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# Along Came a Spider

Search Engine Marketing



## Executive Summary

Customers who use the Internet are becoming more sophisticated. They are cutting directly through the billions of web pages to the single page they want. Their ally is the search engine spider. This new dynamic puts the customer in charge, leveling the playing field. That's good news for mid-market companies, because they can effectively compete with the largest companies through Search Engine Marketing.

### Searching - a new customer dynamic

iProspect asked people how they find web sites. The July 2002 survey showed search engines are the most widely used way to find new web sites. About 77% often use search engines compared to 3% using banner ads. E-mail links (22%), offline media (30%), and web links (42%) round out the field.

Not only is search engine use growing, people are getting better at using them, said Matthew Berk, a senior analyst at Jupiter Research. Berk says many Internet users initially find sites through search engines. Then they either enter the URLs (uniform resource locators) or use bookmarks. This may account for the increase in direct navigation.

A recent survey confirms the importance of direct navigation. The StatMarket division of WebSideStory Inc. conducted an internet user survey finding 64% use direct navigation. That's up from 53% just one year ago.

"Meandering is decreasing. This is a sign that the market is maturing," said Geoff Johnston, vice president of product management for StatMarket.

Search and remember followed by direct navigation is the new customer dynamic. Sites chosen for direct navigation are clearly the big winners. Your company can take advantage of this new customer dynamic by adding Search Engine Marketing (SEM) to your online marketing strategy.

### Search Engine Marketing - the solution

When people search for new information, they provide the search engine with a phrase made of keywords. The search

engine then retrieves links to pages that contain the keywords. Before the search engine displays the list of page links, it sorts them by relevance. The most relevant are placed at the top of the list. The least are placed at the bottom. The list is then divided into pages usually containing 10 to 20 links. Each page holds the list of links and a navigation aide that lets the searcher page through the list.

This simple exchange - person provides keywords; search engine provides sorted relevant list - is the key to understanding how to build your company's SEM strategy.

### Search Engines - the information model

Search engines are very sophisticated software systems. They work much like a research library. You ask the librarian a question (you provide the search engine a keyword phrase). The librarian returns a stack of reading material (the search engine provides a sorted list of links). The librarian answers the question quickly because the content of the library has been cataloged and stored in a card catalog (the search engine answers the query quickly because web pages have been cataloged and stored in a database).

There are two ways that search engines keep the collection and catalogs up to date:

1. The first way is to have people read the pages.

Pages are submitted for review by the author or his agent. People read, organize and classify based on their judgment. Technically, these search engines are called directories. Yahoo is perhaps the world's best example.

2. The second way is to have computer programs called spiders read the pages.

Spiders crawl through the World Wide Web looking for pages. They read, organize and classify based on the actual content of each page. Google is perhaps the best example of this kind of search engine.

Search engines like Yahoo, based on people performing the classification, have been dominant until now. However, the sheer magnitude of the World Wide Web is overwhelming the human effort. Driven by an emphasis on actual content, coupled with increasingly sophisticated spiders, search engines like Google are now dominant. The recent consolidations in the search engine sector suggest that even more sophisticated automated approaches are developing.

## Spiders - the search for relevant content

Spiders review a web page to determine its relevant keywords. That's why spiders love the written word. This means spiders think good pages are like good books.

Books follow well-established practices to convey relevant content through the written word. Like people, spiders are growing more sophisticated at reliably identifying relevant content.

Fortunately, spiders are adopting a fairly good set of guides to relevant web pages. But no matter how sophisticated spiders have become, they are all based on these two simple rules:

1. The more often a keyword phrase occurs on a page the more important it is (more is preferred to less)
2. The earlier a keyword phrase occurs on a page the more important it is (just get to the point)

These two rules reflect the Internet user's preference to rapidly scan for content. In other words, if you write pages using the Internet writing style, both people and spiders will agree on their relevance.

The real question is how do you organize a web page so that it is the most relevant to your audience. After all, people not spiders buy your company's products and services.

## Search Rank - people only pick the leaders

Lets look at how people react to the information provided by the librarian - the search results. The iProspect survey found that 48% of the searchers expect to find the answer to their query on the first results page. Another 28% do not scroll past the second page of search results. 78% of searchers abandon their query if the first three pages of results do not yield an answer. Consequently, Web sites that have not attained top search engine rankings are effectively invisible.

"One of the most surprising findings is that many search engine users believe that top listings equal top brands," said iProspect CEO, Fredrick Marckini. "Beyond augmenting lead generation and driving increased qualified search traffic to their Web sites, online marketers need to take steps to garner top rankings in search results in order for their products or services to be perceived as top brands within their industry."

## Top Placement - cream rises to the top

Marketers understood this effect long before the advent of the Internet. Ries and Ries explain this effect in their book *The 22 Immutable Laws of Branding*.

Law number 6 is the Law of Credentials. It states that the crucial ingredient in the success of any brand is its claim to authenticity. When you have the right credentials, prospects believe what you say about your brand.

As Ries and Ries point out, leadership is the most direct way to establish credentials. Once you are on top it is hard to lose your spot. The iProspect survey shows search engine placement leadership establishes credentials.

Since there is such a high premium for leadership, a lot of effort has gone into developing strategies to get to the top of search engine placements. An entire industry, Search Engine Optimization (SEO), has developed around these strategies.

Along with legitimate strategies that boost the relevance of a page, less scrupulous techniques have arisen. These techniques do not contribute to the value of the page itself; rather, they contribute to page rank only. These techniques are called search engine spamming.

Search engines penalize spamming. They place the offending pages at the bottom of the list. Some search engines have policies that exclude offending sites entirely.

### Search Results - you get one first impression

The first impression your web page makes is its entry on the search engine's results list. The average person will read the entire entry in just a few seconds. At that time, the reader will either click on your entry or skip to the next.

The entry is made from two pieces. The page's title is shown on the first line. The description follows, usually in a smaller type face.

### Titles - grab the searcher's attention

Spiders think the title should reflect the page's content. They check the title against relevant words on the page. If there is a good match, it will boost the page's relevancy. People also think the title is important. If the title matches what they are looking for, it gets their attention, leading them to further action. Every page needs a title.

There are three considerations in writing the title:

1. Company web sites exist to increase awareness of the company itself. While your company may never be a household word, it can become a recognized name in your industry. This recognition is created through exposure and repetition. Use the company's name in the title as often as it makes sense.
2. Product web sites should emphasize the product not the company. The company name should not be used in the title. The one exception to this is so called banner branding. If you use your company name as part of the product name, for example Sony Walkman®, then use the company name in the title.
3. Internet web sites can be seen anywhere in the world. They give you global reach. However, your company may not need or want global reach. Your market may be limited by geography. Titles that include place names such as cities, states, regions, or countries boost relevancy.

To create a title, identify all of the keyword phrases on the page. Using the two most important keyword phrases, write a short summary sentence describing the content. Rewrite the sentence as a noun phrase.

### Description - peak my interest

Spiders give little if any weight to a description. However, People think the description reflects the page's content. A good description builds interest in the page, raising the desire to click on the entry.

If the description is omitted, most search engines use the first words from the web page in its place. That is why you will sometimes see search results like this:

Acme Spool - [home] [about us] [links] copyright 2003.

In this case, the search engine picked up navigational links and a copyright notice from the web page. The search results make it look like there is something wrong with the page.

To create a description, identify all topic sentences in each paragraph. Condense these into a short two-sentence summary of the page.

### Content - engage readers not spiders

Each page of your Internet site is part of a conversation between you and your customer. The purpose of the conversation is to strengthen a mutually profitable relationship.

There are several techniques commonly used to structure the conversation. AIDA - Attention, Interest, Desire and Action - is commonly used to structure selling conversations.

It's widely accepted that you get about 8 seconds to grab the reader's attention. Despite the increase in broadband Internet services, designing for 28.8K transmission speeds is still the norm. This means a page should be no bigger than 35K in size.

People tend to think that the Home Page is the place readers enter your site. This would be true, if web sites were books. But they are hypertext -- a reader can jump directly onto any page from a search engine. Consequently, the 8-second rule applies to all of you web site pages.

In contrast, Spiders think the more words on a page the better. They like pages that contain 200 to 300 words. This is roughly the number of words on a double spaced 8 ½ X 11 page. They read the words looking for relevant content. They ignore things like images, Flash animations and sound files.

In effect you get a budget for each web page. You must fit navigation, 200 - 300 words of content, plus images, Flash animations and sound files into 35K. It must engage the reader, be visually interesting, and further your profitable relationship. All delivered within 8 seconds.

## Keywords - make spiders work for people

Each page on your company's web site must fulfill two larger purposes. It's potentially the first point of contact with a prospect. It's one part of a selling process. This is why structuring content is the main skill in creating effective web pages.

While nobody likes to admit it, your high school English teacher was right. Start all of your writing with an outline. Structure the outline based on where you are in the selling process.

On any given page you can make at most one main point and two supporting points. Use a keyword phrase for each point. This means you will use no more than three unique keyword phrases on a page.

There is a rule of thumb about keywords called the "three-two-one" rule. It says that the keyword phrase associated with the main point should appear three times. The keyword phrase associated with the major supporting point appears two times. The minor supporting point key word phrase is used just once. When you follow this rule, both people and spiders agree about what is relevant on a page.

As people become more sophisticated at searching, they are using longer keyword phrases. Three word phrases are the most common today. However, four word phrases are the second most common and appear to be gaining in popularity.

Your English teacher told you an outline is like dry bones. You have to add flesh to them to make things interesting. It works out that there is another rule of thumb about key words that tells us how much flesh to add. It is called the

"8% solution". It says that 8% of the total word count on a page should be in keyword phrases. At higher percentages, people generally feel that you are beating them over the head and tend to tune out the message. Spiders on the other hand can and do tolerate much higher percentages.

If all of the keyword phrases on a given page were four words in length, 24 words (six keyword phrases with four words in each keyword phrase) on the page will be from keyword phrases. These 24 words should be no more than 8% of the total words on a page. This means there are at least 300 words on a page.

Similarly, if all of the keyword phrases on a given page were three words in length, 18 words (six keyword phrases with three words in each keyword phrase) on the page will be from keyword phrases. These 18 words should be no more than 8% of the total words on a page. This means there are at least 225 words on a page.

In short you can easily put an effective message into the 200 - 300 words that a spider expects to find on a page.

## Links - the path to the rest of the web

One of the characteristics of web pages that set them apart from all other media is the hyperlink. A hyperlink (link) creates the ability to jump directly to another point in cyberspace. Both people and spiders think links boost the value of a page.

A link has two parts - the text or image associated with the link and the address of the link in cyberspace.

Both people and spiders think that the text associated with a link is important. People use it to decide if they want to follow the link. Spiders use the text to determine page relevance. Consequently, we no longer see "click here" as the link text. It wastes a chance to boost page relevancy. It also interrupts the conversation with the person.

While people don't seem to care about the address, spiders are picky about them:

- They follow static links (for example - href="/products.htm")
- They ignore dynamic links (for example - href="mypage.php?id=shoes&sox=running=attire.com")
- They can't find links created by JavaScript.

Spiders take the number of links to and from a page into account when scoring a page's relevance. If the spider cannot follow a link, it discounts it. Since spiders can only follow static links, it is in your best interest to use them.

Links should be integrated into the content of the page. Link text that is also a keyword phrase coupled with a static link address counts like a triple word score in Scrabble®.

Page and site navigation aids can also boost page relevancy. Link text made of title or keyword information helps both people and spiders. Using static links lets the spider follow the link to more relevant content.

### Site maps - the world is not flat

Most web sites contain many pages organized into a hierarchical structure like the chapters of a book. This makes it easy for people to find their way around.

Spiders think that the earlier you find a keyword phrase, the more important it is. Consequently, the deeper a page lies in the hierarchy, the less important the spider thinks it is.

Site maps help both people and spiders find relevant pages. They function like a table of contents for your web site. Since they are found near the top of the hierarchy and contain a large number of links, spiders think they are very relevant. People use them to easily locate and jump to relevant content.

By following a few simple rules, the site map can be valuable to both people and spiders:

1. Make it easy to find the site map:
  - Create a text link to the site map at the bottom of your home page
  - The static link text should read "site map"
  - The site map should be kept in a file named "sitemap.htm"
2. Take advantage of your own hard work:
  - Use the navigation structure for categories
  - Use the page title for links to a page
  - Use the keyword phrases for links to content
  - Use static links to each page.

### ALT - closed captioning for spiders

Web sites usually contain more than the written word. They also contain pictures, animations, sounds, video clips and the like. People think a picture is worth a thousand words. Spiders think they are worth nothing.

Fortunately, the ALT tag gives us a way around the dilemma. The ALT tag puts a caption on the things spiders ignore. Spiders read the caption, because it is words. We take advantage of the words by using keyword phrases in the ALT tag. Thus the spider can properly weight the value of things like pictures.

### SEM - they don't come home without it

Corporate web sites are one vehicle in your company's integrated marketing communications. Like the rest of your marketing communication, you have to get the customers' attention before you can talk to them. "Our survey proved beyond any doubt that search engines are the number one media for driving online business," said Dr. Amanda Watlington, Director of Research at iProspect.

Unlike mass communication, web sites not only let you talk to the customer, they let you listen to the customer. Danny Sullivan, founder of Search Engine Watch, says, "With search engines, millions of people are telling you 'their' messages: what they want to buy, purchase or get information about. You don't broadcast to them; instead, it's the reverse, they broadcast to you."

Just like the rest of your marketing communications, your web site should be constantly growing and evolving. Paul Bruemmer, CEO of Web-Ignite, says, "A site should be designed as a work in process, one that can be updated on a regular basis. The timing of SEM integration may not be critical. What's important is that site designers and their clients budget for SEM strategies as part of the design process -- before, during, or after the site is completed."

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