Online Marketing Primer

Online marketing is the new frontier of marketing. It is a fast growing field both in terms of its marketplace impact and its share of budgets and expenditures. It's too important to ignore so here is a handy overview of its major elements.

Search Engine Optimization

SEO includes all the techniques used to get your site noticed by search engines such as Google, Yahoo!, and BING. Optimizing your site for search to achieve a top organic search ranking is understandably the best way to bring visitors to you, because organic search drives traffic to your site at no cost and 24/7.

How to get started: First, make sure your site is loaded with underline relevant content, and fresh content is added regularly. If you know some HTML, review your code to be sure that the title tags (invisible pieces of code that help search engines categorize your content) of every page are unique and accurately reflect its main theme. Check to see that the most important headline on your page (which should be enclosed within what coders call h1 tags) and the page content contain the keywords you believe users will be searching for. Finally, if your site doesn't have a site map, make it a priority to create and submit one to Google and MSN. If you already have a site map, consider optimizing it for Google. (See http://www.google.com/support/webmasters/ for more information.)

Avoid "tricks" to try to manipulate the system. Tactics such as keyword stuffing (filling your page full of keywords, to the point that the text no longer makes sense), using hidden content, multiple h1 tags, or link farms (pages that are merely long lists of links to other sites). Use of these tricks can get your site excluded from search results altogether.

And don't risk a temporary drop in rankings by doing a major redesign that changes the site structure, page names, and content of your whole site at once. Instead, change your site gradually over the course of several months, and re-submit new sitemaps as you go.

Because of the way search engines work (using programs called spiders to keep track of what content is where), it can take time to show up on Google and other search indexes. Don't expect to see significant results from your SEO efforts for anywhere from three to six weeks. As a result avoid any vendors who claim they can get you results immediately.

What it costs: If you have an intermediate knowledge of HTML, you can probably do some of the most basic SEO work on a small site yourself, but larger sites or sites in a highly competitive category will need the help of an expert to succeed. Service fees vary by the size of your site and the complexity of its content, with costs ranging from $500 to $15,000 a month during the terms of your engagement. Remember, SEO isn't a one-shot proposition. Plan to re-evaluate your position and strategy once every quarter after that if you want to stay ahead of the pack. When you're doing it right, SEO makes your site as friendly to human visitors as it is to search engines.

Pay -Per-Click (PPC)

PPC ads (or 'paid placements') are displayed on top and alongside organic search results. Your ad will only display with search results for the terms you bid, and no matter how many times they are displayed, you only pay when your ads are clicked. Unlike SEO, with PPC you control (through the amount you bid) where your ads appear, how much each click costs, and when your listings will be shown. If you want to get your site or brand noticed immediately, or you have a time-sensitive campaign to run for a sale or special event, PPC (or its new cousin PPA – pay-per-action) is the way to go.

How to get started: Google, Yahoo!, and BING all have do-it-yourself PPC programs, but even though it seems easy, don't make the mistake of rushing into PPC. Each of the engines provides a keyword tool that will give you a sense of the relative popularity on their site of different terms. Be prepared to spend some time using them to estimate the number of clicks per day at various bids and with different keywords before you begin your PPC effort. Then make sure you can regularly devote the time to tracking which keywords convert into customers and how much that's costing you.

For the best ROI, write your ads so that the main title contains the keywords you're targeting; this greatly increases the ad's click-through-rate (CTR).

Finally, don't make the mistake many beginners do of getting caught up in the eBay-like excitement of bidding for a top spot: although it's natural to want to be number one, it's often not the best investment. For instance, if the top bid for a term is $1.25 per click and the second spot is bidding at $.75, it makes a lot more sense to bid $.80 than it does to spend another $.46 a click just to be the "Numero Uno."

What it costs: Depending on the keywords you bid, prices can range from pennies up to $40 per click. The good news is the total investment each month is completely up to you. It all depends on how much traffic you want to drive and what you are willing to spend to get it. If you can't commit to managing your bids on a daily basis, you should consider hiring a paid media consultant. They'll usually charge a percentage of the total spend per month (anywhere from 10% to 25%.

Email Marketing

This form of online marketing involves the use of e-mail to build traffic to your website as well as build brand recognition and sales. There's no more widespread way to reach an audience. Compared to postal mail, it's less expensive, immediate, targeted, and easily measured.

How to get started: First, build or rent a database of subscribers by offering users the chance to "opt-in" to one or more newsletters or special offer categories on your site. Then send them frequent e-mails targeted to the interests they expressed when they signed on.

Consider using a "double opt-in" method, in which subscribers have to respond to an e-mail to confirm their interest after the initial "opt-in." While this two-step process will definitely reduce the number of sign-ups, it also helps prove you are not a spammer, and can keep you off the "blacklists" (blocked senders list) of major Internet service providers.

You should never try to manage your e-mail list and message deployment yourself. Instead, outsource e-mail management to companies such as Vertical Response and Simplycast. Using their Web-based interfaces, you'll be able to deal with all the non-technical aspects of sending e-mails yourself, while they handle the details of bounces, removing users who unsubscribe, adding new users who sign up, and offering proof that you are using industry best practices, should any spam complaints arise.

What it costs: You can get started for as little as $5 a month, and send out thousands of e-mails for a few hundred dollars.

Don't just track ROI from each e-mail sent - track it by customer over time; you want to know not only if your efforts are increasing sales, but if they are increasing sales per customer.

Micro-sites

Micro-sites are highly targeted Web sites with few pages which are aimed at a specific appeal or advertising campaigns. Companies with complex sites or sites featuring thousands of products will often create micro-sites to avoid "message mismatch." This happens when Web surfers can't find exactly what they're looking for when they visit your site or click through your online ads. If your conversion rate from online advertising is lower than your industry averages, you should consider using micro-sites. By sending surfers to a smaller, more focused destination, you may be able to double or even triple your conversion rates.

How to Get Started: For optimal results, you should hire an outside firm that specializes in micro-sites and online marketing. Together, you will clearly define the goals for the project, decide what specific audiences you should target, and determine which keywords you want your site to rank for in order to reach those goals. Determining ahead of time the specific actions you want your visitors to take when they reach your new site is the way to make the money you spend on micro-sites pay off.

What it costs: The cost to set up a well-designed and well-thought-out micro-site can run anywhere from $10,000 to $20,000 or more. Often, the research that goes into the planning stage makes up as large a portion of the cost as the design and development of the site itself, but with micro-sites, micro-targeting is the key, and the rewards will be worth the investment.

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