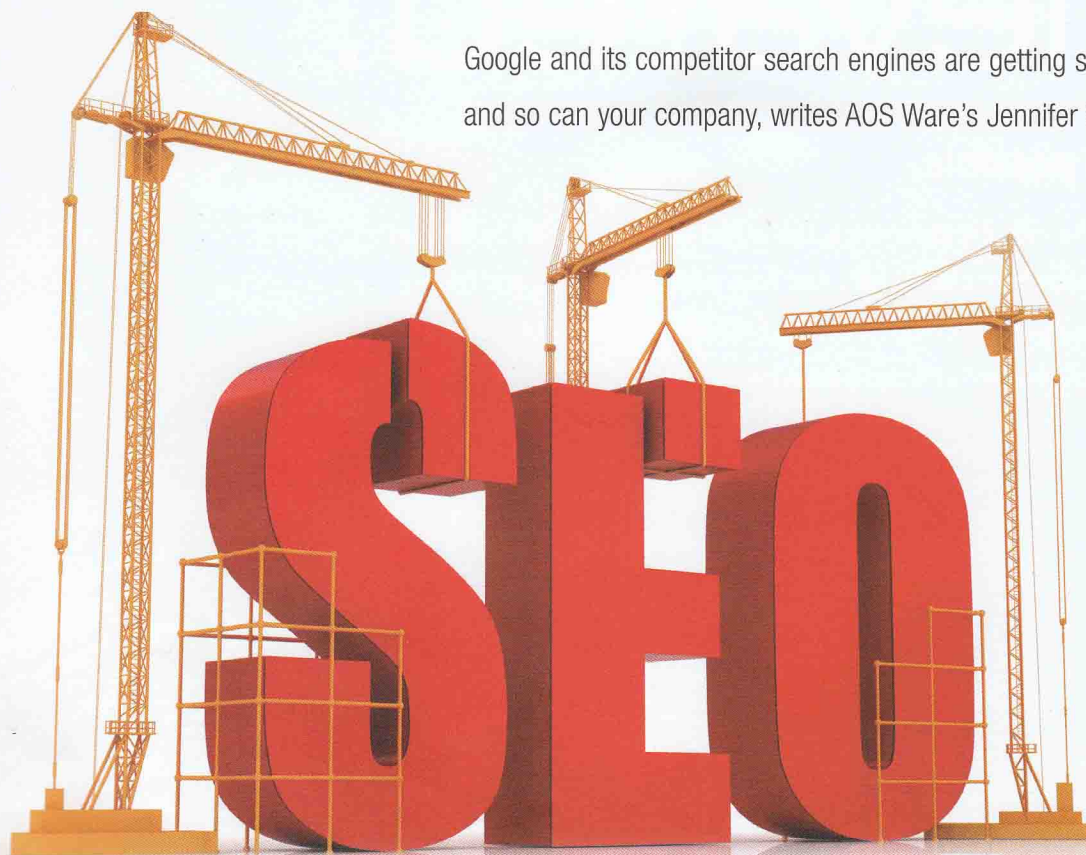


Google and its competitor search engines are getting smarter and so can your company, writes AOS Ware's Jennifer Stine



# The changing landscape

**A**ccording to a new *Internet Retailer* survey, search engine marketing remains a top priority as newer engines become more prominent and search marketing techniques evolve.

The study, which analysed responses from 102 web-only retailers, chain retailers, cataloguers and consumer brand manufacturers, found that search remains one of the top marketing strategies to drive sales and brand recognition online. For instance:

- 28 percent of merchants report more than 25 percent of their site traffic stems from paid or sponsored search
- 51.5 percent say more than a quarter of their traffic comes from natural or organic search
- 47 percent report more than 25 percent of their web sales stem from search engine marketing

With the major engines constantly changing their algorithms and competitors stepping up their search strategies every day, it is important to stay on top of your search marketing strategy.

### Game changing

Google is the dominant search engine with over 75 percent of global search traffic deriving from the engine. Recently, they made some changes to their search engine results pages (SERPs) that can affect what each of us sees in our search results. There are a few to look out for.

### Personalisation

Google has been 'personalising' search results for a while. However, most personalised results occurred when a user was logged into their Google account. Google would show results to a logged-in user based on their previous search and website visit history or information included in their profiles, for example. If you were not logged in you would be seeing the same results exactly the way everyone else did. Now, we all may see different results, even if we are searching for the same exact thing, when not in a logged-in state. Google has created a profile for each computer that tracks your history, IP, preferences, etc and serves up results they feel will be more relevant to you.

### Local

We are all used to seeing the '7 push-pin' map display on many of our search results but Google is taking it a step further. It is no longer necessary to append your search with a location or geographic target (for instance, *office furniture NY, NY*), unless you are searching for a local listing outside of your physical location. Google simply takes your IP address or information from your ISP, and shows you listings for local businesses which are relevant to your search. This is great news for small and local businesses looking to gain high organic rank for broad terms. If you are a local company, strongly

# Search Engine Marketing Strategies

consider purchasing a domain that contains your targeted geographic location. This alone can help boost your organic rank for local searches.

## Page load time

Sites that take longer to load could see their organic rank drop fast. It goes without saying that page load times need to be fast – but not just for organic ranking purposes. Chances are that if your site is loading too slowly, users will simply leave. That said, you have much bigger problems on your hands.

Yes, Google is the dominant engine, but search marketers need to factor in the rising use of Microsoft's Bing, which launched in June 2009. Like Google, Bing provides a tool that delivers the most relevant results for each search. While the algorithms are different, much of the same techniques apply for organic ranking, but Bing's paid search is also making strides. In the coming year, 43.4 percent of merchants plan to shift some paid search spending to Bing, according to *Internet Retailer*. Much of this is influenced by the Microsoft and Yahoo deal. Both have agreed that Bing will become the search engine used on Yahoo sites within the year. That makes Bing a clear second place to Google in the race for engine market share.

## Search engine optimisation (SEO)

Searchers have come to trust organic listings over paid ads. While paid search is still relevant and effective, achieving high organic rank is key to establishing relevance for your top keywords. Jump into SEO efforts with this 3 step approach:

### Onsite optimisation

A website's infrastructure needs to be optimised for search engines in order to achieve top organic rank. If your domain includes keywords that describe the products and services you offer, you are ahead of the game. You can also place keywords into the directories and page names of your site. Make sure each page has different title tags and meta data, that specifically describe what that page is about.

Make sure you have an HTML and XML site map deployed, and that you are developing robust internal linking structures. You can do this easily by linking keywords within the content of your page, or within the navigation of your site, to the pages that speak more

towards that specific keyword. On site optimisation techniques need to be deployed, but your site needs to be intuitive and easy to use first, otherwise your audience will simply leave your site. The rule is: users first, engines second.

### Content

Engines love fresh content, so it is up to you to offer relevant and meaningful content for the products and services you offer. Develop content-rich pages on your site that speak toward your offerings, focusing on 3-4 keywords per page. Selling your products and services on these pages should not be the main goal. Instead, focus on helping the user come to a more informed decision by offering them 'how to' pages, or a guide to finding the product that is right for them. If you can help educate your audience, it proves you are a leader in your industry and establishes trust between your company and your targeted audience.

### Back links

The more websites that link to you, the higher you will rank organically. However, these sites need to be trusted, draw in decent traffic and should be relevant to your audience. When developing link strategies, quality over quantity is most important. There are two types of link strategies, one-way and reciprocal. One way links are built generally by putting content out on the web and linking to your site. You can achieve this by linking to your site through social media posts, blogging and sending press releases out over the wires. Reciprocal links are simply link exchanges between you and another website. Be careful not to exchange links with just any site, try to make sure your audience, demographic or geographic criteria is similar. Both are time consuming, but well worth it. As for paid links, be careful, most paid link programs are simply not worth it and engines will ban you if they think you are buying irrelevant links.

## Pay-per-click advertising (PPC)

Paid searches are still a major component of search marketing strategies. 44.6 percent of *Internet Retailer* survey respondents increased their paid search budgets in the past year and 49 percent say they will increase it in the year ahead. Careful planning is the basis for a successful paid strategy. The primary goal is to increase your quality



score, which will lower your cost-per-click (CPC) and increase ad impressions over time. Consider these 4 steps when launching a new PPC campaign:

## Keyword Research

Cover all your bases by developing a robust list of what keywords you want your ad to display for. Get started by:

- Pulling keywords from your existing website copy
- Analysing the keywords your competitors are using on their site, or PPC campaigns
- Expand the keyword list using a myriad of tools such as Google's Ad Words or Keyword analyser

## Segmentation

Take a look at your keyword list. There are probably logical groupings of keywords jumping out at you. Don't just throw a myriad of keywords into one campaign and expect great results. For example, if you are bidding on terms related to 'office supplies', but also want to bid on terms related to 'school supplies', create two separate campaigns: one for keywords related to 'office supplies' and another for keywords related to 'school supplies'. Do not overlook this step. Segmentation is crucial to PPC success.

## Targeted ads and landing pages

Use the exact keywords you are bidding on in your ad copy. Searchers expect to see ads that contain the exact search term they searched for in the ad copy. This is why campaign segmentation is so critical. You do not want to serve up generic, non-specific keywords in your ad copy, especially if you are selling products or services that are in specific categories. You can always spice up the ad copy by using teaser words like 'sale', 'discount', '10% off', or 'free trial' to encourage more clicks. Make sure that the landing page you are taking the searcher to contains the specific keywords you have running in your campaign and ad copy. Try to avoid 'dumping' searchers on your homepage, where they may need to search for what they need all over again.

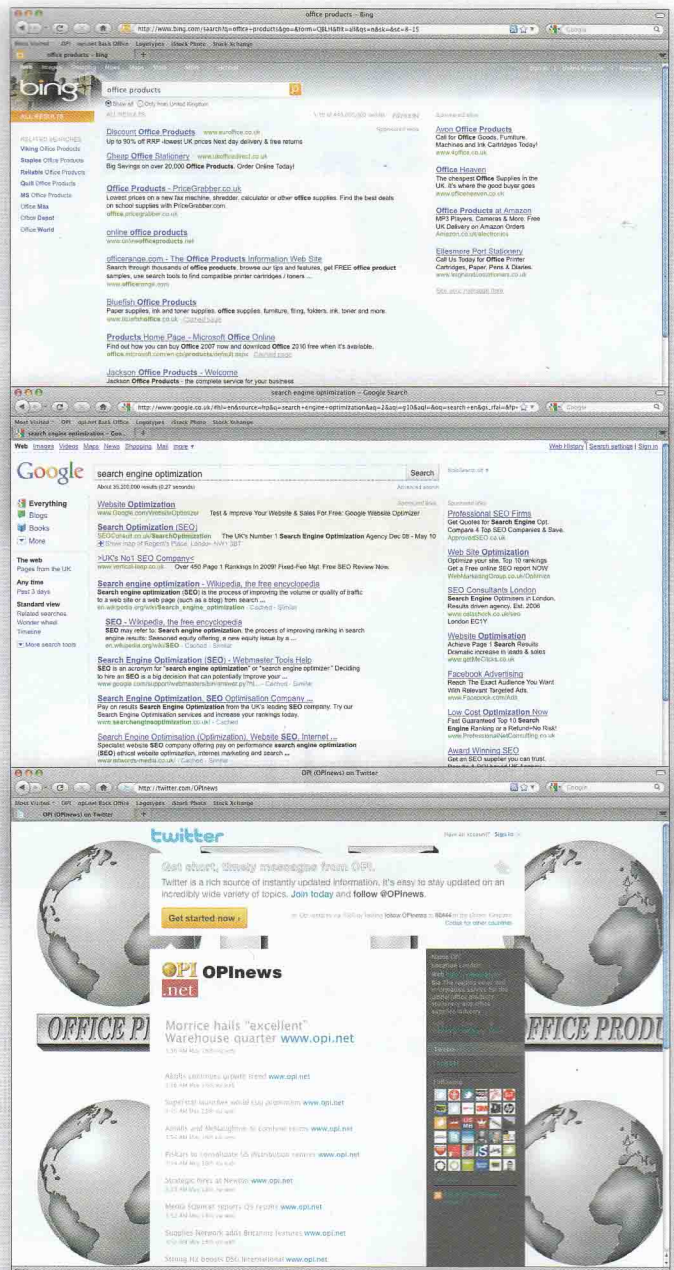
## Tracking

Tracking PPC campaigns is easy. All major engines offer a conversion tracking code for leads, sales or any other call to action on your site. Conversions show up right in your PPC management console. Analysing traffic sources can also be of great help in identifying paid versus organic traffic. Use a program like Google Analytics or Web Trends to run frequent reports.

## Social and search collide

The convergence of search and social media is not surprising. Social sites, like Twitter, are used frequently when people are looking for real-time updates.

After all Twitter is all about what is going on now. Google has seen the need to go beyond posting latest news stories in their SERPs, by including real-time search results from social channels. Be on the lookout for scrolling updates from sites like Twitter as you perform searches. While not mainstream yet, we're sure it will be. Google does factor in number of followers, post count and authority into what they include in the SERPs. For those of you running social media channels, pay attention to what you post.



Social media optimisation (SMO) plays right into this. The more content you post and the more keyword rich it is, the higher the chances you have for ranking organically in real-time updates.

All search engines are in the business of providing you the most relevant results for each search you perform. Most engines are even including related search links at the bottom of the SERPs so you can easily narrow down your search or see related terms others are searching for. With organic and paid ranking factors evolving at a rapid pace and engines constantly changing the way they serve us search results, complacency could equate to disaster for search marketers.

Stay on top of the changing landscapes and search marketing techniques because, in the end, it will be well worth it. ■