

Search Engine Mining

In last month's installment of *In the Trenches*, we discussed "the easy way" for agents to test search engine marketing (SEM) to see if it can be a cost-efficient strategy for making the phones ring with inbound sales calls. This month, we explore the idea of "search engine mining" or SEM2, a crucial next step after simple SEM, as it helps service providers "recycle" their scarce marketing funds.

Simply defined, search engine mining is the process whereby we record the contact information of prospects that find our "store front" Web site in order to proactively approach prospects that didn't buy on their first visit to the site. If we can't advance from SEM to SEM2, we're in trouble if the margin we earn on the services we sell through our Web site can't replenish our marketing funds. So it's important to understand the two secrets of successfully implementing SEM2: only pay for each lead once and provide content.

Content or Crud?

Most store front Web sites are full of the latter. Before evaluating what fills your site, harken back and consider what the "S" in SEM stands for. Serious visitors to your site are prospective buyers searching for information (a.k.a. "content") that will help them become more informed buyers of telecom services. Does your site actually contain useful content that helps visitors sort out the pros and cons of purchasing the telecom services you're selling?

If your site lacks objective content in favor of a simple sales pitch based on low prices alone, you're not only failing yourself and your prospects (you don't get the sale because prospects shop price at your site and then buy elsewhere), you're also contributing to the general price erosion of retail telecom. Quite simply, it's suggesting to the prospect that they can and should pay less than the reasonable prices that will help support a healthy telecom network services industry.

For good examples of three telecom store front Web

sites that lead with content to sell services, check out www.abtolls.com, www.thedigest.com and www.icbtoll-free.com. While these sites provide decent content that undoubtedly turn shoppers into buyers, only ICBtollfree attempts to record visitor contact information via its newsletter sign-up form, allowing for follow-up sales efforts. (In defense of ABTolls and TheDigest, neither necessarily has to record contact information for follow-up sales as the sites are – due in large part to their content – two of the Internet's most heavily trafficked telecom store front Web sites.)

But for those of us not blessed with starting several years ago on setting up a Byzantine network of high-quality reciprocal links (another key to the success of ABTolls and The Digest, as evidenced by searching "link:www.abtolls.com" at www.google.com), content coupled with the recording of visitor contact information is the shortcut to SEM success.

How Many Secrets?

Earlier we stated the two secrets of successful SEM2. But truth be told, those who see the rules as one (content helps us pay for each lead only once) will find the greatest success. Successful SEM2 practitioners know that financial success lies not in selling one prospect one service one time but in selling each prospect multiple times for as long as the prospect has a need for additional services. However, unless your service is impossible to replicate at a cheaper price (tough to do in this industry), your prospects and one-time customers will not be beating the hard-to-forget path back to your door to become repeat buyers. In other words, you must manage the repeat sale/repeat pitch process yourself.

Fortunately, effective management of the repeat sale/repeat pitch process (also known as customer relationship management or CRM) is fairly uncommon in the service provider world that serves small to medium-sized businesses (SMB). (We say "fortunately" because

the current lack of effective CRM in this space defines a unique, economically exploitable opportunity.)

Lures, Lies and Lunch

Currently, most of the CRM examples in the Web marketplace are bad examples of unscrupulous site operators that covertly acquire email addresses from visitors with lures of quality content only to spam them mercilessly with content-less solicitations. Of course, the Web site owner will suggest recipients of spam, "get what they pay for," a veiled reference to the fact that Web surfers always expect a free lunch consisting of quality content in exchange for nothing in return. Telecom Agent Association would suggest that an equitable middle ground exists.

So how does one get started down the road of SEM2 success?

Step 1: Create the bait. Who would you rather have at your side to help you buy a car at a used car lot, an automotive engineer or a used car salesman? Obviously you'd take the latter since they would know best how the used car sales game is played. Likewise, who better to "create the bait" of a "How to Buy *blank* Telecom Services" guide for your storefront Web site? You, of course.

As an experienced seller of a telecom service, you also qualify as an expert purchaser. And even if you don't consider yourself such, just pretend you have to help your mom buy the telecom services you sell from your most-hated competitor. Simply write out everything you would tell your mom to ask your rival in order to get the very best deal possible, and *viola*, you have your very own, original "How to Buy *blank* Telecom Services" guide.

If you are completely stumped for ideas, simply review the consumer protection pages in the front part of your local Bell phone book or check out the consumer pages of the Federal Communications Commission or your state's public utilities commission Web site. Not that you need to copy the work of others, because what you'll write on your own usually will bring the best results. Those who are completely unable to string sentences into coherent paragraphs still can create "award winning" bait in the form of a "*Telecom Buying Checklist*" or a list of the "*Top 10 Mistakes Made when Buying Telecom*," neither of which would require impeccable sentence structure.

Step 2: Cast the bait. Of course, the best "bait" is wasted if no one hears about it, so proactive marketing is critical to long-term success. The choice of how you'll cast your bait may be defined, in part, by how you'll "deliver the lunch," as described in step three further below, but here now are some quick and easy ways.

First, place an "Adwords Select" advertisement on www.google.com or most any other pay-per-click service. This is the best way to get immediate traffic. (See our November 2002 column for more on how to properly execute an inexpensive Google ad.)

Next, put up a one-page Internet Web site to meet and greet all the automatic search engine spiders, which will get you higher rankings in natural search engine results. Once you have a site up, you'll want to submit your site as widely as possible, either on your own or through a site submission service.

Trade links far and wide with any and all Web sites that have visitors who might be interested in your "bait" content. The all-time masters at link trading are the folks at ABTolls. (Again, search "link:www.abtolls.com" at www.google.com, and then go and do the same.)

The one thing you don't want to do when marketing your bait is

publish the piece on your Web site. Remember: no "freebies." A prospect doesn't get the goodies until they've at least given you their email address.

Step 3: Deliver the lunch. When your prospects have found your bait and are ready to give up their contact information in order to get it, you need to deliver your bait quickly without a lot of funny business. If your Internet service provider (ISP) allows for autoresponders, it's the quickest way to deliver the content. Always remember that unless you command the resources to confirm the contact information another way, only deliver the content via email as this is the only way to confirm that at least the email address you're given is correct.

Beyond autoresponders, another way to deliver content is via the free, downloadable Eudora software from www.eudora.com. Eudora is an email software-handling package, which can be coded to check a specific email box, such as ldreport@xyz.com, every five minutes and reply to any email with content in the body of the email or as an attached file.

Yet another way is to set up a Yahoo Group at <http://groups.yahoo.com>. Once set up, a group can be programmed to automatically email a stored document to any new group subscriber.

Step 4: Keep them eating (and buying) with consistent quality content. Though so close to long-term-term success, many of us fail here because we get so excited over the couple of orders received via steps one through three that we forget to keep our sales funnel (the lines of communications) open and lubricated for future business.

For example, many agents brag that they are the portal by which carriers access their customers when the exact opposite is usually the case. We'd argue that nine out of 10 agents fail to maintain any sort of contact at all with the customers they've put on one carrier or another. Then they're surprised when they contact a customer two years later to move them – because the carrier has stopped paying commissions – only to find out that the customer doesn't know who they are. By and large, it's the carriers that do the best job at step number four because they send a monthly reminder of who they are in the form of an invoice.

Maintaining quality contact can be next to free using an email newsletter service or cost just a couple hundred dollars per quarter with something as easy as a two-page newsletter sent to your customers with a first-class stamp. But whatever you do to execute this critical step number four, just make sure you do something. Don't let a month or quarter go by where your audience doesn't hear from you. If nothing else, simply send them a summary of telecom headlines from the past period with a one-paragraph opinion from you on where the industry is headed.

Nothing beats having a customer know who you are when it comes time to ask for referrals or offer new services. Don't forget to call them from time to time if only to confirm "who's on first," because we all know that decision-makers come and go. It's imperative to keep making friends over time so outgoing decision-makers introduce you to the incoming ones.

Telecom Agent Association (TAA) shows telecom agents how to market telecom services and helps telecom vendors find successful telecom agents. For more info, visit www.telecomagent.org or call 888-878-2141.