GABRIEL GOLDENBERG

Edited by Richard Kershaw

ADVANCED SEOs' 7 CURIOUSLY OBVIOUS RULES

AND 31 SINGULAR TACTICS THAT ILLUSTRATE THEM

INTERNET MARKETING NINJAS

FULL SERVICE INTERNET MARKETING & TOOLS

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What People Are Saying

"Love your thought process. Lot of it reminds me of the critical thinking I picked up in my NLP training. It's very different from any other SEO books I have read, which is good. I liked that your book wasn't 450 pages long and telling me how to create a page title.

Great read, I marked down lots of parts to read over again and it sparked a lot of ideas for me. For example, I love including more content on your blog using Ajax. Nice ideas around ecommerce. Your book is great for people who want to be a little bit creative in this field (which I want to be). In fact, another chapter of just your creative ideas would be great ;)

- Kieran Flanagan - SearchBrat.com

"Thanks for the book. I really appreciate the fresh angle that you bring to SEO. I needed this jolt because the "gurus" have been boring me with the same old techniques. I was worried that there was nothing more to learn about SEO. Your book changed all that. Keep up the good work!"

- Justin Lofton - FreshRankings.com

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Editor Richard Kershaw

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Introduction

What's The Big Idea?

If you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. If you teach him how to fish, you've fed him for life. (Assuming he really, really, really likes fish.)

Want to learn sport-fishing, so you can catch the big ones?

This book is for online marketers and webmasters at an intermediate level or higher, who want to:

- Go after the highest-ROI, most-competitive markets
- Gain respect, raises, and promotions for delivering results
- Increase sales for their agency
- Spend less on search marketing services and be more self-reliant
- Have more time for themselves, by avoiding things they don't enjoy
- Get creative and move outside the box, rather than be an unremarkable also-ran

This book is about problem solving in search marketing. I want to teach you principles that will direct you to think deeply and act intelligently so you can reach any goal.

The assumptions I made in writing this book

At the heart of this book are some assumptions I've made about you, dear reader. It's important to explain the assumptions I made because the more you fit the profile, the greater the value you'll get from this book.

I assume that you are:

1. Savvy on search - obviously. If you're a beginner, this isn't the book for you.

2. Goal-oriented - mostly building your business or non-profit.

3. Open-minded - this book finds inspiration for whitehat and grayhat tactics in blackhat and grayhat SEO.

4. Willing to think critically and implement - you don't have to already be a critical thinker, but you've got to be willing to improve.

A lot of this is about encouraging you to think outside the box and sharing tips to do that. But the value you get out of this is entirely in your hands. As my grade 7 math teacher, the ever-cheery Mrs. D'Ermo, would tell us: "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink!"

I hope you'll make good use of this book.

Principles of Creative Search Marketing

Rule 1: Constantly Learn From Others

Hopefully, this book will give you the principles you need to solve your own search problems. Nonetheless, you should continue reading other how-to material, even after finishing this book, for three reasons.

- It's more efficient to learn from others' experience.
- You can learn about problems you have yet to encounter.
- Reading serves to inspire.

Learning continuously is literally essential to success. To borrow a quotation I saw in *The Knack* (a great book on entrepreneurship), "A smart person learns from his mistakes; a wise person learns from others' mistakes."

Read Constantly To Gain Public Information

Learning from others' public experience

"Did I just buy a book to be told that I should read?" That question may be going through your mind, but bear with me. I'll encourage you to read certain things in particular, and explain why.

Reading is the fastest way to get up to speed. That especially matters for newbies who have an abundance of time and a lack of knowledge.

It's amazing how much high quality information is available, for free, online. Between blogs, forums, whitepapers, ebooks and other forms of online publishing, I've literally read thousands of hours worth of material. Free information is especially valuable when you're starting out and don't have much budget for self-education.

Free information online has three big problems, however. First, it isn't organized in any particular way. Second, the filters against misinformation don't always work. Third, you don't control the info. Sites go offline, delete content, change URL structures, etc.

1. Organization. The online world has imitated newspapers. What's published today isn't usually related to what was published yesterday. So to learn a topic in depth, you have to zigzag between multiple blogs, webinars, whitepapers, etc.

You can bookmark them and link to them from your own site, but you still won't have an organized reference for when you need one - you'll just have your memory and a motley collection of posts. And key posts can disappear at any time - I know, because it's happened to my own resource lists. Significant repetition between blog posts is another consequence of the absence of central organization.

As most of you know, 20% of the causes in any given field generate 80% of the effects, hence the 80-20 rule. Most practitioners of a given discipline - whether its SEO or heart surgery - see the same problems over and over again. 20% of the SEO issues generate 80% of the work SEOs do. So it's only normal that 20% of the SEO issues generate 80% of the blog posts.

Once you've mastered that 20% of the SEO problems, you're in a peculiar situation. You have 4/5 chances of reading a blog post about something you already know.

2. Misinformation. We've all seen popular bloggers outside our field write some nonsense about SEO. Because they are trustworthy in their own fields, their audience transfers that trust to their writing about SEO. And thus nonsense appears credible.

3. Lack of Control. Important articles and posts can go offline any time.

So free online information is good for newbies with no budget. They'll slowly learn from others' experience.

But these problems limit the value of information published online for advanced SEOs. In contrast to newbies, advanced SEOs have an abundance of knowledge and a lack of time (from being solicited etc).

The question is, how does an intermediate-advanced SEO/webmaster learn from others' experience?

Books solve the problems associated with free information online.

1. Organization. Books are organized references you can go back to after the first read. Chapter-organization make it easy to find a refresher when you're faced with a given problem. You don't need to dig through bookmarks or links in your blog - just open the table of contents.

Taking this a step further, you can buy books geared towards experienced professionals and thus get advanced lessons from other people's experience.

This organization also prevents repetition. Books give you a better chance of reading about something new to you from the other 80% of SEO issues that generate only 20% of the blog posts (and 20% of the work).

2. Credible Information. Another great thing about books is that publishers vet authors for credibility and have an expert review the manuscript for quality. That filters out most misinformation. (You still see some things slip through the cracks as when a credible expert ventures beyond their field of expertise.) Of course, this advantage doesn't necessarily apply to self-publishing "advanced SEOs" [crackpots]...

There are some exceptions to the rule. Aaron Wall's SEO Book was self-published, but it was very high quality. And some other ebooks have a comparable quality.

The point isn't to prefer a paper or digital format, but just to emphasize that you get great quality and value from books, even as an intermediate-advanced internet marketer.

3. Control. Books don't disappear into the ether, unlike websites.

So you should buy books as soon as possible. If you've bought this one, you're at an intermediate level or better and can afford a book a month, or every two months. And you can borrow books - on business, at least - from the library.

Relative to the value they provide, self-education books are the single best investment you can make in your career. You get ideas that can literally be worth thousands or tens of thousands to you, for pennies on the dollar. No financial investment even compares.

Me with various marketing and business books I own.
Amongst other titles are *Web Design For ROI, Don't Make Me Think, Honest Seduction, and Sitepoint's Usability Kit.*

And I practice what I preach: So yes, this is a book encouraging you to read, but now I've kept my promise to put some substance to the recommendation. I've answered two very important questions – what you should prioritize in your reading and why. Consider the value of your time. Consider what a modest shift in time allocation from online reading to book reading does for your ROI.

I don't mean that advanced SEOs should stop reading online. Even advanced SEOs can still learn from blogs and online materials, especially when it comes to news like algorithm updates or new techniques and technology. All I'm saying is that you'll gain more on average from books, because of the problems I mentioned above, as well as the diminishing marginal returns on reading online.

Of course, reading isn't the only way to learn from others though it is one of the cheapest. There are videos and audio files, too.

Search Engine Land's premium memberships provide access to videotaped Search Marketing

Expo (SMX) panels, for example. Having attended a number of SMX trade shows, I can tell you that their sessions are excellent. Pubcon has also been taping its sessions, which are amazing, but those tapes are only for internal use as of this writing.

SEO Book and SEOmoz both offer videos to their Pro members. SEO Book includes it with the paid membership, while SEOmoz sells DVDs of Moz seminars .

That said, I personally have mixed feelings about paid membership sites that offer training and an advanced community. I have been a member of several, including:

- Moz.com
- PPCBlog.com
- PPC-Coach.com
- Problogger.com

The upside is that these sites offer the opportunity to interact with some brilliant people at affordable rates. I couldn't afford to hire the people behind these sites for 1-on-1 coaching. You certainly do learn a lot and get help being more productive in a variety of ways. And increasingly, you get remarkable tools as part of your membership.

The downside is that if you stop paying, you can't review what you learned later on. I've read and re-read Sandra Niehaus and Lance Loveday's *Web Design For ROI* plenty of times. I printed out Aaron Wall's SEO Book, back when it was a book, and frequently referred to it.

By contrast, there were some great threads on PPC Coach that I no longer have access to as I've stopped subscribing.

So if you use these sites, you need to write yourself summaries of the key lessons and tips, or else have a scraper log in and periodically export what you care about. Perhaps these sites could make themselves more valuable by offering an export feature for favourite threads or threads one was thanked in...

In the defense of membership sites, people like Aaron Wall have had their content stolen and repurposed by many other people. As Aaron pointed out to me, offering an export feature would make it easy for the jerks in his audience to steal his material.

Baby Steps To Start Reading Constantly

1. Ask your friends for 3 books on SEO, usability or conversion rate optimization that you must read. I can vouch for those books I mentioned in the caption to my picture.

2. For intermediate SEOs: Ask friends what advanced SEO and conversion/usability blogs they read. Email or Twitter are good for this. I've posted my list on my site[1]. Add their RSS feeds to your NetVibes.com (it's free) RSS reader.

3. Check out Sphinn's front-page for posts on topics you're not familiar with. Read those posts then visit those blogs' archives for more.

4. Review the pros and cons of paid membership sites like those of SEO Training Dojo (some brilliant technical SEOs there), SEO Book, Moz or Search Engine Land.

5. Consider keeping private notes on what you learn from paid membership training programs. Also, keep a log of the actions you take and the results you achieve as a result of the program. That will let you evaluate ROI at renewal time.

1. http://seoroi.com/blogroll/advanced-search-marketing-blogs/

Network Relentlessly And Gain Private Information

It's remarkable what you can learn from making friends. At my first SMX show I saw some SEOmozzers hanging out at a lunch table. As a member of SEOmoz (now known simply as Moz), I decided to go over and meet the people I'd only spoken to online until that point.

One of the people at the table was Carlos del Rio, an advanced SEO and conversion rate optimization expert. As we were talking, Carlos pulled out a book called *Web Design For ROI*, by Sandra Niehaus and Lance Loveday of Closed Loop Marketing (Closed-Loop-Marketing.com).

Carlos loved the book, and mentioned that Sandra gave him and others who attended her panel a free copy. I found Sandra in the halls and she was kind enough to give me a copy. It's one of the best books on usability and conversion around.

Networking has allowed me to learn in many ways.

1. Friends and connections have given me several great books on marketing.
2. Free training and tools in exchange for blog coverage
3. Private advice and Q&A support
4. Invitation to attend a trade show free, in exchange for blog coverage
5. Invitations to parties that extended my network, so continuing the cycle of learning
6. People have told me about upcoming books and trade shows
7. I finally learned what the point of blog commenting was - relationship building!

Note: While I could have made "attend trade shows" its own chapter within the section on "Learning Constantly," networking encompasses more than just shows. That's why this chapter is called Network Relentlessly, not Attend Trade Shows Relentlessly. Besides, trade shows are typically expensive and you can only fly so much without getting worn out by it.

Networking: Much More Than A Source Of Learning

I had the good fortune to meet Jim Hedger at SMX. Jim's an accomplished SEO (see MarklandMedia.com) and host of a WebmasterRadio.fm show.

While we had fun chatting and hanging out, Jim and I didn't do any business together. So if I just evaluated my relationship on that basis, I'd have said it was a waste of time. And that couldn't be more wrong.

I used to participate really heavily in the SEOmoz community. There, I chatted with Jeremy Dearringer from Slingshot SEO. Jeremy noticed a link I'd given him and we started chatting and established a relationship.

As SMX Advanced 2009 neared, Jeremy suggested we meet up at the show. In person, Jeremy told me about a custom platform Slingshot has for working with independent consultants and freelancers. It sounded good, but I was still lukewarm to the idea.

Happily, Jim saw me at the same show and really pushed me to work with Jeremy (pushing in a nice way). Finally, Jeremy and I did a trial project together which worked out nicely. We've worked together for a year now, and Jeremy's a great client.

Hanging out with Jim really paid off!

Networking isn't only about business cards. It's about starting relationships and maintaining them over time.

The Story of Joe Girard

Joe Girard was one of the USA's top car salesmen of all time. It wasn't just that Joe knew how to listen to his prospects' needs. It was that his prospects bought a car, then another when the first needed replacing, and so on, for life. He really applied the concept of "lifetime customer value"!

Why did Joe have such incredible customer loyalty?

He had relationships with his customers. He sent cards at each holiday in the calendar. Gifts at anniversaries. He referred business to his customers.

In his book, Joe describes his card system for tracking and following up with customers. He wrote everything he knew about his customers on cue cards. In particular, he wrote down dates and people that mattered, like anniversaries and children.

When someone bought a car, Girard moved their card to the back of his card-holder. Then he followed up with the next person in the box. And so Joe periodically got back to each person in the box about their car needs, when that person's card moved forward to the front of the box.

And in the meantime, Joe Girard had followed up numerous times throughout the year, with birthday and holiday cards, phone calls etc.

Joe Girard had built an offline CRM system!

[Interestingly, this sort of thing also works very well for link building. The good people at Buzz-Stream have created a link building CRM system that allows people to keep track of their contact history with a prospect, including integrations with email and Twitter.]

Susan Gunelius and I

Susan was the first person ever to comment on my blog. I followed up with a comment on her blog. Soon, I guest-posted on Susan's branding blog.
Periodically I sent Susan tips about topics for her blog, such as the relationship between colour and branding.

The relationship built up over time and Susan eventually became the About.com guide to blogs. Guess who she interviewed about SEO? Me. Guess who got links from About.com? I got links – and so did my friends, thanks to our relationship.

Extended Baby Steps: My Favourite Relationship Building Techniques

1. Follow people on Twitter and reply to their tweets. If you don't see them in your feed because they tweet at different times than you login to Twitter, visit their profile periodically and find something interesting to chat about with them.

In offline conversations, you listen and show interest in what others are saying. Online, people will tweet what they want to talk about - you don't even need to rack your brain!

2. Send emails. They don't have to be big, long missives. "Hey, what's up" is great.
When emailing leads, occasionally include a link to a great post (yours or someone else's) that ties into their industry. Telling people what you're up to (briefly) also helps, because then people are less shy to talk about themselves.

For friends and casual acquaintances, more personal content can help. And for local acquaintances, invitations to lunch or drinks are a very strong way to renew ties.

3. Promote other people's sites and products, free. Don't ask for something in return.

Link out from your blog. Retweet. Vote for them on social media and submit their content there. Introduce friends to bloggers. Refer leads. Send traffic.

4. For clients and people who've done a lot for you, do things for them offline. Send holiday cards. Send chocolate. Invite them out in person. Magazine subscriptions regularly remind readers of the sender in an enjoyable way.

As a general rule, the more effort or friction involved, the more the gesture will be appreciated. That's why offline always trumps online.

5. Pay attention.

Call them for a chat. Send an email to compliment a post they wrote. Leave a valuable comment on their blog. Suggest post ideas for their blog. Offer specific forms of help such as links or introductions to others. Seek them out at the conference bar.

6. Interview others or be interviewed.

This is a win-win proposition. One side gets a post written up for just asking a few questions. The other side gets exposure to a different audience and links.

Finally, here are a few posts I like for more detail on the topic:

- http://seoroi.com/influencers-1
- http://seoroi.com/influencers-2
- http://seoroi.com/influencers-3

Rule 2: Teach Yourself

Learn From Your Own Experience

1. Be Self-Aware When Browsing

As an internet marketer, you spend a lot of time online. This can be a rich sources of inspiration, if you pay attention to how you interact with the different elements in a site.

For example, back when Sphinn (formerly Digg for SEOs) was based on voting, there were "Popular in Upcoming" stories in the sidebar. Those were stories with a fair number of votes but that hadn't yet obtained enough votes for homepage promotion.

If you could get your story into that section, other Sphinn users would often notice your story and give it the additional votes necessary for your story to get promoted.

SlightlyShadySEO noticed how he interacted with Sphinn's sidebar. He shared with me the practical application that you needed to get a lot of votes in the first few hours your story submission went up. Once you were in the top stories in upcoming, you could relax and let that area work for you. Similarly, after Facebook started placing content above its ads, it made the sidebar a lot more interesting. It trained me to look at it for friend suggestions, old photo albums etc.

Being self-aware that this content draws my eye to the sidebar, I'd guesstimate that this increased Facebook ads' average CTR. Even if a higher CTR didn't result from the integration, you can easily see how this new content area would lead to more impressions per visit for Facebook.

Either observation – about CTR or average impressions per visit - is a valuable insight for ad-supported publishers. They can test similar content suggestions to increase CTR on ads or to increase pageviews per visit.

Take a step back when you're surfing the web. Pay close attention to how layout, functionality, graphics and so on influence your behaviour.

2. Do Whatever It Takes To Gain Experience

a. Offer to work for free

When I wanted to learn more about buying links, I made an offer on my blog.

I'd manage a paid link campaign for free, so long as the campaigning company had $1000/month minimum to spend. The first three people to respond would get spots.

I could learn about buying links without spending my own money or risking my own domains, and the limited availability made things scarce while protecting my time.

When I made this offer, I'd already been in SEO for over 3 years, including work for the Government of Canada and Ice.com. I didn't need to build a portfolio - although this kind of free interning is a good way to do that - but I did need to gain experience before I could get into this service seriously. I learned a lot about buying links, from finding opportunities, to minimizing the risk, to reporting and cash flow. As well, the expertise and contacts I built have helped me with whitehat link building.

Another benefit was that I had limited reporting to do. I also had broad freedom to do as I saw fit, within the wide guideline of implementing best practices I'd read about. My main contact at the company was also supportive in suggesting ideas, offering resources and giving me feedback on what his bosses needed to see.

I learned a good deal about my likes and dislikes from this project. Hands-off reporting? I like it. Getting paid and paying others on time? I like it. Finding competent, affordable developers who'll deliver quality work on time? I would like it...

I learned thousands of dollars' worth of lessons on paid links for free.

As experienced pros, you may wonder if this is really applicable to you. But the effect of "free" is remarkable for breaking down doors. Want your reluctant boss to start usability testing? Buy usability tests - there are numerous affordable tools available[2]. Tests at UserTesting.com start at $29. Users record their screen and voice as they try to do the tasks you assign. You can show that video to your boss and others to spectacular emotional effect. Buy-in becomes a breeze.

b. Run your own site

Running your own site is another great way to gain experience. Since you're not accountable to a client, you can take whatever risks you like. You can test crazy colours, language, greyhat or blackhat techniques etc.

(Within the range of blackhat practices, I would avoid unethical practices like hacking or linkspamming others' sites, which hurt others. Cloaking, by contrast, just messes with search engine algorithms - no one gets hurt. Rule number 7 discusses guidelines for deciding what's right for you.) Another advantage in running your own site is that you see things first hand, and see more things because of that freedom. The observations you make about traffic and rankings can be valuable.

2. Silverback, UserTesting.com, Feng-GUI and Usabilla are just a handful of great ones available.

I once gave a friend free consulting on his African culture site, ToukiMontreal.com. A local SEO competitor was outranking me for "SEO", and had a lot of footer credit links from his clients. I thought I'd try that approach, and asked my friend for a footer credit.

A few weeks later, on a routine rank check, I found my site halfway down the page for the phrase, SEO ROI - my site and brand name. My intuition as to what happened is that the ToukiMontreal link got flagged as a paid link (it was offtopic and in the footer). Accordingly, Google gave me a little ding - but an obvious one. "We know what you're up to - now cut it out!"

While the rank drop is just anecdotal evidence, a lot of what SEOs (and businesses) do is just based on anecdotal evidence. Over time these anecdotes acquire a sexy name: "Experience."

A little caveat: If running one site is good, running two sites must be better, right? And three sites really great? At 5 or 10 sites, you're a KING!

Uh, no.

The problem with this reasoning is that it assumes you have unlimited time, passion, and desire to work. In reality, this spreads you thin. You can take on more than one project, but know your limits. Doing a miserable job on 10 sites is a waste of time.

c. Review Mistakes And Failures

We make mistakes every day. Analyzing those mistakes provides plenty of fodder for us to improve. Personally, if I repeat a mistake, then I make a point of looking at why it happened and finding a solution for it. The repetition makes it an even greater priority because it tells me that I may face this situation again.

Joel Spolsky's column in Inc magazine taught me how to analyze mistakes[3]. The process he uses is called the 5 Whys. All you do is ask 'why' repeatedly until you get to the root of the issue. Usually that takes at most 5 Whys, sometimes less.

Once you've identified the real problem, you can consider solutions. If you stop short of the underlying cause, you'll just address the symptoms. And the root issue will continue to stir up trouble.

d. Test

Testing becomes gradually more valuable as you gain more knowledge with which to create hypotheses.

3. Actually, he got the idea from Toyota, which he acknowledges himself.

Intermediate SEOs should also test, even if the marginal benefits are comparable to what they can still learn from books etc.

For cutting edge experts, testing is the best way to keep learning because there is less you can learn from others for the same time investment, within a given field. For each additional hour invested, there are fewer things to learn - a diminishing marginal return.

For these top-flight pros, books are a partial workaround to this issue, because they're organized and address the less commonly discussed "80% of the issues that cause 20% of the problems."

(Recall that once you've read enough blog posts to master the 20% of the SEO issues that generate 80% of the blog posts and work, you're in a peculiar situation. You have 4/5 chances of reading a blog post (or having a private chat at the conference bar) about something you already know.)

While those numbers have a blog post paradigm, there's a parallel with books. Books' likelihood of teaching you something new varies according to how many you've read on a given topic. After reading a few, such that you're also familiar with the "remaining 80% of issues that generate 20% of the work" this probability of learning something new is also less than 100%.

So how do you test? The answer's right after the following baby steps on gaining experience.

Baby Steps To Start Gaining Experience

1. Pay attention to your own browsing habits. How does a particular design element affect how you interact with the site?

2. If it costs money do it for free for others. Then base yourself on what you've read or heard privately from others. It's not volunteering - it's a scholarship.

3. Buy a hosting package that offers good tech support. Most will include a free domain. Launch a blog, set up a forum, whatever. Then test as much as you can.

4. When you screw up, ask yourself why. Keep asking why until you find the root issue.

5. Get a few domains and run an experiment. Here's how.

How To Run An SEO Experiment

By running an experiment, I mean classic split test experiments. They're simple and affordable to run, making them accessible to most folks, regardless of budget or prior experience.

The goal for these tests is to achieve results "unlikely to be due to random chance." Results that are good enough to rely on, for practical purposes. I'm not addressing statistical significance because my goal is to help you become a better SEO, not to get your paper published in a science journal.

My thanks to Branko Rihtman (SEO-Scientist.com) for making me appreciate this distinction.

SEO experiments rely on the same principles and have to answer the same questions as ordinary scientific experiments.

a) What are we trying to find out?
b) What answers or theories exist about that, already?
c) What are the independent and the dependent variables?
d) What are we going to do to the independent variable?
e) How are we going to measure the effects on the dependent variable?
f) How do we ensure that our results are scientifically valid?

Useful Testing Jargon

1. Independent variable – The variable we're going to manipulate.

2. Dependent variable – The one we expect to affect by manipulating the independent variable. [It's dependent on the independent variable.]

3. Mouse tracking and click counting – Software that shows you where visitors moved their mice and where they clicked.

4. Eye-tracking studies – Research into what parts of a graphic draw people's eyes and the order in which the eyes focus on the various visual elements.

These can be used to track what parts of a webpage draw people's eyes. CTR is partly a function of where people look, hence the utility of such studies to people in our field.
For more on eye-tracking, Enquiro.com shares the results of many such studies.

5. Predictive heatmapping tools – Software programs that rely on known eye-tracking patterns to make educated predictions about where people will look.

6. Heatmaps – The way eye- and click-tracking studies express results. They indicate the parts of a graphic that draw more eyes or clicks. They do this by overlaying richer, hotter colours on attention-drawing areas of the graphic.

7. Control and experimental groups – These are two sets of test subjects, the “a” and “b” in the phrase “a/b test.” They differ in that you don’t change the control group’s independent variable, while you do change the experimental group’s independent variable. As a result, you can attribute any difference in the results between groups to the change in the independent variable

We said that an experiment has to answer some questions. Here are some possible answers in the case of an SEO experiment. None of these lists are exhaustive.

a) What we’re trying to find out may be:

- The effect a given tactic has on rankings.
- What impact a call-to-action has on CTR from the SERPs
- The effect of recent changes in the search engines’ algorithms
- How a change in the title or meta description affects conversion rates

b) What answers exist already?

- Those you’ve experienced
- Those you’ve observed
- Those published by others
- Those shared in private

Important: If there is a satisfactory answer at this stage, you don’t have to go through with the experiment. But if there are contradictory answers, a test can help you find out the right answer. See the next sidebar for an example of this in practice.

c) Independent variable options:

- Link value factor: e.g. its type (image, text, otherwise), nofollow vs dofollow, its destination (deeplink or homepage), its anchor text (exactly targeted or otherwise), location on the page (body, sidebar etc.) etc.
- Onsite factor: internal navigation, use of keywords in headings, message match between our SERP listing and the page content, load speed etc.
- Backlink profiles
- Layout and positioning of results in a [mock] SERP

d) Dependent variable possibilities:

- Rankings: our own or competitors
- CTR
- Bounce rate
- Conversion rate (CR)
- Cost per action (CPA)
- Revenue per visitor

e) Ways to measure results:

- Rank checkers
- Usability tests – especially useful for projecting CTR and bounce rates
- Web analytics
- Exit surveys like 4Q, from iPerceptions
- Eye-tracking studies or predictive heatmaps like Feng-GUI and Attention Wizard
- Mouse tracking / click counting software like CrazyEgg, ClickTale and UserFly

Key rules for achieving results that are "unlikely to be random":

- **Measure before and after:** Take measurements before and after your change (e.g. of rankings, traffic etc.) Then revert the changes and measure again, to see if the difference before and after (if any) wasn't due to a coincidentally timed algorithm change. Finally, if your change really did make a positive improvement implement it a new and leave things as is. Again, thanks to Branko Rihtman in this regard.

- **Isolate:** You have to isolate the independent and dependent factors to make sure that nothing interferes with the test. Otherwise, you won't be able to conclude that your modification of the independent variable caused (or didn't cause) a change in the dependent variable.

- **Use control and experimental groups:** Compare results between groups and see if your test had an impact.

It isn't necessary, but you should write down ("document") your whole process. You'll be able to justify your views by showing how you arrived at them. Another benefit is that documentation will allow you or others to copy your experiment and try to produce the same result, thus verifying the initial study.

Yahoo's Paid Inclusion Program

Yahoo used to have a Paid Inclusion program, which they got when they bought Altavista. You could pay, on a CPC or a per-submission/review basis, to have URLs of your choice included in Yahoo's organic index. Experts were split on whether this boosted rankings or not.

In 2008, a company I worked with told me they used Paid Inclusion. All I'd read said that Paid Inclusion did not boost rankings. So I thought we could cut the program and save money. Fortunately, the company's analytics expert had read otherwise. After reading more and asking private questions of friends, I found out that there was no consensus on the issue. So we decided to test.

We used 8 brand new sites, 2 of which I submitted for paid inclusion. The targeted keyword was a made-up gibberish phrase. The sites submitted for paid inclusion ended up ranking #1 and #3. All on page SEO factors were equal.

It was a remarkable anecdotal data point, albeit admittedly not scientifically valid.

Later, I reviewed Yahoo's search results and found a majority of top ranking competitors also using Paid Inclusion (you could tell because there was no "Cached" link for them in the search results). Of course, that's just correlation - not causation. Nevertheless, it was an additional data point to consider in making an educated guess as to whether to keep or cut Paid Inclusion.

In the event, we chose to keep Paid Inclusion because it seemed more probable than not that it did boost rankings.

Later, the company cut the program. I was told that there were better ways to spend the money. That's excellent critical thinking, examples of which we'll see later on.

Steps In Testing

Step 1: Create a hypothesis.

Your hypothesis guesses what varying the independent variable will do to the dependent variable. It's usually in the form of an "If X then Y" statement.

For example: If I buy links, then I will rank higher. This is a little broad, so we'd want to get more specific. We'd know a hypothesis would be broad because we're documenting the experiment, creating a recipe to reproduce it. If we just write "add sugar," obvious questions of quantity and quality arise. A better hypothesis is, "If I buy in-content links on relevant pages, then I will rank higher for my targeted terms."

Step 2: Identify your variables.

Look at the hypothesis.

For the independent variable, ask, "What am I modifying?" In the above hypothesis, it's the backlink profile, because I'm buying links.

For the dependent variable, ask, "What is my manipulation of the independent variable trying to change?" In my hypothesis, it's rankings.

Step 3: Isolate your variables.

Recall that we want to prove (or disprove) a causal relationship.

What we must do to prove causation...

a) Create test subjects that are identical in all respects. This isolates our variables. If your test subjects are sites, ensure the following are equal across the sites you test.

Domain length. Keyword presence in the domain. Legibility. Number of pages. Length of content on each page. URL format. Internal navigation. Number and location of keyword repetitions in content (NOT keyword density, which is a myth). Amount of code. Loading times. Do all in your power to make the sites equivalent.

b) Create a gibberish keyword that doesn't exist anywhere else on the web.

If you test with a real keyword, other sites' behaviour confuses the causal relationship. You won't know if your rankings changed because of what you did to the sites, or because of what competitors did.

Maybe they changed their URL formats and didn't use 301 redirects. Or maybe their linkbait did really well, and so they're climbing over you in the rankings. There are too many things going on with a real keyword, many of which you have no idea about.

What we must avoid doing in order to protect the causal link…

Don't pick traffic as your dependent variable. Traffic depends on both CTR and rankings, which confuses matters.

Don't modify other things at the same time as you buy links. Don't add content. Don't pull a publicity stunt. All those things might affect rankings, and would stop you from concluding that the purchased links boosted rankings.

Step 4: Change the independent variable of the experimental group.

The next step for our above example is buying the links within content on relevant pages.

Step 5: Measure your results and analyze them.

Track the ranking changes and evaluate what impact the paid links had. You know that your variables were isolated, so you should be able to conclude that rankings changes were due to your manipulation of the independent variable.

I use AuthorityLabs.com for rank tracking. They have historical ranking graphs, so you can correlate the change to the independent variable with a ranking change. They're also developing a way for you to write notes into these charts, so you can document experiments and visualize results easily.

SEO Tests In The Wild

You've run your first controlled SEO test - great! You're not done though - it's time for testing in the wild.

To the extent possible, the methodology you follow should be the same as with controlled testing. For instance, test with sites that all have backlink profiles mostly composed of blog post links, instead of sites mixing forums, directories, and press releases. So just as human testing follows mice testing in drug development, test on existing sites “in the wild” after you’ve done your controlled testing. The purpose isn’t to generalize an observation about the algorithm, but see whether your research applies to the real world.

Caveats

While the ideal for proving causation is a test run on brand new sites, the reality is that most SEO is done for sites that exist already. And these sites have confounding variables that influence how the search engines will treat them. The age of their first links, the depth of their content, mentions in the news and so on all influence results.

Another thing to consider is that the algorithms may categorize sites in ways that limit the usefulness of controlled testing. For example, Bing may treat links differently depending if they point to a new site or an established site.

Exceptional circumstances:

Sometimes, ranking fluctuations are so significant that it’s unlikely anything your competitors did caused them. My friends at Slingshot boosted a site’s rank by 400+ positions on one occasion. That’s a huge change that they can be reasonably confident was due to their work.

But... there are even exceptions to the exception. With Google’s May Day update around May 1st, 2010, sites saw drastic ranking fluctuations that were due to a big change in the algorithm. If Slingshot had been testing on real keywords at the time, the test would have to be scrapped, because the algorithm change was a confounding factor. One data point that helps with accounting for algorithm changes is comparing rank changes in Google to Bing:

If only one engine’s rankings changed drastically, it may be an algorithm change. If you see significant ranking changes simultaneously in both Google and Bing that suggests that the changes are due to your own efforts, and not to algorithmic fluctuations. (This assumes that the search engines don’t coordinate their algorithm updates. But coordination may happen. That was the case with the introduction of the new rel=canonical.)

Rule 3. Study Patterns

Learn By Looking For Relationships In The Data

Identifying relationships in data is incredibly valuable. Once you spot a relationship, you can make an educated guess as to what is its cause. That can lead to greater experience via experimental testing, to lateral thinking and to logical testing.

Here's what noticing relationships and exploring their explanation looks like.

1. *Collect together your data points.* Just as lawyers start by identifying the relevant facts, SEOs need to begin by collecting the data. The data can be statistics, blog posts, historical rank tracking, dates you launched linkbait etc. Books are great sources of data.

   Let's take my anecdote about earning an offtopic footer link as a sample data point.

2. *Look for coincidences*. Ask, "What does this piece of data have in common with this other piece?" What do polar bears and my friend Dee have in common? In winter, neither gets cold.

   For the offtopic footer, my brand rankings dropped shortly thereafter.

3. *Guess at plausible explanations*. What explains the coincidences you've seen in the data? What's the relationship? Polar bears and Dee have equal amounts of fat. (Just kidding! I'd never insult polar bears.)

   I guessed that the offtopic link earned me a shot across the bow from Google, based on the coincidental timing between the link acquisition and the drop in rankings.

4. *Test the explanations.* You can test them out logically, which we discuss in the chapters on 'finding truth', or by running an experiment, which we've seen above.

   It's important to note that experiments aren't always necessary. But when experiments are necessary, the relationship identification stage answers the first two questions we raised about testing, earlier.

   1 - "What are we trying to find out?"
   2 - "What answers to this question exist already?"

Sample answers:

1 . Whether the coincidence is due to some causal link.
2 . What you've read in books.

It's known that Google distrusts irrelevant footer links, and may penalize people for them. If I wanted, I could create an experiment to verify this hypothesis and try getting irrelevant footer links for other sites of mine and see what happens to their branded-keyword rankings.

With practice, you'll automatically notice and explain relationships in data. Often, you'll spot new opportunities as a result.

Relationships In Search: See Things From The Search Engines' Perspective

Distilling principles from a mass of information helps you understand what motivates behaviour. This kind of analysis helps explain what motivates search engines. If you can understand that, you can notice trends and get a feel for search engines' future direction.

In search marketing, the goal posts move according to what will make money for the search engines.

All other things being equal, anything that will result in:

- More advertisers competing in the PPC auction
- Taking a greater share of a given sector's profit margins
- Boosting revenue from the auction. This means
    - Higher clickthrough rate (CTR)
    - Higher bids
    - More accurate ad targeting (which results in greater CTR)
    - Bigger budgets for search marketing
    - Taking market share from competing marketing channels.
    - Increasing the benefit of PPC
    - Lifting search volume, which means more traffic to sell
    - Encouraging ad clicks by adapting the user experience

Note: In the case of affiliates evicted from AdWords, that's a situation where all else was not equal. Google is bringing more merchants into AdWords, and merchants have greater margins than affiliates - affiliates by definition only get a small percentage of the sale. Even if in the short term, the auction prices for clicks dropped, once merchants get hooked on PPC, click prices will rise anew.

To the same effect, lots of affiliate accounts that got banned were engaged in deceptive practices. By teaching searchers to distrust AdWords, these affiliates were hurting Google's brand and its long term revenue prospects.

Even if you didn't know that Google was a for-profit company, you'd be able to conclude the specific tactical goals named above from looking at the following actions (the data):

1. Google offers Google Analytics free. Those advertisers who pay attention to metrics increase their PPC ROI and put more money back into AdWords.

2. Google lifts advertiser efficiency by offering Google Website Optimizer.

3. Google's Comparison Ads product sells mortgage leads on a cost-per-action basis.

4. AdWords is constantly evolving to increase efficiency and allow better targeting.

5. Universal search's integration of images, news, shopping feeds, maps, blog posts, and videos has decreased the amount of traffic going to regular pages.

6. Personalization and localization of search results dilutes the traffic available via SEO while leaving PPC volume intact.

7. Ongoing anti-spam efforts fight blackhat SEO - a competing marketing channel. (In fairness, many blackhat SEOs hurt users with things like malware and hacking.)

Baby Steps To Start Identifying Relationships In The Data

1. Use a hub finder tool to compare top ranking competitors' backlinks. Look for the common motivations that got webmasters to give those backlinks to competitors. MajesticSEO has its "Clique Finder," SEOBook.com has its "hub finder," and Moz has a "Competitive Link Finder" tool.
2. Read competitors' press releases. What themes underlie them? Why are they there? What direction is your industry headed in?
3. Look at market research reports like the Internet Retailer 500. What trends can you notice?
4. Skip to the book's critical thinking section about questioning motivations. That will help you explain, "Why is this happening?"
5. Look at competitors' affiliate programs and check into their commission rates. Then review their conversion processes, upsells and strategy. Are they making more money per visitor than you? What patterns do the higher-paying competitors' programs have? What's the

reason for those patterns?

6. Share your comments with others on data relationships you've seen. Write a blog post (I welcome guest posts on this topic!), email some friends or just go to the water cooler. Ask others to challenge your view's logic and see if it holds up.

Rule 4: Think Laterally

Is This Relevant To My Situation?

How can I modify this technique? How can I adapt this to apply to me?

These are the essential questions of lateral thinking.

Take the above example about Google's behaviour patterns. Some ad networks (including link brokers) still sell blind deals, where the networks describe the ad inventory to advertisers but don't fully disclose it.

Think about how much bigger the clients' spend would be on these blind networks if clients could target with their eyes wide open! All the experts on the Google Content Network (AdSense), emphasize the 'placement performance report'. It tells advertisers what sites their ads appeared on, which ads got a high CTR, and which generated conversions.

Google has proven that helping advertisers become more efficient at buying ad inventory leads to them buying more of it, and at higher prices. If SEOs can help clients optimize their ROI, they can expect bigger budgets to come their way.

Once you've identified a data relationship, or simply found inspiration from your learning materials, you can adapt other peoples' ideas, and adapting is the easiest way to innovate. You only need to improve things slightly, not come up with something entirely new.

I find lateral thinking really valuable when you read blackhat SEO blogs or forums. I've come up with several greyhat or whitehat tactics based on the principles described in a blackhat website. I only had to adapt the execution. You'll find some of these tactics later on.

The University of California cites 10 critical thinking questions that apply almost universally[6]. Here's number 10.

"How would someone from a related but different discipline look at the problem / solution / issue. Could an interdisciplinary approach improve the analysis / discussion / evaluation?"

6. "Critical Thinking Questions You Can Ask About Anything" G.S.Goodman.
http://seoroi.com/uc-davis-questions

This doesn't just apply to reading blackhat SEO blogs. It also carries over to reading about other disciplines, like direct response, web analytics, usability, email marketing, graphic design, network security etc.

To help you with this lateral thinking, we'll look at some critical thinking questions, starting next chapter. They will help you figure out the key tension that prevents something from applying in your case. For now, here are some baby steps to get you going with lateral thinking.

Baby Steps To Lateral Thinking

1. Add blogs to your RSS reader that are outside your field. It can be a moderately different field (email marketing), or a totally different discipline (human resources).

2. Participate in a cross-disciplinary project team.

3. Trade lessons with others in your office. Show the accountants some keyword research and learn to read a cash flow statement.

4. Share offices, secretaries and so on with other independent consultants or agencies. Baby Step 3 is not only for inhouse SEOs.

5. Organize a meetup. Meet new people and hear some fresh ideas!

6. Look for analogies and parallels. Supplier relationships are similar, regardless if you're in search or retail.

Principles of Critical Thinking

There are a few fundamental keys to thinking critically. They involve questioning:
1. The frame of debate and its definitions and paradigms.
2. Debaters' motives.
3. Assumptions.
4. Premises, logic and conclusions
6. Logical Limits - deductive validity
7. Probability - inductive validity

Note: I'm using the notion of problem solving interchangeably here with winning a debate, since the critical thinking rules are the same. But you don't need an adversarial situation like a debate to be able to use these ideas.

Rule 5. Define The Problem

What's Going On Here?

The first step in any problem-solving oriented critical thinking is to define the problem.

When faced with a given problem, people often focus on one particular aspect of it. That limits the solutions they can find.

Instead, start by finding the frame of debate and questioning it. Here are some questions to help with that.

1. What exactly is bothering people?

If you start by addressing the wrong problem, you'll never get to a solution!

2. Is the issue a symptom or is it the root problem?

On occasion, people's frustration with part of the problem obscures what lies below.
It's the difference between treating a rash with soothing cream and treating the allergic reaction that caused the rash. The cream won't save the person's life.

3. What is/are the cause(s) of this problem?

Obviously if you've determined that the tangible problem is just a symptom of something else, you need to dig for the root issue.

"My website just lost 25% of the traffic Google was sending us and I need your help!" Many SEO consultants will have heard some variation on that.

The standard advice is to just wait it out, because Google sometimes has major ranking fluctuations that revert back in a few days. An SEO who jumped to the conclusion that the site needed more content or links would be assuming a causal frame for the problem that was not justified by the facts

4. What are the consequences of framing the question this way?

Frequently, people start by analyzing the possible outcomes of a question and then find a justification for the outcome that suits them.

In business, this issue often comes up in negotiations. The other party is really insistent on a particular term, because they expect to benefit from it. If you listen and identify the benefit they're seeking, you can propose an alternative solution that provides the same benefit but meets your own needs more closely.

5. "What are the basic concepts or terms being used? How do these definitions affect the framing / understanding of the problem?"[7]

This issue comes up in many places.

"Hydroelectric dams are good/bad for the environment." You can't go anywhere with that statement unless you define "good/bad for the environment."

Also, that accepts as the frame of reference that dams should be judged on their environmental impact. Perhaps another frame of reference should be their cultural impact – will the resulting flooding force communities to move? What is the root problem? What problem are we trying to solve?

6. What paradigms are people relying on?

Why do people joke that "blog" stands for "Better Listings On Google," (instead of web log)? Does Google love new blog posts? Or do new posts send human signals to Google via the Google toolbar, Gmail and/or attract links? What is the *paradigm* – a blog with 20,000 RSS subscribers or a new Blogspot.com subdomain?

The first step in any problem-solving oriented critical thinking is to define the problem.

Exercises

In each of these critical thinking chapters, I'm going to present some problems and solutions. The goal is for you to practice the chapter's critical-thinking notions.

The questions are open-ended, so the solutions can vary. The answers below feature the ideas I was trying to direct you to, but other plausible answers exist, too.

7. G.S. Goodman, supra note 6, http://seoroi.com/uc-davis-questions

Problems

1. SEOs say that "Search engines love fresh content." Do they really? Why not index every new, non-spam page that is ever created, then?

2. "They're beating us because their brand is better trusted," Steve The SEO told his somewhat puzzled CEO. "You mean Google can tell that our return policy is bogus? What, are they making test returns?" quizzed the CEO. Articulate to a layman the problem Steve's talking about.

3. Charmayne and Don compete in the same ecommerce niche. Charmayne's site outranks Don's, and her backlink profile is 100% paid links. Don's backlink profile features whitehat, relevant directories, only. What's Don's problem?

Solutions

1. You have to define "love" and "content." Product descriptions are content – does adding more products to your store with more descriptions mean higher rankings? Search engines do sometimes give a boost to fresh content - but that's usually for news-oriented terms where the "query deserves freshness."

What are we trying to figure out? When we say love, we're talking about how a search engine treats a given site. Is that really based on how frequently that site publishes new content?

Search engines do regularly index new content. They do that in varying degrees for ***trusted, linked-to*** sites, depending on how much trust and link power a given site has. So if you're talking about "love" as "indexing," perhaps search engines love some sites' fresh content.

For less trusted or powerful sites search engines don't index all their pages, even if they're not spam. First, these sites don't have the links to merit constant attention from crawlers.

Second, they're not necessarily useful to users. Often, ecommerce or affiliate sites have little-to-nothing in terms of differentiation, using manufacturer descriptions, no reviews, no price comparisons etc. Large ecommerce sites and affiliates go to great lengths to gain reviews and write their own product descriptions.

If you're talking about "love" as "ranking," Google hates a lot of fresh [generic] content. And for those familiar with the May Day update, this may be even truer today[8].

8. I recommend this article from Red Fly Marketing to understand this in depth: http://seoroi.com/red-fly

2. If you covered any/all of the following, you're on the right path.

Search engine trust is mostly determined by the backlink profile of a site. One aspect to this is the reputability of backlink sources. An academic institution is more trusted than a personal blog, for instance.

A second aspect of trust as reflected in the backlink profile is the co-citation. The more a site is linked to in the company of other relevant sites, the more search engines associate it with that topic. Some examples of high-value co-citations are footnotes in academic articles or bibliographies, and posts listing the "Top 10 Industry X Blogs."

Let me share a story to illustrate. Many companies have contacted me to be included in a post I wrote listing the top 30 companies in a certain field... 18 months after the post was published. They're either seeing it rank or seeing competitors' backlinks, or both...

Trust also ties into having anchor text that follows a normal distribution between optimized anchors and non-optimized. Brand and domain anchors are more common in editorially given links (as opposed to paid links or spam links), and therefore also more trustworthy.

Another aspect of trust is the domain itself. Anecdotally, I've had an exact match keyword domain name of mine rank (for a longtail word) before I built a single link to it. I believe - but have no way to prove - that the site was discovered based on Google collecting my browsing data[9].

Also, my research shows that exact match domains can rank with a fraction of the links their non-exact-match competitors need.[10] Whether that's causation or correlation is up to you to determine, but my impression is that it's causation, based on my experience and because my research covered numerous sites in a wide variety of industries.

Lastly, I wouldn't be surprised to find that high retweet counts and other social media signals contributed to trust.

3. Since backlinks are the key ranking factor and Charlayne's backlinks are all paid for, we can safely say that her paid links are the source of her rankings. And we can also determine that on the whole, her backlink profile is superior to Don's whitehat profile.

From this starting point, Don's key problem can be characterized a few different ways.

9. Andrew Shotland has an article listing 17 ways to get indexed without links or submission, based on the experience of different industry experts he's spoken to. http://seoroi.com/local-guide-indexing
10. http://seoroi.com/link-building/backlinks-compete-elite/

One obvious argument is that there's a loophole in the algorithms and Don needs to exploit it too. Charlayne's links are junk, but they work. Don should buy junk links, too.

Or perhaps it's not a loophole but deliberate. Charlayne's buying advertorials on well-read blogs, and the engines want to count links that send traffic. Nobody visits directories. This reasoning leads us to conclude that Don should buy advertorials.

A more thorough analysis might ask why Charlayne is buying links and why Don only gets directory links.

Perhaps Don and Charlayne have the same root problem. Being in ecommerce, they don't see any way to get links besides directories or outright purchases.

This analysis suggests that Don can compete with whitehat means. He just needs to diversify his link sources. Guest-blogging, participation in relevant forums and linkbait can all solve this problem.

A third view may just be that Charlayne has more links. I didn't specify how many links each site had in the problem, so you might be forgiven for not thinking of this. But this comes up surprisingly regularly. "Our competitors are beating us with paid links." Maybe...

Maybe they just have more links in total, and your competitors are winning with brute force. Maybe "our competitors are beating us with more links."

Question The Motives

What does the person behind this product review site want? To help people researching these products, or to leverage their fake reviews into earning affiliate commissions?

It's a normal human instinct to try and use the argument that we think will be most appealing to the other side, or the argument that will make us look the most noble. We'll tell a roommate that we did their laundry and omit that we're hoping they'll OK a friend's upcoming visit.

Ask yourself **why** a person is arguing the way they are. Why not in some other way? Some useful questions in this regard are:

- Would their argument be respectable if it was based on a different motivation than that which they're presenting?
- Is this argument aimed at appealing to a wider range of people than some other claims that advance a narrower interest?
- Who benefits from this? What are the consequences of accepting their argument, and how can people benefit from it?

For example, Google may claim that one of their goals is providing a better user experience.

It's well-known that humans rely on brands as a short-cut to decision-making. What's less well-known is that Google uses the speed with which people click through as one measure of the effectiveness of their search results. So by placing brands in the organic results, Google encourages brand-based decision shortcuts.

Who benefits from such shortcuts?

What happens when brands show up in ad slots? It's plausible that the net effect is a greater CTR for brand advertisers, who end up depending more on AdWords traffic. And a lot bigger budgets go into PPC as a result.

I'm not saying I have proof that Google is behaving this way. Rather, I'm demonstrating the application of these questions and the insights you can derive from critical thinking.

An Overview of Human Needs To Better Understand Motivation

Cynics often reduce human motivation to food, shelter, money, sex and power. They're not far wrong.

The best explanation of human motivation is *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*.[11] Psychologist Abraham Maslow suggested that human beings feel five types of needs, and that for a person to feel a need higher up in the hierarchy, the lower-level needs had to be satisfied, first.

It's like building a pyramid: you can't create a third floor if you haven't set blocks in place for the first and second floors.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Let's illustrate with some examples from real life.

11 The Hierarchy of Needs http://seoroi.com/maslow

1. Influence Derived From Physiological Needs And Safety Needs

Dictators exploit physiological needs by rationing food, electricity and other essentials.

You can also work on people's security needs. Want to meet your needs for food and drink, and not have your roof torched in the evening? Better keep quiet about that beating you saw.

Truth be told, repression works. But messing around with people's physiological and safety needs means making enemies. It's a high-risk method.

Replace the word dictator with "fire-breathing boss" and you'll understand why offices plagued with such people see such high turnover. That's why fire-breathers rarely lead big companies.

Fire-breathers aside, these needs motivate a lot of our actions in the real world. For example, my benefits copy for this book addresses security needs by talking about about risk management for site owners and job security for inhouse SEOs.

2. Motivation Based On Love And Belonging

In Brian Tracy's book, *The 100 Unbreakable Rules of Business Success*, rule 37 is the Rule of Power.[12] He defines power as the "ability to influence the allocation of resources."

Tracy goes on to write the following brilliant, very insightful explanation as to where this influence is derived from: "Ultimately, true and lasting power in an organization comes from the consent of the followers." Permission marketing anyone?

Influence is granted to others by the influencee's consent, and that consent is much more likely to be granted when the influencee feels that a genuine relationship exists between them and the influencer.

Imagine that a soccer player on a team is jeered by fans for selfish play. The tone of the comment and the absence of any pre-existing relationship between him and the fan means that the message will be ignored.

Now suppose that the player's teammates suggest discretely (to avoid embarrassment) that he should pass to his teammates more. If the players currently relate to each other with mutual trust and respect, then the selfish player will start passing more to keep being respected and accepted, so consenting to his teammates' influence.

12. "The 100 Unbreakable Rules Of Business Success," Brian Tracy. Berrett-Koehler Publishers (January 1, 2000)

Peer pressure works on people's desire to belong. While it often leads to negative outcomes like smoking or drug use, it can clearly be used for good, too.

Another example is the case of students sharing notes. A key motivator for sharing is the desire to encourage reciprocation. People who don't share may find themselves excluded from future note-sharing.

3. Respect (Of Others And Self-Respect) As A Motivator

When social media experts highlight tactics such as commenting and retweeting, they are highlighting means to influence based on the desire for others' respect.

Everyone desires the respect and esteem of their peers.

Again, this is related to the concept of peer pressure. Some people cave in to peer pressure in order to get the respect of certain peers. As a peer of mine in high school once joked self-consciously, "Come on, all the cool kids are doing it!"

When a guy buys a Lamborghini, he's not buying a car. He's buying a chick magnet. Jaguars and BMWs are sold on the premise that owning one will gain the owner respect as a successful businessman at the country club. Status symbols are sold on respect.

4. Influence Due To Self-Actualization Needs

It's a Hollywood cliché that the bad guy kills without remorse whereas the good guy is hesitant and remorseful. Why is that?

It's because both the good guy and the bad guy are looking to reach their full potential. Creativity, morality … most of the advanced thinking that we do falls into this category. Appealing to someone to solve a puzzle or a unique problem challenges them to think deeply and helps them satisfy the need for self-actualization.

In a nutshell, proposing to someone that they pursue a particular path because it is more ethical, or more creative or somehow involves one of these advanced functions, is one of the strongest arguments that can be made. Appealing to a person's need for self-actualization makes for a compelling argument. Who would work in advertising cigarettes when they knew that cigarettes killed people?

So why do people advertise cigarettes when they know they're bad?

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a pyramid – the upper level of blocks can't be laid until a lower level is laid. One possible reason why people take on cigarette marketing work is that their more basic needs aren't being met.

Another possibility is that, like the bad guys in said Hollywood flicks, some people have an odd sense of ethics. To take a more extreme example, terrorists believe they're self-actualizing as demonstrated by investigative journalist Stewart Bell in his book, *The Martyr's Oath*.

Whether good or bad, self-actualization is the most powerful motivator for audiences that can relate to it. When someone's other needs are met, the need for self-actualization cries out for satisfaction.

Conclusions On Influence And Motivation

Influence can only exist where there is motivation to support it. Understanding your audience begins with assessing what their motivations are, or are likely to be. Familiarity with Maslow's pyramid will help you discover the audience's motivation. Only then can you influence them.

You can also do this in reverse. Start by designing your product to appeal to a specific need that people have, and so define your audience.

Problems

1. In the battle between Google and paid links, Google has repeatedly said that they catch paid links and penalize one or both of the parties to the transaction. What's Google's motivation for saying this? It's not user benefit because no one buys links for irrelevant sites that will annoy users and won't convert.

2. You just read a blog post saying that having standards-compliant code boosts rankings. Does W3C validation really matter? Why might someone say that?

3. Match the ad slogan with the need(s) being addressed.

"Guarantee your standard of living once you hit retirement"
"It's Miller time!"
"Because I'm worth it"
"Tastes so good cats ask for it by name."
"Merrill Lynch is bullish on America."
"Got Milk?"
"Preparing to be a beautiful lady."
"You'll wonder where the yellow went when you brush your teeth with Pepsodent"
"Finger lickin' good."

"The ultimate driving machine"
"You're in good hands with Allstate"
"I bet he drinks Carling Black Label"
"Reach out and touch someone." [For AT&T long distance.]
"Be all you can be."

Solutions

1. Many SEOs say that Google is just trying to fight a business model that competes with their own.

Google sells search traffic from the sponsored listings, and text link sellers really sell search traffic from the organic listings.

When a friend put it that way to me, I understood Google's motives in the war on paid links. It's an anti-competitive move against others who sell search traffic.

2. There are a huge number of websites whose code is faulty. Yet that hardly says anything about the quality of the content on the site. If the Federal Reserve had a sloppy developer, would that make it any less of an authority on banking?

Matt Cutts essentially said that at SMX West, 2010.

"Mike McDonald, WebProNews - "It's not going to hurt you [if the site doesn't validate] but it's not going to help you in the rankings right?"

Matt Cutts - "Yeah, there are so many people that write invalid HTML with syntax errors, that still is good content, that we need to be able to rank that good content even if somebody doesn't, you know, have something that is completely lint free in terms of validation."

The web design blogger who writes that W3C compliances matters is probably selling coding services. If validating code is necessary to rank, then it's best to hire "Fancy Joe's CSS Shop" than "Mike from the football league."

Nevertheless, I can think of at least one instance where standards matter: redirects. If you use a 302 temporary redirect when you mean to pass the ranking ability of one URL to another because the page has moved URLs permanently - the province of 301 permanent redirects - you may hurt your rankings.

If we include using the right type of redirect in our definition of "standards compliant" code - defining the terms of the debate - then yes, validation does matter.

3. “Guarantee...” - Security

“It’s Miller Time...” - Belonging [Everyone is drinking Miller...]
“Because I’m worth it” - Self-esteem, others’ respect, arguably self-actualization
“Tastes so good, cats...” - Self-esteem/actualization: Feeling good about treating your cat well.
“...bullish on America” - Belonging. Are you patriotic? So is Merrill Lynch, so bank there.
“Got milk?” - Belonging & self-actualization. All our endorsers drink milk.
“...to be a beautiful lady.” - Self-esteem
“...where the yellow went...” – Self-esteem, security.
“Finger lickin’ good.” - Food aka physiological, duh.
“The ultimate driving machine.” Self-esteem / others’ respect.
“You’re in good hands with Allstate.” - Security
“I bet he drinks ...” - Others’ respect.
“Reach out & touch someone.” - Family belonging / love.
“Be all that you can be.” - Self-actualization

Rule 6. Question The Logic

See http://SEOROI.com for more on advanced SEO

Assumptions, Premises, Logic And Conclusions

Assumptions

The way I really learned this, at a conceptual level, was when Professor Dennis Klinck, explained to me how he successfully identified assumptions.

In a class discussion, Prof. Klinck challenged an assumption I hadn't picked up on. I doubted that I could have thought of it myself, so I asked Prof. Klinck how he noticed the assumption.
Prof. Klinck explained the process of finding assumptions as follows.

> "You begin by asking, 'What is the paradigm situation? What does this statement have in mind?'
>
> "Then, you modify the facts one at a time and see if that changes anything. If it does, then you've identified an assumption."

To illustrate, consider the statement: Google wants Googlebot to see the same thing you show users.

What is the paradigm situation? An ordinary website that might be tempted by cloaking.

Let's change a fact from the paradigm. Suppose you have a nifty javascript tool that boosts conversions. Do you have to duplicate that in some form that Googlebot can read? You aren't misleading by using javascript. And if you had to create an alternative for Googlebot, you'd be breaking another Google guideline: design sites for users, not search engines!

(Googlebot is learning to read javascript... but it's not yet at a high school reading level.)
It's important to distinguish between assumptions and premises. An assumption is something taken for granted without proof. A premise is the basic starting point of an argument.

You can assume a premise, but you can also assume a conclusion. For example, you know that soccer team 'X' has no substitute players. You might assume that they will always lose due to fatigue. In this case, the conclusion – that the team will always lose - is assumed. The premise that not substituting players causes fatigue is a known [read: proven] rule, and therefore not an assumption.

Challenging Logic

Sometimes, a false argument is made on factual premises. Consider this argument. "95% of house fires had firemen going in and out of the house. Firemen cause 95% of house fires." Obviously, firefighters respond to fires, they don't cause them. You can have invalid arguments that are based on true premises.

So what was the problem here? The logic tying the premises to the conclusion was faulty. **Correlation is not causation.**[13] Firemen's presence at the scene of fires doesn't mean they cause fires!

The firemen example may seem silly, but we often say similar things in the context of SEO. "I bought two links in the past couple of months and now our rankings seem to have dropped. Do you think it's because of the paid links?" That's a real question a successful, competent SEO asked me.

According to him, the paid links were free of any obvious footprints. So it's unlikely that Google caught them and penalized the destination site, as opposed to my offtopic link in the footer, discussed earlier.

[A more plausible explanation is that the rank drop coincided with algorithmic changes affecting the site... Again, this is the kind of relationship spotting that valuably leads us to experimenting. The logical analysis described here is unfortunately not conclusive.]

Finding And Questioning Conclusions

"What inferences are being made from what kind of data, and are these inferences legitimate?"[14] Transparency is a value that you always hear about in internet marketing. As I was thinking it over one afternoon, I thought the idea might be phrased this way:

"He who is not transparent is a "thief." He who fears transparency wants to hide his dishonesty."

But that would be another logical fallacy. It's "falsely generalizing from the specific." I took something that is true in one case and assumed that it's true for every case.

While a thief is afraid of transparency, that does not mean that everyone who is afraid of transparency is a thief. There may be other reasons to fear transparency, besides that it would reveal one's dishonesty.

13. Wikipedia has a pretty interesting section on logical errors and fallacies. Rather than duplicate that work, I'll just invite you to visit. http://seoroi.com/wiki-fallacies
14. G.S. Goodman, supra note 6, http://seoroi.com/uc-davis-questions

For example, the Iranians tweeting against their government in June 09 were not transparent about their whereabouts, names etc. Yet they weren't thieves. They feared transparency because of the cruel, repressive regime.

(As an aside, Randall Munroe of XKCD illustrates generalizing from the specific beautifully.[15])
You could also describe this "thieves fear transparency" idea as "Affirming the consequent." Wikipedia explains it as drawing a conclusion from premises that are irrelevant to it, by means of falsely assuming Q implies P on the true basis that P implies Q."

If a person is a thief ("P"), they behave discretely and are opaque to the public ("implies Q"). Suppose John behaves discretely and is opaque to the public ("Q"). John isn't necessarily a thief ("implies P").

Problems

1. A competitor bought links, and they rank high. Can you conclude that a competitor's paid links are what ranked them? Why or why not?

2. Craig hired some mediocre programmers on an outsourcing site, which we'll call Slowdesk. As a result, his site has search engine unfriendly URLs and a low clickthrough rate from search results. He swears that he'll never hire on an outsourcing marketplace again, to ensure his future SEO success. What do you make of his logic?

3. Jenna manages SEO for a sports equipment brand. She's been tracking rankings, and noticed that when the site relaunched in Flash, it also started showing up higher. She concludes that all sites ought to be redesigned in Flash to get the same rankings boost. Is that a valid example of testing in the wild? Is her logic sound?

Solutions

1. You can't assume that the paid links caused the higher rankings. That's the mistake of assuming that correlation equals causation.

Note: I'm not against paid links. The reason I picked this example is because a lot of us complain when we get penalized for breaking search engine guidelines, when competitors who also break them maintain their rankings.

That implicitly assumes that violating the guidelines is what lead to their rankings. But that implicit assumption can be far off - Chris Cemper has a great video regarding a case study he did that

15. http://seoroi.com/xkcd

showed that paid links can sometimes be detected and disregarded by search engines.[16]

Also, it's worth mentioning that Bing's attitude towards buying links, while not encouraging, is tolerant so long as they're useful to users.[17]

2. Be wary when the "proof" for an idea is that the reverse idea is true, or that a particular example of the idea is true. This is actually just a variant problem of Q implies P on the basis that P implies Q.

Just because Craig had a lousy SEO job done on his site because he went through an outsourcing marketplace, doesn't mean that leaving that marketplace will guarantee a good SEO job being done on his site.

P - going to the outsourcing marketplace - caused Q - poor SEO. But that doesn't mean that negative P - leaving the marketplace - implies negative Q - not poor SEO, e.g. a decent SEO job.

3. Try changing the paradigm. Will what happened in one case hold true in a different situation? Is there perhaps an external cause at play, and all Jenna has identified is a correlation?

Jenna's test is a valuable data point, and she may be onto something. But it's lacking a few things. She had no control group, so she can't compare to other equivalent sites. We also don't know if she took steps to isolate her variables. Obviously she can't delete competitors' sites, but if the site was redesigned, it's also plausible that content and navigation changed, or that the relaunch got press and links.

Since we know that Flash usually worsens SEO performance, we should check whether another explanation is possible. For instance, the rankings boost may have been due to algorithmic changes regarding brands.

Jenna is generalizing from the specific, probably incorrectly.

For more logic problems, check out BeatTheGmat.com . It's a site dedicated to prepping people for the GMAT exam, much of which has to do with logic.

16. http://seoroi.com/cemper-links
17. http://seoroi.com/bing-guide "At Live Search, we recommend against investing in buying or selling paid links because they likely will not provide much revenue back to your site. This is especially true when compared to other opportunities to invest in new and unique content that your audience would find compelling. [...]
"The way Live Search addresses this issue is by attempting to assess the value of every link we find. Essentially we look at each link individually to understand the degree to which the site is really endorsing the link. So, while we most likely will not ban your site for buying or selling a few links, it is also likely that they may not actually end up providing any value either." October 13, 2008, 02:14 PM by Rick DeJarnette

Logical Limits - Deductive Validity And Inductive Validity

Finding Truth - Deductive Validity

One way to disprove an idea is to take it to its logical extreme.

For example, if a man says that women can't be lived with, he should choose a life of celibacy and avoid all contact with women. That would be a pretty difficult way of life – certainly a majority of society couldn't live that way or mankind would die out.

Testing an idea in this way is known as testing its deductive validity. Deductive validity means truth in 100% of the cases. "Women are impossible to live with!" is deductively invalid.

Back when search results were just 10 blue links, it was deductively valid that you needed a page on the web (not necessarily a page on your own site) so as to show up in Google's results. Nowadays such a statement would be false since map results show businesses that have no web presence. Google lists their name, address and phone number.

Obviously, deductive validity is a high threshold and few ideas meet this standard. This is particularly true of the social sciences while pure and applied sciences like math feature many more ideas that are deductively valid.

Here are some questions to ask to test the deductive validity of a claim:

- What is the logical limit of this claim?
- How can I push this statement to the extreme?
- Is the claim always true, or are there exceptions at the extremes?
- If not always, is the claim true more often than not?
- Under what circumstances (the context) is it true? What causes it to be true sometimes and not others – what does it depend on?
- What are the implications?

Problem

Google In The Middle

In his article, "Google In The Middle," Nicholas Carr writes, "For much of the first decade of the Web's existence, we were told that the Web, by efficiently connecting buyer and seller, or provider and user, would destroy middlemen. Middlemen were friction, and the Web was a friction-removing machine."[18]

How can you test this argument?

Solution

Look for the paradigm situation. Change the facts one at a time to identify assumptions. Then push that paradigm to the limit to stress-test the assumptions, logic and conclusions.

Nick starts that paragraph with "their" conclusion ("they" are the web's early evangelists) that "the Web, by efficiently connecting buyer and seller, or provider and user, would destroy middlemen."

The evangelists assumed that middlemen introduce inefficiency into the system, as Nick quotes them, "Middlemen were friction." Nick goes on to show that, rather than eliminate middlemen, the web has given rise to one of the world's largest: Google.

Before Google, it was hard to find things. Browsing through directories is slow, and Altavista's results were often irrelevant.

Google made things more efficient. Since Google came around, you can now search once and find what you want. That disproves the assumption that middlemen increase friction. So the conclusion that the web would destroy middlemen doesn't work, on a deductive validity standard.

A better assumption would be that poor technology increases friction. And that's one reason why a lot of this book is about usability - so you can end up like Google and not Altavista!

Basing yourself on Google's example, however, you can't conclude that the web creates middlemen, on a deductive validity standard. Take the large tech blogs. A lot of traffic skips the middleman (the search engines) and visits these blogs directly.

If we ask "when do middlemen create friction" and "why do middlemen create friction," we discover that the paradigm rests on the assumption that middlemen don't care about user experience. "Who," "what," "where," and "how" are also valuable questions for unearthing assumptions, depending on the situation.

"The web eliminates friction" is wrong on a deductive standard. But it can be true... it just depends on the circumstances. If you narrow the evangelists' claim to a tight set of circumstances, it's more likely to be deductively true.

18. Nicholas G. Carr, "Google in the Middle," http://seoroi.com/google-middle

Inductive Validity

Inductive validity is another way of measuring the truth of an argument. Instead of setting the threshold as truth in 100% of the cases, inductive validity looks for a claim to be probably true.

The importance of this is for cases where we've made an inference. As Graham Priest explains in his "Logic: A Very Short Introduction," we evaluate the quality of inferences based on their probability of being true.[19]

It's probably true that if you build or buy links to your site, you will get indexed and ranked. Sure, there are some exceptions for crummy automated spam links, but most decent links will get you into the index and ranking.

When people tell you something like, "It's a question of degree," or "It depends," they've usually got in mind that the statement is inductively true but that there are significant exceptions.

Taking top position in AdWords – good or bad move? It depends on whether you'll just get a greater volume of the same quality traffic, or if position one comes with a lower conversion rate due to more tire kickers.

You always need to consider circumstances when taking advice from a consultant.

Why are they giving you that advice? What is the context in which they learned the information they're sharing? If you understand why and you understand the context, then you can intelligently decide whether the advice really fits your situation or not.

What is their advice inferred from? Experience? Documented and reliable tests?

I wrote a post about how human resources departments should be the ones to measure social media, and perhaps handle it as well.[20] Why would HR handle a marketing function?

They'd do that because HR's specialty is building and maintaining relationships, and repairing them when they're broken.

Am I probably right or wrong that HR would do a good job based on that inference?

It depends on what the purpose of your social media campaign is.

19. "Logic: A Very Short Introduction," Graham Priest, Oxford University Press, Oxford UK, 2000.

If it's strictly to broadcast your posts like you were issuing company press releases, then perhaps leave it to marketing because their knack for titles and calls to action will probably draw more clicks. If your social media efforts aim to build relationships, then have HR run it. And if it's the case that both clicks and relationships are goals, perhaps a combined HR and marketing team should be running the social media campaign.

Controlled Testing Leads To Wild Testing

Inductive validity is the reason that controlled testing is not enough on its own, and that testing in the wild must be done later.

In controlled testing, the circumstances are by definition different than anything we might test in the wild. For instance, such testing doesn't account for competitors and the differences between their sites and ours.

Does that mean that controlled split tests have no value? No, they're still useful to discover particulars, such as the strength (or relative strengths) of different link sources and ranking factors. As well, they're a risk management tactic, because they enable you to try something out without risking your own site in the process.

Problems

1. You're trying to get your company's CTO and merchandising manager to switch from the company's home-rolled ecommerce platform to a souped-up Wordpress ecommerce theme.

To figure out if that's a good idea or not, what questions should you, the CTO and the merchandising manager ask?

2. In *recently* removing the keyword "free" from its AdWords negative keywords, your B2B company's PPC team suddenly got a surge in *traffic* and *leads*. The amount of detail in the forms is equal to what it was before the change.

The sales team has appealed to the CMO for budget to have you rank the site organically for those keywords that include the word "free." You're cautioning the CMO to be weary.

What inference did they draw? Why are you leery of these leads?

20. http://seoroi.com/seo-roi-quality/hr-to-measuresmm/

Solutions

1. What purpose does the ecommerce platform serve? Is a system built for blogging practical for ecommerce? Why might an ecommerce platform be less than optimal for SEO?

What factors does it depend on? In what circumstances is using WP probably the right move, and in what circumstances is it just the SEO community's love for Wordpress that has us stretching it too thin?

By considering these and other questions, you can discover why you're advocating WP, and whether it makes sense for ecommerce. What conditions might it depend on? When will it be more probably worthwhile switching to Wordpress, and when will it not be worthwhile?

2. The likely inference they drew is that the leads are equal in quality to what they had before. You're skeptical of that inference. Why might it be probably true or probably false?

The amount of detail in the forms is the same, so the inference that the leads are equal in quality may well be valid.

On the side of it being a bad inference, the leads only came in *recently*, so there's not been enough time for the sales team to convert them through the long B2B sales cycle. Lead quality may have dropped, which is the factor you're concerned about, due to the leads having typed the keyword "free."

Rule 7. Making The Right Decision

What Google's Mad Poker Skills Can Teach Us

High-value thinking in SEM aims at decision-making. We don't dwell on things over which we have no control.

One criteria for making decisions that is common to both poker players, blackhat SEOs and Google is known as "expected value," or EV. It's a mathematical approach to cost-benefit analysis.

Expected value is the average value offered by a particular choice as it is repeated. In other words, if you make that same choice an infinite number of times, will you come out ahead? How does repeating that choice compare relative to other choices - will you come out further ahead?

Expected value tells you whether this choice will make you richer or poorer, on average."

In Poker

Pro poker players estimate the expected value of their hand. They multiply the probability of winning (PoW) by the value of the pot they can win (VoW), and add that to the probability of losing (PoL) by the cost of losing (CoL).

The formula for expected value (EV) looks as follows. [21]

EV = PoW x VoW + PoL x (-(CoL))
EV = Probability of Winning x Value of Winning + Probability of Losing x -(Cost of Losing)

21. Technically, for the math lovers, it should be EV = PoW x VoW + PoL x (-|CoL|) = Probability of Winning x Value of Winning – Probability of Losing x (Negative the Absolute Cost of Losing). Absolute numbers are always positive. They are thus a better reflection of the way we talk. We don't say, "My return at the casino was negative $50." We use absolute terminology like, "I lost $50 at the casino." Realistically, most people don't remember (or try to forget!) high school math, so I left the absolute reference for people who really care.

How To Miscalculate Expected Value

Note: Be sure to add in the minus before the cost of losing. Otherwise, since we normally speak of costs without mentioning the minus, you risk messing up the math. If the odds are 50-50 and you stand to win two dollars or lose two dollars, here's what it should look like.

EV = 0.5 x \$2 + 0.5 x (-(\$2)) = 1+ 0.5 x (-2) = 1 + -1 = \$0 per bet on average.
(It should not look like EV = 0.5 x \$2 + 0.5 (2) = 2. Nor should it look like
EV = 0.5 x \$2 + 0.5 x (-(-2)). This latter one might happen if you express the cost as a negative and then multiply that by minus one.)

In both cases your conclusion is that you'll make \$2 per bet, on average. That's absurd since the odds and value are equal on the winning and losing sides.

Suppose you're deciding whether to match another bet ("call the bet" in poker terms), when the potential pot winnings are \$150. Suppose that your hand gives you a 40% chance of winning and your cost to call the bet is \$150.

The expected value is 0.4 x 150 + 0.6 x -150 = 60 – 90 = -30. You'd end up losing an average \$30 (e.g. expected value -30) each time you made the bet, if you repeated that bet enough times.

Let's imagine repeating that bet 100 times. You won \$150, 40 times. Your total winnings are \$6,000. You lost \$150, 60 times. Your total losses are \$9,000. You're \$3,000 in the red, or \$30 for each time you made that bet (100 times).

Let's change the numbers.

The pot is \$100, and you have a 40% chance of winning the hand. But your cost to call the bet is only \$10. Now, even though you probably will lose this particular hand, it's still worth making the bet because of expected value.

0.4 x 100 + 0.6 x -10 = 40 – 6 = 34. On average, you make \$34 with this bet. Over 100 bets, you win \$100, 40 times, for a total of \$4,000. You lose \$10, 60 times, for a loss of \$600. You're in the green for \$3,400, or \$34 for each time you made this bet.

In Blackhat SEO

Blackhat SEOs (BHs) also use the notion of expected value. Suppose they run a network of 10,000 sites, and each costs \$6 for the domain and \$4 a year for hosting. The BHs only need an expected value of \$10 per site to break even.

What might that look like in practice?

Suppose the average profit each site can pull in is $100. And the probability of that is again 40%. We've already seen that the cost of burning any given site is just $10.

So the expected value calculation is as follows:

0.4 x 100 + 0.6 x – 10 = 40 – 6 = $34 Expected value.

Even if we only give the blackhat SEOs a 10% chance of success – e.g. a 90% chance that any of their sites will be burned – they still come out with a positive expected value!

1.1 x 100 + 0.9 x -10 = 10 – 9 = $1 EV.

If you play with the numbers and do more examples yourself, a few things will become clear about expected value.

1. If the value of winning greatly exceeds the cost of losing, this can compensate even terrible chances of winning. And if the odds are excellent, this compensates even a small Value of Winning (VoW) compared to a big potential loss (Cost of Losing, CoL).

When blackhat SEOs stood to make $100 but only had a 10% chance of winning, and the cost per site was $10, it was still profitable to try and beat Google.

If the pot is $10, but your cost to call the bet is $100, you're putting a big stake up for little relative upside. But if your chances of winning are 99%, who cares? You'll make $8.9 on average from this bet. You earn $10 over 99 bets, for $990 total winnings. One time, you lose $100. Your profit is $890 after making the bet 100 times.

2. The probability of winning and the probability of losing must amount to 100%.

It sounds obvious, but if you try and come up with your own examples and don't pay close attention, you might use impossible numbers like a 40% chance of winning and a 90% chance of losing. I did that when writing this!

In The GooglePlex

Google skillfully plays the EV game, as these examples show.

- Google has purchased numerous businesses that have had great potential to be significant players in the web economy, like Advanced Semantics (AdSense), Blogspot.com and Youtube.

- Google regularly produces new tools, methods and advice to make its advertisers more efficient and productive. Even if some of these fail to gain traction, the big successes (e.g. Google Website Optimizer) more than compensate, because they lead to increased spending on PPC.

Limitations On Expected Value

a. Negative Infinity

What happens when you stand to lose something that isn't replaceable, even if the probability is low?

Would you risk coming home late, if you and your spouse were planning to discuss the possibility of divorce? Even if there's a tiny chance of getting home late and there's a significant raise available

for getting this report tonight – i.e. the expected value of working late to finish the report is positive – the risk of divorce would get most of us out of the office on time or even early.

Logicians refer to such losses as "negative infinity." Obviously, expected value provides a poor basis for making decisions in these cases.

b. Expected value only applies where you expect to face the same decision many times.
Pitting 10,000 sites against Google's algorithms is what blackhats dream about. But Google sometimes wipes out entire networks of blackhat sites.

This makes the question of expected value moot, because you're not betting $10 against Google 10,000 times… you're making 1 bet of $100,000. If the odds are anything less than stellar, you don't want to risk $100,000. (This also explains why lots of blackhat spam is run off of free web hosts, with auto-generated [read:free] content, on free subdomains or with cheap .info domains.)

c. EV doesn't tell you what to do if your expected value is 0.

If the odds are 50-50, and you can win $10 but may lose $10 - what do you do? Clearly, you need other factors to influence your decision besides expected value.

In sum, expected value is useful - but it a silver bullet solution to making decisions. Some other practical considerations that are essential to making decisions include (i) behaving ethically and (ii) doing work you enjoy.

The Newspaper Test And Personal Tastes

A simple ethics test I love is the "newspaper test." Ask yourself, "Would I feel proud if my actions made headline news tomorrow?" Imagine everyone you care about and respect – parents, mentors, friends etc. – learns of your actions. [Hat tip to Sean Covey's "7 Habits," for teaching me that.[22]]

For example, I was once offered a gig managing a $1M site buying budget for a gambling site. I turned it down.

Why?

When I was 15-16, I became fairly good at playing Texas Hold'Em poker with pretend money. So I figured I could make real money off this skill.

I deposited $90 in an online casino, which was a very significant sum for me as a kid. I made a few bucks in the first hands, but then lost $50+ in a big pot.

My thoughts at that point were basically, "Wow, I'm seriously, seriously screwed. And I've got to play super conservatively to make this back now."

This drive to make back my money was roughly an addiction. I remember being in class one afternoon and being completely unable to understand what the teacher was saying. All I could do was watch the clock and think, "OK, there's only a half hour left until I can go home and make my money back. Come on already!!" It was like when Charlie Brown's teacher spoke and all he could hear was "wonh-won-wonnnhh." That's an awful thing to happen to a 15 year old kid, wouldn't you agree?

I know I personally can't accept work in the gambling industry or anything else that creates addiction (e.g. porn, alcohol, cigarettes). Deep down, I'd know that some percentage of the site's customers were miserable because of me.

Casino SEO

I'm not judging people who work in the industry, because I've never been in their shoes. I have friends in these fields who contribute to charity and do positive things for society. But I don't buy the justification that some casino is going to make that money anyways, so it may as well be them. If I make that money, I'm also creating the attendant misery. It's on my conscience. Besides, SEO ties into conversion optimization, such that SEOing a site also means maximizing the number of people who will be miserable.

22. "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens," Sean Covey, Fireside. (October 9, 1998)

Every year, some people will buy investment vehicles that don't match their needs (e.g. too much/ little risk), but make lots of money for the seller. Why not be the person selling those?

The Disneyland Test - Having Fun

Your own joy is also an important consideration in making choices. If you hate asking for links, then you probably should think twice before you accept a job as a link builder. If you love the win-win of pay-for-performance consider affiliate marketing.

There's more to making decisions than expected value. Being proud of what you do for a living and having fun when you do it are as important, if not more!

Problems

1. Demand Media (DM), operators of eHow.com, Livestrong.com and a few other large content businesses, use Internal Rate of Return (fancy talk for ROI) calculations as a key measure of their content's profitability, as well as to forecast what topics will be profitable to write about. These sites are some of the largest AdSense publishers.

On the costs side, DM's ROI numbers are based on (i) average costs of producing content and (ii) overhead. Trafficwise, the key numbers are based on a) internal analytics and b) a premium keyword datastream from Google. Revenuewise, historic and projected AdSense click prices are key. Imagine you had access to these data points. Come up with an ROI formula to calculate what you're making on content that you've produced and/or a formula for content you expect to produce. You don't need to use all the data points above.

2. Calculate the EV of buying a firm in an emerging market. That market's current size is $2B annually, of which the firm already has 4% market share. The price to buy the firm is equal to annual revenue, meaning $80M. The technology is the industry's best but the CTO and some lead engineers plan to leave if the company is acquired.

3. A college degree lead generation site makes revenue per lead of $15, and the keywords they're targeting have 20,000 searches a month (setting aside issues of match type).
They convert at 10% and their search result CTR projection for position 1 is 40%, position 2 is 25% and position 3 is 10%.

To have a 50% shot at the #3 ranking, they'll need a $50,000 investment in SEO, upfront, and $10,000 a month thereafter, for at least 6 months. The 6 month commitment is non-refundable, though it only needs to be paid monthly.

For a 50% chance at #2, they'll need $75,000 upfront, and $30,000/mo for 10 months. The 10 month commitment is non-refundable, though it only needs to be paid monthly.

For a 50% chance at #1, they'll need $100,000 upfront and $30,000/mo for 18 months. The 18 month commitment is non-refundable, though it only needs to be paid monthly.

What is the expected value for each position? How long will it take to breakeven?

4. Imagine you're doing keyword research for a company that absolutely refuses to test its keywords out on PPC before choosing SEO priorities. What data can you rely on to make some informed guesses as to what keywords convert best? Hint: Think like an affiliate marketer and/or someone researching PPC keywords.

Solutions

1. First, we need to define our terms. ROI = Total dollars of revenue generated minus a total given investment. Another formula is ROI = Dollars of revenue generated per dollar of investment.

You can give a valid answer using the first formula. I happen to find the second formula easier to think about in this case, so I'm going to give my answer based on that.

ROI = Revenue / Investment
Revenue = Traffic x AdSense CTR x Click prices
Traffic = [Number of Searches x SERP CTR]
x AdSense CTR (historic data)
x Click Prices (historic data and forecasted growth due to auction model)
= Revenue

Investment = Content + Overhead (salaries + utilities (hosting, office space etc.))

Forecast ROI = { [Number of Searches x SERP CTR] x AdSense CTR x Click Prices } / [Content + Overhead]

To go from ROI to EV, you take averages. Average CTRs and click prices and content prices and overhead.

Recall that Expected Value is the average value of a choice made enough times for the results to be statistically valid.

So EV for Demand Media = Average Revenue Expected on Future Content / Average Costs Expected for Future Content.[23]

23. Incidentally, this is similar to the formula for forecasting SEO ROI and/or forecasting it. I wrote a guide on the topic: http://seoroi.com/seo-faq/8-steps-forecast-seo-roi/

2. You'll notice that this problem didn't specify what the chances of success were. In that sense, it's a lot more like real-life. Unlike poker, M&A activity doesn't have some table of "winning hands and their respective values." That means that the probability numbers are up in the air.

In such a situation of uncertainty, the best bet is to make a range of projections. Then you plan according to the moderately conservative projections, while hoping that the optimistic scenario happens instead.

For example, you might say that the best-in-class technology is a big deal, balanced out by the CTO and some lead coders desire to leave post-acquisition. Chances are 50-50.

Or you could say that the software depended entirely on the CTO and lead developers. Chances are 70% that you'll lose.

Optimistically, the technology's lead over competitors gives you time to find a new CTO and programming team, so you have a 60% chance at winning.

A moderately conservative guess would then be to expect a 60% - 65% chance of failure in this case, and calculate EV accordingly.

Regarding the upside, the market is worth 2B and growing. Just maintaining a 4% market share, and seeing the market grow to 2.5B, means another $20M in revenue next year. And that's just the first year.

A more conservative approach is to look at what speed the company can reasonably grow at. Supposing the company can grow at 25% annually, the company can be worth $200M+ in five years.

In short, there's a really big potential upside when you take a five year view.

EV = 35% x 200M - 65% x 80M = 70 - 52 = 18. The EV is positive - go for it! (Assuming you have the cash and opportunities to make enough of these bets that you eventually achieve the positive EV.)

3. Position 3 EV:

Probability of winning = 50%
Value of winning = [10% CTR x 20,000 searches] x 10% conversion rate x [$15 revenue per lead] x number of months at position 3
Probability of losing = 50%
Cost of losing = 50,000 + 60,000 = $110,000.
EV = 50% x [2000 visits x 10% conversion x $15 lead x #months at #3] - 50% x [$110,000]
= 50% x $3,000 x 6 months (just picking at random) - $55,000

= \$9,000 - \$55,000
= -\$46,000

On average, paying that much for position 3 isn't profitable, if the rankings stay current for 6 months. Even if the #3 position is maintained for a year (50% x \$3,000 x 12 months), the EV is still -\$37,000.

To break even, on average, the #3 position would need to remain constant for a total of 3 years and 7 months. Considering how competitive that market is, such stable rankings are quite unlikely.

Position 2 EV:

50-50 chances
Value of winning = 25% CTR x 20,000 searches x 10% x \$15 x #number of months at position 2.
Value of losing = \$75,000 + 10 x \$30,000 = \$375,000

Position 2 EV = 50% x {[20,000 x 25%] x 10% x \$15 x 10 months - 50% x \$375,000.
= 50% [5000 x 1.5] x 10 - \$187,500
= 50% [7500] - \$187,500
= \$3,750 x 10 - \$187,500
= -\$150,000

Position 2 also presents a negative EV.

Position 1 EV = 50% x 8,000 x 10% x \$15 x 18 months - 50% x \$640,000
= 4000 x \$1.5 x 18 - \$320,000
= 108,000 - \$320,000
= -\$212,000

These calculations all make assumptions. What might those be?

One is that the conversion rate will never be optimized.
Another is that the payout per lead won't increase with volume.
A third is that this SEO effort will only bring in traffic from those 20,000 searches, and nothing from variants. In SEO, a rising tide lifts all boats, so gaining authority links for one keyword will often help the site as a whole, so the assumption to the contrary is misguided

What if you change the assumptions? If you assume that you can optimize the conversion rate, get higher revenue per lead and gain traffic on other keywords too, what is an obvious loss may be profitable.
So is Expected Value just incalculable and useless?

While real life may not be as neat as poker hands, EV can be estimated...

The trick is to identify the key levers that push EV up or down, and make assumptions about them explicit.

Once you know what factors affect EV, and your paradigmatic assumptions, challenge them. Then calculate a range of EV estimates with varying assumptions.

Also, as with any sort of forecast, keep in mind that you can revise it later. Starting out, you just want to make a reasonably close guess. But even grossly wrong estimates can be survived if you recognize errors early and revise EV calculations periodically.

4. Data points you can use when PPC isn't an option include:
   - Spyfu competitive keyword data,
   - SEMRush bid estimates,
   - Affiliate datapoints such as newsletters and payouts
   - Competitors' navigation. (See tactical chapter, "FREE: Your competitors' keywords.")

Final Words On Creative & Critical Thinking

Outside of search marketing, thinking critically in your daily life can be fun, too. You can make witty comments more frequently. Because you begin to question how things are phrased and tend to spot assumptions or implications more easily, when someone says or phrases something in a silly way, you can poke a little fun at what they said.

[You should never make fun of other people though, because that amounts to bullying. Besides, people are far more inclined to laugh at your jokes if you make fun of yourself.]

Next Up: Tactics!

Why do I share specific tactics?

When I told my mom I was writing this book, she asked me whether sharing tactics wasn't giving away the farm. It's a great question, and one I've sometimes struggled with.
I share for two reasons.

First, by sharing principles of creative and critical thinking, I've given you guys the means to develop these tactics on your own. So if I didn't share these tactics, that wouldn't prevent you guys from coming up with them on your own.

And that's not just some nice, fluffy theory. It's happened to me twice that a tactic I kept to myself ended up getting shared by someone else.

If anything, sharing the principles was "giving away the farm." But my perspective is that the market's so big that I can share the tactics and still prosper alongside others using them, too.

Second, sharing these tactics builds up goodwill and reputation. Like I mentioned earlier, networking is a key to learning. So by writing this book, I'm planting the seeds of future relationships.

And because I want to appear noble (and maybe because it's a little bit true), I'd like to give back to the search community.

5 years ago, I was told that I would not be rehired as a lifeguard if I applied back next summer to the same pool I was working at. At the time, I was deeply upset and had trouble getting my mind off what I saw as an overly harsh evaluation. I couldn't imagine what work I might possibly find for the next summer, nor how to get a job when I'd have no reference letter from my bosses at the pool.

That's when I got into search. I started a politics blog that winter, and googled around to find out how to promote it. From reading Darren Rowse's Problogger.net and Yaro Starak's Entrepreneurs-Journey.com, I got the basics of SEO and went from there.

I barely made a few hundred bucks the next summer, consulting mostly on a website called WebsiteAuctionHub.com . But I kept at it, and one thing grew into another.

A friend referred me to his uncle, whose Hotel-Montreal.com was already ranking reasonably well, but which we boosted even higher.

From SEOmoz.org and SEOBook.com, I learned huge amounts that were largely responsible for giving me this profession, today.

From a blog post Sphinn's members, I started making more friends in the community.

From chatting on instant messengers and Sphinn, I eventually met many of those same people offline at SMX West. I'd expected it to be a pretty lonely experience, but I ran into people I knew literally from the opening cocktail. Tamar Weinberg (author of Techipedia.com and "The New Community Rules: Marketing On The Social Web"[24]) was kind enough to come up to me and give me a warm welcome, as were the Critchlows and Duncan Morris of Distilled.co.uk .

Recently, I spent a semester studying abroad... which I was able to afford all thanks to the search community…

To the lifeguarding staff who told me not to come back, I still can't believe you said that. Thank you so much! :D And to the community that gave me so much – here's to you!

24. http://seoroi.com/new-community-rules

Convert

Tactic 1: How To Rank Despite The Splash Page

Splash pages suck for SEOs.

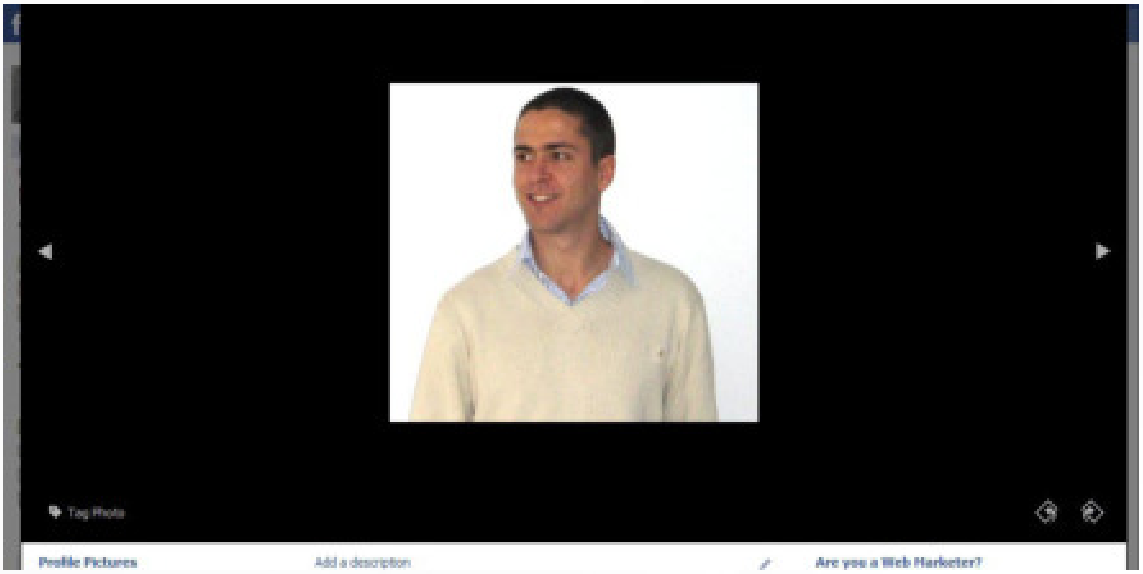
Rather than using the homepage to compete for head terms, you're forced to ask a segmentation question (e.g. "Select your language"). That means you don't get to write SEO friendly content or show a high-ROI call to action.

Are you ready to rank and convert despite the boss' insistence on a splash page?
I call this technique, "the double homepage."

Have you ever been to a site like Ralph Wilson's famous Web Marketing Today? He uses a DHTML rollover to get more newsletter subscribers. It looks like this:

Replace your splash page with a DHTML rollover. Ask about age, language, etc.

Similarly, Facebook sometimes uses a lightbox effect when people click to see pictures. Clicking shows the picture in full size with the rest of the site darkened in the background.



You can use the lightbox effect to present splash page stuff automatically when the page loads, and then have a normally optimized homepage behind that.

There's a slight catch with the Lightbox approach - it depends on javascript. About 5% of the web population has javascript disabled, so nothing will happen for them. Most modern browsers, including IE, Firefox and Chrome have javascript enabled by default, so your boss and key stakeholders won't notice.

If you still need a solution for javascript-disabled browsers, use a flash animation to circle/highlight your segmentation links immediately after page load. For instance, most Canadian sites offer English and French versions, with the links to the alternate language in the upper right. An animation can flash a border around these links and ask if people prefer a different language.

(Note: Using flash as a highlighter is not suitable when segmentation is a legal requirement, e.g. Governmental language selections.)

You can enhance this tactic further by cookying visitors' selection so that you don't need to show them the splash page on subsequent visits. That excellent tip comes courtesy of Dr. Pete of UserEffect.com, a usability consulting shop.

Voilà – two homepages, without cloaking. Legal gets the splash page, SEO gets the traffic. Everybody's happy!

How This Applies The Principles

The first step in coming up with this tactic was defining the problem. In this case, it's the use of the homepage for segmentation, rather than for SEO and conversion.

The next step is to ask what assumptions are made by use of a splash page. Recall that to identify assumptions, you have to consider the paradigm situation, then change elements of the paradigm and observe the result. The paradigm is a homepage used to ask a segmentation question. What if we don't use the homepage to ask that question? The next step is to ask what assumptions are made by use of a splash page. Recall that to identify assumptions, you have to consider the paradigm situation, then change elements of the paradigm and observe the result. The paradigm is a homepage used to ask a segmentation question.

What if we don't use the homepage to ask that question?

The obvious conclusion is that this means asking the language question later. That may not be acceptable because showing a site in the wrong language will turn people off and make them leave.

(Note: That's not always true in countries where people are used to just clicking an alternate language link, as in Canada.)

There! We've just spotted the assumption: "Putting the segmentation question on the homepage is the only way to ask the segmentation question immediately."

How can we segment, immediately, without relying on the homepage?

The answer is DHTML.

This solution is arguably even more effective at segmenting than a splash page! Splash pages are typically limited to homepage visitors. What about all those visitors arriving directly on landing pages? DHTML and lightbox segmentation will reach those people (assuming it's implemented sitewide).

See http://SEOROI.com for more on advanced SEO

Tactic 2: Write Conditional CSS For Higher Conversion Rates While Protecting SEO Traffic

The Problem

Standard conversion best practices call for removing navigation from lead generation landing pages. Removing navigation avoids losing visitors into the site only to forget why they came.

Ecommerce stores selling multiple products obviously benefit from letting visitors browse and compare.

Unfortunately, this best practice conflicts with SEO best practices, which advocate liberal use of internal links.

Reconciling the two isn't impossible. The next best thing to removing navigation is to move it out of the way, for example to the footer. While there is still a risk of visitors meandering away from the landing page, the risk is minimized.

This raises another problem. If you put the navigation in the footer, it will likely get less search engine trust, precisely because people don't use footer navigation.

What's a conversion-minded SEO to do?

Here are 4 options to keep both search engines and humans happy while better converting your traffic.

The Solution

CSS

Option 1 - Location Rotation: Check the referring on page load and change the navigation's position, depending on the source.

For search engines, place links where humans might see them. For everyone else, move the navigation to the footer.

This helps convert non-SEO traffic, while still making the necessary concessions to search engines. Search engines accept this as a whitehat practice, because you're still showing the same thing to them and the visitors they send you.[25]

Option 2 - Instant Minimization: Using AJAX, "collapse" the navigation automatically for search engine visitors. Once collapsed, the navigation will still be accessible, but with much less visual prominence. Move it to the footer for everyone else.

Collapsing is what happens when you click minimize – the minus/dash/underscore – on a regular browser window.

Option 3 - Peekaboo: When the page loads, use DHTML or obfuscated javascript – illegible to search engines - to place a graphic over where the navigation would normally appear. Have that graphic blend in with the background, so that it's inconspicuous and doesn't distract visitors. You can also use a referrer check to not do this with search engine visitors.

It's like playing peekaboo – you put your hand in front of someone's eyes and then all they can see are your hands.

Option 4 - Camouflage: While you shouldn't make your navigation the same colour as the background, you can make the navigation lower contrast than on regular pages.

Cloaking

Search engines disapprove of cloaking in most cases (with exceptions like geo-targeting), so use this technique at your own risk.

Step 1. Show search engines the navigation, and feature it prominently.

Step 2. Don't show humans the navigation.

How This Applies The Principles

Challenging Assumptions & Reframing The Debate

What is the basic situation in which the problem arises? The problem arises where a page built to draw organic traffic for lead generation, leaks that traffic via the navigation. We'd like to remove the navigation, but doing so might affect other pages' rankings.

25. For those concerned that this amounts to cloaking, the issue has existed for years within SEO. For those concerned that this amounts to cloaking, the issue has existed for years within SEO. Here is a source that speaks to the effect that it is acceptable: http://seoroi.com/sel-perfect-market
Additionally, Covario's SEO software, has done this for years. It adds an intermediary between search engines and websites; search bots and humans get an optimized page while other people get the regular version.

Let's ask some questions to find out what the problem is.

- There's a tension between SEO and conversion. What causes it?
- The presence of leaks and the inability to eliminate them altogether.
- Why are people clicking away on the navigation? How can we prevent that?

People may be clicking away for several reasons:

1. Visuals: The graphics and design of the page aren't compelling enough to get them to convert. Their eyes wander to the navigation.
2. Content: Text in the navigation better delivers on visitors' intent than our content.
3. Curiosity: Some peoples' nature will lead them to click away to explore.
4. Insufficient information: The page leaves important questions unanswered.

In the solutions I offered above, the paradigm I had in mind was the curious clicker.

If you want humans to act differently, you need to change their environment. Moving the navigation prevents the curious from being distraction.

What this tactic doesn't do is address the first two problems effectively. For these cases, here are some tips to get you started.

First, if the page's visuals aren't compelling, change them!

Add or alter the hero shot, replace it with a video, change the colour or font of the text, and/or increase the contrast in the active window. Use eye-tracking, click-tracking and usability testing tools to test your new versions against the existing one.

Second, if your navigation better matches visitor intent than your page's actual content, you've ranked the wrong page. In that case, consolidate the content from the two pages on the URL that is ranking.

Third, if your page doesn't answer visitors' questions, use usability testing to determine those questions (or poll existing customers and sales staff), and adapt the copy.

Tactic 3: Message Match With Dynamic Slideshows

An increasingly popular homepage element is the dynamic slideshow.

The idea is to maximize screen real estate above the fold by rotating through a few slides, each promoting a different page on the site. Here's an example of what these slideshows look like.

Unfortunately, there's a problem with dynamic slideshows: message match.

Message match means repeating the message from your traffic source on your landing page. An example of poor message match would be ranking for a keyword but not showing those keywords on your page prominently. As a result, visitors from that keyword are more likely to bounce.

Why would that happen with a dynamic slideshow? It would happen because you got search traffic looking for content found in later slides, rather than the one showing on page load.

It's like cassette tapes. Remember the hassle of fast-forwarding through six songs to find the one you wanted?

So how do you solve that problem? How do you match the search result listing to your dynamic slides' content?

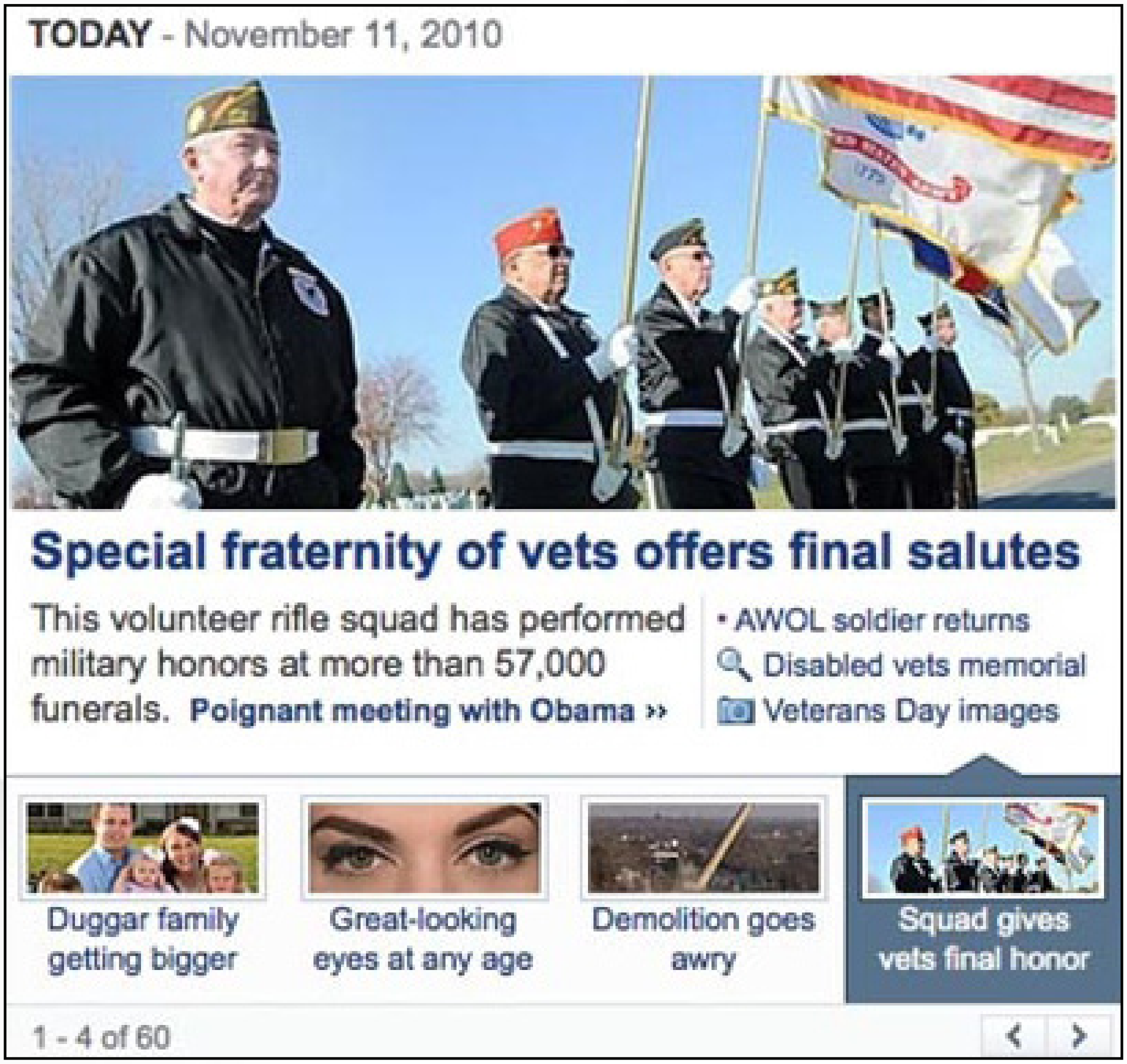
The best solution I've come up with is a two-step process.

1. Check the referrer on page load to see what keywords or source generated the visit.

2. Skip ahead to the corresponding slide.

It's like selecting a scene from your DVD movie's menu then skipping to that scene.

Consider Yahoo's homepage slideshow.



Suppose someone came to Yahoo's homepage looking for the story about these veterans. If you look at the preview panels below the main photo and caption, the veterans are on slide #4. Yahoo visitors don't need to wait until the slideshow cycles through to right slide. Instead, Yahoo can just check the referrer and skip to the right slide.

Notice also the captions and images in that slideshow. Those are great for usability as they give people a preview of each slide.

Many slideshows use unclear navigation like the meaningless squares in the first example slideshow. Previews are much clearer and therefore preferable.

Another benefit of this tactic is that you can target very different keywords on your homepage. There's still an upper limit set by the max character count of a title tag (~ 65 - 70 characters, depending on the last word's length). But, to return to the Yahoo example, you can go after "Duggar family" and "Veterans squad military funerals" without trying to awkwardly share the page.

How This Applies The Principles

The idea was inspired by a blackhat SEO. He explained to me how some linkspam uses referrer-checking to detect manual reviews. When reviewers visit, they're shown a 404 page to hide the onpage spam. When Googlebot visits, it gets the spam page.

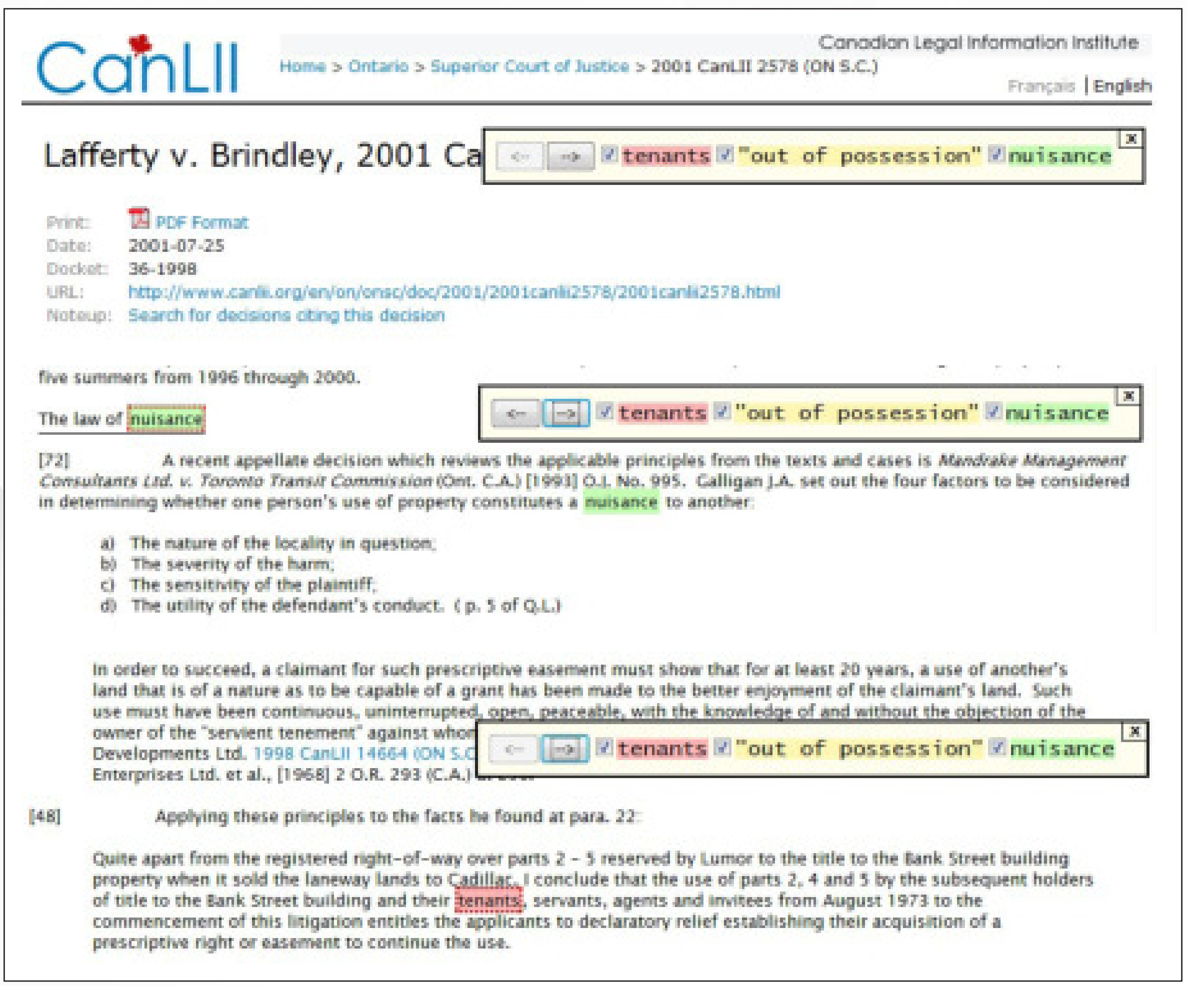
This tactic uses lateral thinking in taking that blackhat idea and asking how it can be applied to whitehat SEO. The idea is to provide a better user experience by better serving your search visitors and converting traffic better.

Tactic 4: Message Match On Longtail Keywords

Longtail keywords, like dynamic slideshows, have a propensity to create a disconnect between what visitors clicked on to get to a site and what they see on arrival.

The difficulty is that so many possible longtail keyword combinations can send traffic to a page, and it's impossible to predict them all. And even if you could, it would be hard to fit them all into your headline, which is typically how you create message match.

The solution comes to us from CanLII.org, the Canadian Legal Information Institute. When you do a search through their database of case studies and click on a result, CanLII highlights and color-codes the keywords. As well, it provides skip-to-next functionality so you can quickly find the occurrence of your keyword on the page. Here's what that looks like.



You can uncheck keywords so that the skip to next functionality will only take you to the keyword that matters most to you.

Even if a keyword is 9 paragraphs below the fold, you can still help the user notice it quickly.

Once again, step 1 is to do a referrer-check on page load. Next, generate the highlighting and skip-to-next box to match.

How This Applies The Principles

This tactic starts by asking what the real problem is.

Is it a lack of message match? No, that's just a symptom.

Why can't you achieve message match with the longtail? Because you can't fit all those keywords in the header.

What's the argument? The premise is that you have a static header. That means you can't get more than 8-10 words in.

So you can't fit in every longtail keyword that might be combined to others to find the page.

What if you challenge the premise? Leave the header static, but add a dynamically generated keyword-highlighting and skip-to-next box above the fold. Generate that on the fly with a keyword-referrer check.

Tactic 5: Defend Your Reputation... And Your Margins

Some people talk about search engine reputation management (SERM) as if it only serves to hide nasty blog posts from before you settled the class action...

However, savvy companies can use similar techniques to protect margins by dominating SERPs for phrases using some variation on “brand + coupon”.

Imagine you’re a retailer who accepts coupons at checkout. Many shoppers see that, feel they can get a cheaper price, and search for “retailer X coupon.”

Some coupon affiliates try hard to rank for those brand terms. With last-click attribution, they can get paid just by touching the last phase of the checkout. Thus, those affiliates ranking for “retailer X coupon” are simply grabbing commissions for sales already in the bag.

What can you do if you use coupons in other channels? Removing coupons from the checkout process isn’t an option. Similarly, withholding coupons from your affiliates is no solution because affiliates have workarounds using other channels’ coupons.

One option is to use smarter web analytics that don’t credit these referrals, such as sales generated only a few seconds after a cookie drop.

But that remains problematic - you still have to discount the goods! Also, coupon referrals usually send visitors to the homepage, not back to the checkout, so you’re disconnecting people on the verge of buying! Therefore, even smarter analytics don’t fully solve the problem.

Why annoy prospects with their credit card in hand? Why discount when the sale is already made?

Reputation management is the best option. Outrank your affiliates for all your coupon terms. As a merchant, it’s easy to rank for “retailer X coupon” keywords.

Then, on the ranking pages, you can either say… `

> “Sorry, we’re not currently offering any coupons.”

Or you can only offer coupons that encourage a higher order value than your average.

> “Save $10 when you spend $100.”

Problem solved. No commissions to affiliates who contributed nothing to the sale - or may have even jeapordized it. No discounts on sales already made. No cross-channel coupon tracking problems.

How This Applies The Principles

Learning from your own experience - I noticed that I searched for coupon codes when I was presented with a request for one during my checkout. As well, having done SEO for coupon affiliates, I knew that “brand + coupon” keywords were highly valuable.

Problem definition - Based on my own experience, I realized that merchants are paying affiliate commissions and giving discounts on sales they’ve already earned.

Challenging assumptions - The last-click attribution model assumes that the last referring source must have helped the person decide to buy. That’s not always true.

Tactic 6: Sexy SEO Headings

SEO best practices say you can't use beautiful branded fonts in pictures-of-text for your headings. And conversion best practices dictate using what converts best - not always a keyword-rich heading.

So if you want to:

- Use the brand font and a picture-of-text heading
- Have the best converting title possible
- Rank highly in search results

Then wrapping an image in h1 tags is not always a solution (even assuming your alt attribute is well written). This is the case because:

1. The image (and thus alt text) may not include keywords.

2. If you force it to include keywords, it may not be the top-converting heading.

So how do you make the web designers, brand managers, conversion experts and SEO pros play nice? Usually, one of the following solutions is used.

a – Talk it out and come to a compromise solution.

b – Go with a majority vote.

c – Have the SEO throw raging fire and brimstone until they comply.

More seriously, here's a neat little workaround.

Step 1: Create handsome, branded-font pictures of text and use whatever copy the conversion guru wants.

Use alt text for the blind, and Googlebot. Not because it's part of this technique, but as a courtesy to those users and to maintain good habits.

Step 2: Edit your CSS so that your header text is displayed in all browsers like a subheadline or like normal copy.

It can be the same size and have the same stylings (i.e. none) as your regular paragraph text, or a little bigger and a brand colour.

Step 3: Write your SEO headers into the copy and tag them with the normal h1s, h2s, and h3s.

What's the final product look like?

Here's a screenshot from an SMX presentation by my friend Sandy Niehaus, of Closed Loop Marketing. Notice that the headline keywords are repeated in the initial paragraph? That's what we're going for, but with CSS that wraps header tags around those keywords.

An alternative way to do this is to make the fancy header font load thanks to javascript, so it's javascript-dependent. Most people, including brand managers and conversion pros, have javascript enabled, so they'll see their sexy font as intended. For users like Googlebot who have javascript disabled, you can gracefully provide an alternative to the javascript ("gracefully degrade" in coder talk) with a normal h1 and/or adapt the h1's styling with CSS.

How This Applies The Principles

First, it defines the problem at the very beginning. How do we balance these various objectives?

Second, it learns from others. I saw the IfByPhone lander by paying attention to Sandra.

Third, this approach questions the assumption that an h1 tag has to have CSS that is markedly different than the rest of the page.

Fourth, the tactic challenges the paradigm view and accompanying logic. It asks, "why are keywords in headings usually a good idea?" Normally, they're there for message match between SERP listing and landing page. This cuts the bounce rate and boosts conversions.

But suppose that for manpower or budget reasons, you have to make do with the same page for SEO as well as other traffic sources. In such a case, the best title may skew toward other traffic sources. This shows that the logic of keywords in headings doesn't hold in all circumstances.

(If one page has to handle multiple sources of traffic whose messaging is different, consider conditional CSS for higher conversion rates.

For example, you can make the headline and subheadline relatively larger or smaller to better match the copy that drew the traffic for various groups. Suppose your SEO snippet highlights "cheap prices" and the banner traffic was told "urban style." Then your conditional CSS can make the cheap prices headline larger for SEO traffic, and make the "urban style" subheadline larger for banner traffic.)

Tactic 7: Forums - A Great Source Of Longtail Traffic and Affiliates

My first experience with social media came back in high school.

I had just seen the movie 8 Mile, and the music caught in my head. I got home and googled the lyrics to one of the songs. After a few searches, eventually one of the results looked promising.

The site I visited turned out to be a hiphop forum called NobodySmiling (NBS). Between my mood and the forum's attitude, I joined and started participating in the forums. I had fun and became one of the top contributors, eventually joining the moderating team.

I would spend 4-6 hours a night performing moderator duties, and participating in the community's discussions with comments, tutorials, etc.

I made a number of friends that I chatted with regularly outside of the forums. One even called my Canadian high school from her home in England to vouch for my volunteer hours! (Hi Laura!) Others lead to my purchase of beat-production software and tools.

A key lesson I learned from those forums was that if I wanted to learn something, I just needed to find the right forums online. When I eventually got into SEO, that again proved very true with the Search Engine Watch forums in particular.

Online marketers can take away a few lessons from my experience:

- Encourage and facilitate communication between users so they make friends. Your site is a natural topic of discussion between them, which leads to more participation and builds passionate users.

- Forums with a passionate userbase quickly build a huge volume of content. That's excellent for building longtail value and helps convert new visitors into repeat visitors and members, as with my lyrics search.

- Your top members' involvement in the niche probably isn't limited to your site. That makes them potentially excellent affiliates and evangelists for your site. Think of my purchase of music equipment as a result of my friends' encouragement. You can monetize forums directly, but also indirectly monetize them by recruiting your top members into your marketing organization.

How do you encourage communication between users? There are several ways to do that:

1. Organize regular chatroom discussions. Keeping to a schedule builds up a base of regulars, who will tend to befriend each other. NamePros.com is a good example of this.

2. Create incentives for participation. Frontpage exposure on Digg is an example. People need to get votes, and that requires asking friends for help and reciprocating.

3. Recognition is another important incentive. It can take the form of user ranking charts and award badges visible on member profiles or below their avatars. NBS users loved the trophies it awarded for top emcee, best poet, etc. Many of these required nomination and/or votes, which again encourages participation, but you can structure the award to encourage other forms of participation. For example, it can be based on earning "thanks" from others, which is a game everyone can win at as opposed to zero-sum voting contests for limited frontpage attention.

4. Reach out to new members. Introducing yourself on threads is nice, but personalized outreach by more senior members can go a lot farther.

5. Start a mentorship program. Mentors guide newbies, praise their progress, and answer common questions, limiting the frequent forum problem of endless rehashing. ("Are directories dead?") With the right mentorship, newbies can also quickly become power users themselves, creating a virtuous cycle.

6. Organize offline meetups for members. In an interview with Inc magazine, Yelp's founders revealed that throwing parties for users performed extraordinarily well. If I may speculate for a moment, I'd say that Pubcon is one of the reasons WebmasterWorld is such an incredible forum - the members know each other offline.

7. Set the example and enable people to contact you, your administrators and moderators on instant messenger, Twitter, Facebook etc. If you do take this approach, limiting yourself to preset office hours is probably a good idea, so you don't spend all day talking and doing nothing else. Similarly, "company" accounts are worthwhile to keep your private life separate.

How This Applies The Principles:

Viewing my experience at NobodySmiling like a third party would was important to this tactic. I was mentored by senior members and we chatted regularly on MSN and email. One even became a pen pal!

Similarly, questioning my motivation lead to the observation that the awards were hugely effective, as was the recognition from other members. Likewise, I wanted to close and move threads so much because it meant a clean forum. I was an online neat freak, come to think of it.

This tactic also questions the assumption that forums are difficult to monetize, which depends on the paradigm of direct monetization with mediums like banners. It considers a longer-term form of marketing in driving longtail traffic and membership, and recruiting affiliates and evangelists.

Tactic 8: Local SEO: Protect Call-Tracking Integrity

There's a tension between call-tracking phone numbers and the integrity of your local contact info.

Call-tracking numbers let you measure your local SEO's effectiveness at driving phone leads. On the other hand, to rank in Google Maps, you need your business contact information to be consistent across the web. Otherwise, Google Maps may feature another marketing channel's phone number, making your tracking ineffective.

Another problem with Google seeing a different phone number is that you can find yourself with a canonicalization problem. As David Mihm explains, "duplication will split your 'citation equity' (local SEO's link equity) across multiple listings."[26]

David highlights a further issue between call tracking and Google listings. "What happens if you want to cancel your contract with the provider through whom you're running the tracking number? It'll take months to get a new phone number flowing through the local search ecosystem, even starting right at the top with the major data providers."

How can you resolve these tensions?

Ask, "Why would Google get the phone numbers mixed up?" You might cause a mix up by showing Googlebot one (or several) phone number(s) on your site and landing pages and a different one in Google Maps.

Fortunately, you can hide the phone numbers on your site from Googlebot.

- Display the phone number as an image or flash file,
- Place it within a iframe on the appropriate page
- Include dozens of parameters in the frame's URL
- Noindex the iframe's URL

How This Applies The Principles

This tactic again finds an assumption that doesn't necessarily hold up. Can you guess what it is?

Ask, "What's the paradigm?" The paradigm is that Google crawls your pages and indexes your numbers, which then cross-pollinate with Google Maps.

26. http://seoroi.com/local-phone

What if Google didn't cross-pollinate those numbers into Google Maps? There's an assumption identified: that the indexing of your pages means the phone numbers that appear on them will appear in Google local. Since there's no way yet to tell Google not to cross-pollinate the phone numbers once they're crawled and indexed though, that doesn't help us.

What if Google didn't crawl the numbers to begin with? We've got another assumption - that crawling your pages means Google will also crawl your phone numbers. Perhaps you can get your pages crawled but not your phone numbers? Voila...

Post-Script: David Mihm rightly points out that using tracking numbers for each internet yellow pages and local listings site will cause confusion with your citation information. And you can't get external sites to prevent your number being crawled. So you can't make use of tracking numbers in all your local search efforts.

However, if you can track your Maps rankings, you can try to measure the results from buying internet yellow pages listings. Look for an increase in rankings that correlates closely in time to when you bought the listings. This won't tell you whether these yellow pages sites generated calls directly, but it's better than not measuring at all.

Build Links, Buy Links and Fight Paid Links

Tactic 9: Undermine Competitors' Paid Links

How do most link buyers go about buying links discretely? Link brokers aren't on the tables, so having the money to buy links doesn't guarantee anyone will sell them to you. Furthermore, this means you need to contact site owners directly.

With the proliferation of link purchase spam emails, fewer and fewer webmasters respond to link marketing emails, despite best efforts at personalization. Even those buyers who genuinely personalize and target individual sites must approach multiple sites to elicit just a single response. It's downright frustrating.

When you've just spent a morning emailing personal notes to a half dozen link buying prospects and only a single one responds – several days later – are you then going to reduce your chances with them any further?

No, you're not. And that's why most link buyers don't disclose the risks of selling links to their prospective suppliers.

What You Can Do

Will these webmasters feel taken advantage of if they find out that Google can penalize their site for selling links? It seems likely.

How can you use that to your advantage? You can teach the link sellers about the risks in selling links. For example, the Google approved solution is to use nofollow on paid links. And nofollow allows the link seller to honour the contract while protecting their site. After all, if the link buyer didn't say anything about risk... they also probably said nothing about dofollow or nofollow.

Perhaps you might offer the worried webmaster a javascript alternative to the plain html link, or code and instructions for a 302 temporary redirect?

Or perhaps the link-selling site can be bought out. That can be especially interesting if most of your competitors' link strength derives from a few sites, as with the case of blogrolls.

The Flip Side Of The Coin

As a link buyer, the question of whether or not to disclose the risks bothered me. So I drew up the following list of arguments for and against disclosure. This is tangential to the tactic, but I think it's a valuable framework for reflection as you develop a paid link strategy.

For Disclosure Of Potential Risks:

- Do unto others as you'd have others do unto you. This argument is the strongest to me – I'd like to be told about the risks if someone approached me.

- If people find out later on their own, they may feel like you took advantage of their ignorance. This could lead to either.

a) Further requests for money

b) Sellers adding a nofollow without telling you, which you'd only realize later.

Against Disclosure:

1) Why should you be responsible for Google's policies? Heck, Google itself advises you to behave as if they didn't exist. Why handicap yourself?

2) Sure, Google may send traffic to these sites. But when was the last time Google put money in their pockets? Often, Google never made them a cent. You're arguably doing these people more good than Google is.

Is there a way to reconcile doing unto others as I'd have them do unto me without neutering my link buying efforts? The Golden Rule seems to be the strongest argument so far.

If I disclose, how can I state the risk clearly and succinctly, yet still overcome the possible objection to selling links? I don't know that people will read my email if I make a long argument, so I want to keep it short and sweet.

Some related questions that have come up and may be interesting to address in your answer:

1. What if someone has their site penalized?

2. What is a fair risk premium for selling a link?

3. Does it make a difference if a site is commercial/non-commercial? What if it's a commercial hobby site? How about if it's a serious site that's garbage except for

this page?

4. Would your answer change if the likelihood of penalization were a 100% certainty?

5. At what point should you disclose risks? On the first email? Once they've indicated interest?

6. Do the link prices you're offering include a risk premium for the potential search traffic loss? That is, will you offer extra dollars above what you want to pay for the link, as a kind of insurance premium? If so, the risk is accounted for in the price.

7. Are you buying links on pages that can realistically refer traffic that will convert? If so, then shouldn't that link count for search relevance? This issue isn't about trying to look like a whitehat following Google's guidelines, but rather that the sites selling the links shouldn't be penalized for linking out in relevant ways.

8. Are you mitigating the risk for link sellers? What do you know of search engine's abilities to recognize paid links?

How This Applies The Principles

We're analyzing the premises, logic and conclusion of your typical SEO who feels overwhelmed by competitors "cheating" with paid links but isn't crazy about reporting them. The argument goes something like this:

Premises: They bought links.
Logic: Their ability to buy links is an unfair advantage. I can't compete with that!
Conclusion: They're going to keep winning until I either buy links or they get penalized.

The implicit assumption is that those links are stable. If the link sellers knew of the risks, that's a fair assumption. But as we've seen, link buyers generally don't disclose the risks of selling them links to their prospective suppliers.

Question the assumption, and you find yourself questioning the whole house of cards. Is it really not possible to compete with your link buying competition? Are link buying and spam reporting the only solutions? There's clearly a third option.

Tactic 10: Why Email and Whitepapers Facilitate Paid Links

What's the challenge with paid links?

Making them look like unpaid links.

What do unpaid links look like?

They appear to have a non-financial motivation for linking.

We've all seen those offtopic sidebar and footer links, or obvious in-content links with perfect anchor text that appear in blog post after blog post. (I even saw paid posts that linked to other paid posts. Way to expose yourself!)

The key problem link buyers have to solve is having paid links that suggest the link was given for some reason besides money. Whitepapers help answer that question.

When you run a lead generation campaign giving away a whitepaper, people give you their emails and you send them the whitepaper.

You can follow up with those people by email - since they're obviously interested in your content - and see who'd be interested in linking to you for money. They can link to blog posts on related topics. For instance, "I liked ABC's whitepaper on house-training your pet whale."

That's just the beginning. Suppose they find your whitepaper controversial. They leak it to protest and link to the lead gen page where it's at to indicate what they're linking. Or the whitepaper is in PDF format and links to your site. Any other form of commentary on the whitepaper (sponsored by you) can also link back.

Or what if you set up an affiliate program for these leads? They can link to you using affiliate links - generating both direct traffic and a search engine boost!

All these address one of the central problems with paid links - explaining how you 'earned' it.

But there's another problem with paid links - finding people who'd be interested in taking your money for links.

Now you've just generated a lead. The person's come to your site, asked for the whitepaper and given you an email. The next step in the process is for the sales force to contact them.

You see where I'm going by now, right?

Discount! Why yes, we could offer you a free extra month's trial if you write an ongoing case study on your blog about your use of our product...

How This Applies The Principles

The essential question being asked in this tactic is, "How do we find a motivation for the link that's pure as mountain snow?"

To which the obvious answer is, "You lie."

I'm kidding, but there's a point to my kidding.

Tactic 11: Sources For Link Prospect Inspiration

If you're going to buy links, then you've got to keep motivation in mind. You've got to point to a non-commercial motivation when called upon to answer the question, "What's motivating this link?" I have three techniques to modify the traditional "copy sites that rank" link prospecting model.

1A) Use the Google Global Firefox Extension to see who ranks in different countries.[27] You'll often find very different results. Since most businesses compete within a defined geographic area, they probably won't mind linking to you, as you're in another country.

1B) Another variation is to collaborate on translating glossaries or other international content. For instance, English tour operators sending customers to France and French tour operators sending customers to England can trade guests posts comparing the two countries' food, mentalities, arts scenes etc.

2) Search for misspellings of your keywords. The pages that rank are still relevant, but they might not even show up in a top 100 search normally.

Look at related keywords in Google's keyword tool. You may only sell cross-training shoes, but basketball shoes are related. Why not trade links with a basketball store?

Other sites offer similar data. Ever notice Amazon's "Customers Also Bought" section? If you look at Amazon's page for Adam Smith's book, *The Wealth of Nations*, you'll see that "Customers Also Bought" books by John Maynard Keynes and Karl Marx. This is a great source of inspiration to find related-but-noncompeting stores.

How This Applies The Principles

The essence of this technique is questioning implicit assumptions about what is relevant, and who will give you links.

If you're a local car repair shop in Montreal, why not create a directory of car repair sites around the world and trade links? (For those scratching their heads about link exchanges, it's fine so long as the sites are relevant.)

27. http://seoroi.com/global-extension

Tactic 12: Link Campaigning With Demographic Targeting

Link buying advice often sounds something like, "Get links from relevant pages for the greatest boost to your rankings." Link buying advice is often incomplete.

According to David Szetela of Clix Marketing, one of the foremost experts on Google Display Network (formerly Content Network) campaigns, you should base much of your Google Display Network (GDN) keyword selection on demographics. While most campaigns aim to target relevant sites - a good strategy - there's more volume to be had with demographic targeting.

To be more exact, this tactic is for products that have a mass-market appeal. It's not for niche items. For instance, even though GQ magazine's demographic overlaps significantly with that of this book, advertising this book in GQ would not convert particularly well.

Some SEOs use the GDN to discover link target opportunities based on advertising on sites thematically similar to your own. But why not get links - assuming you're selling to the mass-market - from demographically appropriate sites? If a mortgage broker can target the adsense blocks on a forum for new and expecting parents - many of whom will be in the market for a new home - why not get links from them?

Savvy link buyers can use GDN data to make link ads more effective. They ask:

- "What sites convert? Let's find similar ones."
- "What keywords are we targeting to show up there?"
- "What does this tell us about our likely demographics?"

And these advertisers can also survey customers to discover with greater precision what their customers' demographics are and what their content consumption habits are. (See also the chapter on mixed contextual-demographic retargeting for lots of other ways to get this data.)

You can ask questions such as the following, provided there's an incentive for people to respond, and to respond truthfully:

- Are you male or female?
- How old are you?
- What is the highest level of education you have completed?
- What is your religion?

- What is your ethnicity?
- What magazines do you read?
- What email newsletters do you subscribe to?
- Rate your interest in the following subjects ...
- What do you like best about our product?
- What do you dislike about our product?

Using this data, text link campaigners can write copy adapted to highlight the features customers most appreciate. They can also discover new media channels in which they can reach their prospects.

Yet Another Way To Use Demographic Data

Demographics go even further than hinting at new sources of links and referral traffic. It's well-known that to reach Digg's frontpage, you should find some an angle where your site can overlap with the interests of Digg geeks. Technology, college-age humour and so on...

The problem is that if you're not a Digger, and you don't have a natural affinity for their interests, it's really hard to guess at what they might like.

Enter Facebook.

As I'll discuss in depth in the chapter on mixed contextual-demographic retargeting, Facebook's ad platform allows you to see the overlap between demographics and interests. In short, as you select your targeting options (demographic choices like age and gender; interest choices like soccer and Apple), Facebook updates their estimate of your ad's reach.

Are young male techies (the core of Digg) into Lolcats? What about home renovation? Medical dramas? You can target males 18-34 who like Apple and see which of those three topics is most interesting to them. As a result, your linkbait idea generation process has some guidelines that increase your chances of hitting Digg's frontpage.

As you can imagine, I'm giving Digg as an example, but clearly this can apply to any linkbait effort.

How This Applies The Principles

First, this tactic blatantly takes from another marketing discipline - advertising - which traditionally has focused on demographics.

The lateral thinking comes in by analogizing link building with display ads. I grant you it wasn't a great stretch of imagination in light of the text link ad industry.

Lastly, there's a questioning of link building's traditional premise - that you need thematic keyword relevance. If you're building links with the normal marketing goal of generating conversions from

Tactic 13: The Stock Photo Hook

Offering stock photo credits for links can make organic link building scalable, solving some problems with guest posting.

Guest posting is an established form of link building whose strengths are the location of the link - in the post body - the human attention that the links get, and the scalability of the process.

It's no secret that sidebars and footers are lower value than in-text links, especially because contextual links get clicks. But the best aspect of guest posts is that these relationships can be tapped repeatedly for links. Guest photography offers all these advantages plus potentially significant cost-savings over traditional guest posts.

Stock photography sites sell licenses to use their pictures for a few credits each. Each credit costs about a dollar. Since most bloggers don't have much in the way of visuals in their posts, stock photos can liven up their sites. You can offer bloggers the use of accounts with pre-purchased credits (kind of like a debit card) in exchange for a credit whenever they use a picture.

As well, in contrast to Creative Commons licenses, stock photos present no legal problems for commercial bloggers.

A third benefit is that these links are scalable. So long as credits remain in the stock photo account, you can keep getting links.

The bottom line is that this tactic can get you quality links in exchange for a few dollars each, in contrast to the $25 or $30 average payment per guest post. And the links still get human attention in the photo captions.

How This Applies the Principles

In large part, this is a case of lateral thinking. It takes an established form of link building and adapts it by changing the type of content given away.

One of the underlying thoughts here is noticing a pattern, namely, bloggers' widespread lack of images in their posts. Reading widely in the blogosphere helped in this regard.

Lastly, there is a positive expected value to such link outreach efforts. These efforts can generate links repeatedly and at a low cost.

See http://SEOROI.com for more on advanced SEO

Tactic 14: Disguising Paid Links As AdSense

Have you ever thought of duplicating AdSense's look, feel and performance, but using text link ads?

It's up to you whether or not to say the ads are by Google specifically, which matters because of legal implications.

The steps to follow:

1. Put Adsense on the page you want to sell a text link on.

2. Take a screenshot of the ad block.

3. Post the screenshot on the page where the AdSense would be.

4. Put the desired anchor text in the screenshot's alt attribute.

5. Note how the ads perform when clicked or hovered on, then duplicate that with CSS and javascript. Ex.: Use javascript's onmouseover attribute to hide the link destination.

6. If "Ads by Google" appears, replace that text with the little "i"-in-the-corner which appears in other AdSense ads.

7. Code the screenshot ads as plain html links.

8. Add other AdSense blocks to the page so it's more difficult to notice something amiss.

9. Use clever positioning code (think divs/CSS) so that your real AdSense code can appear to be in the right location on the page and in the code, when in fact the fake AdSense (i.e. the link ad) is in that location.

Variations :

- Do the same thing but leave the Ads By Google as is and have it link to the appropriate page.
- Use image mapping so that the right part of the ad is clickable.
- Copy the background colour but instead of an image, use CSS to position text over the background image. Make that a text link rather than an image link.

What about people trying to highlight the text? Wouldn't that reveal the fake?

Images of text are already being used as ads, as discussed by Marcus Frind of PlentyofFish. It could be an image ad, where the text normally can't be highlighted.

How about intellectual property? Google is a trademark, after all.

Assuming you're doing this small-scale, the value to Google of suing for this is probably less than the cost of one of their lawyer's hours. I'm not encouraging you to break the law, but just pointing out that the law is probably not a cost-effective means of combatting this.

In any case, you can always apply this technique to the dozens of other ad networks out there or even make up a fake one!

Why are we hiding the link's destination?

Real Adsense blocks don't show it. It would be a giveaway if yours showed AdvertiserX.com in the status bar.

Won't the javascript prevent the link passing ranking juice?

You aren't really doing a javascript redirect, just preventing the appearance of the link's destination in the address bar.

If the javascript is problematic, you can play around with one of the affiliate or CPM networks' ads. These usually run through one of their servers, where the domain is something incomprehensible like arhjcj.com/yadatracking. You can use an affiliate-network style gibberish domain and make it look like an ad that way. Of course, your gibberish destination will 301 and pass value to the ad's real target.

Update: It seems Google encourages use of onclick and mentions nothing about Pagerank. See this FAQ they published about click-tracking/counting:

http://www.google.com/support/googleanalytics/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=55527

Why are you leaving the AdSense code on the page?

Because most people doing SEO are smart enough to look for the adsense code in the page if they're suspicious (which they may be after this idea spreads). Some might even have design skills, so making it look like it's in the right place is equally important.

However, most of us aren't designers. So we'd be hard pressed to tell if what looked like an AdSense block was really AdSense or if it was a paid link masquerading as such, cleverly hidden with divs, css etc.

Are there other ways to apply this idea?

First, you needn't use regular AdSense units. You can also use the two-click conversion AdSense unit, whereby visitors click on a general category text link (which appears as a text link) and then this takes them to a page with individual ads linked to particular advertisers. That way you could actually have a page with a slew of text links on it.

How This Applies The Principles

How can ad blindness be used to your advantage? To start off, there's some lateral thinking at work in this tactic. It takes a display advertising issue and applies it to link buying.

Second, there's a lot of questioning of the logic and conclusions of this idea's argument. That's where leaving the AdSense code on the page, hiding the destination, intellectual property, and other questions come into play. This tactic isn't without flaws, but at least by questioning and probing them it's possible to come up with workarounds.

Tactic 15: NGrams For Anchor Text Selection

Blackhat SEO "5ubliminal" wrote a post explaining Ngrams and their utility for keyword research. With a little thought, I found a whitehat application for this concept.

An Ngram is a math concept that looks at patterns in what follows and/or precedes a set item. So when the items are words, Ngrams consider the words following/preceding a given word.

For instance, we know that the phrase "social media" is often followed by the word "guru" - a social media guru. And you might find that it's often preceded by local modifiers, as in "NYC social media guru."

If you wanted to rank for "social media," you might therefore use "social media guru" as one link's anchor text. "NY social media" would serve as another link's anchor text and perhaps "NY social media guru" as a third link's anchor text.

(Presumably these would target relevant inner pages, rather than the more broadly-targeted homepage.)

The question is, how do you get this Ngram data?

There are a few solutions.

1. You can spend thousands to buy NGram data that Google has released.[28] Then spend more money to have programmers get rid of the fake data seeded in there to trip up spammers. (If a fake Ngram shows up on a site, Google can raise a flag that the content may be auto-generated, since a human wouldn't have written it.)

2. Another technique that's simpler would simply be to scrape enthusiast websites in your niche. Whenever the scraper software finds an instance of your target keyword, have it collect the preceding and following 2-3 words.

3. While keyword queries don't always match natural language use of keywords ("netflix rental" vs "rent movies from netflix"), I suspect that Google Suggest data overlaps to a certain extent with Ngrams. You can use Ubersuggest to scrape Google Suggest.[29]

28. http://seoroi.com/ngrams
29. http://seoroi.com/ubersuggest

4. You can get some data from Google's NGram tool.[30] It displays results like Google Trends, but the data derives from Google Books, not Google's web index. Accordingly, the utility is currently limited to historical comparisons rather than keyword discovery. More information is available from a few sites associated with the project.[31]

And what do you do with the data you've collected?

Once you've collected the data, filter it to find which words most commonly precede/follow your target keywords?

With the patterns in hand, you can weave N-grams into your link building, content writing, and so forth.

Sounds complicated - do I really need this for every campaign?

You're right, this is a complex tactic. And no, you don't need to research N-grams for every SEO campaign you run.

In my view, this is more of a tactic for extremely competitive markets requiring high volumes of links or content. It's a way to vary up the anchor text in a way that closely parallels real-life usage.

For content writing, it can also inspire content ideas and natural keyword usage rather than a sometimes awkward use of keywords.

How This Applies The Principles

The tactic starts with seeking inspiration by learning from another field: blackhat SEO.

I thought laterally to apply this idea in a different way than auto-generating content. By looking for the core idea, a specialized form of keyword research, I realized the data can be used in several ways.

This tactic also looks at the deductive validity of applying this data in 100% of cases. You don't need it in small-scale, less competitive markets.

30. http://seoroi.com/books-ngram
31. http://seoroi.com/culturomics , http://seoroi.com/science-article , http://seoroi.com/harvard-ngrams , http://seoroi.com/google-release

Similarly, for highly competitive industries, you would need to run a "sanity check" if you were to buy the data from Google. This would prevent you using fake N-grams meant to mislead content-writing bots.

Tactic 16: Cloning Expired Sites

BlueHatSEO.com had an article about desert scraping.[32] He suggested digging around expired sites on archive.org, grabbing their content and reposting it on your own sites.

SlightlyShadySEO.com created a tool checking Yahoo's Directory for unregistered domains. The idea is to register the domain and get a head start on link equity.

Both those ideas are interesting, but each has a flaw. Desert scraping violates copyright. Expired domains with inbound links may lose those links if the site is replaced with something new.

By contrast, imagine you're an editor reviewing the sites in your directory. If they're the same as last time, or the same as what you have in the cache, great. Leave the link as is. Otherwise, drop that link.

By combining the two techniques, plus using legal channels, you can get the best of both and funnel link equity elsewhere.

How Cloning Expired Sites Works

1. Track "drops" - domainer jargon for the domain names whose registration is expiring and are becoming available to the public again.

2. Check the list of drops for link equity. Some tools do this, but they all rely on the search engines' link data... A search for expired domains, expired domain tools and variations will get you what you need. Ex.:expireddomainsleuth.com (non Majestic/Moz).

3. Use archive.org, Whois data, or affiliate network contacts to find the webmaster's contact info. Reach out and see if they'll sell you the intellectual property or rights to use it (e.g. copyright, trademarks, likenesses) etc.

4. Duplicate the site, on the same host.

5. Link to any related sites you want!

32. http://seoroi.com/desert-scraping

Caveat Emptor:

In my experience, expired domains that have links are not going to have valuable in-content links that refer traffic. Any links around are either from abandoned pages or directories. Thus any links you get will have limited long-term value, since the links are not useful outside of SEO, and the algorithms follow human behaviour, generally speaking.

That said, if a site has a listing in Yahoo and/or some other expensive directories, it may be cheaper to revive the site and buy a license for the content rather than pay for the directory links directly.

Applications And Further Development

Use your clones to link to mid-level sites you own, or to third party pages that link to you. A mid-level site is a ho-hum site you run mostly for link equity, but not to rank (to avoid them being investigated by competitors).

This allows you to disguise your backlink sources. Instead of linking directly to your ecommerce site, you link through an intermediary. For example, that one-off minisite from last year's viral campaign can be the middleman, and funnel link equity to the main ecommerce site. Or you can use a generic, ugly site that will be quickly forgotten. No matter how much competitors beg webmaster@ buffersite.com for the same link, they won't get anywhere ;).

Another possibility for larger companies would be to partner with domain name registrars. They can send you lists of soon-to-expire sites, registered with them, which also have links. And you can get to work immediately on buying those sites, perhaps avoiding the drop altogether.

How This Applies The Principles

Networking was the origin of this tactic. But the details are not necessarily so obvious - the idea occurred to me during a chat with SlightlyShadySEO, after he blogged a list of expired domains still listed in the Yahoo directory.

Our chat was rooted in some lateral and critical thinking. "What's blackhat about using links to expired sites, and how can I adapt the tactic to fit within grayhat SEO?"

"What's the root problem for a grayhat SEO with links to expired sites?" There are two: stealing content violates copyright while changing the content leads to having the inbound links removed. "What's the paradigm situation?" That I'm either going to scrape archive.org for the previous site, stealing the content, or that I'm going to put up a brand new site on the domain, regardless of what was there. And then I'll use that link equity to rank sites I care about.

“Will the links stick around if I make a new site there?” - This questions the conclusion (implied in the blackhat version of the tactic), and discovers a few assumptions in its premise and logic. The premise assumes that a new site will go up. The logic assumes that a new site is no problem and the link equity will just continue onwards.

I asked SlightlyShadySEO what would happen if/when Yahoo reviewed their directory and culled the deadwood. It turned out that that was an eventuality he hadn't considered, which lead us to the idea of restoring the site as it was, and buying the rights to the content.

Tactic 17: Promote Linkbait By Email, Not Digg

Linkbait works because of distribution. And email marketing is a greater vehicle for promoting linkbait than social media, because the distribution possibilities are superior, to say nothing of segmentation.

With the right list of linkerati, email marketing can be more potent than social media. Consider Marketing Sherpa's lists, for example. They have over 200,000 subscribers!

Some of that is dead weight. Email addresses get abandoned and list fatigue sets in. But dead weight can be pruned. After a long period of inactivity, Mind Valley Labs received a newsletter they were subscribed to telling them to buy or get lost.[33] You can also target inactive subscribers with promotions, like Copeac did:

33. http://seoroi.com/inactive-subs

With social media, success at linkbaiting depends on the size of the community. For your distribution to grow, the community has to grow too. Yet that's not always the case, as Digg's numerous controversies have shown. As well, every time you want to linkbait, a fresh push is required, taking time and energy, with no guarantee of success making the Digg front page.

With email, you have control over the distribution - the quantity of people seeing your linkbait - because you can grow your list. And that control means you don't need to beg for votes and spend every waking hour digging, tweeting etc.

Email also allows segmentation, which makes linkbait that more effective. Did someone click an email link and then click the Digg button? Add him to your Diggers segment. If you get referrers from someblog.com/wp-admin, you can check that blogger's IP against the IPs of traffic your newsletter drives to your site to identify their email address. That way, you build a segment of bloggers in your email list.

Here are 3 other fun things you might do with segmentation and linkbait.

1. **Local linkbait** - Send your post on Montreal's worst potholes to only those people who've said they're from Montreal or whose IP location specifies it.

2. **Reward longtime readers** - Offer a special 'loyal members only' giveaway. (You might want newer subscribers to see this too, to motivate their loyalty, but that's a separate question.)

3. **Target your top "email-to-a-frienders"** – Offer rewards, acknowledgment, and "thank-yous" to people who email friends from your site (so you can track it, and act on it as opposed to those who do it within their email client). Also empower subscribers and ask for suggestions on future newsletter content. This is a typical community building method that can carry over well if you're building a forum or such. Promote your promoters, right?

Email marketing can be a huge asset to distribute linkbait through. It has several advantages over social media and it lets you use segmentation, multiplying the strength of your list.

How This Applies The Principles

An assumption widely held in linkbait-marketing circles is that blogger-rich audiences like Digg and Reddit are the key places to launch your content. And there's a certain wisdom there.

But just as you can call a Digg user on the phone, you can also reach these same audiences by email.

Sometimes the above assumption is turned into a premise for arguing that only Digg (Reddit, etc) power users can really be successful at launching linkbait. Only they have the profile-notoriety that will draw sufficient attention to the submission, and only they have the friendly voting circles built up to successfully push something to the front page. And the conclusion of the argument is that you either need to become a Digg power user, hire one, or give up big scale linkbait.

That assumption doesn't work. If you take that assumption as your premise, then the argument that's built on it is going to be false, too. With the right email list you can launch linkbait and get around Digg.

This is not to say that building an email list is easier than becoming a power-Digger, but you can arguably scale up an email list more easily thanks to PPC ads, as opposed to finite man hours for Digging.

Understand and Discover Keywords

Tactic 18: The 5 Minute Offline Commercial Intent Keyword Research Tool

A client asked me what keywords to insert into their copy. Since they've yet to test with PPC, I gave them the standard tool-based data and suggested that they find out what meets their business goals best by following up with PPC.

But as a small business with an offline location, I realized they can develop keyword research that larger players usually can't for legal and bureaucratic reasons.

The idea is to ask clients to fill out a short survey when they walk in and are waiting to be served. Let's suppose this is a car repair shop.

Q1: Is this your first time buying this service (here or elsewhere)?

Q2 (If you bought this service or a similar one elsewhere): What was your experience like?

Q3: When was the last time you bought similar services?

Q4: Are you a new or returning client?

Q5: Please describe the service as if you were explaining it to a friend who needs a lot of detail to understand what you're talking about.

Q6: In addition to [obvious feature of service, eg getting tires balanced], what motivated you to buy this service?

Explanations For The Questions:

Qs 1-4: The first four questions tell you about the commercial value/interest this person represents to your business. These questions help you determine whether they will:

- Be a high lifetime value client
- Need education on the topic
- Have pre-existing notions or worries (think of SEO leads who've hired a shoddy firm before)

You can obviously adapt the questions to your business.

Q5: The fifth question will reveal the keywords people use to think of your services. As these answers accumulate, you'll observe patterns amongst them. In combination with the first four questions, you can get an idea what keywords are likely used by the highest value clients.

You find out what keywords correlate to prospects that get regular car service and which are used by procrastinators, first timers, repeat clients, etc. This facilitates tour choice of what keywords to bid on or rank for, how much to bid, what to do on the landing page (e.g. hero pictures to reflect audiences, how to segment the traffic into audiences).

For example, some keywords may be commonly used by a 50-50 mix of new and repeat buyers. In that case, you can segment the traffic on the landing page and give them follow up pages with more targeted copy and matching hero pictures.

Q6: The sixth question will help you shape your copy by paraphrasing the benefits described by your clients in the survey. If clients answer, "to save money in the long term" you orient the copy to that message. If their spouse is insisting on getting the car tuned, you can promise a happier spouse. You highlight the benefits that speak to them.

Conclusions

Correlate commercial intent to particular keywords with a simple survey. Ask about a person's purchasing history, and how they'd describe what you do. The questions about particular details fine-tune your perception of the customer's value to your business.

Post Script: This survey variation on the listening technique is really the original idea of budiwaluyo, who used it for a language not then supported by keyword research tools.[34]

How This Applies The Principles

The premise of much keyword research is that it has to take place online. Another premise is that it's got to be based on query data that people have typed into a search engine.

What are keywords, though? Aren't they just a form of human language? And if that's the case, then isn't just listening to how humans speak another way to discover keywords? There is no requirement for keyword research to happen online.

Why would databases of past queries be the only way to listen? What about ordinary conversations? Or surveys? Or scraping websites?

34. http://seoroi.com/seomoz-user-account, http://seoroi.com/offline-kw-research

21 Corporate Drive, Suite 200
Clifton Park, NY 12065
518-270-0854
www.internetmarketingninjas.com

The same questions and challenges can be made regarding traditional testing of commercial intent. Best practices in search marketing involve testing with paid search to discover your highest-ROI keywords. Or at the very least, you can look at bid price estimates from Google for a comparison between keywords.

You can make educated guesses by doing your research offline.

Tactic 19: FREE: Your Competitors' Keywords

There are three ways to find out what keywords competitors your are trying to rank for or buy with PPC ads.

Technique 1: Analyze your competitor's site

Technique 2a: Buy the data from a keyword monitoring service

Technique 2b: Buy the data from a panel measurement service

Analyze your competitor's site

Step 1: Look at their sitemaps. This page usually lists every valuable page on a site using the keywords the page is targeting.

Step 2: You can either:

- Copy-paste the code on that page into a file. Then use CTRL+F to find all the external links and copy paste the anchor text into an excel file.

- Get a web spider and have it crawl the page then extract the links for you.

This technique has limits, though. It doesn't:

- Show the relative value of keywords. Linda Bustos of Elastic Path Ecommerce asked me, "Should I target body wash or shower gel? Your technique doesn't answer that."

- Show the absolute value of a keyword. Does it convert? Imagine an ambiguous keyword. Eg "bass" – Is that bass fish or bass guitars?

- Tell you what the competitors' message is, in their PPC or SEO listing. Are they promoting a deal or upmarket products? Special feature or ease of use?

Solution: Find out how many competitors have been buying ads on a keyword and for how long they've bought it. If many competitors have advertised on it for a while, it's effective.
Spyfu can tell you that…

Technique 2a: Buy the data from a keyword monitoring service, such as Spyfu

Spyfu has tools that solve the problems with doing keyword research through a competitor's sitemap.

1 – Spyfu Domain History tells you what keywords a competitor bought over the past year, and for how long. By seeing the keywords they've bought for the longest time, you can see what keywords are most valuable.

2 – Ad History shows you all competitors who have been bidding on a keyword for the past year, and for how long they've been bidding.

Ad History shows you their ad text, too. By seeing the patterns in competitors' ads over time, you can see how to write your copy.

I also like Spyfu for other reasons. Spyfu helps **find keyword patterns** or categories I hadn't discovered during my own keyword research. For example, years are often used with car model names, when people want car insurance.

Spyfu also **tells you the competitors' ad ranking** in the search results. The higher the ad's position, the more they value that traffic …

Spyfu value-maximization tip: Look at trends in position over time. If you see a competitor gradually raising their ad's position, chances are that the keyword is proving better than expected. And if they're dropping, it's probably a poor keyword!

Technique 2b: Buy the data from a panel measurement service, like Compete

Compete.com's data collection methodology is more reliable than that of Spyfu, because Compete includes data from a toolbar installed by 2 million people. Their actual use of the search engines is tracked! The downside is that it's a lot more expensive than Spyfu, starting at $199/month.

How do you protect your keywords from competitors?

If competitors are scraping your site, you can detect and block their user agents or even mislead their scrapers by cloaking.

Another way to protect your own keywords is to split your PPC campaigns amongst multiple domains. Keep in mind how Spyfu and Compete work: they give information about particular domains. Your competitors would have to know all your domain names to get all your keywords if your campaigns are split amongst multiple domains. Of course, you have to balance keyword protection with a domain's effects on CTR. Affiliate marketing blog Diorex.com has found that domains can create 5-10% increases in CTR.

How This Applies The Principles

What are my competitors' motives for using those keywords in their navigation? To indicate the linked-to pages' relevance for those keywords, clearly. That being the case, I can make an educated guess that the keywords they've used are the keywords that they're targeting.

Another principle seen here is the notion of learning from others' experience. Why guess at keywords? Similarly for copywriting, Why waste dollars guess-and-checking what copy works best when you can view competitors' ads to see what's been running the longest? Let others' efforts in the field be a guide to you.

This also questions the assumption that you need to send all your traffic to a single domain. Why not set up a pseudo-affiliate site and send your paid search traffic to that site?

Tactic 20: Are These RATS Gnawing At Your ROI?

Acronyms are garbage keywords. I'm going to explain, and illustrate with a few examples.

The more specific the intent of a keyword, the better you can convert the traffic. The more your prospects know what they want, the easier it is to close the sale, because. you can do a better job responding to their needs.

So why are acronyms awful keywords?

With acronyms, your task is doubly difficult.

First, you have the problem of ambiguity, as with normal head terms. Someone looking for "ballet" may be interested in the Bolshoi Ballet Theatre of Moscow, in ballet shoes, in ballet music, etc.

Second, one acronym can stand for many things. At least with ballet you can exclude the possibility someone is looking for football boots. But consider this acronym, "CCQ."

To anyone in the Quebec legal profession, that stands for Civil Code of Quebec.

To any Quebecer with Mozilla Firefox, typing CCQ into the address bar gets you the Commission de la Construction du Quebec, which means that the Commission is Google's "I'm Feeling Lucky" search result. (Firefox redirects address bar searches to Google.)

Similarly, when I was reading about the International Criminal Court, or ICC, I saw – and clicked on – this ad:

Makes sense, right? Looks like an ad offering the ability to look through the archive of decisions the ICC has rendered? It turned out that the ad offered exactly what it promised… only the ICC meant the International Chamber of Commerce!

So acronyms' ambiguity both attracts useless impressions (which lower your CTR and drive your bids up) as well as to attract useless clicks (which drive your ROI down).

Acronyms, like rats, need to be monitored or purged. Your ROI depends on it.

How This Applies The Principles

This lesson comes from my own painful, personal experience. I learned of the problems with acronyms when promoting a dental business on the keyword "AGD." One thing AGD stands for is the Association for General Dentistry. It's also short for "Airgun Designs," a woman's fraternity and so on.

Tactic 21: SEOs Rejoice When Pirates Share Their Booty

The Pirate Bay – the world's largest torrent site – lets you view what people are searching for as well as its tag cloud, which is what people are sharing, literally.[35]

When pirates share their booty, SEOs rejoice!

Competitors' internal search logs facilitate keyword research. It's fair to say that keywords searched within a site are likely also searched at Google and Bing (niche sites like legal research sites and deep resource sites in a given field may have a longer tail than the mainstream, though). The question is, how do you find those logs?

The Magical Beauty Of Footprints

What is a footprint?

A footprint – sometimes called fingerprint or thumbprint – is an identifiable trace generated by a CMS.

For example, Wordpress' default installation includes a few footprints, such as "Powered by Wordpress" and a variety of admin and login links in the sidebar. Googling "Powered by Wordpress" or other footprints of the popular blog system will turn up Wordpress blogs. Similarly, many SEOs were taught early on to search for common directory footprints like "Add URL" or "submit your site."

How do I use a footprint?

If you can figure out the footprint – you can enter that footprint as a query and find more sites running that CMS.

Alternately, you can use a footprint to identify which top ranking sites use the CMS in question. You can add /wp-admin/ to a site's domain name to see if it's built on Wordpress, for example.

How do you identify a footprint?

Look for parts of the page or website that have been created automatically by the CMS. These commonly include URL structures, unique sequences of words on a page (e.g. "Powered by Wordpress"), peculiarities in title tags and pages that aren't common to all websites.

35. http://seoroi.com/pirate-bay & http://seoroi.com/pb-tags ; both are Not Safe For Work (NSFW)

Sometimes, you'll need to use a combination of elements (e.g. URL + title content), because they're not 100% unique to a CMS. For instance, a Joomla site could discuss the "Powered by Wordpress" footprint and show up in search results.

Blackhat linkspam tools (and manual linkspammers) have long used footprints to identify vulnerable sites, including guest books, forums and blogs.

Forums with member-list pages will often find the first page full of fake profiles. *~00aaaguy is really a bot-created member profile taking advantage of the member list's default alphabetical sort. Being linked from the first page of the member list gives his profile maximum internal link juice to pass on to his spam site.

What else should I know about footprints?

Nowadays, blackhat linkspammers continue to search for footprints, but increasingly they seek out security vulnerabilities for the sake of injecting linkspam and/or malware.

Similarly, savvy webmasters and SEOs should be checking their own sites for such footprints to eliminate them.[36] This is a proactive means of avoiding blog comment spam and hacking attacks.

There are also some footprints that you need to be aware of. You don't want to reveal your CMS, as with inclusion in CMS showcase sites or in the profiles of web development companies that specialize in a given CMS.

Note: This doesn't mean giving up on these links entirely. Instead, you can just buy a (insert minimal amount of work e.g. $100 script, hour consultation etc.) from web developers specializing in a different CMS. You get the portfolio link without exposing your real vulnerability.

It's also worth mentioning that once you've identified a footprint, you can modify it with your keywords to find relevant sites. For instance, look for furniture directories by searching for Add URL furniture.

As I was saying, footprints can also help with keyword research…

There are two ways to find internal site search keywords. First, some CMSs display this information to the public. So the first time you see a site doing this, identify a footprint (see sidebar on footprints) to find other sites' internal search logs. Index Web Marketing's Jeremy Easterbook and I discovered that Magento reveals internal search logs, as this footprint shows:

36. Idea via http://seoroi.com/reduce-spam

inurl:catalogsearch/term/popular "Popular search terms"

Remember to include the quotations around "popular search terms.

Second, some sites just display this information without it being generated by a CMS. You can find this by paying attention to sidebars and footers.

The problem with this second group of sites is that the information is sometimes there just for the sake of keyword stuffing. It's a way to fit many anticipated modifiers on a page in what appears to be user generated. It's faked. These sites are trying to hit longtail keyword combinations. The best way to respond is to compare to other sources of data and test with PPC.

Lastly, eliminate publicly visible search logs on your site. It's your data – don't share it with the world. Personally, I'd 301 any URL sharing this data back to my homepage. If the data is displayed as part of a page (e.g. a category page) that you need to keep, then delete the information off the page. Or consider replacing the data with some keyword modifiers you'd like to rank for.

How This Applies The Principles

Once again, we have an idea from one field - linkspam - transferred to another area - keyword research. It comes from picking up on the relationship between spam, CMSs and footprints and the reason behind that relationship. And in answering "why," we obviously address the issue of what's motivating people.

This tactic involves a range of personal learning experiences from things I've read, to people I've spoken to, to comment spam I've received or observed.

You should be wary of "popular searches" lists and question what motivates the people deliberately sharing that information publicly.

Tactic 22: Glossaries And Indices Are Keyword Databases

An alternative approach to keyword research tools – and one that's quite desirable in saturated niches – is to listen to what others are saying or writing. After all, if it's said or written, it usually gets searched, too. One application of this is to find competitors' keywords, as I discuss in another chapter, or to survey customers. But the application I want to share here is glossary and index mining.

A glossary explains jargon in a niche. If you want to reach savvy members of a community, you can target those people searching for technical terms. And all you need to do to discover these keywords is search for glossaries.

There's another spin on this technique that can offer even richer results. Book indices are literally massive lists of niche keywords. Here's a sample from *Always Be Testing*, Bryan Eisenberg, John Quarto-vonTivadar and Lisa T Davis' book on CRO.

"Test Types
    A/B test
    Click test
    Comparing univariate and multivariate
    Do anything test
    Linger test
    Multipath multivariate test
    Multivariate
    Split path test
    Univariate"

Indices like these are also great sources to inspire fresh content pieces. Will you write the Ultimate Guide To Multipath Multivariate Testing?

Finally, I'd like to point out another unique source of keywords. That's Amazon's "Key Phrases - Statistically Improbably Phrases (SIPs)." As the name suggests, SIPs are "phrases that occur a large number of times in a particular book relative to all Search Inside! books."[37] It's hit or miss, though. For example, on the page for Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations, you'll find "late recoinage" - sounds like a hit - and "other cultivated land" - clearly, a miss. At the very least, it will inspire new avenues of research.

37. http://seoroi.com/search-inside

How This Applies The Principles

This tactic defines the underlying problem. It asks, "What's wrong with ordinary keyword research? Why doesn't it work for new entrants to a market?"

Answer: It focuses on head terms, which are usually owned by entrenched players.

Their margins are fatter, CPC bids higher, and link profiles deeper. Until they build up margin or volume, newcomers can't bankroll a PPC campaign while maintaining a positive expected value.

The problem of expected value leads us to a solution where the barriers to entry are lower. Glossaries, indices, and other sources of jargon are just what it takes to find longtail keywords, out of sight to keyword tools but within the budget of newbies.

Perform Other High-ROI SEO Tasks

Tactic 23: Test SEO/PPC Copy 10 Times Faster!

Here's the recipe for the fastest rising CTR cake you ever baked!

1. Generic keyword domains that match your campaign's keywords, which domains get type-in traffic (aka direct traffic).
   Since those generic domains that get type-in traffic are very expensive, an alternate solution for limited budgets is to buy type-in traffic from ad networks like Elephant Traffic or Marchex.
2. Some SERP CSS and design; available from any SE.
3. Good quality analytics software that can scale and accurately track clicks.
4. A creative mind

1. Buy, rent, or gain access to generic keyword domains that get type-in traffic. You can contact domain owners directly through the Whois information, or you can use third party domain brokers.

If you're new to domaining, learn more at Namepros.com's forum.

Most domainers will want to sell you the domain, but you might be able to rent it first to see test the traffic.

2. Next, replicate a real SERP environment for type-in visitors. The key characteristics are the "organic SERPs section" all linking to your site, albeit to different pages, and the ads being those you'd like to test. Use a search results page look and set up your PPC ads and SEO listings (title + meta description + URL).

3. Third, tie all the listings into your analytics and see what gets the best CTR and ROI. You can measure conversion rate, cost per acquisition (by estimating PPC costs for each position or SEO costs to reach each spot), average order size, etc.

For keywords where the search results are fairly stable, I'd test how competitors' listings and domains perform as opposed to you. If you want to test the effect of their domain name on CTR, you can send the traffic through affiliate links (so it's not a total loss). Or you can just duplicate their site with a similar appearance, behaviour and domain name. (E.g. Typos of domains or replacing the letter "l" with the number "1".)

4. Apply the lessons to your site's SEO and PPC copy.

And that's how you can quickly test which ads and title/meta/URL organic combos convert best. This works 10 times faster than ordinary testing is because you can test several ads and listings against each other simultaneously.

Other Benefits

Another advantage of this is that you can use this technique for competitive intelligence: duplicate a competitor's ad, landing page, etc, and see what the CTR and conversion rate is. Then take the PPC campaigns you manage and the SEO campaigns and roll out the best performing variations.

Another use for this is to test new keywords you're thinking of targeting. Get the appropriate generic domain name and voila.

How This Applies The Principles

Pulling knowledge from the domain name and search marketing communities, type-in traffic on generic keyword domain names performs similarly to search engine users searching for the same keywords. That's our fundamental premise.

The reason this tactic varies from that of the blackhat who inspired it is that said blackhat ranked a fake SERP. If we're going to take a whitehat approach, we can't do that because it violates search engine guidelines against search results in search results, and the prohibition on cloaking.

Traffic other than organic SEO traffic is therefore called for. In this case, that's generic type-in traffic. So long as you don't use Google or Bing's logos, you avoid trademark issues and should see a realistic user test.

Tactic 24: How To Beat Captcha Cracking Bots

If you're using captchas to protect your forms, you may find that you're still getting spammed despite the captcha. How can you beat those captcha cracking bots?

Give instructions that only humans can understand.

Bots don't yet recognize and decode audio or video. And presumably they don't crack every image on a page.

So what you can do is record audio/video instructions that the bot won't be able to figure out – only humans will be able to make it through your form.

Some possible implementations:

A. Include several captchas on the page and indicate which one to solve, via an audio or video recording.
B. Include captchas but use audio or video to specify which word on the page really needs to be entered in the captcha box.

If each roadblock is cracked, or the wrong one is cracked, you know a bot did it and can flag it as spam.

How This Applies The Principles

Ironically, the issue with captcha cracking bots is that they themselves are an excellent example of critical and creative thinking.

They begin by asking what the problem is that they're solving. The problem is recognizing characters when they're twisted, blurred, and mixed with visual noise.

The solution therefore is to remove the noise, fix the characters and match them to a database of characters.

Our problem is therefore to work around the logic of these bots. If they find a box, an image, a text field and instructions to type the image's characters into the field, they're fine. That's the paradigm.

But if you play with one of those elements, they're in trouble. So I've suggested playing with the instructions.

Tactic 25: How Legal Privacy Trumps Whois Privacy

Disclaimer: I'm not a lawyer so please only take this as information, **not legal advice**. Please inform me of any errors you find.

What is a trust?

Trusts evolved through the (feudal) tax-evasion efforts of commoners and low-level knights in the Middle Ages. Before running off to rape and pillage in the Crusades, a person ("A") would leave their property with a friend (B) to hold onto for A's family or kids, in case A died.

(The King or feudal lords collected taxes on property transferred in a will. By transferring between living persons, you avoided taxes.)

Problems arose where the friend tried to claim the property for his own use rather than be its custodian for A's family.

The courts of equity resolved the problems by holding that the "cestui que trust" (today known as the trustee) was bound to hold the property for the benefit of A's family. A's family thus had what is known as "beneficial title."

To recap, the trust is where a property owner passes ("devises" or "settles" in legal terms) his property to another party, for the benefit of a third party.

The person receiving the property is known as the "trustee" (B), and he holds "legal title." B holds the property in trust for C, the third party designated by the settlor. C has the "beneficial title" and is thus known as the beneficiary.

(A is left with nothing, though if a court finds that the trust "failed," both legal and beneficial title usually return to him.)

Note: You can have trusts created by wills, nowadays. It need not be a transfer between living people.

Why should webmasters who want to buy or sell websites care?

The reason I shared the history lesson was to make clear the distinction between legal and beneficial title. By taking advantage of that distinction, webmasters can write contracts that transfer control of a site without attracting scrutiny from Google. In essence, the contract simply states that the site's seller is creating a trust in favour of the buyer, with the seller as trustee. The property in question would be specified as being the website, and all that attends to it.

Google profiles and pays attention to certain webmasters and SEOs' activities. If they have a shadier profile, their activities buying websites may trigger flags (but probably not filters or penalties) at Google. It's unclear whether Google has access to the real registration data in instances of private registrations.

What is the result of using a trust?

The Whois record for the site's domain will read that the property is still owned by the site's seller, since he as trustee retains legal title. However, the beneficial ownership of the property passes to the purchaser.

Thus Google has no way of knowing that the site was sold.

Caveats On This Technique

You need to ensure that the trust document clearly shows the "three certainties:"

- Certainty of intent to create a trust [the settlor's intent]. If he meant it as a gift, lease, power of appointment etc. you might have trouble. Best to use the word "trust." Obvious, but you'd be obvious how many people screw that up.

- Certainty of the subject-matter of the trust, i.e. the property being transferred. Is it just the domain? Hosting too? The backend? vBulletin licenses? Take an inventory of everything and specify it in the trust instrument (and in the contract specifying that you're to have this trust created). Then make a clause that if you forgot anything, your intent was to include all things reasonably required for the site's operation in the subject matter.

- Certainty of objects, i.e. the beneficiaries. Who exactly is getting the property? You? Your business partner? Your company? Note: If it's your company, it had better be incorporated; the law is vague on non-incorporated entities.

Be aware that you run the risk of the trustee "selling" the site a second time. To prevent that, you need heavy penalty clauses for breach of the trust on the part of the trustee.

How This Applies The Principles

The learning here comes from quite far afield. Reading widely is a wonderful thing.

There's lateral thinking to see how trusts can apply to SEO. If you want to hide something from the King to avoid taxation, might knowledge of how to do that somehow be useful for dodging Google?

Finally, this tactic challenges the premise that when buying a site, the Whois records must change. If the premise isn't true, then the logical conclusion also fails. Namely, the conclusion that Google will find out about all site purchases thanks to Whois record changes.

Tactic 26: Mixed Contextual / Demographic Retargeting For Brand Lift

Google's "brand update" (aka "Vince") made brand recognition a major factor in rankings.

Here's how to saturate your audience's web experience with your display ads and increase brand awareness, with what I call "poor man's retargeting."

Retargeting is advertising that displays ads to people that have already visited your site.

On page load, ad publisher A's server checks to see if a visitor has a cookie on their computer that marks them as having previously been to company X's site. If it finds the cookie, then company X can 'retarget' the prospective client with an ad on publisher A's site.

Ordinary retargeting tends to require a steep learning curve (AdWords) or limit you to sites selling ad space through the particular ad network you're using for retargeting. While my technique may be less precise, most of the data you need is either free or really cheap and you can use it without being limited to the sites in a particular ad network. Further, you'll learn a lot about your audience that will help you better understand the market and thus sell more.

Here's how my alternative form of retargeting works.

Visiting a site is one behaviour to base a campaign on. You can also succeed by retargeting based on demographics, context, and audience interests and traffic patterns.

Five sources of data can help us retarget according to those notions. By correlating data from each source with the others, we can build an accurate picture of our audience and more precisely target them as they wander the web. The five data sources are

1. Quantcast
2. Compete
3. Ad publishers' internal analytics and voice-of-consumer surveys
4. The link graph
5. Facebook and Myads advertising

Let's explore each of those in a bit more detail.

Quantcast.com

Quantcast is an audience verification service. Ad publishers copy-paste their javascript code onto their site, and Quantcast can then verify the traffic numbers they claim in their rate card. This minimizes the risk of fraud for advertisers, especially when ads are sold on a monthly basis.

But Quantcast goes beyond just that - they also estimate the demographic makeup of a site's audience. They cover age, gender, college education, household income, kids, minorities etc.

Their data can't really be used in isolation from other data for "retargeting," because then all you'd really be doing would be a demographically targeted campaign.

The way to use their data is in conjunction with other data to inform your decision. For example, you can use it to decide whether or not to buy ads, or how much to pay.

Imagine you're targeting male golfers 50 and over who read example.com. Quantcast can help you evaluate whether another golfing site has an older male audience (which probably overlaps with your target audience), or if it's mostly young ladies interested in Michelle Wie.

Even better are three reports that Quantcast offers that specifically address overlap.

First is "Audience Also Visits," which is self-explanatory.

Second is "Traffic Frequency," which Google analytics calls loyalty. This helps predict what impact your ads will have – branding campaigns benefit from more loyal audiences, while direct response campaigns typically do better with drive-by searchers.

Third, more distantly related is "Topics That Also Interest Your Audience." This is helpful for finding cheap ad inventory. For instance, if your target audience really cares about two topics whose ad pricing varies significantly - e.g. luxury travel and fiscal reform - then you can reach the same audience while buying cheaper ad inventory.

Compete.com

Compete has a toolbar on two million people's computers, and it logs the sites they visit and in what order. They also buy ISP data to complement the data they get directly from consumers. A newer source of data for Compete is the Fox Audience Network, which includes both demographic data and contextual targeting options based on Fox's various properties. Based on all that data, Compete estimates what a site's traffic looks like.

You can use Compete to see what keywords people use to reach a site, and what sites refer traffic. But neither report provides accurate numbers. I know that large discrepancies exist between Compete's estimates and reality from personal experience and private discussion. If you get Compete Pro, you can also see demographic data.

If you can determine from the keyword patterns that the audience is full of newbies and you're aiming for newbies - great! If the referrals are from other sites targeting newbies - excellent! Conversely, if the keyword or referral patterns indicate an advanced audience, either bid less for the ad space or don't bid on it at all.

Finally, if you can see from Compete what sites get traffic from the sites you're advertising on, then you can target them there as well.

Internal Analytics And Voice Of Consumer

With internal analytics you can find out - more accurately than you would see via Compete - who is sending a site traffic and who they're sending traffic to. I use Sitemeter analytics, and I know that it has a report specifically dealing with outclicks. Accordingly, I can tell where my traffic goes. Many blogs also use Sitemeter and you can ask - or pay - to see where they're sending traffic.

If you're advertising with them, you can also offer to pay for the blog to get the pro version of Sitemeter which features tracking for the most recent 4000 visitors at a time, rather than being limited to the most recent 100 visitors.

Voice of consumer is the qualitative side of web analytics. In short, you survey visitors, at the end of their visit, with a lightbox type popover. You ask what they came for, whether they achieved it, what feedback they might have etc.

Based on the answers and your own experience you can make pretty educated guesses as to the makeup of your audience. Are they tech savvy? How old are they? What are their other interests? What other sites in the niche do they visit?

Do those attributes match the attributes of the audience you're after?

One free tool you can use is 4Q, from Montreal firm iPerceptions. You just copy-paste their javascript and 4Q handles the rest.

The Link Graph

The link graph is the network of links that connects sites together.

It shows my blog as being connected to Wiep.net, Wolf-Howl, Search Engine Land, Slightly Shady SEO, SEO Smarty, John McElborough, Search Engine Journal etc. “THE” link graph refers to the graph for the whole web, but you can have “a” link graph of a smaller subsection of the web.

By researching what sites link to each other, and how frequently and prominently, you can get a proxy for what the Outclicks report in Sitemeter tells you directly. In other words, who does this site send traffic to?

For example, suppose I accept ads and so do the sites I connect to in the link graph. You’re interested in advertising on my site, so you check through my posts and see what sites I link to most. You see that Wolf-Howl gets a fair number of links from me, so you decide to advertise there, too.

Shortcuts To Efficiency With The Link Graph:

A. One key area to look at is blogrolls. If a site was good enough to be included in a ‘Worth Reading’ list, then the blog’s author probably also links to them in their blog posts.

And since blogrolls are often reciprocal, you might expect that the traffic goes in both directions. So if you find an interesting site from the links in a blogroll and in blog posts, you may notice that the site also returns traffic back in its blogroll and in-post links.

B. You don’t need to manually check who links to whom yourself, or assign someone to do it. You can use a web spider.

The specific options that matter for this are how deep to crawl - this affects how full of a picture of the web graph you get, but can also lead to information overload - which links to crawl - obviously, you need to choose external links only.

Facebook And Myads Advertising

What’s unique about Facebook advertising is the correlation data you can get from it. Facebook updates the estimated audience your ad will reach whenever you ad or remove a targeting option.

For example, as of Oct 14 2010, 127.7 million Facebook users claimed to live in the US and be aged 18 or older. Of those, 54.6 million of them are men. And 314,000 of those men listed “Starbucks” as an interest, as opposed to 968,420 American women aged 18 and up.

(Note: I’m not talking about “fans,” but about people listing Starbucks in their profile as an interest. This is also different from people listing Starbucks as an employer in their Facebook profiles. About 40,000 people did that.)

So play with Facebook's ad targeting to better understand your demographics. Under the interest targeting area, use topic names, celebrities associated to the topic, and any other associations you can come up with (e.g. books, movies, ideologies, groups, etc.), plus Facebook's suggestions. Then layer on other targeting options to see where the bulk of your audience is.

Clearly women like Starbucks more than men, so to keep that audience loyal and grow it, Starbucks should target sites with majority female audiences.

While Myads' interest targeting options aren't currently as specific as Facebook's targeting options (e.g. "Sports > Soccer > English Premier League," but not also "Serie A," "Primera Liga" etc.), they're also easier to manage and get volume with. That is, you don't need to spend a half hour thinking up all the different interests that might be useful. It's a tradeoff between precision and scale.

Note: As of this writing, Facebook is revamping interests to consolidate them with autocomplete suggestions. The interests I originally wrote down no longer appear on my profile. You can still target me with them, but they're invisible. This will probably consolidate a fragmented ad inventory and increase bid prices in the auction.

In sum, the steps for contextual-demographic retargeting are as follows:

1. Find sites you'd consider advertising on.
2. Look at the different data points and find the overlap and correlations
3. Advertise on the sites that share the most common traffic.

How This Applies The Principles:

What does it take to achieve brand awareness?

Repeat messaging to the target audience.

What is one excellent way to do that?

Retargeting.

These questions lead us to defining the problem. How can you retarget without buying ads on a network?

Defining the problem this way also rejects a premise of retargeting ad networks - that cookies are necessary to reach the same user across multiple websites. Granted, that's a more efficient approach, but there are several ways to skin a cat.

Another application of the rules here is the notion of gathering data to look for relationships. In essence, this is that rule writ large.

There's also an aspect of expected value here. If you only target your ads by channel, or just target a specific blog in your niche, you can do alright. But if you want to optimize your ROI, you need to get more granular and look at the audience details. The people reading Moz's blog are different than the people reading Syndk8... even though both are within internet marketing and some overlap exists.

The trick is to find what sites' audiences correlate and to what degree, so as to maximize the frequency with which your audience sees your message. That way, your ads earn greater expected value of your ads derives by both generating conversions and greater brand awareness.

Tactic 27: Niche Market Research Beyond Keywords

While I respect and support efforts by keyword research companies like Wordstream to develop tools that enable niche research, niche research for SEO involves a lot more than just keyword discovery.[39]

You need to know a few things about a niche before deciding to join:

Who are the competitors, and what are their competitive differences?
I would figure this out by doing a few searches on the main keywords and reviewing the top sites. To be more thorough, you can use the 5 sources of competitive intelligence I've shared on my blog.[40]

Todd "Stuntdubl" Malicoat also shared a list of competitive research tools.[41]

What kind of obstacles to newcomers - can you discover with online research into competitive differentiators?

- Big brands - it takes lots of money to catch up
- Customer loyalty as demonstrated by adoring reviews - why would they switch?
- Reviews increase usefulness to users - how will you get reviews?
- Lots of programming or design needs means a large investment to catch up
- Service commitments, like 24/7 support

These are indicators of how hard it is to get into the niche. For instance, if you see that one competitor owns multiple sites in the niche based on the Whois domain registration (or simply ego-footers like "Copyright WeLoveThisNiche Inc.), you know you've got a scale problem to overcome.

How tough it is to rank linkwise?
I use SERP overlays that display link numbers below each page listed, allowing me to gauge the competition's link strength. The overlays come from SEOBook.com's SEO for Firefox and Moz Pro's Firefox extension.

I mostly look at the raw link totals and unique referring domains, but SEOBook's extension can also indicate success on Digg etc. I also lightly dig into the details of the backlinks to evaluate quality and why they're getting links, e.g. Link trades, paid links, forum signatures, guest posts etc.

39. http://seoroi.com/ws-kw-niche
40. http://seoroi.com/5-sources
41. http://seoroi.com/competitive-tools

Something else to consider is existing relationships. A company I know publishes a magazine that they send to 20,000 high school guidance counselors. They even have a “client care” person who calls them. That builds relationships and makes link building much easier!

How tough it is to rank contentwise?
The SEO industry is a great example of this. Go rank for SEO on Google. Seriously... you’re going to need ridiculously good content, on a regular basis, over a long period of time.

This means you’re going to need to develop great content yourself or source it from others. Outsourcing gets harder and more expensive in direct proportion to the technical-savvy required from the writer.

This is one reason why you tend to see fewer affiliates in B2B niches than in B2C. Anyone can have an opinion on fashion, but how many people can regularly write original, intelligent things on ERP software?

What kind of ‘topical networks’ exist in the niche?
A ‘topical network’ is the network of issues/topics related to the niche. For example, the hotel niche is related to the conference/convention topic because hotels often host conferences. They’re in the same topical network.

There’s some overlap here with the concept of “hubs,” aka “local (read:niche) interconnectivity,” where a hub is a page that links out to numerous sites in the field.

But hubs and topical networks are different entities because hubs often won’t refer traffic - their links are often only useful for SEO, as niche, editorial endorsements. As well, a single company may run a topical network so that they only link within their network. Hubs link to friendly competitors and related but uncompetitive sites (ex: hair salons to hair loss products).

One topical network example is that Monster.com plays in both the job board market as well as in the online college degree market. Online college degrees are often sought by people looking to improve their careers, without quitting their jobs (e.g. they want night school).

So topical networks can feature sites with valuable content that draws traffic and converts it, as well as referring visitors to other sites in the network for related needs. These network sites can both refer converting traffic and provide valuable links.

Takeaways: For each of these situations, what comes to mind is the traditional advice about outsmarting the opponent when they can outspend you. Or alternatively, if you find that the competitors aren’t that strong, you can probably take a fairly generic approach to link building, mix in a bunch of hubs, and rank.

Regarding the competitive differentiators, I would try and find my own for any competitive niche such that you can weather the engines' algorithmic storms. Building a community is one accessible, albeit time intensive option.

Having a topical network (of real, not spam sites) can also serve as such a protective differentiator, because you've got sources of traffic and revenue beyond Google that can cover your expenses if search traffic drops for a time.

On the programming depth question, this is something I personally struggle with. In ecommerce, unless I only want to target the short-tail, you I need to build a fairly broad site. That means that it's a challenge to develop a robust ecommerce site (for either dropshipping or affiliate referrals), and of course evaluating code quality is more or less impossible unless I partner with someone. Obviously this is more of a concern for independent webmasters, but in-house people also need to fight for resources at times.

If you discover that topical networks do exist in the niche, you'll want to think how you can duplicate that. For instance, a mutual affiliate deal with conference organizers might help a small hotel that lacks conference facilities to compete with the big hotels.

How exactly to build that network amounts to business development, partnering and dealmaking, which I'm no expert in. But at least you now know what to look for and have some options on how to act on the information.

How This Applies The Principles

What is a niche? If you don't accept the common internet marketing view of a niche equating to a group of keywords, then niche research isn't keyword research. Challenging that premise leads to a whole different logical evaluation of whether or not to enter a new market.

You can also apply the principles here by considering how big the market is and evaluating whether research is necessary. Clearly, this is more involved than the keyword discovery process. But if there's very low demand for the product, you can skip most of this. You need to question what is the expected value of investing your time in research.

Tactic 28: How To Filter Your Leads By Education And Linkability

I had a ridiculous, useless, time-wasting conversation with a garbage "lead" a few years ago. Here's what happened.

He calls me up and we begin talking. I keep trying to figure out what business he's in, but he repeatedly avoids the question. Then, he mentions my being 20. I'm a young guy, he notes, and therefore I should be all the more excited by this opportunity (My thoughts: "Ohhh, this is gonna be a doozie ...").

I again ask how we can work together and he responds vaguely, telling me how great this opportunity is and that there's limitless potential. By the time he says he'll create the site (having no SEO knowledge) and I'll build the links, for the exciting prospect of future revenue (read: work for free), I'm about ready to hang up, but I hold back.

After an hour of talking and noticing progressively more signs that this man is clueless, I finally hang up.

I normally don't talk badly about leads who don't become clients. In this case I'm making an exception because the person wasted almost an hour of my time on what should have been a 5 minute call. He kept insisting and trying to convince me to work for him for free.

Also, I've heard a variety of those phrases before from the mouths of other bad leads, and my fellow SEOs will benefit from hearing them.

Here's a framework with which to qualify SEO prospects

The ideal client is highly knowledgeable, measuring results and experienced in PPC. They have a fair budget for SEO, and a unique value proposition to makes link building easier.

That's why I just ask about budget directly, because people who have a budget will tell you, and people who have under $1000 will usually hold back, in hopes of getting a deal quoted, or will admit their low budget and hire you on an hourly basis.

1. Have you done SEO before? If so, for how long?
2. Describe SEO best practices that you're familiar with.
3. Are you using PPC, or have you done so before? Is it profitable, or was it then?
4. How long have you been in business?
5. How much brand recognition do you have in your industry?

6. Are you an affiliate?
7. Name three reasons someone would link to you.
8. What's the monthly budget (a range is fine)?
9. What control would I have over the site?

Questions 1 to 3 assess the prospect's savviness. This tells you how much handholding they need and indirectly tells you about budget. Savvier prospects have greater budgets.

Questions 4 to 7 hint what kind of authority they may have in the algorithms, and affects your ability to build links. Companies in business for a while have suppliers and business connections they can request links from. And branded businesses have goodwill built up in their brand so people are more willing to link to them.

Questions 7 to 9 are self-explanatory.

How This Applies The Principles

Who said that all leads were created equal? Clearly, that's nonsense. If we believed that, logic would dictate treating all leads equally. Further, you would waste your time with the wrong leads or else end up miserable with clients that don't fit your character or business capacity.

I said here that you want more educated clients. I generalized from the specific - I want educated clients. Some of you may enjoy the customer education parts of SEO more than I do. You may know how to avoid having clients second-guess you and avoid them trying to self-direct the strategic or tactical implementation, at least better than I know. Newbie clients may be just what you want!

Others amongst you may prefer small-budget clients, because you can be firmer on your pricing with them. Their lower buying power means they don't get price breaks. Or they may be all you have time to consult on.

Inhouse SEOs and site owners can take this and think laterally. Do you score leads for your sales-force or for clients who purchase leads from you? Are you an entrepreneur who does joint ventures? These questions, or variations on them that match your criteria for high quality leads, can apply to your business, too.

Tactic 29: Tailor Your Site To RSS Subscribers

On Search Engine Land, DixonJones.com, and other sites, there's a code that instantly adds in referrer tracking parameters on page load. In the implementations I've seen, the referrer tracking is added to indicate RSS as the source.

If you know that a visitor is an RSS subscribers, that presents an opportunity to show tailored messaging that offers a better, more profitable experience.

This is a slight adaptation from Seth Godin's observation that there's a wasted opportunity when you treat repeat visitors the same as new visitors, which inspired the popular "What Would Seth Godin Do" plugin.[42] That's the plugin that people use to add a little custom message above or below posts, usually inviting new visitors to subscribe by RSS feed.

The limitation of the plugin is that it's based on cookies.

In a visit to Dixon Jones' blog,[43] I ended up at a funky URL. It had the following parameters tacked on:

?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+DixonJones+%28Dixon+Jones%29&utm_content=Netvibes

As you can tell, I was browsing Dixon's feed in my feedreader; I'm a fan of his writing and have visited several times before.

When I visited Dixon's site from a computer that hadn't been cookied before – e.g. a 'new' visit - the plugin treated me the same as someone who genuinely had never read Dixon's blog before.

Don't get me wrong – the plugin is great and I use it myself. There's just a hole in it for people who delete cookies, access sites from multiple computers, etc. **Referrer tracking can fill the hole left by cookie-based tracking solutions.**

42. http://seoroi.com/wwsgd-plugin
43. http://seoroi.com/bbc-bh

Here are some customization possibilities to enhance RSS-subscribers' experience on your site.

- Display RSS-subscriber-only-downloads. These incentivize people to subscribe to your feed, the same way lead generation forms promise whitepapers. Those downloads are only visible within the feed (or in RSS-based emails), courtesy of Joost de Valk's RSS footer plugin.[44]

- Referrer-tracking can simplify life by offering these downloads on the site itself. It's possible that people could fake the referrer to get access to the downloads free, but that would be limited to a negligible minority.

- Different calls-to-action that speak in a more familiar language. Blogs are conversations, and subscribers are those you speak to most frequently. If I'm building a community around the blog, why not invite subscribers to register as members?

You can also remove or swap normally static items

1. Calls-to-action and ads that your subscribers won't take action on.
The plugin I mentioned invites me to subscribe, but virtually every blog today has a dedicated area to encourage RSS subscriptions. Frequently, that area is in commercially-valuable real estate: the header, sidebar, etc. Similarly, some inhouse promotions have been seen - and ignored - dozens of times previously; why would it now convert?

Why not replace it with some perk for subscribers or with a custom promotion? Ex.: 10% off Majestic SEO for RSS subscribers.

You could also remove that area and leave it as agreeable white-space! Decreasing clutter tends to increase focus and conversion rates.

2. Adsense. Numerous blog posts and studies have shown that search traffic is more likely than other sources to click on AdSense. The corrolary is that RSS subcribers are largely blind to AdSense.

By removing AdSense for subscribers, you increase linkability. And what's more, you increase linkability amongst an audience with a high propensity to link to you - all in exchange for a minimal chunk of (lost) change.

44. http://seoroi.com/footer-plugin

A Final Caveat:

While there are obviously lots of advantages to referrer tracking, I know that in some cases it can cause Internet Explorer to collapse (not sure if that's 7 or 8), as well as Firefox. I discovered this at McGill University's library, where the following URL loads SEL's favicon and nothing else:

http://searchengineland.com/googles-usability-fixation-reveals-local-ranking-factors-40579?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+locals-only+%28Search+Engine+Land%3A+Locals+Only+Column%29&utm_content=Netvibes
Since the URL works from other locations, my best guess is that this issue affects computer networks behind firewalls. That's something to consider and test when marketing to large businesses.

How This Applies the Principles

This tactic adapts some existing ideas, meaning that it looks at other people's experience and existing data on how to solve a given problem. As usual, the starting point is learning from others. This tactic then identifies an assumption - that return visitors always return on the same computer - and shows how that assumption is flawed.

As to customizing in general, you could say that this tactic increases expected value by questioning the truth of a common practice – treating loyal return visitors the same as everyone else. It's not deductively true that keeping the site the same for all audiences is effective. And if you define the audience as RSS subscribers who visit the site, it's not even inductively true that "not customizing" is more useful than customizing.

Tactic 30: How To Consolidate Content And OutWikipedia Wikipedia

It's sometimes difficult for blogs to maintain rankings over time. The nature of blogs' information architecture is that older posts slowly roll off the homepage and deeper and deeper into the archives. As a result, they get progressively less internal link love. So how can you adapt your information architecture to better distribute your juice and keep up rankings over time?

Search engines don't have a particular reason to crawl deeper than the main category page, as a general rule. But blogs are complicated. On the one hand, some of the newer posts likely rehash older ones, but some others feature genuinely new material. Which ones should you care about?

Category pages typically only feature 10 posts. So you have to go through a lot of pagination leading to increasingly less link juice to find older posts.

Further compounding the problem is the fact that All In One SEO noindexes your category pages by default. If you were a search engineer, wouldn't you treat links from noindexed pages as less valuable than those from pages meant to be in the index?

In my experience, noindexing blog category pages is the right choice by default because otherwise your category pages can make it difficult for Google to decide what page is canonical. And you can't make a category page use rel=canonical for an individual post, since that would mean the individual post is the canonical category page, too.

So what can you do?

The solution comes to us from corporate America. "Maximally leverage the synergies of your site to reductimize your content utilization." Or in real English, merge posts about a narrow topic together.

Step 1: Use a 'site:example.com keyword X' search on Google to find all your posts on a given topic. For instance, google 'site:example.com blog content creation'.

Step 2: Identify the strongest post by number or quality of backlinks, or the page that makes most sense (e.g. not a narrowly targeted, high converting product review post).

Ex.: example.com/blog-content has more backlinks than example.com/blogging-brainstorming and example.com/blog-images .

(Each part of Step 3 is to be ready simultaneously before you go live.)

Step 3a: Create a Table of Contents with jumplinks that lists all the sections of content (e.g. posts) on the page. You now have example.com/blog-content#brainstorming, example.com/blog-content#images and example.com/blog-content#this-urls-earlier-content.

Step 3b: 301 all the other pages to their section within the main one.

E.g. Take example.com/blogging-brainstorming, site.com/blog-images and so on, and 301 them to site.com/blog-content#brainstorming and site.com/blog-content#images .

Step 3c: Copy the content from site.com/blogging-brainstorming and site.com/blog-images onto the URL of your strongest post, as identified at Step 2.

Step 4: Ensure the redirected pages no longer appear on your category pages, so you don't waste one of those 10 precious slots on a URL that redirects anyways. Wasting the slot, forces robots to dig deeper into your pagination, and give less authority to what they find.

Step 5: Make your category pages list up to 100 posts, so that you can get more juice to the older posts. At the same time, load numbers 11-100 with AJAX, so the page load doesn't take forever and the scroll button doesn't grow tiny. Only when you get to, say, the 100th or 200th post does a new page need to be loaded. This makes for decent usability while keeping things search engine friendly.

If you've recently scrolled through search engine image results pages that keep adding pictures as you scroll down, that's what they're doing.

Step 6: Sort-and-list your category pages' posts by ratings. Then, make this 'sort-by-importance' view the default for search engines, ensuring your best content gets the most crawler and human attention.

Perhaps the most obvious choice to do this is to tie-in with your analytics so pages getting more search traffic are listed higher. You can also rate according to your own tagging of posts' usefulness on the backend. Another option is user ratings of your posts, but this requires a large user base.

Possible Step 7: Make your category pages only list post titles without excerpts, and then remove the noindex from category pages. This reduces the likelihood of canonicalization problems, while perhaps making your category pages pass more value to individual posts. This addresses the hypothesis stated earlier in which search engineers might give less weight to links on noindexed pages.

How This Applies The Principles

Why settle for gradually losing search traffic over time just because your default information architecture is chronological? That question sums up the problem concisely. And even better, it suggests a solution - improved information architecture.

Specific parts of the solution are inspired from my own personal experience with WordPress plugins. There's a plugin for creating tables of contents, and others for permanently redirecting posts. The plugin I use for 301 redirects is great, but it doesn't prevent a post from appearing in your category pages, which inspired step 4.[46]

46 http://seoroi.com/301-plugin

Tactic 31: Mine This Data For Competitive Intelligence

Competitive intelligence provides an inside-track on industry trend-spotting, and the opportunity to enter a market as soon as possible. I gluttonously consume information, and thought I'd share my diet with other competitive intelligence gourmets.

1. Affiliate Networks.

Ever wonder what a competitor's margins are like? What countries they focus on? What KPIs they use? What verticals they're in?

Get the answers to all these questions and many others by joining multiple networks.

You can look at competitors' payouts, and see a baseline cost-per-action (CPA), which indirectly informs you on margins. You'll see what countries' traffic converts for them, giving you insight into their markets and legal organization. And of course, you can see the promotions they're offering prospective customers.

2. Email Newsletters.

I recently got a newsletter disclosing a merchant's average order values, average affiliate commissions, and conversion rates, broken down by market segments. For newbies struggling to find their niche, this is valuable info!

Consumer-facing email newsletters are also valuable, although I admit that I'm slack in monitoring these. Some things you can pick up:

- Benefits emphasized – inspiration for your own copy
- Profitable or high volume products or otherwise desirable goals
- Tone of voice for branding purposes

3. Corporate HQ websites.

I subscribe to the RSS feed of a particular company that I highly respect, where they openly share corporate strategy. It's impressive seeing the massive, fast-turning gears turning in these people's heads, and it's also inspirational here and there.

If you're a fast-food restaurant owner, you can probably pay attention to McDonald's, Harvey's, Wendy's, KFC, and other press releases to see where they're going in a broad sense. The same is broadly true of many industries.

Similarly, if you look at Google's investor relations site [47], they present their strategy along with juicy tidbits to stock analysts with a certain degree of openness. For instance, they once had a webinar regarding their display ad strategy.

In sum, the days of the Google Display Network showing text ads are numbered. And if you're running an ad network, you should consider how to scale up graphic advertising instead of text ads.

4. Alerts and keyword trackers.

Think these tools just serve to measure how much brand discussion is happening in social media? Guess again.

If new, as-yet-unknown competitors are linkbaiting, you can't subscribe to their RSS feed.

But you can set up trackers to look for particular keywords linkbait might target, or roll your own solution to monitor Digg, StumbleUpon, etc.

Similarly, if the approach is more traditional, why not monitor press-release sites for your industry keywords?

Find them while they're fresh to the industry and take action as appropriate!

5. Mainstream newspapers and magazines.

Maclean's, a popular Canadian newsmagazine, had an excellent piece on the Wall Street Journal and paywalls.[48] There are some fantastic nuggets to pick up in there, which I haven't seen in the usual industry news sites.

During SMX Advanced 2009, I picked up the local Seattle paper and saw a piece about Google taking on Amazon in ebooks, which finally came to fruition in winter 2010.[49]

How This Applies The Principles

One: I read widely!

47. http://seoroi.com/g-display
48. http://seoroi.com/murdoch-vs-www
49. http://seoroi.com/seo-roi-quality/froogle-20-google-declares-war-on-amazon/

Two: I took a lateral thinking view and applies a different viewing lens to some fairly popular data sources.

Going further, this is an application of the 'collect the data and observe relationships' rule. The more of these data points you're looking at, the more informed a picture you'll be able to draw.

For instance, the company that emails its affiliates conversion rates across verticals also discusses its employee growth and raising of VC capital in press releases. By reading to what that capital is allocated, I saw their strategy for cutting costs by bringing some processes inhouse and to a larger, newer facility.

Conclusion

What's Next For Advanced SEOs?

As most of you know, SEO is dead.

Sorry, I couldn't resist. :D

SEO is becoming harder on a daily basis, however. There are a few factors contributing to that, but the main ones I see are:

1. Google's persistent efforts to lower the ROI possible from SEO while increasing the risk of investing into SEO.[50] Google's aggressive integration of its various verticals into the main search results, and the progressive monetization of these verticals, means that more of the search results page is converting to paid space.

2. The constant entry into SEO of new players, be they SMBs or Fortune 500s that finally want search traffic more than "interactive" (read: Flash) "immersive experiences" (read: non-ROI driven marketing spending).

3. The growing diversity of channels to master, which means you need to learn more or find others to work with. Mostly this is tactical (e.g. how to show up in product search), but it can also be strategic. Will your retail chain carry a new, exclusive Barbie model in time for the holidays so that you can use Google News to rank for "barbie dolls"?

The upside is that advanced SEO skills are going to be increasingly valuable for the foreseeable future. Corresponding to the above trends, there's probably going to be:

1. An increasing demand for conversion rate optimization to maximize the revenue per visitor. With fewer oranges, you need to squeeze harder to get the same amount of juice.

2. More site buying and selling opportunities, and of course general demand for SEO services.

3. Greater reliance on specialists and less DIY SEO by entrepreneurs (that is, those that have had some experience) in the field. Additionally, you'll likely have the occasion and perhaps even the need to create new tactics.

That brings us full circle. You now have the tools to develop new SEO strategies and tactics, and there's a need for them. Have fun with it!

50. http://seoroi.com/search-changing