Search Engine Friendliness of Search Engine Marketing Methods

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Abstract

The article examines search engine friendliness of the most popular and widely used search engine marketing (SEM) methods. In the first part, SEM methods and approaches that are in line with search engines' official guidelines are examined and analyzed. The second part deals with popular methods which are not welcomed by search engines and are implemented by companies solely for search engine rankings manipulation purposes. Finally, the last section describes several experiments conducted on live websites in order to figure out modern search engines' abilities to identify widely used deceptive practices and presents the risks associated with SEM methods which are strongly inconsistent with search engines' official guidelines.

Introduction

Different companies prefer different Search Engine Marketing (SEM) methods and approaches for achieving organizational SEM goals. Choosing the right combination of SEM methods requires a deep knowledge about possible positive or negative results of every SEM method that is available for implementation over short run and long run. One of the important properties of every SEM method or technique is search engine friendliness or, speaking more simply, how search engines treat the method and how it is consistent with search engine official guidelines (Google, Inc., 2013).

Generally, SEM methods can be divided into two major groups based on their search engine friendliness level. The first group contains methods that are strongly supported by search engines and always considered as search engine friendly, which are also known as "white" methods. The second group contains methods, which are not consistent with search engine requirements (Wilding, 2013). The implementation of those methods can result in serious penalties and sanctions imposed by search engines. The set of these methods and approaches generally known as "black-hat" Search Engine Optimization (SEO) or just "black" methods.

Search engine friendly SEM methods

"White" SEO remains as the most popular approach in SEM for many years. Companies who do not carry out SEM activities which can somehow violate search engine guidelines usually benefit from such strategy over the long run. The implementation of such methods provides companies with security associated with the risk of being penalized by search engines. However, the effectiveness and the expediency of implementation of search engine friendly SEM strongly depends on several important factors like content uniqueness, marketing budget, competition level, and so forth. For instance, paid search advertising, which refers to paying search engines for top positions in search engine results pages (SERP) for selected keyword groups, requires continuous expenditures by companies, whereas websites with unique content can achieve high positions in organic search results by simple and cheap "white" techniques without additional advertising or marketing expenses.

Paid Search: One of the "whitest" methods of Search Engine Marketing is paid search, which refers to purchasing SERP top positions for targeted keywords from search engines. Google, Bing, Yandex and other popular search engines developed special software solutions for providing paid search services to organizations. For example, Google AdWords is Google's program designed to facilitate SEM campaign planning, implementation and control. It allows to specify SEM goals and track conversion rate during campaigns' lifetime. Organizations can implement their SEM campaigns through AdWords by choosing specific target markets for selected keywords based on geographical location, gender, age, user preferences, company budget, etc… Paid listings will appear not only in websites owned by Google, but also in affiliate web pages that cooperate with Google through Google AdSense program (Google, Inc., 2013).

Although paid search guarantees achievement of high SERP positions almost immediately, it has several drawbacks. First of all, it requires continuous expenditures by organization. In order to be on top during specific period of time, companies should pay for the privilege throughout the whole period of SEM campaign. Secondly, if a company decides to quit keyword buying process and terminate SEM

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campaign, privileged position in SERP will be downgraded to the organic position. Although, the payment mechanisms offered by search engines are very flexible, paid search is very costly method over the long-run.

Content Correction and Optimization: Although the process seems to be intuitively simple at first glance, it requires a lot of research and analysis. According to Turow (2007), successful web pages should appear to be more focused on the keyword phrases that the target audience types into search queries, not sales or marketing language. Insufficient knowledge about what search website users search for and how it is related to organization's products and services can result in wrong keyword targeting and ineffective keyword optimization. Organizations need to identify the right keywords based upon user intent in the real world and then create or adjust content around those terms (Patel, 2012). Detailed analysis and natural incorporation of popular search terms into the content of website usually results in better search engine rankings and satisfied visitors.

Structuring and Cleaning Markup, URL Optimization: Along with content, companies need to pay a close attention to website's markup. HyperText Markup Language (HTML) is the fundamental coding language in website development. Special tags built in HTML enrich the possibilities of effective keyword targeting and optimization. Deploying special tags and markup attributes in HTML allows to emphasize the significance level of keywords and phrases. For example, HTML headings are blocks of code placed around certain keywords, providing a certain level of prominence and style in the overall page structure (Adams, 2013). Search engine robots analyze website markup during crawling and indexation processes to determine keyword relevance of web pages for various search queries. Overall, structured and clean markup always has a positive contribution in increasing websites' search engine friendliness level.

URL structure is also important because it helps search engines to understand better the relative significance of the given page and its position in website hierarchy (Dover & Dafforn, 2011). As opposed to users who does not pay much attention to image file names or URL of news articles, search engines process that information also for better keyword relevance evaluation. For example, let us compare two general URL formats:

• www.example.com/topic-name/article-name/
• www.example.com/?p=5698.

Search engines have no problem with either variant, but for certain reasons it is better to use the first format, because it contains relevant keywords and is more user-friendly, since one can figure out what the page is about just by looking at the URL's name (Krush, 2013).

Organic Backlink Building and Social Media Marketing: Currently there are many widely-used methods and techniques available for obtaining backlinks. The fundamental difference between methods lies in naturalness of receiving links. Search engines treat a backlink as an organic or natural if it was placed in a relevant web page by real users. As opposed to organic links, their non-organic counterparts are usually put on irrelevant web pages or created by "fake" users.

Currently, social media marketing is one of the most effective methods of gaining organic backlinks. Social networks can serve as a very effective marketing channel for attracting new visitors who can spread links to the promoted website, hence increasing popularity (Macarthy, 2013).

Search engines screen social networks and index outgoing links more often than any other web resources. Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and other social media websites provide lots of opportunities for promoting web pages and increasing traffic.

Website Performance Optimization includes activities that are set to enhance website performance, improve visitor experience and positively contribute to overall search engine friendliness of organization's website. Website performance improvement methods fall under "white" category and do not include any activities that can violate search engine guidelines. Website performance optimization methods include:

• browser and operating system compatibility enhancement activities
• device compatibility enhancement activities
• outgoing links optimization activities
• web page loading time optimization activities
• web server uptime monitoring
• anti-hacking activities and removal of malicious scripts and files.

Sitemap Submission and Canonicalization: Generating and submitting a sitemap file can be helpful when a website has pages that are not easily discoverable (Google, Inc., 2013). Sitemaps can serve as a road map for search engines in website crawling and indexing process. According to Google, the data in Sitemap is used to learn more about site's structure, which will allow to improve crawler schedule and do a better job crawling the site in the future.

Canonicalization is a SEO process of converting data available at multiple locations into canonical or standard form by explicitly indicating to search engines which URL should be used for accessing web pages with duplicate content. In other words, canonicalization simply refers to the concept of picking an authoritative version of a URL and propagating its usage, as opposed to using other variants of that URL (Dover & Dafforn, 2011). For instance, a user will arrive at the same web page if he or she accesses http://www.google.com/ and http://google.com/. Although the content is the same, technically these two pages are different because of the difference in URL's. Search engines reserve the right to automatically determine which one of the identical pages is more authoritative unless webmasters do not explicitly state the preferred one.

Geotargeting and Language Optimization: Geotargeting refers to content adaptation for visitors from different countries and geographical regions (Tavor, 2011). For example, a company which owns a multilingual website can redirect visitors to the different versions of the website based on the visitors' native language. Geotargeting is an online market segmentation process which divides a broad target market into subsets of potential customers based on their location. It allows organizations to implement product differentiation strategies to target geographical segments.

Language optimization and adaptation is the most widespread form of Geotargeting. It is obvious that the number of language options available on a company's website affects the probability of getting new customers in a positive way. Let us pretend a company that plans to sell its products and services in the European market. If its website is available only in English, it will miss search traffic associated with search queries in other European languages. German, French or Spanish people more likely will search information in their native languages, so organizations will always be better off by extending available language options. Therefore, online target market segmentation mechanisms are powerful tools in the hands of SEM specialists for increasing

the volume of search traffic.

"Black" SEM methods

As opposed to search engine friendly methods of SEM, "black" SEM methods, also known as "black-hat" SEO, are strongly inconsistent with all major search engines' official rules and guidelines. The emerging of such methods and techniques is related to search engines' algorithm imperfections, which open the door for manipulating website rankings through "black-hat" SEO. However, it is important to note that these methods are absolutely legal and many organizations are not able to resist to the temptation of such opportunities in SEM.

"Black" Backlink Building: SEM backlink building methods that violate search engine official guidelines include:

• posting links in forums, comment fields or in social networks, which can be considered as spam,

• participating in sophisticated link schemes or exchanging links with other websites in order to increase popularity,

• buying links or paying for posting articles containing backlinks at third party websites.

Despite possible positive effect on search engine rankings, these methods of backlink building can pose serious threats to organizations' website search engine friendliness and overall SEM campaign success. However, due to the fact that it is not an easy task for search engines to identify such practices, many companies ignore the risk associated with search engines' possible sanctions and extensively implement those methods.

Doorways: Google defines doorway pages in the following way: *"Doorway pages are typically large sets of poor-quality pages where each page is optimized for a specific keyword or phrase. In many cases, doorway pages are written to rank for a particular phrase and then funnel users to a single destination. Whether deployed across many domains or established within one domain, doorway pages tend to frustrate users"* (https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/2721311?hl=en). Doorways considered by search engines as a spam and are classified under so-called "black" SEO techniques.

Generally, the content of doorway pages has no informational value for website visitors and contains a link or an automatic redirect to some other target page which is promoted through such doorways. They are basically fake pages that are stuffed with content and highly optimized for 1 or 2 keywords that link to a target or landing page (Wilding, 2013). Search engines tend to automatically and manually exclude doorways from their indices because web pages that have no value to people and used exclusively for search engine deception, in most cases, for profit, contradict with search engines' website quality guidelines.

Hidden Text and Content: Hiding text and links in a web page for keyword optimization purposes is considered as a deceptive action towards search engine robots (Google, Inc., 2013). The logic of such actions by SEO specialists is in achieving high-keyword relevance for targeted queries while keeping the look of a web page unchanged for visitors. For instance, presenting a phrase in white color on a white background, which makes it invisible to human visitors, is one of the widespread ways of content hiding. Search engine officials strongly recommend to avoid such actions and threaten to impose penalties against websites that incorporate content hiding practices.

Cloaking: Cloaking is a method of SEM that violates search engines' official Webmaster Guidelines (https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/35769). Cloaking refers to the practice of presenting different content or URLs to human users and search engines. The purpose of implementing cloaking mechanisms by companies is achieving balance between search engine friendliness and website design. The page created for humans is made in an arbitrary manner, without any restrictions associated with search engine optimization, whereas page designed for search engine spiders is written in accordance with the requirements of SEO.

Keyword Stuffing and HTML Tags Manipulation: Excessive loading of web pages with keywords (relevant or irrelevant) in an attempt to manipulate search engine rankings is known as keyword stuffing. It is considered as a SEM method that violates search engines' rules and guidelines which can lead to banning a website from major search engines indices. According to Google, filling pages with keywords results in a negative user experience, and can harm site's ranking. Keyword stuffing practices involve:

• repeating the same words or phrases in various parts of a web page,

• inserting keywords or popular search queries that are not relevant to the subject of content,

• paraphrasing text blocks for targeting wider range of search queries,

• reproduction of the same content under various filters without substantial value to user with an aim to target filter-related keywords (for instance, grouping same content based on countries or cities).

Finally, HTML tags manipulation practices refer to the inclusion of targeted keywords into special HTML tags and attributes in order to artificially raise their importance and relevance. Although keyword-related HTML tags and attributes are initially designed for facilitating website content evaluation process by search engines, it opens additional door for unethical and deceptive actions to manipulate search engine rankings. For example, <title> tag, which should include title text for a web page, can be filled with irrelevant keywords for purposes of cheating search engines about the true subject of the content. In the same way, image alt attribute, also known as alternative tag, which is designed to present the alternate data to search engine about image description (Adams, 2013), often is used to deceive search engines by providing irrelevant information about image content.

Experimental implementation of "Black" SEM methods

In order to identify the consequences of "black-hat" SEO in modern online business environment, several experiments on live websites were carried out. The main goal of the experimental implementation of various "black" SEM methods was to find out whether search engines are capable to tackle those practices nowadays. Besides, the experiments aim to reveal deceptive behavior identification mechanisms used by search engines and potential risks associated with implementation of "black" SEM methods.

Undertaken Experiments: Totally three separate experiments were undertaken in order to find out how search engines react on various "black" SEM techniques.

1. In order to identify how doorways behave over long period of time and how various search engines classify

doorway pages in SERP, thousands of doorway pages from www.building.am web portal were analyzed. The doorways were promoted through irrelevant "keyword stuffing" practices and do not contain any valuable information for human visitors.

2. To figure out link scheme implementation consequences over long period of time for participating websites, complicated link scheme was realized early in 2012 among 8 independent websites.

3. Finally, to draw a clear picture about consequences of link buying activities on SEM, www.comfy.am was engaged in link buying activities from several popular link markets during 2010-2013.

Results

1. **Doorways and Keyword Stuffing:** The conducted research showed that, creation of doorway pages through keyword stuffing techniques can bring additional search traffic for organizations. The obtained facts about doorways' positions in search results imply that search engines do not possess sufficient abilities to identify and remove such pages from their indices. Although doorways are designed to "steal" search traffic and do not offer any valuable information for website visitors, they can serve as an additional tool for obtaining extra search visits for organizations without search traffic conversion goals. For example, a company that earns profit through selling ad space to third parties based on traffic volume has no defined SEM goals to convert search visitors into paying customers or make visitors to undertake any specific targeted actions after landing on the website. These kinds of organizations are interested mainly in the volume of search traffic and pay less attention on visitors' behavior after entering the website.

2. **Link Scheme:** The research results suggest that link scheme realization practices can serve as a working mechanism for obtaining high quality backlinks. Link schemes, if implemented professionally, will surely increase total backlink mass of promoted websites, which in turn can have a positive effect on search engine rankings over the long run. The conducted experiments had proved that search engines have serious difficulties in identifying complicated link scheme realizations across many domains. On the whole, it can be inferred that implementation of link schemes for backlink building purposes involves low risks and more likely will pay off.

3. **Link Buying:** Unlike the first two experiments, the undertaken link buying activities for www.comfy.am uncovered that paid links represent a serious threat to organizations' success in achieving SEM goals. Search engines constantly track suspicious web pages and take preventive measures against them in order to maintain search results quality. Although link buying is the most rapid way of increasing backlink mass for organizations' website, it is also the most risky one. So in order to avoid possible sanctions from search engines, which can ruin the future of any website, it is strongly recommended not to be involved in link buying activities.

Conclusion

As it was shown, different SEM methods have different attitude from search engines. Some methods are consistent with search engines' official guidelines, whereas others are carried out to manipulate search engine rankings. Organizations need to clearly identify the degree of search engine friendliness of their search marketing campaigns, which can have a direct impact on overall results. Having up-to-date information about search engines' official recommendations regarding various SEM methods can help companies to undertake necessary corrective actions or avoid being accidentally engaged in activities, which are not in line with search engines' guidelines.

Despite search engine officials constantly urge companies to reject "black-hat" SEO techniques, which, according to them, cannot improve SEM results over the long run, many organizations are extensively engaged in "black-hat" search marketing. As the conducted experiments revealed, modern search engines have capabilities to identify and penalize websites, which are buying links to increase popularity. However, it was also shown that sophisticated link schemes and doorways are less risky as compared with paid links. Due to the fact that search engines have difficulties in fighting against several "black" SEM methods, many companies prefer to use those techniques to achieve better search engine rankings.

Apparently, in parallel with search engines' algorithm improvements, "white" SEM methods will become the optimal choice for more and more companies engaged in online business activities. In the meantime, as long as "black-hat" SEO pays off, it will be used by many companies despite on the risk associated with its implementation and long-term consequences. Although it is impossible to precisely predict how search engines will succeed in fighting against "black-hat" SEO in the future, obviously it will be among the most important directions of search engines' evolution in the nearest future.

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