

Building a great keyword list
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As the web continues to grow, the number of users that are looking for goods and services online is also growing exponentially. This makes search engine traffic more and more valuable as a marketing medium for web merchants.

Whether your primary focus is the paid placement PPC engines, paid directories, portal deals, shopping engines or the XML feed engines, your choice of keywords is critical to your success because they are the primary elements that bring motivated traffic to your site. Internet users type keywords into a search engine query box to act on their needs, so careful selection of the right keywords can attract the right kind of traffic that results in good conversion rates.

There are a few basic characteristics of search queries that are important to note. The first is that only the most popular search queries are alike. For many sites, the organic unpaid search keyword mix on a particular page will be quite broad. Similarly, for XML and directory inclusion the keyword mix for a particular listing that represents a page is also quite broad. There are a lot of ways a user can construct a search that is relevant for a page. The second most important point is that, according to several sources, between 40% and 58% of all search queries are three terms or longer. So users are beginning to use the power of search to better target their requests as they learn how to search better.

So what does this mean to us as search engine marketers? And how do we capitalize on it?

In the old days (before the PPC engines), large web sites with hundreds or thousands of product specific pages relied on spidering to get their content and keywords into the search database. But now site owners are forced to pay for traffic from search engines on a CPC basis. Search engines require a list of exact keywords and phrases combined with titles and descriptions. It is incumbent upon the site owner or agency to develop a comprehensive keyword list that fits their site and marketing objectives. Moreover, the PPC engines have recently implemented minimum clickthru thresholds that must be met for keyword listings. Google automatically penalizes for poor clickthru rates and Overture has a Click Index. So you also have to make sure that your keyword selections can meet that minimum. Allow me to expand on this point. If your "keyword market" is one- and two-term searchers, your search engine marketing strategy should focus heavily on paid placement and shopping engines. But if a large portion of your market consists of people who are moving beyond one- and two-term searches, then the XML paid inclusion engines and directory inclusion will probably work better for you.

Here's an example. Let's say you have a web site that sells thousands of plumbing parts, and a search engine user was looking for a pair of faucet handles for his or her Delta faucet. They are going to make this search at Yahoo! because it's the #1 site in terms of visitors. You have listings at Yahoo!. You bought a number of keywords at Overture and other CPC engines. And you also have good indexing at all the major engines. To

possibly see your listing(s) at Yahoo!, the user would have to search for “plumbing parts.” If he searched for “faucet handles,” he would get a combination of Overture and web results. If he searched for “delta faucet handles,” he would get pure web results from Google. How would you search?

Additionally, your Yahoo! listing would only link to your homepage. Your Overture listing (if in the top 3) would probably link to your faucet homepage. While your “delta faucet handles” results would link directly to your product page. Where would you want the user to go?

Understanding customer search behavior—how they search for your products and services—will give you a huge advantage over your competition. By paying attention to the type of products you sell and to the most logical method customers would search for, you can dramatically affect your chances of success in the SE space.

Here are a few basic guidelines to follow when choosing your keywords.

Make sure you use keyword phrases, not just individual keywords. Individual keywords tend to be expensive and, for many clients, they are next to useless from a conversion point of view. This is partially due to the fact that general searches tend to be entered by searchers in early phases of their buying cycle. That doesn't mean they are worthless, but you may not want to invest in speculative traffic. Successful searches—the ones that bring traffic that turns into orders/actions in the short term—usually use multiple keywords and phrases.

Start with the longest list possible. If you use a system like Did-it.com's Maestro to manage your SE campaign, it will automatically remove any keyword listings that are not converting. After that, you can examine the reports of word phrases that didn't convert and possibly recombine them to come up with the right phrases.

The best way to start to build your keyword list is by talking to people in your business. You'd be surprised at the variety of words they come up with. Have the top brass of a company get together and brainstorm about as many words and phrases as possible to describe what they do. Then try and combine these words and phrases in meaningful ways. Also, talk to your customers. Ask them what terms or phrases they would use to search for your site. Their answers may surprise you and conflict with what you have learned thus far.

In addition, you should examine your own website's log files to see the actual search phrases visitors are using to find you. When visitors are referred to your page from a search engine or directory, they leave a trace that reveals what keywords and key phrases they used to search for your site. Also examine your competitors' meta tags. What words and phrases are your competitors using to describe their products and/or services? You might even want to check out their source code and see what words and phrases have been inserted into their keywords meta tag. Don't plagiarize; just augment a list that you can use in the appropriate way on your site to describe your content.

It is a tough decision to consider using your company name as a keyword or phrase. If you have poor free rank and think that searchers are looking for you, then go ahead. However, you may have channels of distribution for your company that result in others doing search marketing for your company name or brand. Also, remember that some people search with geographic terms, so use city or place names to narrow and define your keyphrases. This will reduce competition for your keywords, and the traffic you get as a result will have the highest conversion possible.

It is very important to use keyword suggestion tools to augment the initial list with popular, related terms. The first one you should try is the Overture suggestion tool. You simply type in one of your candidate keywords or phrases, click, and—boom—you're immediately presented with a list of the most popular actual search terms related to your input, with stats for the past month, as measured by the Overture engine. Make note of the most promising variations on your initial terms, and add them to your working list. Repeat with the next phrase. Google has a tool as well. In addition AltaVista and Teoma have suggestions that come up with every search. The professionals also use Wordtracker, a paid search term suggestion engine. Often after your list is complete, you can pre-assess how good your selections might perform to help in setting the initial CPC rates.

However, if you're using Maestro, the system will automatically test, measure and adjust each of your keywords in real-time based on its response.. You may find that Maestro or an ROI based system will de-emphasize many "single" keywords and any highly competitive phrases that have obscene prices that could never result in a positive ROI (e.g., "Internet marketing"). They probably have no chance at all of achieving a top 30 ranking. The trick in paid search marketing is to find phrases that are popular but that don't have a lot of competition.

Marketers often pick the top 20 or 40 keywords they think are important for their businesses in search engine campaigns. These words become the core of the campaign and tend to be the obvious ones with high search volumes. Often, fierce competition ensues for these terms, driving up prices in auction marketplaces. Even non-auction sources of paid search traffic like paid inclusion often set price on demand. Their rate cards are by category and are often based on Google's and Overture's auction marketplace prices. Looksmart and Inktomi both have rate cards these days.

So how does a marketer assemble a campaign in which prices are reasonable and volumes sufficient? For many, the answer is to go broad. Going broad is a way to capture the rather long tail of the search curve.

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