



Meeting Customers on Their Own Terms...Their Search Terms

“Top-down” marketing was dying a slow, unattractive death, even before the Web took over the world. The advertising dollars, creativity, number of repetitions needed for retention, and everything else needed to launch, maintain, and build a brand were increasing every year, along with the odds against success.

Enter the Web, where everybody could find everything and talk about it to everybody else for no marginal cost. The idea of “bottom-up,” word of mouth marketing, generally not much more than a gleam in some marketing professors’ eyes, became a reality. In business-to-business, it has become more than that—it has become THE decision-making environment. For a major purchase, 98% of the people involved in making that decision will have accessed Google before the decision is made (Enquiro B2B Survey, 2007).

For most B2B purchases, particularly first-time purchases and technology products, the Web is the only source for information. Studies show that, in the B2B market, over 75 percent of purchasers searching for a new solution begin their search on the Web. The issue is how to measure search, to provide our clients with an objective measure of their performance on the major search engines. Google, Yahoo and MSN count for over 92 percent of all U.S. search traffic. (comScore data, 6/2007)

Rankings, Visibility and Readership: How Many People Are You Reaching?

When someone uses a search engine to find a solution, typically he opens up a search engine, often Google (over 70 % of B2B searches), inputs a search phrase of two to five words, and gets a whole bunch of search results back—often millions of listings assembled ten at a time on separate pages. The searcher then clicks on listings—or, as is increasingly the case (especially with young men), refines the search and then clicks, refines and clicks—until he finds what he is looking for. To the searcher, the efficiency of

Brand X Austin, Inc., dba RefreshWeb
www.RefreshWeb.com
512/637-5271 fax 512/371-3055
5828 Balcones Drive, Suite 202
Austin, Texas 78731

a search engine is probably measured by how few listings he needs to explore to find what he is looking for.

There has been considerable research on the “readership” of each page of search results. In the B2B arena, we believe 100% of searchers see the first three listings, up to 90% review listings 4 through 10, and about 50% go on to the second page. After that, readership declines rapidly—a small fraction of searchers reach the third page.

So how do we measure this process? It is important to know that the number of incidences of search phrases is carefully measured. RefreshWeb has developed the Total Available Search Market™ metric, or TASM™, to evaluate our clients’ potential search phrases to find the best candidates. We make a list of our client’s search phrases, measure the number of times that phrase was used in the course of a month, measure the client’s position on a search engine result page for that phrase, and do the math to measure out how many people will see the client’s listing when they input a particular search phrase.

The math is easy—what is not immediately intuitive is the reality that creating a useful metric means not trying to do too much. What makes for good marketing intelligence is “actionability”—a metric that is too reductive reduces the ability of our clients to act on the data we are giving them. We need to keep our eyes trained on the performance of the important keyword phrases in order to have a sense that we are attracting the “most, right” traffic to the website. That kind of focus—keyword by keyword—is critical to developing an effective natural search strategy. It is even more important when adjusting and tweaking the website.

The Relentless Art and Sweet Science of Keyword Selection

Optimizing a website means deciding what keyword phrases (KPs) you want to compete on and then weaving those keyword phrases into the copy and metatags of your website’s critical pages. A search engine, like Google, will compare the keyword phrase of the searcher with the content of gazillions of web pages, find the pages that have the most matches, further evaluate each matched page by looking at inbound links, determine which

page is the best match and then rank accordingly in the search results. But it all starts with you selecting the keywords you want to compete on!

Two points need to be emphasized here: 1) you decide what is important—these decisions are strategic and critical, and 2) they are not set in stone—there is much trial and error involved. As your business evolves, as the buying behavior of your customers evolves, and as the phenomenon of search evolves, your KPs must evolve too.

The wonderful world of search has become incredibly competitive, and that has vast implications for your KP selection. Virtually any competitive keyword phrase will return literally millions of competing pages. As we will see, if you are not in the first 20, you are out of the running. It's pretty scary.

We spend a lot of time researching KPs to find the best opportunities, which basically means we develop a much longer list and then reality check that list by seeing how competitive each phrase is. Then we recommend the KPs that look like they offer the client the best chance to successfully compete.

In practical terms, this means we recommend transactional phrases (better purchase intent) that may be much further down the initial list, because the phrases at the top of the list (the ones that have the biggest monthly search numbers) usually are too vague and have too many competing pages to offer much traction. In short, we dig a lot deeper now, and that trend will be accelerating.

At the same time, we encourage our clients to never be satisfied with their KP list. Work it, revise it, reconsider it at every available opportunity. Since we can only effectively optimize on a finite list of KPs, we need to continually refocus by refining the target terms' optimization to increase visibility. Understand that none of this is possible if you are not focused on the performance of each KP. But once the search performance of each KP is available to you, you have actionable data—thus, the Total Available Search Market report.

Optimization or PPC? You May Only Be Buying Timeshares on Google

Google recently has made optimization a requirement for landing pages. Landing pages are where all those little PPC ads point. Relevant content *to your search* needs to reside on the landing page, or suddenly the advertiser needs to pony up a much higher bid to stay there. It underscores what we've been saying all along: relevant content really matters.

Pay-per-click engines have very sophisticated ways of pulling money out of your company's pocket. The first assumption is that highest bids will get you to the top of the page...the most valuable real estate on the Web. What many people don't notice is that you don't own that top space. For popular search terms, there are many bidders willing to pay top dollar, but there's only a limited amount of top space. So Google has created "timeshares" for these penthouse positions. It cycles through dozens of ads, with clusters of "top bidders." (To check if this affects your ads, just hit "refresh" and see if your ad is still there.) We have seen up to five clusters in contention, meaning that our ads are only reaching 20% of the Total Available Search Market for this particular engine.

That's another reason to invest the time and effort in getting high rankings in the search engine results pages by way of natural, "organic" site optimization. By creating a site optimization strategy using 25 important keyword phrases, we positioned one client's site immediately in the Top 20 for all these terms, with 15 ranking in the Top 10 and three No.1 rankings. Net result was a 300% increase in visibility. Increasing visibility, and optimizing for more transactional, more product-specific search terms, increases sales substantially...about 2x what you might expect. If your customer uses the Web to look for a solution, but she can't find you, it really doesn't matter how good your product is—you aren't going to make a sale.

TASM and Search Competitiveness

RefreshWeb is a business that helps its clients win. Win in search rankings. Win by attracting good leads. Win by filling the pipeline. Win by using search terms to identify the buyers. What is the definition of winning, when it comes to organic search?

Unlike a horse race, search is a race that never stops. It is a race where the judges can and do regularly change the rules in mid-stride. The horses in the race are not the websites of our clients and their primary competitors. Instead, the horses are the keyword phrases on which they make a strategic decision to compete. In short, search is like dozens of horse races being run concurrently, without a defined finish line. What is a winner in that context?

This is the heart of the issue in evaluating the search competitiveness of a company's website. It is very much keyword-by-keyword combat and must be evaluated as such—because the real game is in the adjustments you make upon evaluating real-time data. The popularity of search phrases ebbs and flows, with the sum total of searches on relevant terms composing the current Total Available Search Market™...a metric with meaning. The data stream is constant and the adjustments are constant, as are those of all competitors.

SEO and SEM are becoming more important and critical to meeting customers on their terms. What's driving this? Two things: First and foremost, clients want it. Clients realize that the Web is the first stop for information and referrals about purchases, particularly for new products and particularly in the B2B space. And second, search engine referrals are gold, whether they are from organic search or pay-per-click—they indicate prospects who are already motivated, who are looking for a solution and are now actively considering a purchase. Search marketing puts your product or service right in front of these new prospective customers at exactly the right moment.

John Rasco
Founder & President
RefreshWeb

###