search marketing service or a search marketing news service. The two are difficult to combine, because search engines and other search marketers don't trust you as much, if they think you are just trying to get inside information for your own purposes. I see search marketing activities through my own sites, of course -- but those can be skewed as can be the sites of anyone with only a small portfolio or "window" into the space. That's why I do a lot of listening and reading and try to ensure with conferences that I'm putting people who are in the trenches forward to share knowledge.

Do you believe in the whole white hat black hat debate? Is there such a thing as spam? Other search engines have done interesting things too, but is it reasonable for Yahoo! to buy links for their lead generation subdomains?

Sure, there are hats, but I did a chart once where I showed how on some issues, white hats and black hats might be a lot closer than the think. And sure, there's spam. Scrape a bunch of pages, get me to your web site when I search for some city name plus pizza, and you don't have what I want but rather a bunch of AdSense -- that's spam to me a searcher. And you've wasted my time. Spam because you cloaked a page that's virtually the same as the text you might render in a Flash file? Technically, yes -- but for me, it's always been about the intention rather than the exact technique. It certainly continues to get grayer, especially when courtesy of Google, anyone can cloak using [Google Website Optimizer](#) and not have to worry about it. If Yahoo's buying links, then turning around and penalizing others for doing so is pretty sucky. But it's really Google that's been leading the don't buy links campaign. I think that's a losing battle, but I understand why the keep wanting to fight it.

Search engines tell people to not buy links, and in some verticals individual companies own dozens or hundreds of sites. Do you see the search market consolidating traffic to popular offline businesses, or will there still be room for small players 10 years down the road?

I think small players will still find room, because they're often smarter and more nimble than the big people. Local, for example, still seems wide open for many smaller players.

Given your authority, many people likely pitch stuff to you every day. What do you find to be good proxies for determining intent?

Telling me you're the next Google of anything generally is a bad way to start the conversation. There's a variety of other clues I don't want to list so as to not spoil that filtering. But they aren't hard to guess -- emails that clearly don't indicate any knowledge of my site, my actual name and so on.

How have you avoided becoming jaded by some of the dirtier aspects of Internet marketing? In a world with paid blog comments, and social media manipulation sites like subvertandprofit.com, what made you bold enough to create http://sphinn.com, catering to marketers?

Part of it is the hopes that marketers aren't going to want to mess up their own nest, so to speak. But also, part of the approach is to say that people should feel free to submit their own stuff. After all, who knows what your best stuff is better than you. Why make you play some tricks or feel bad? In addition, it's kind of fun -- are you really going to want to spam a bunch of marketers, many of whom will spot it and call foul seconds after it appears? Forums have had to deal with this already. For me, Sphinn is in many ways simply an extension of forums with voting.

How long is your current work day? Do you have any tips for minimizing the potential downsides for spending too much time at the computer?

I tend to be up around 11am my time, and work sadly through 1 or 2am, though I'm trying to pull back. My best tip right now is to build a tree house!

Thanks Danny.

You can check out Search Engine Land for the latest search engine news, and track Danny's tree house building adventures at Daggle. If you would like to meet Danny in person he holds many Search Marketing Expo conferences each year.

Eli – Blue Hat SEO

Eli's Blue Hat SEO tends to be filled with in depth ideas on how to do aggressive search engine marketing that is often outside the bounds of published search engine guidelines. His blog is far more creative and original than most.

Interview

October 8, 2007

What is your background? What got you into SEO?

I started around '95-'96. I had a lot of interest in music and games and stuff so I created a couple sites related to stuff I normally really enjoy and download a lot. I got in good company with a few guys who ran hosting and colocation companies who made quite a bit of money so naturally my focus started shifting towards how I can make as much as they do. From there it kind of spurred into researching and developing traffic generation and search engine related stuff in an effort to keep up with these guys who had quite a bit more resources and money than my broke ass did. From there it kind of escalated and apart from a short break in college I've been doing it ever since.

You have many original posts on your blog highlighting many interesting techniques I have never heard shared publicly before. How do you come up with all your new ideas?

Thanks, even though they seem pretty generalized and polished many of the techniques I talk about are developed from either a problem I've had to solve in the past or stuff I've encountered while dabbling in specific industries. For instance bloggers as an industry have a multitude of resources and methods they use to promote their blogs. While a lot of their techniques may seem like common sense to them and are well formed over years of experience and others fine tuning it, their methods and resources may not be so obvious to people in other industries. It's fairly safe to say that I have ADD when it comes to jumping around in various niches and markets so I get a good variety of the unique ways each one markets their sites. While it may be standardized stuff to them, many of the techniques can be spun and with a little creative twist can be applied to any other form of generic sites. So while many of the techniques may create a Why didn't I think of that moment, most are well practiced and many marketers within the specific industries they came from know no other ways of doing it. I just kind of twist them and

collaborate them into a methodology anyone can use based on my own experiences and how I've applied them to my sites. Eitherway none of the techniques I talk about ever negatively affects my actual business and I usually have the techniques spun an even better way before I give out the old way.

Isn't the value of many aggressive SEO ideas inversely proportional to the number of people using them? What makes you decide what ideas to share and when to share them?

In many cases that's absolutely correct. I've shared several techniques that have died within days of posting them. Just to list a few examples, my Abandoned Wordpress series, Wikipedia Series, and Amazon.com exploits. In all these cases I know before I ever post it that it'll die moments after I do. So most of the time I'll post it out of greed. They are usually techniques I've been using for several years and have since retired them out and quit using them. Naturally with any technique others are bound to figure it out. When I start seeing them popup underground and are being used against me in increasing numbers when I'm no longer using them myself I might as well wreck it. There's a saying; If you're going to wreck a room, you might as well WRECK IT. So in those rare cases when a retired technique starts becoming this annoying little buzz in my ear I might as well squash it and help out a few of my readers at the same time. Win-win if you ask me. Most of my other techniques on the other hand are scalable and free range. I develop them to last, so whether I'm the only one doing it or everyone else on the net is doing it they're not something that can get stopped only suppressed. Often times through saying stuff like Don't do that, its sneaky and we don't like it. Existing propaganda and inherent difficulties in the technique itself usually take care of the rest and help weed out the people who just read for entertainment. There are a few people however that have been reading since the very beginning and after every single post actually do every technique and report back to me through email. They'll be the first to testify that the techniques almost never die, and just because many people know about them doesn't mean everyone is actually using them.

What are QUIT and SQUIRT? Is your system fairly scalable? What types of risks are associated with using them? What types of site should I consider using them on?

[QUIT](#) stands for Quick Indexing Tool and [SQUIRT](#) stands for Super Quick Indexing & Ranking Tools. My office is filled with wacky and weird acronyms. QUIT is the free one that basically employs several hands off indexing techniques I've developed over the years. It helps get the submitted site crawled by the search engines very quickly, and often times indexed within a day or two. It works off a very simple principle. How many ways can you think of to attract a search engine bot to a specific url? Make a list...figure out a way to do each one with a hands off approach (can't modify the site). You got yourself a Quick Indexing Tool. :) SQUIRT is the paid version and works much the same way. It employs all the techniques QUIT does plus a few extras that aren't scalable, so the membership must be limited. It also goes one step further and develops a bit of link worth to the site to ease it into better deep indexing and rankings. Lastly, it uses analysis of the site to counter a few shortcomings through hands off methods. Just as an

example, if a page of the site doesn't have the targeted keywords in its title, then give that page a few backlinks with the keywords as the anchor text. Stuff like that. Most of it is very simple, there's just a lot of it in play at once.

If search did not exist what do you think you would be doing right now?

Lol, I'd be super sizing your Value Meal.

Currently it appears as though Google is heavily focused on domain age and authority. Do you see them staying this way for a long time? Does improving automated content generation technology make it hard to move away from domain authority? Where do you see them going next with their relevancy algorithms?

I'm going to have to politely disagree with that. I think Google is moving in the opposite direction. More towards LSI technology and content relevancy as it pertains to the domain as whole much like Yahoo has been trying to pull off for many years. I think the direction switch started taking place when MSN came out with its own engine. While MSN focuses heavily on age as it pertains to their index rather than actual domain age back when it first opened it had a very young and growing index. So the rankings were more determined by keyword relevancy. So there was a brief period where MSN had all these really nice fresh sites and while rankings were much easier to come by they had fresh results with newly updated content and newer sites with better information. Meanwhile Google, who was relying heavily on DMOZ (as a basic prerequisite for rankings) was finding themselves with SERPS that had a bunch of old stagnant abandoned sites. This was very apparent if you were developing sites in aged industries such as Real Estate. Just three years ago if you had a real estate site, no matter how good it was, it was constantly outranked by old agent cookie cutter sites, and unless your site was at least a year old it would have a hard time even popping into the top 100 for its keywords. Now you can see things moved in quite a bit different direction. You can get a site competing in an aged niche just as easily as long as the content fits properly and in a much shorter time (3-8 months as apposed to a full year minimum in certain cases). I do agree and see authority as a big issue though. Fortunately authority can be replicated and pushed. I did a post awhile back called [SERP Domination](#) that talked about ways to push authority and get a brand new site to compete in highly competitive niches. I think improving your automated content plays a big part in that.

Google is starting to move away from being a search engine toward being a content host. How do you see this affecting the future of spamming Google?

Absolutely. There is a breaking point in Google becoming a content host, which I'm certain is their overall goal. As long as they can reward the contributors with increased traffic to their site (ie. -negative rankings..above the top listing like with google base products) people will be willing to donate content to them. I for one will testify that Google Base is very difficult to spam on a mass level as apposed to their search. This is due to the fact that they have a very good hands on antispam

team and their content levels are low enough for human checks to be possible. The way I see it is, as their content hosting efforts increase, so will the possibilities for spamming them on a mass scale. It's just a matter of time. Until then, I limit my spamming of them at a level just below getting caught. At the moment, unlike Adsense, their multiaccount banning capabilities are very well done and to be frank it works out well for them. Their content is very good and in all objectiveness very well kept as far as spam goes.

I have never done much overtly black hat SEO. I was not good at programming when I got on the web and after I had been online for a few years I decided to try to build things that can grow logarthimically. Can black hat techniques grow logarthmically? Do you have any strong branded sites to stabelize your income if the black hat streams come and go? How many different website marketing techniques do you use at any given time?

With beautiful domains like blackhatseo.com and seobook.com theres no doubt in my mind you have a nack for predicting the next big things in the industry. If I were you I wouldn't bother with black hat either. You obviously got it made with the skills you already have. I do preach a lot about programming and building sites through autogeneration. In fact a lot of people consider my style Code SEO. I have quite a few very high profile sites, you've probably heard of them and they do bring in good money but I don't ever really talk about them. I like to diversify my investments because not every investment is solid. As far as my blackhat network goes it is actually as solid as it gets. It's very rare when a black hat site of mine gets banned and if you saw one unless you have a really well trained eye you'd probably have a very hard time knowing it was black hat. Thats just part of the investment though. The more legit you can make things appear while autogenerating it the more income you can squeeze out of it in a site's lifecycle.

What is the longest timeframe you have seen an overt black hat site rank for in the various engines? How much have the lifespans of these types of sites changed over the past 5 years?

I think the lifespans of black hat sites increase as your skillsets increase. I have some black hat networks that are still around now and bringing in income and gosh I don't even remember when I made them. Thats also why I talk a lot of "hosted black hat sites" on orphan subdomains and such. Like in my recent SEO Empire post. They really help when making the obvious ones stick. I usually stick to the rule of thumb, if you can mimic the footprints of white hat sites and minimize the footprints of blackhat sites than theres no reason why they shouldn't last forever. Search engines can only ban a footprint that no legitimate sites use. So if you're interested in starting blackhat, as long as you stick by that principle you'll be just fine as far as investments go.

Are there some markets that are too competitive for automated marketing? How do you do successful black hat SEO in hypercompetitive markets like mortgage or insurance?

I don't personally compete in competitive black hat dominated markets, like you mentioned mortgages and pharmaceuticals and such. I feel a little more secure with my black hat sites roaming around the longtailed phrases and localities. It's just a matter of putting in the extra effort which in those cases I'm too set in my ways to sit down and accomplish. I know several people who do strictly that and make a very good living, but I personally have no strong opinions on the matter. So I leave those markets to the pros and if I want to get competitive I use my white hat sites to do it.

Do you do much client work? Have any AdSense sites? Do you mostly rely on affiliate commissions? Have any infoproducts or more tools coming out? What business model do you see as the best source of growth for established SEOs? What segment do you think looks best for new webmasters?

I've never done any client or paid SEO work. I couldn't imagine a worse form of hell to be honest :) I do answer a lot of questions privately though, or at least as many as I have time for. I have lots of adsense sites. I do mostly affiliate marketing and CPC, but I've spent a couple years of my career building actual ecommerce sites. Other than additions to SQUIRT I really don't have any new webmaster related products coming out. I had a few ideas I set into motion but it may be a looong time before they actually come around. I would like to do more though, but I'm afraid of spreading myself too thing. Internet Marketers as I'm sure you're well aware of can be very demanding of ones sanity. When it comes to business models though I wrote a post called SEO Empire. It is MY business model. I've always wanted to write a detailed article on web investments and that's probably as close as it comes to making me happy.

Given the offline macroeconomic trends and trends online what high growth markets do you think are currently less competitive than they should be?

Well of course I'd have to couple trademarked markets into that group, such as myspace, facebook, digg and such. As long as they are working hard to knock down the big boys in the coattailing markets theres always room for new growth. The biggest market I see right now that no one has yet to figure out a good way of capitalizing on is web episodes and webtv. Theres sites like tv-links and other show specific sites that give out streaming episodes of tv shows and movies that are in constant danger of copyright infringement and being shut down by their hosts. More often than not these types of sites get more traffic than they can handle very quickly just because they are in such high demand. Even just putting up a simple site for a small anime type show with all the current episodes available to stream can drive thousand of visitors a day within a month or two of being brand new. The only problem the industry has to figure out is how to keep from getting shut down and attacked constantly. This just goes in line with a theory I've started pushing my own company towards quite a few years ago that television and the Internet are increasingly having an effect on each other.

You seem to be quite outspoken about there being many scams and a lot of hype in the SEO market, complete with A lists and all that sort of stuff. Do you ever see these trends changing? Are these niche specific, or just a reflection of general social structures that cross all lands and industries?

Yeah thats definitely a topic I feel very passionately about. I think scams and hype only exist where theres opportunity. Our industry just happens to have a ton of opportunities for it to flourish. I just try to do my part, step up the plate and make a difference. I take it to a bit of an extreme though by attempting to cover the Advanced SEO topic which is kind of like the Antarctica of SEO, most know its there but how many have actually seen it talked about? The reality is, all I'm doing is making changes by example. I'm saying this is how I want SEO blogs to be like, the spirit can be applied to just about any aspect of our industry including newbie material. Persistently, instead of using the success of it to promote myself or advertisers I use it to promote other likeminded blogs. Many small blogs have made it big and exploded over night just by showing they have what it takes by writing a guest post on Blue Hat and getting it published. Thats where I'm seeing this trend go every day. I really don't think it'll be very much longer before the bloggers that work torwards being helpful start really showing that they are truly taking over. You can see the gurus that establish their expertise by bragging rather than showing are starting to slope and decline to make room for those that are mimicking the helpful spirit. It's just a matter of time and I think it'll come faster than people imagine :)

I am new to online marketing...what books, articles, blog posts, and blogs should I start reading?

Lol, ass kissing aside, i really do send nearly all new people to the industry that talk to me to SEOBook. SEO book gives it out clearly and explains the stuff they need to know. Everywhere else tends to be flooded with bait and switch tactics and misinformation that leads them to the exact opposite direction they should be going. Not only is it a good resource but it's miles ahead of the other blogs and books trying to attract "offer fillers." <- my affectionate term for John Chow readers (my words not Aarons). I also like several blogs where the writer is not only talented but is also in the thick of the industry just like his/her readers and trying to make his way. For instance JonWaraas.com does a great job candidly talking about his experiences and what he's learning at the moment. He's also cool enough to share his sites with you. A great step from there might be the late NetBusinessBlog.com where the new writer and past talk about nice little techniques that range anywhere from intermediate to advanced and are always a great read. Also can't go without mentioning EarnersBlog.com, busin3ss.name, and professionalmiddleman.com.

I am new to the web...when should I consider quiting my job to be a full time marketer/webmaster? What are the biggest attributes I need to succeed online in today's market.

By all means please eat. Three out of every four projects I develop fail overall. As a new person to the business expect to do much worse, so make sure to take care of

yourself first and the business second. The added stress of having to pay bills while developing your business only escalates the toll off the inevitable failures that await you. Thats the beauty of the Internet business. hehe don't just dive into a pool without checking the water first. You can get started without a $100k+ startup cash and tons of risk. You'll still have to work just as hard as any other business startup, you just have the luxury of being capable of starting small. The only quicksand you'll run into is the myth that you can make money in your spare time. Many often figure out, who actually has SPARE time? You have to treat it just like a regular job. Make smart investments in both time and money. Build and escalate until your other job starts to phase out. When you can finally answer both of these questions with a yes you should be good to quit your day job. 1) Does your day job earnings supplement your online earnings? (or is it visa versa). 2) If you suddenly got sick and were taken away from your online work for three months, would you come back to a business that has grown?

What is the best keyword you have ever ranked for? What is the best keyword you ever ranked for using almost nothing but automated mareting free content?

Should have specified a time frame, but since you didn't we'll go old school :)

At one time or another in my career: Music, MP3, Downloads, Freeware, Real Estate, Games, WWW, Homes, Pamela Anderson, Internet, Bikini, Sites and College.

No, sad to say I don't have any sites that still rank for any of those terms. :(But I still do have some very competitive phrases amongst my sites today, they just can't compete with some of the million dollar ones from back in the day when SEO was relatively new.

Have you ever felt a search engineer was lying about something? If so, have you ever called them out on it?

I think we're being lied to about nofollow. Consider this the call out :)

It seems as though large branded sites are able to get away with far more than smaller newer websites can. What tools or features would you like to see search engines make available to help level the playing field? Do you think search engines are more focused on relevancy or profit?

I think they're focused on profit through relevancy, and currently they attempt to accomplish that with authority factors. The playing field isn't level because its designed not to be. I honestly wouldn't want it to become level and fair. I kind of see it as "I don't have to outrun the bear, I only have to outrun you."

Do you ever see search losing some of its importance? What might replace it?

Webmasters set the pace the web, they always have. What's important to the webmasters becomes important to the users. It was the webmasters that made

Google, MSN, and Yahoo important not the other way around. Just throughout history, the moment webmasters quit caring about something it becomes obsolete and forgotten by everyone within no time, the opposite is also true. It's entirely possible that search will lose its importance. I don't see it happening anytime soon, but if the average webmaster gets frustrated enough with them and a good alternative comes out I'm sure it won't take very long from that point before its gone. A good way for them to begin that process might be to hand pick a couple sites like wikipedia and have them conquer every single result...oh wait.

Do you ever see Google losing their dominance? What might replace them?

Going along with the above question, there was a short time in Google's history right before Matt Cutts and Webmaster Guidelines/Tools where they started becoming very secretive about their algorithm and lost nearly all contact with webmasters outside of a submit url button. During that time a whole multitude of search engines and creative forms of search started popping up like crazy. It was like there was a new one almost every day. Some were really fun to play around with. None really had both the form and function that would of inspired a permanent switch for me, but it goes to show how easy it is and I doubt Google will make that mistake again.

Do you feel domains names have large synergies with SEO? I am currently not using the domain names BlackHatSEO.com and WhiteHatSEO.com to their full potential. What do you think I should do with them? What would you do with them if you owned them?

I think domains are a very large factor in SEO and I don't think many will disagree. I was always curious about those domains of yours Aaron. They're awesome. I'm sure you get asked 10 times a day to sell them. Why not throw up forums on them or even mashups? I understand your underuse of them though, I'd be all excited to get them but then I'm certain a hard reality would hit and I'd come up blank for what to actually do with them. I personally would love to some day see an AskABlank SEO site. I'm sure you've seen the format before, its like Ask A Midget(hypothetical, don't go searching for it). Then people get to submit questions and the midget answers and it gets posted publically covering various topics, but with SEO. An idea?

Why BlueHatSEO? Why not another word/color?

Completely, 100% random. I'm not even fond of the color Blue, Green is my fav. If you've ever noticed, the site is extremely generic. Default Wordpress template, No SEO, no link building (never even done a link exchange), no link bait, no nofollow tags, no submissions to social sites, no promoting...absolutely nothing from the very beginning. Very very -by- all definition and to the core... pure white hat. I did it intentionally to make a point. Interesting Trivia For Ya: Can you name the ONE other popular SEO blogger that has also done it? Minus maybe the ridding of nofollow tags. :)

-- Thanks Eli. To check out his blog go to http://www.bluehatseo.com/

Interview

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Debra Mastaler

Debra Mastaler is a well known guru on all things related to link building. Prior to working on the web she was involved with public relations, so she is great at understanding what ideas spread and why they spread.

Interview

September 7, 2007

How long have you been doing link building? What did you do before link building?

Alliance-Link has been in operation since late 2000, it came about while I owned and operated a directory featuring organic food and clothing. When I started to rank well for a large number of money terms, business owners advertising in my directory asked if I could I help them do "SEO" on their sites. Well, I had no clue what "SEO" was so I started looking around for information and found the now defunct Rank Write newsletter by Jill Whalen and Heather Lloyd Martin. Jill took the time to explain what I was doing and how it influenced a website's visibility in the search engines and from there, Alliance-Link was born.

Before that I spent 15 years in the marketing department of Anheuser-Busch and four years before that in the Civil Service. Both jobs provided valuable experience in all three of the main marketing segments – sales, promotions and publicity. It was an invaluable experience and a large part of why I work the way I do today. It's also the reason why I won't drink anything but A-B products. Buy Bud! Support my 401K!

Do you tend to build links in spurts or at a steadier pace?

Depends on the industry I'm working in. I use a tiered approach where one part of the linking service dovetails into the next or two services work in tandem. That way I increase my chances of attracting more links from different sources and can use the resources from whatever promotion I've created multiple times.

For example, if we're focused on distributing link embedded content I'd build out the host site with a detailed version of the content (complete with photos, video, downloads etc). Much shorter versions would be sent to topical bloggers with a redeemable incentive or freebie for their readers. At the same time we'll contact key media and announce the new resource. Once both the bloggers and media have

been notified we'll launch a standard press release and email the client's customer base with an announcement and link incentive. All four tactics run either simultaneously or within days of each other. I am less concerned with attracting large numbers of links in a short period than I am of attracting many of the SAME type links. I try to avoid that.

Are you a fan of paid links?

I'm a fan of good solid links. If I need to pay to get them, then yes, I'm a fan.

But I'm definitely not a fan of the "paid links are evil" discussions going on all over. Google has its guidelines and either you choose to follow them or you don't. I believe it's that simple. If you don't and feel paid links are worth the risk then buyer and seller beware. Search engines aren't the only link police on the block anymore.

What are the most effective ways to buy links?

Anyway you can that keeps you under the radar!

LOL… It's trite but true. I like to buy advertising links from large membership based organizations and associations and negotiate their email and mailing lists as part of the deal. This is especially effective for new product launches or rebranding since you can incorporate a special sales offer as part of the link request. Since you're marketing to businesses belonging to a membership based association, you'll end up with topically focused links from established companies. It's the ultimate "link within your industry" tactic.

I also do a lot with paid and traded sponsorships. Find a publicity vehicle in your industry and buy a top sponsor position taking care to negotiate for options like mailing lists and viral email campaigns. A lot of people talk about this tactic in terms of finding a charity to sponsor – and that's FINE but unless the charity has a national presence you'll see little return in residual linking. Charities don't give out donor lists and don't include private business in mailings and auto responders. Basically, there is little opportunity for viral reach.

I wrote about finding sponsors recently, how to use them to build links and a couple of sources to mine for partnership leads. It might help if you're interested in this type of link marketing.

Is anchor text still a big deal? Do you ever buy low quality links just for anchor text?

Yes I believe anchor text is still a big deal and yes occasionally I use low quality links for anchors. There are always handfuls on the lists I buy, I can't help that. As long as they're in Google's and Yahoo's index, its fine and I'll use them.

I know there is a thought process out there that says – get links from a wide variety of sites since it emulates a natural linking pattern but I don't purposely design a

strategy to include a certain number of low quality links. I figure the scrapers will be by in due time and I'll see some links from them so that's enough junk for me.

That said I do keep an eye on the types of sites I'm extending my special promotions to and will eliminate a site from my list if it's not indexed or hosts links to an objectionable site. For me, this is one of the most time consuming parts of link building – checking partner sites for compatibility.

How do you get focused anchor text while keeping the link profile looking fairly natural?

You make it sound conversational. It's why using blogs to build links works so well. It's much easier to embed links into a conversation than a static page.

Do you ever create content as a link building strategy? How do you know which webmasters to target and what ideas are likely to spread?

Well I personally don't create the content but I do write the marketing plan that recommends what content should be written and the tactics used to promote it. I'm lucky to work with a couple of gifted women writers who NEVER let me get involved with that part of the linking program. I stick to research and linking and let them write.

When I start a job I never know which websites to target, that comes as a result of hours of research and review work before the first link is ever negotiated. I spend almost half my time researching the client's industry looking for trendsetters as well as the sites getting the most attention and ranking well. The bigger the site the more keywords they have and the longer you have to look.

It's probably easier to hit the Powerball than to figure out what ideas will spread and net links for a website. I've been wrong my fair share of times, sometimes it's more about being first than being creative.

It's not beyond me to look at what's been done before and try to tweak it to fit my client's products and services. I look for old press releases and articles printed in offline publications for leads as well as scour YouTube for old video. Ideas are only lacking if you give up looking for them.

How do free samples work to build links? If I don't have anything worth talking about how can I get people to want to link to my site?

I am always amazed at what people will do for a free tee shirt. I had a client who offered a free company tee shirt to anyone linking to their site. We ran the promotion through their newsletter, email and snail mail list and converted over 22% of the membership. It was a substantial numbers of links.

The offer was simple. Link to us and we'll send you a shirt. After a year, over half of the links were still in place using the targeted, anchor variations we provided. All for a beefy tee. Go figure!

Getting people to link to a site that has little linkable content means you need to know a good deal about the people who use your products. You might not have anything worthwhile on the site but if you know what motivates your customers you can create a "deal" and provide it as an incentive to link. Talk to your customers and ask what it would take to get them to link to you.

Do you ever recommend going to trade shows or doing anything else offline to build linkage data? What do you do if an industry exists mostly offline?

I've never recommended a client attend a trade show as a way to increase their inbound link counts but after thinking about it, it's not a half bad idea. Anytime you have face-to-face opportunities with the people buying your products you have opportunities to capture links. It could be as simple as saying – "hey, link to us and we'll give you $100 bucks off our widget" or some other incentive. It's a passive approach but then you're not expending any energy or money to get the link so why not?

Industries that exist mostly offline have online counterparts and that's where I'd start looking for opportunities. Where's the media covering their niche? Where are the how- to sites and the reference sites covering what they sell? Find those and you'll find spots to secure links from.

If a client is unwilling to change their site how do you make their site more linkworthy?

If a client refuses to make recommended changes there isn't much you can do overall except buy your link love. This happens more than you think, a lot of big companies have rules and CEO's that make it hard if not impossible to change content. I try not to work with these types of accounts, linking is hard enough as it is. Sites like this can also add themselves to the directories and do a little utility linking for inbound links.

Do press releases still work? Are there better ways to garner media exposure?

Yes and yes. Press releases still work at attracting attention, and some are indexed in various media portals but overall they provide little link popularity weight.

I recommend clients buy a subscription from one of the media relations companies like Burrells Luce or Bacon's. They provide media lists that are constantly updated and categorized by industry making it easy to find the right journalists. They also have a list of editorial calendars for many trade and consumer publications which allows you to submit content for consideration or reserve advertising space in a timely manner.

I also recommend you mine Topix on a continual basis for media contacts as well as basic sales and marketing opportunities. I get more from that site than many others!

Has link building changed at all since web2.0 came about, or are more people now aware of some of the techniques you have been using for many years?

Yes, I believe both linking and society as a whole has changed since Web2.0 has come about. The timing was right for the technology to morph and for the younger generation to be drawn in to push the growth forward. Google became a verb, MySpace the corner hangout and LinkedIn the company water cooler. Throw in the blogosphere as a pastime second only to baseball and yeah, I'd say linking has changed.

Funny thing is – the way I link hasn't changed. I have more resources at my fingertips and more people to target but in the end, I still have to write the promotion, ask for the link and add it to the site in order for it to count. Even newer tactics like "link bait" need research and review before the first article can be written. So the principles haven't changed but the vehicles have.

Are there directories media members look for when searching for a contact for a story?

Yes, there are resources out there the media uses when looking for experts in specific fields. Here's an example:

SheSource.org - "an online braintrust of female experts on diverse topics designed to serve journalists, producers and bookers who need female guests and sources."

If you're a verifiable expert in something find resources like the one above and add yourself to them. And I stress "verifiable"; you need work experience, references and education to be considered so get your resume together before you run out beating your chest. No member of the media will use a resource (meaning you) unless they can verify their expertise.

What are 3 of the easiest things a webmaster can do to improve their site credibility and linkability?

There are hundreds but since you asked for 3 of the easiest, here's what I do:

1. Survey your customers and ask what they'd like to see on the site and then give it to them. Once you've upgraded the site, ask the same customers to link to it.

2. Add an incentivized "link to us" request in all correspondence (auto responders, confirmation emails, reminders etc). Make the incentive a bounce back to stimulate further sales.

3. Develop a fully functional resource center. Include all the information about your company and your industry you'd expect to find in an encyclopedia and then add photos, videos and podcasts. Look up what's been written about your company by others and include that as well. Alert those authors and the media once the resource center is up and running..

I've been doing the last one since I started in this business; I call it building a "link library" on your site. It's a corny old term but it's the most effective linking attraction tactic I use.

When do link exchange partnerships make sense?

They make sense when you want to deep link using a specific term or if you want to launch an awareness campaign. I've always said the power in reciprocal linking isn't the link as much as it's the control you have on what it says and where it points. If someone wants to swap links and you agree, look at the page the link will sit on to be sure it's not one of a hundred. Give the partner site a well worded anchor text link surrounded by carefully crafted verbiage that points to an internal money making page. If the partner site balks at giving you the additional real estate then I say pass on the link. Even well crafted anchor text links can benefit from intro or explanation paragraph around it.

Reciprocal linking also makes sense when it's done "outside the box". There are times I'll offer link space on a client's site in exchange for space in a mailing (online or off) to introduce a new section/product/service on a site. In this case I've swapped placement for exposure. Invariably I'll see a link or two out of it but the purpose behind that promotion isn't to build links but to build awareness.

When do business partnerships make sense for link building? How do you leverage someone else's brand to build links for your site?

I just blogged about how to leverage brand to [build links](#) on The Link Spiel, the partnership between the two sites mentioned is a classic case of targeted co-promotion. Partnerships can be as simple as donating time to a forum in exchange for signature/content links or can be more structured and formalized like the companies Wallstrip and optionsXpress mentioned in my blog post.

Consider creating an advisory board and invite people you know and respect to be part of a business partnership. Credit their work as you promote yours and you'll find they'll link to you.

Directories have fallen out of favor amongst many people on SEO forums. Do they still hold any weight? How do you tell if a directory is worth listing your site in?

Yeah, directory bashing by SEO's seems to be the rage these days which is funny since so many of the newer ones have been developed by SEO's.

The concept of "merit based inclusion" is what makes securing links in the better directories desirable. It's reasoned that search engines bestow hub authority on these sites because human review is necessary before a site is included. And since human review is part of the co citation process search engines are programmed to reward, it stands to reason these types of sites would pass link popularity.

I use directories as a standard part of every link building service I offer and look at a number of things before I'll submit:

- Is the page my link will sit on in the Yahoo and Google index? If not, why? Is it something simple like it's a new page or is something blocking that spider?

- Does the home page of the directory show PageRank but not the internal pages?

- Do the directory pages host an inordinate amount of adsense? If they do, I pass. Same applies for site wide links. If there is more than a handful of site wides, I walk.

- If it's a paid directory, is it a lifetime or annual submission fee? I go for lifetime with the exception of the Yahoo! Directory which I advocate using if you're a new business.

- Do you have to use the name of your business in the anchor text link or will they allow descriptive keywords? If they do, I mix up the keywords and the descriptions.

- Does the directory allow deep linking?

- How long has the directory been online? My threshold is two years.

- Does the directory have an RSS embedded on its category pages? This is a bonus for me as I can keep tabs via keyword settings on new sites being added.

- And lastly – does the directory allow you to edit submissions? It's helpful to be able to change your descriptions/anchors to reflect the changes in your business.

I always submit to the "tried and true" directories such as JoeAnt, Ezilon, GoGuides, BOTW, Uncover The Net and RubberStamped as well as any niche directories I can find.

And yes, I still try to get into DMOZ provided I find a category editor on the page I want to submit to. Otherwise I don't bother anymore.

One last tip about using directories…You'll find a lot of the niche and local directories are hobby sites run by enthusiasts or business owners. Look around these sites for email signup boxes or an indication they publish a newsletter. If they do, write the owner and ask if he'll resell his mailing list or allow you to place a text link ad in their newsletter. You'll find it's an inexpensive way to reach a targeted audience.

When should a company build links in-house? What amount of the link building should they do and when does it make sense to outsource?

A company should be building links the minute their site hits the Web! I recommend a new company use an experienced link building firm to develop a link marketing plan and a detailed analysis of the linking landscape. (Both crucial to move forward). The idea here is to research the linking structures of well ranked sites and determine what helped get them there. Whether you hire a consultant or use in-house staff shouldn't matter at this point, both would have a first rate link marketing plan to work from.

That said I do believe it's a good idea to bring in a link building consultant every nine to 12 months to refresh your in-house staff and bring them up to date on what's working and what's not. Or - at the very least, keep one on retainer and schedule monthly updates.

Thanks Debra. If you want to learn more about link building check out Debra's blog, The Link Spiel.

Thanks for reading these interviews & buying the book. Hope they help you. Best of luck with everything & to your success,

Aaron