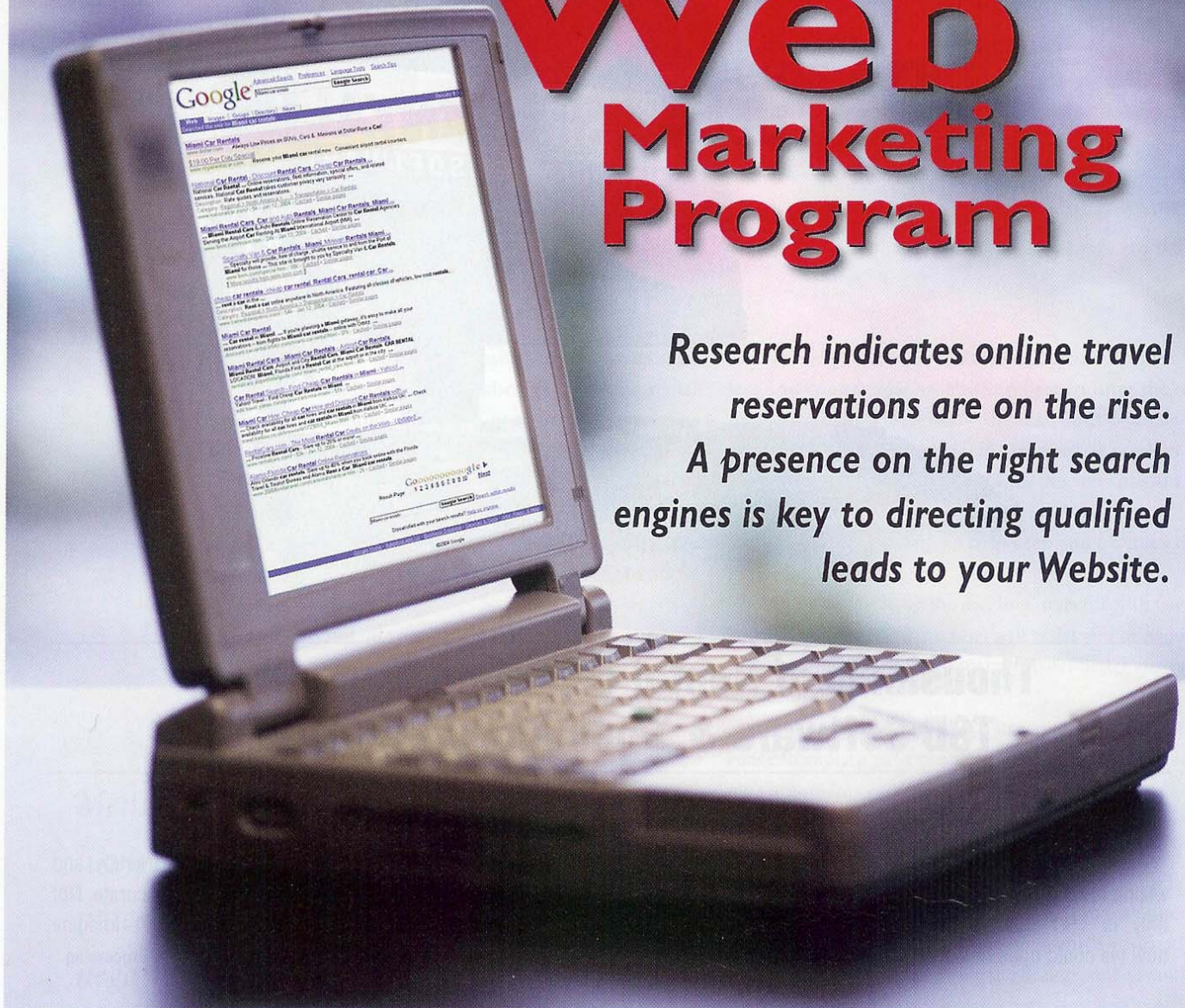


Strengthening Your Web Marketing Program



Research indicates online travel reservations are on the rise. A presence on the right search engines is key to directing qualified leads to your Website.

Like most rental operators, you look to the Internet for revenue opportunities and know all there is to know about marketing through search engines. Right? Just in case, let's take a fundamental approach to evaluating necessary information for developing a successful search-engine marketing (SEM) program.

The latest Pew Internet & American Life Project found that use of the Internet to research a service or product has increased significantly. The study found that 83% of Internet users have researched a product online as of December 2002. The Pew study also found that 53% of Internet users have made travel reservations online as of December 2002. Clearly, buying or making a reservation for travel is one of

the fastest-growing activities online.

Search engines are recognized as the best way to direct qualified leads to your Website. This is highly targeted traffic. If you service Seattle, for example, you want someone searching for "Seattle car rental" on a search engine to find your Website.

The SEM Options: Natural or Pay-for-Performance

SEM consists of two types of efforts: organic or natural search engine optimization (SEO) and pay-for-performance models. To grasp this concept, you need to understand the difference between a crawler-based search engine and a directory.

**By Mayra I.
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A crawler-based search engine is a database of cataloged Web pages extracted from the Internet through an automated “crawling” process. A search engine’s crawler (also called a spider or robot) follows links to Web pages. It makes copies of the Web pages found and stores them in its database, which is referred to as a search engine’s index. This database is what users query against.

A directory is also a searchable database of cataloged Web pages. However, unlike its automated counterpart, the information in a directory is assembled by volunteer editors and contains short summaries of all Websites that have been manually indexed and categorized. This database, too, is what users query against.

In either case, any keywords or keyword phrases that a user enters in a search engine or directory’s search box are matched to Web pages in the database that contain those terms. Web pages are sorted by probable relevance and presented with the most “relevant” Websites appearing first. The process and factors used to create this relevancy are proprietary — thus, company secrets. Understanding exactly why one site is listed higher than another is not easy, unless a pay-for-performance model is used.

Search engine results are just the first part of the branding process. A DoubleClick study showed that “41% of all users are gaining awareness from online search results.” This means that any potential customer could research travel plans to your city, looking for your car rental service, at any time on the Web. The information that consumers find should be intentional and managed through a carefully planned and ongoing SEM program.

Studies show that between 83% to 92% of first-time visitors to a Website find it through search engine result pages (SERP). Most searchers never look beyond the second to third page. The number of Websites that have been cataloged by search engines and directories alike are astronomical. Google, the most popular search engine, boasts “3,307,998,701 Web pages” indexed in its database. This results in thousands of Websites competing to achieve top ranking for their chosen keywords and keyword phrases.

With all this competition, is it possible to be listed in the top three search result pages of



In the U.S. version of Google, the search phrase “Miami car rentals” returns nationalcar.com in the most desirable position. But that doesn’t mean National has the top spot in all Google versions and in non-English searches.

This is because that content usually appears intermixed with unpaid results where ranking is based on natural SEO.

The difficulty in achieving a top ranking through natural SEO has given rise to pay-for-

performance measures through pay-per-click (PPC) programs. PPC is great for frustrated site owners who don’t want to bother with tweaking Web pages and link campaigns. Simply put, with PPC you bid to get the site ranking you can afford and only pay for the traffic that is generated from the search results. PPC is a good strategy to jump-start a campaign offering a simple, viable concept if money is not a problem.

Promoting Your Site Is Essential

It’s not enough to just put together a Website and upload it to your Web server. You need to promote your Website consistently if you want to get continuous traffic. Tactics may involve organic or natural SEO and pay-for-performance models.

Natural SEO involves tweaking your Website to cater to both potential customers and unpaid search engine results. Some of the major search engines offering free listings include Lycos, Google and Open Directory Project (ODP). An optimized car rental Website should present Web pages that load quickly, offer the ability to book online, and make use of marketing copy. You need to *know your customer*. These are features that will help convert search engine traffic to sales.

The next level of commitment is paying to be included in the database of search engines and directories. This is often referred to as paid inclusion or paid submission. This is an advertising program in which Web pages are guaranteed to be included in a search engine’s index in exchange for payment, without any guarantees for high ranking.

Some “pay-to-play” search engines and directories include Yahoo, Teoma and LookSmart. Paid inclusion content is not considered “pay for performance,” even though it is paid for.

On the other hand, there are downsides to bidding for a good ranking. For instance, popular search terms are highly competitive, and bidding wars can quickly inflate the cost-per-click. Some advertisers even bid on hundreds of terms to achieve best results requiring diligence and careful management. Finally, search engine users are becoming more aware of sponsored listings and most often ignore them.

Using pay-per-click advertising is an investment that can increase sales when managed appropriately. PPC requires constant diligence to prevent over-bidding and ensure that those paid-for clicks are converting into buyers.

The Internet has no boundaries. It’s easy to go beyond the border and capture an audience of a different language. If you service international markets, submitting to non-English search engines should be a given. Just remember to submit Web pages in the foreign language you are targeting.

Let’s compare Google Nicaragua (<http://www.google.com.ni/>) with Google U.S. (<http://www.google.com>) to find car rental companies in Miami using both the English and Spanish

version of the keyword phrase “Miami car rentals.” In <http://www.Google.com.ni>, the search phrase “renta de autos Miami” returns [miamirentacar.com](http://www.miamirentacar.com) in the top spot. In <http://www.Google.com>, the search phrase “Miami car rentals” returns [nationalcar.com](http://www.nationalcar.com) in the desirable placement.

If a rental car company is to appear in the same spot of either search engine results, that company needs to optimize for both keyword phrases using the appropriate language site. In this example, both companies are losing relevant visitors. This brings us to the topic of localizing your site. Let’s face it, most car rental companies don’t understand the significant brand awareness they can obtain by adjusting a Website to create multicultural versions.

You will have to decide whether to handle the project on your own or work with an outside localization vendor. Even if you handle the translation yourself, you should consider having this information reviewed by a professional source. Translation of information is a highly specialized skill, requiring a great deal of accuracy and professionalism to ensure that your message communicates to the reader appropriately. Again, *know your customer*.

There are other ways to target local traffic online. Begin by adding your city and state to the title tag of your “About Us” page. Also, consider including all or part of your address in a prominent place on the page. Finally, add local information by including links to area hotels, restaurants and attractions in a links page. By taking these steps, you can greatly increase your search engine visibility.

Localization may seem scary for independents and third-tier car rental companies for the obvious reasons. However, ignoring the opportunities that lie within a local market is more damaging. All rental car companies, regardless of size, can benefit from obtaining awareness from international markets as well as those within their local radius.

A SEM Plan Addresses a Range of Concerns

SEM encompasses site design, effective copy and often involves SEO, advertising via pay-for-performance programs, or a combination of both.

If you’re contemplating a do-it-yourself approach, you should consider all of the above



for maximum results. It’s also important to note that 95% of SEO, when it’s done right (not including pay-for-performance) can be completed at the beginning and needs little tweaking thereafter. Properly executed SEO pays for itself over the long term. It’s a measurable investment but does not provide instant gratification.

SEM is a game of strategy. SEM requires the astuteness to match the query used by searchers with your target advertising, exceptional research skills, technical aptitude, and ongoing training. Pay-for-performance programs cost money, so you’ll need to allocate funds for paid submissions and monthly spending on PPC campaigns.

Management of PPC campaigns will require approximately 15 hours each week per Website for ongoing managing and measuring of results. You will need to spend at least a couple thousand dollars per year in software and resource subscriptions to aid in-house SEM. This cost is in addition to employee salaries and training.

Depending on your company goals and resources, outsourcing SEM may be more cost-effective. When selecting an SEO/SEM company, trust is essential. A good place to begin your search for a SEO/SEM company is through peer recommendations or by researching industry organizations such as International Internet Marketing Association, SEO Consultants, SeoPros, and the World Association of Internet Marketers.

The cost of professional SEM services varies. Most SEM packages are based on number of keywords managed. Payment may be in a monthly subscription fee model. The subscription fee may be based on a percent of the

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allocated monthly spending per month or a flat monthly fee. There are SEM companies that offer training services for in-house staff to help jumpstart efforts to put your Website on the search engine’s radar.

Regardless of the model you choose, it’s important to measure results. Test your Web page copy and track your return on investment. Each pay-per-click search engine offers reports. If possible, track your progress daily. These tools tell you how well each keyword phrase is doing and allow you to fine-tune your efforts.

If your Website offers what searchers are looking for, search engines want to send you qualified traffic. You can have a SEM program tailored specifically to your business needs and budget. It’s not rocket science. It just takes patience and the right combination of in-house and outsourced SEM efforts. Before long, you will be successful in marketing your car rental brand online.

A proper and complete SEM strategy is a necessary component in any marketing plan for car rental companies with an online presence. According to the Internet Software Consortium, 171 million domain hosts were in use worldwide as of Jan. 1, 2003. Of that number, 88% of the Web pages are not indexed by the largest search engines. This means that many Web sites miss first-time visitors.

How much more business could your car rental company earn if you ensure that your Website is positioned for the Internet? There is no limit. ■

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