Word Games by Mark Buckingham

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Everyone wants to be top of the list on Google, but to do that you need to be clever with content and search engine optimisation. Just as Estate Agents cite 'location' as the key to successful property investment, most web professionals assert that 'content, content, content' is king of the web. But this simple rule is forgotten with monotonous regularity. Bland, prosaic copy, sluggish navigation and overbearing graphics blot the internet landscape, creating a world where engaging content and usability are patently more afterthought than forethought.

Instant impact is crucial. Recent Nielsen/Net Ratings research (May 2004) indicates that UK users spend an average of 47 seconds on a page (other research suggests users have even less patience). With the array of choices most web users face, this isn't as long as it first appears. If you fail to convey your message or keep visitors interested, it won't just damage the longevity of your website (and play right into the hands of more erudite competition), but it may also impede your search engine visibility.

Time to invest

For although high-quality content is vital, so too is investment in search engine optimisation (SEO). SEO is the specialised process of tailoring a site's copy, structure and text to achieve as high a position as possible on a search engine's natural search results page - as opposed to paid listings - to reach a site's target audience. Colin Price, director of Surrey-based web design agency IO Visual Communications, believes many companies undermine the importance of SEO.

'Accessible design and good, informative copy - satisfying both your audience and the search engines - are nearly always the most important aspects of a successful site,' contends Price. 'Many sites fail at the first hurdle, with clumsy design structure, poor keyword density, and lifeless prose.' Like other popular engines, Google's closely guarded ranking algorithms (or scoring formulas) are continually refined to determine quality, consistency and relevancy, in a bid to satisfy an increasingly demanding audience. Purportedly employing over a hundred criteria for ranking sites - commonly favouring HTML and text over dynamic content - the onus is on the site creators to be content-focused. But how does an honest, hard-working site achieve such coverage in a progressively saturated marketplace?

Ironically, the evolution of semantically orientated search-engine scoring technology is driving businesses back to the basics of direct, open communication. Ranking algorithms commonly favour content-rich, fluid, efficiently-designed sites. It's generally considered that what works well for the user, is likely to satisfy most engines. Sites delivering pertinent information, quickly and clearly, typically gain precedence over sluggish, image-centric counterparts. However, a user-friendly, lean site with deficient content can be as redundant as an educational, yet inaccessible site.

Back to basics

Bestselling author, Michael Ridpath (whose latest thriller is set against the rise and fall of the 1990s dot.com boom), believes that despite rising competition in almost all areas of the web, the fundamentals of usability are frequently overlooked. 'The difficulty for the users has become how to wade through the ocean of links, icons, pop-ups, animated graphics, hard-sell tag lines, hyperbole,

grandiose claims and repetitive titles to quickly find the nugget of information that they are looking for,' comments Ridpath. 'Every website needs short, clear passages of level-headed text, which convey what the users are seeking. They should be quick to find and easy to see.'

There are few greater goals for most commercial sites than prominent organic ranking (natural search results as opposed to paid-only listings) - with top Google positioning arguably the most coveted pinnacle. And with Google's colossal database (ostensibly limited only by the technology to support it), coupled with more and more businesses intensifying their online marketing efforts, competition is keener than ever in almost every corner of the web.

While no substitute for quality content, investment in SEO can mean the stark difference between success and ultimate failure: and balance is the key. Over-zealous optimisation can do more harm than good. Typically ascribed as 'ethical optimisation', many SEO professionals are eager to make the distinction over the spurious methodology employed by some of the less conscientious companies in an attempt to trick the system.

An image can indeed speak a thousand words but, like most engines, Google is mostly blind to graphics when indexing and scoring your site's content, effectively seeing only your source code. And with search engines increasingly selective in how they rank sites - giving weight to usability and consistent content over ornate design - your site copy really must speak convincingly.

This is something that online ticket site cclive.co.uk, operated by Clear Channel Entertainment Europe, found out. Mark Yovich, new media director explains:

'We had a visually dominant site, which, although averaging two million page impressions a month, was lagging behind our competition on Google. We hired a search engine copywriter to help us optimise our site, research and evaluate strategic keywords, and create copy that clearly projected the nature of our company and services. We wanted to use text to build a relationship with our audience instead of relying on visuals.'

Considering the inherent importance of professional, creative, well-balanced copy, it's no surprise that SEO copywriting is now an emergent specialisation in itself. Most SEO consultancies and website writers now offer combined optimisation and copywriting as the cornerstone of their service. Just as excessive optimisation can be damaging for any website, poorly presented, insipid copy is more likely to inspire your visitors to surf elsewhere, than create confidence in your company and generate an enquiry or sale.

SEO, at its most effectual, is an experiential process; essentially comprising of keyword research, copywriting and structural optimisation (as well as many 'off-page' factors, such as strategic link building). Evaluation of your competition and, where possible, analysis of your existing traffic and user-feedback, is a good way to initiate the SEO process.

It's also imperative to diligently select strategic key phrases. Through a combination of research, brainstorming and web-based search-term suggestion tools, consider all possible descriptive derivations of terms that describe your company, services or products. Then select a handful of strategic key phrases, refining your list to a handful of practical terms to be carefully worked into the sales copy. Usually, niche keywords attract targeted traffic over more generic,

highly competitive terms. Optimising your design structure and visuals should be concurrent with optimising your copy.

Satisfying both your audience and the evolving search engine algorithms may be tricky at times, requiring a degree of trial and error, but it needn't compromise your ability to get creative and project an effective message. The benefits of investing in SEO copywriting can be rapid, as ccLive's Yovich discovered. 'Within days our rankings climbed and, unsurprisingly, traffic improved,' he explains. 'Visitors also stayed longer on pages deeper within the site. For example, our subscriptions page formerly had little or no text content: now, regardless of how a user has arrived there, it clearly conveys what we do and encourages interaction.

Monitoring activity

'It also helps us better monitor user activity and ascertain which areas visitors are most responsive to. Admittedly, it's something we should have done before, but even now, some competitors still don't fully appreciate the benefits.'

A good SEO copywriter conversant with (if not specialising in) the fundamentals of optimisation, will follow the principles of creative sales writing to best project your company and services in your desired style, while carefully incorporating the selected key phrases - without compromising flow or readability. They should also be especially attentive to keyword density, frequency and positioning.

Andrew Park, partner at Glasgow-based search engine marketing specialists WeSellU, works with companies eager for instant online exposure. Paid-for-performance, or pay-per-click (PPC), marketing can be a highly effective, but

costly method of acquiring instant targeted traffic. 'On average, our customers spend about £300 per campaign, with many high-volume sites paying £6 per click and above for the most competitive listings on Google,' says Park.

PPC marketing has many clear benefits; with the right keywords, and a well-managed budget, visitors are more or less assured. But it's not the only way to drive traffic. Whilst pay-per-click advertising can produce immediate results, the payback from taking the time to build germane, accessible content can be considerably more cost-effective and, in many cases, boost the potential returns from a PPC investment. SEO is increasingly used in tandem with pay-per-click advertising, often to great effect. 'Although requiring a degree of understanding and patience,' continues Park, 'SEO can bring a company invaluable free advertising and publicity. Sustained exposure also affords our customers room for experimentation; for instance, our clients can use pay-per-click data to further optimise their site, and can target new niche areas with their PPC campaigns that they may have overlooked with their organic optimisation - and vice versa.' Like a growing number of internet marketing firms, WeSellU now advises pay-per-click clients to optimise their sites. 'We now work with a copywriting and optimisation agency to facilitate this service,' says Park. 'Many clients are realising the importance of developing content and the long-term value of prime placement. It's become a natural evolution for us and an essential service for many of our customers - one that we can't afford not to offer'.

Optimisation is all about balance: a harmony of streamlined, accessible design and engaging, lucid content is the key to profitability on the web. Get content-focused, deliver what the user wants - and more - and your biggest challenges will be won.

Search engine optimisation primer

- Google and other engines look for consistent themes - or page specificity - as a prime indicator of relevancy

- Present your copy in clear readable chunks, ideally with dedicated pages for each subject area. Don't be afraid to use bullet points

- Every page should include descriptive titles, image tags, clear sub-headers and an HTML links menu (including sitemap)

- Profligate graphics and unnecessary code can encumber page-loading times and usability, as well as potentially affecting your rankings. Ensure your images are compressed and large visuals used cautiously

- It's crucial to incorporate selected search terms throughout your copy while ensuring your text is vivid and clear. Look for opportunities to work in your key search phrases, but avoid excessive repetition

- Crisp, descriptive copy is more likely to harness a visitor's attention and signify that you are an authoritative source

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