



Discover the Advantages and Disadvantages of Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) vs Pay Per Click

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You've just launched your new website (or launched the redesign) and now you're sitting back waiting for the orders to roll in. But wait a minute, something's wrong... there don't seem to be any. It's as if your site doesn't exist.

Well, I hate to burst your bubble, but unless you have either a well publicised site or many websites linking to yours, you're going to have to rely on the search engines. And if your site doesn't rank in the first three result pages, it's more than likely you won't be found at all. So... you know what's coming next; that's right, you need a good dose of search engine marketing (SEM) to make sure your site gets listed on the search engines' results pages. Do this and the traffic to your website will soon follow.

"Right", I hear you say. "Let's do some search engine marketing then..."

Well that's certainly a good start! But first you have to work out your approach to maximise your returns. Let's call this your search engine marketing strategy. In order to create an effective strategy you need to understand a bit more about how search engine marketing works. Currently, we can roughly-speaking separate search engine marketing into two different approaches:

Organic: including search engine optimisation, links from other websites and offline marketing.

Paid: including pay per click, paid submission and online advertising (banner ads).

So to help you further, I've listed below the advantages and disadvantages to each approach

to SEM and outlined my recommendations.

Organic: Advantages

The majority of the work behind search engine optimisation (SEO) is a one-off activity, and so is usually charged out at a set upfront fee. The changes made to your website will probably still be relevant and driving traffic to your site a year from now. Credibility: most people (research indicates between 60 and 80 percent) will click on the organic results rather than the sponsored (paid) results. If you rank well in one of the major search engines (Google/Yahoo/MSN), you will most likely show up in the majority of the search engines worldwide.

Organic: Disadvantages

Changes must be made to your website's code. Normally the changes are invisible to visitors. However, if you have invested heavily in a search engine-unfriendly site, the process can be time-consuming and costly; and occasionally significant changes may need to be made to your site's copy, navigation or design. Of course ultimately, you'll see returns if you commit to the necessary changes. Results (rankings and traffic) start slowly. You will normally see results within 3-4 months. There can be no guarantee. As the search engines themselves have the final say, you can't predict how many rankings you'll get for a particular search term or engine; nor can you predict how much traffic you'll get to your site.

Paid: Advantages

Pay per click (PPC) advertising programs are fast to implement. It usually takes two to three weeks to set up and run. Google AdWords are up-and-running as soon as you start the campaign, and Overture listings are live within 3-5 business days (after an editor reviews them). Nothing has to change on your web site, although I would recommend you create targeted landing pages for each advertisement as they've been proven to increase conversions (but that's another subject for another time!). There is no limit to the number of terms or keyword phases you can bid on. PPC is good if you intend to run promotions through your site, as you can turn the PPC campaign on and off whenever you choose. You can dictate where the listing appears on the result's page (within the sponsors' ads area) and determine what the ad says. It's very easy to test all your different search terms and offers etc, and to measure the results.

Paid: Disadvantages

Clicks can be expensive. Bidding wars often erupt. You must keep paying for the clicks every month. If your budget is ever cut, your listings will disappear, along with your search engine traffic. Most people (research indicates between 60 and 80 percent) will click on the organic results rather than the sponsored (paid) results. It requires a time investment to monitor and adjust listings on a constant basis, or budget to outsource this activity. Listings are subject to editorial acceptance. With SEO, you can state whatever you like on your website (which is where the search engines pull your page title and description). But with PPC, editors insist that all listings be factual and that you not compare your company with others. This means that even if you are the "largest" provider, you can't state that.

Now you know a bit about the advantages and disadvantages of both organic and paid search engine marketing, you must decide how to approach your online marketing campaign.

Organic marketing is probably best if:

You want to spend some time on search engine marketing upfront and have it pay off in the future, on conceivably every search engine there is around the world. You have a budget to do some work now, and want to save money later on. Your site is fairly simple, without a lot of complicated bells and whistles. You can afford to wait a month or two for results. You don't want to have to manage or maintain anything on a daily, weekly or monthly basis. Paid advertising may be for you if:

You want to get up-and-running quickly. You have a promotion where you want to be able to turn a PPC campaign on and off. You want to be able to test search terms, products or offers and quickly see results. Your site is search engine-unfriendly and you don't want to invest in changing it. You're confident you'll have the budget to spend for the long haul, and you have time to maintain positions on a regular basis.

Of course many companies and businesses tackle both organic and paid SEM at the same time, and this is what I would typically recommend to maximally attract qualified traffic to a website.

If you are currently designing your site, or redesigning an existing one, make sure your developer knows how to create search engine optimised code or is working closely with a SEO consultant. Getting it right from the beginning will save you time and money in the long run. And it needn't cost a fortune either if you tackle this upfront

If you have an existing site you wish to optimise, you may have a hard decision to make if your current site is not search engine friendly. If your site has been built using extensive use of frames or dynamic pages (your URL may look like: <http://www.yoursite.com/page.asp?id=8>), the cost to rectify these problems can be discouraging. If this is the case, now may be the time to seriously consider redesigning your site earlier than you'd planned.

Either way, the use of a small paid (pay per click) advertising campaign before optimisation can be a great way to nail down those essential keywords to use throughout your site's copy by recording which keywords customers respond to the most in your campaign.

David Crowther is the director of NerveCentral, whose mission is simple: to maximise its clients business and profit through the web. We have provided web solutions for many organisations and small companies, including well-known corporates such as Thomson Travel Group, Q8, Edding, GlaxoSmithKline, Galderma, and Hertz. Download our free report 5 (Often Missed) Usability Tips for your Website to Increase Profit now!