



Search Engine Marketing: Do it yourself or hire professionals?

Imagine that, to promote your business, you decided to air a 30-second television commercial, several times a day, on local stations. It's a great idea – just about everyone watches television, and a daytime TV spot is the perfect opportunity to get your company's name in the minds of consumers.

But even if you have a top-of-the-line, high-definition video camera and the most advanced computer on the market, it's unlikely you'll make the commercial on your own. For starters, knowing how to light and compose a good shot is a fairly specialized skill. Getting the sound right will also be difficult, and if you want music in your commercial, there are rights and clearance issues to worry about. Then you'd have to put the whole thing together – will the video editing application that came bundled with your computer be right for the job? And even if you manage to put together a smoothly-shot commercial with a great script and a stylish edge, how will you go about actually getting it to the TV stations?

There's a lot of skill to consider when you commit to a serious advertising campaign, no matter what the medium. And search engine marketing is no exception.

What is search engine marketing?

Search engine marketing is the process of structuring a website so it will gain the maximum amount of attention from search engines – tools like Google and Yahoo!, which everyday web users task with finding exactly the pages they're looking for. A good search marketing campaign will index your website in all the major search engines; identify the search terms, or keywords, most likely to bring potential clients to your site; and ensure that your site is among the most popular results the search engines return when those keywords are used.

On the Internet, anyone can be a superstar... right?

By its very nature, the Internet is democratic. Anyone can log on, and in a single afternoon, participate in several conversations on a virtually endless variety of topics. With services like Blogger and Wordpress, anyone with a connection can build an entire body of online writing, on any topic they choose.

This leads many people to believe that, because search engine marketing takes place entirely on the Internet, just about anyone can do it. And in a certain way, that's true – in the sense that anyone can learn to play the guitar, or anyone who works hard enough can start his or her own business.

As we all know, however, the reality of doing these things is quite a different story. Learning the skill set required for search engine marketing takes time and experience, and it's unreasonable to assign such a huge project to one of your current employees (unless you relieve him or her of a substantial portion of work). It consumes a considerable amount of time and energy, and the dynamism of search engine algorithms means it's a job that never ends – unless your business shuts down, or you decide to no longer have a website.

Of course, you could hire a full-time employee (in reality, it would more likely have to be an entire team of employees, but for the sake of this example we'll imagine it's just one) to manage your search marketing efforts. That's one more yearly salary to pay, along with more taxes, another benefits package, and maybe even another office. And if you lose that employee, the time it takes to replace him or her is time your company isn't keeping up with those ever-changing search engine protocols. For small businesses, these are big considerations.

What's more, if you start from the ground up, and begin your own in-house search marketing campaign, you're bound to make some mistakes along the way. And time lost to mistakes is money lost, particularly if you've embarked on a pay-per-click campaign.



In short, search marketing is one of those tasks that's often best left to the professionals.

What it takes – and how netStride can help

Much like the creation of a television commercial, a good search marketing campaign consists of several steps, each as important as the last. Generally, most campaigns use a two-pronged approach: Organic marketing and pay-per-click (PPC).

Any campaign will begin with keyword selection. Of course, you'll be an important voice in this process, and the list of keywords will begin with a list of the products and services your business provides. The search marketing team at netStride has a variety of tools at its disposal that help zero in on those terms that web searchers are actually using, and the terms that will help potential clients land on your page.

For example, targeting the general keyword "homebuilders" for a homebuilder who works exclusively in the Philadelphia area would be a futile effort. Adding geographic modifiers – which in this case would result in keyword phrases like "Philadelphia homebuilders," or "homebuilders in Philadelphia," or even "homebuilders 19154" – makes for a better quality list of keywords. They'll be more likely to attract much more targeted visitors, who in turn are more likely to need the services of that specific homebuilder.

Once netStride's search marketing team has selected the proper keywords, we go through your entire site, page by page, to "optimize" it, making sure those keywords are properly placed at strategic points throughout the copy and within the site's code. A copywriter will edit the text of your site to ensure that the keywords appear frequently – often a delicate job, as both readers and search engines are savvy to blatant keyword placement. A quality search marketing team will include a copywriter who knows how to seamlessly integrate search marketing practices with powerful advertising copy.

But it doesn't stop there. Once we've optimized your site and submitted it to be indexed in both general and industry-specific search engines, we engage in the lengthy process of link-building – getting other websites to link to the content on your site, making it more attractive to search engines. And every month, we review your rankings in the search engines, making sure you're getting good results for each of your keywords. If one or more of those keywords needs a bump, we do what it takes to give it that bump.

netStride also manages pay-per-click search marketing campaigns, wherein your company can bid for placement in a specialized "sponsored results" section of a search engine's results page. Again, this is a monthly process, and one that only ends when you decide to stop marketing your site.

We also provide monthly search engine analysis reports and ranking statistics, allowing you to see the progress of the campaign. These reports provide you with hard data, so you know for sure whether your investment is worthwhile.

How long does the job take overall?

Search engines are businesses, too. As the Internet grows, they're constantly changing the methods they use to index pages and better serve their users. They've also got to make sure they're always a step ahead of so-called "black hat" practices – unscrupulous search marketing methods employed by less reputable, less ethical teams. New developments in search engine technology are appearing every day.

As a result, search marketing has evolved into a never-ending process. Keeping on top of the algorithmic changes in search engine indexing practices means constant research, endless perusal of industry blogs and webzines, and



attending professional development conferences. The netStride search marketing team works hard to maintain a continuing education in this way.

Hiring netStride as your company's search marketing team

If your business has the spare dollars to hire its own in-house search marketing experts able to keep themselves perpetually informed on the latest developments, in addition to performing their everyday work of optimization, copywriting, indexing, link-building, and managing pay-per-click campaigns, such a team would likely be a great investment. But every business owner with a web presence should understand that a search marketing campaign is an endless process; simply building a website won't get it to appear on the first page of a set of Google results, even if your company offers a very specific product or service. Hiring netStride as your company's search marketing team allows you to focus on what matters most: Running the day-to-day operations of your business.

Aside from that, there's a long list of advantages to outsourcing your search marketing efforts:

- An external firm is external, so it's less susceptible to the internal politics of a business – and therefore more able to provide unbiased advice.
- Outside teams have developed a list of industry contacts, and so can draw advice and expertise from several sources.
- An outside team brings with it the years of experience it's developed in working on other projects. At netStride, our team has worked on an array of search marketing challenges, so there's very little that's new to us.
- External firms like netStride can provide other services as well, such as hosting, design and other types of electronic marketing (such as permission-based email marketing) which, along with your search marketing plan, can be seamlessly integrated into an overall web strategy.
- Search engines and web directories vary in the way they accept indexing submissions, including rules that can often change; this is yet another layer of data to learn if you're embarking on an in-house search marketing campaign. External firms are familiar with all of these.
- Subtle changes in search engine algorithms can make a top-ranking website drop several spots in a results list. An outside firm can tackle a problem like this the moment it happens.

Because the experts at netStride understand the constant flux of the search marketing environment, and because we make it our mission to track this technological evolution, our methodology is agile. When new search engine formulas come to light, and when new technology is introduced, we can adapt quickly. We fully understand that your investment in our search engine optimization service must produce tangible results, and we are confident in our long track record of doing just that.