



SEARCH: FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Creating Value Through Search

How can DTC marketers optimize their Web sites to make sure they rank highly in consumer search? They can begin by answering a few simple questions about the content on the site that may serve as a report card for gauging performance and the “value” it delivers to patients.

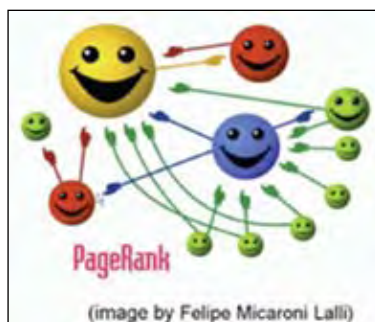
By Jeremy Sanchez

Value. It's something we all know when we feel it or see it, yet there's no question it is harder to find these days. In the world of marketing, value is often disguised by image. The Web, and search engine marketing in particular, is making it difficult for brands to inflate or disguise their value (or lack thereof). The old saying “a picture is worth a thousand words” may be true, but it's the thousand words that matter the most on the Web. This is game-changing for marketers and exactly why many traditional businesses, especially channel marketers, are scrambling to find a strategy.

In August 2008, comScore reported that Americans performed 11.7 billion searches per month with just over 60 percent of all searches going to Google. The research firm also reported that the health information category is growing at a rate four times faster than the total Internet. So, what are DTC marketers doing about it? Most, but not all, are taking the traditional approach of throwing money at it. So far, the money is going in the direction of pay-per-click advertising (PPC). Yahoo! changed the media landscape in 1997 when it introduced PPC as an alternative to CPM-based media pricing. The switch to PPC was a big one, but the monumental change was in forcing companies to drop graphics and communicate a message through words alone.

With PPC, marketers today are forced to present their value proposition to consumers in 95 characters or less. The additional challenge is (depending on the industry and the stage in the purchase cycle) only 30 percent of consumers click on paid search results. Many consumers do not trust paid listings, and more than 70 percent of them select the organic (non-paid) search result.

Both Google's latest earnings report and industry research support this trend. In



the third quarter alone, Google paid more than a billion dollars to advertising partners who hosted Google ads. Why? While Google finds content for searchers, it does not create the content. Google's job is to prioritize information and provide relevant results that best match searchers' intent and mission. The discipline of optimizing your site for these organic results is called Search Engine Optimization (SEO). So, how does Google figure out which site should rank No. 1, No. 2 or No. 3? Let me use an analogy.

I am writing this article in October for a December publication. Nov. 4th will be an important day for America because Americans will cast their votes for the senator they believe can lead the country in the right direction. Your vote will be based on who you believe will create the most value for the world, America, and your loved ones. Similarly, Google prioritizes the world's information based on value. Yes, while there are many complex algorithms driving Google's search engine, it essentially based on human logic: matching people with something of value.

Google assigns value to content by looking at incoming links to a Web site and the relevance of the content between the sites linking to and from it. Think of links as votes. Just as in a political race, endorsements by the right people can translate into more votes based on the assumption the endorser is respected by people who have the same or similar views. But, just as you cannot win the election by winning the popular vote, it's about the right votes from the right place.

Google doesn't just prioritize sites in the results by those with the most links (popular vote), but also measures the “endorsement power” of the link. Google gives us a proxy view into the value of link endorsement or authority by something it calls PageRank. You can view the PageRank of your Web pages if you have the Google toolbar installed in your browser and have it enabled. An authority site usually has a larger number of quality sites pointing to it and very few outbound links (like the yellow orb in figure at the left).

The acid test of perceived value

The Mayo Clinic is a natural authority Web site because of the depth of its content and reputation. This can be validated by looking at the number of high-quality, relevant links to its site. You can view a sample of the Web sites linking to your Web site by using the following search query at any of the major search engines: “link:www.yoursite.com.”



Links are the true acid test of perceived value and the quality of a site's content. To create value, leading DTC search marketers are working to answer the following questions (using the example of a medical site):

Are we anticipating searcher intent? Is our Web site offering the right content to consumers based on their search behavior? What about searches for symptoms or early diagnoses? Are we using our own marketing language or taking time to understand the words our customers use?

Keep in mind, we can't rank in the search results for words we don't actually use on the Web site.

Are we competitive against Wikipedia and brand-neutral sites for non-branded searches? Is it reasonable to expect that our Web site can rank for early condition searches such as Parkinson's, insomnia or osteoporosis when the search results are dominated by neutral-content sites such as the Mayo Clinic or WebMD?

Are we capitalizing on a multiple domain strategy? Can our Brand.com be seen as a credible source for providing accurate and trustworthy information, or do we need to consider a multiple domain/Web site strategy based on the type of information our consumers seek? For example, should we create condition-based informational Web sites in addition to sites for the brand or products themselves?

Are we monitoring and responding to trends? Are we watching emerging search trends that may positively or negatively impact our brand? Are we monitoring the conversation in our brand or condition community? Are we influencing it through our PR efforts? When appropriate, and within med-legal constraints, are we communicating back?

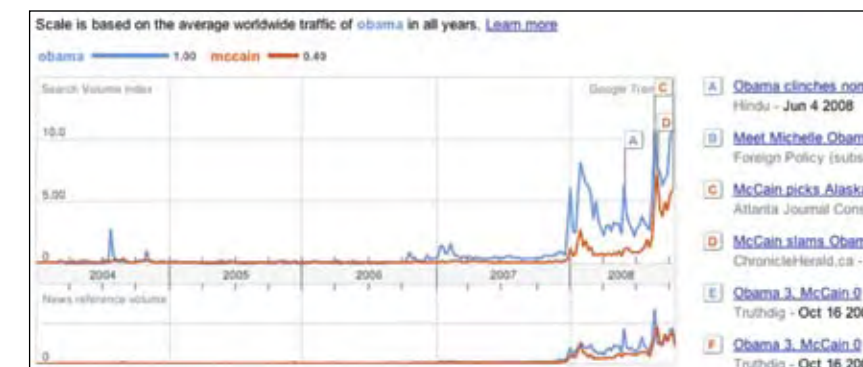
Are we effectively using social media Web sites? Are we using sites such as YouTube and Facebook to connect to our consumers in “their” environment? Are we enabling our content to be pushed or pulled to them from our Web site? Do we make it easy for bloggers to re-purpose our preferred content?

The leaders today are answering “yes” to the majority of these questions.

A database of intentions

The days of creating the perception of value through image alone are gone. Search engine visibility is a direct representation of a company's or person's contribution. If there is inherent value in that contribution, it will be recognized and rewarded.

John Battelle refers to Google as the “Database of Intentions” because of the vast amount of data about what people want to know or do that has been amassed by the engines over the last 10 years. To go back to our earlier political analogy, we can look at Google's volume of political searches for some insight into voters' intentions. Based on Google's report of search volume, Senator Obama has an edge over McCain in November.



Was Google right? Over the course of the next few articles I will explore each of the questions above in detail and show you examples of DTC marketers who are executing well. We will explore all facets of search marketing and tools that are available to you so you can put your ideas to work. ■

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