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Search is officially social

The impact of social media on SEO

Social media is the hottest topic in online marketing today. Companies that know how to utilize this form of media are using it to great effect in their online campaigns and optimization strategies. Companies that aren't in-the-know understand that they will need to figure things out and incorporate its use into their mix sooner or later if they want to stay in the game. It is the great e-Commerce dream of the 21st century- where there's potentially a pot of gold hidden in every Facebook page. However, to tap into that pot of gold, it requires careful planning, dedication and creativity to capture the imagination of the audience. In other words it has to be really, really good!

Social Media IS a powerful tool from a narrow Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

site to yours, can be measured and is used as a vote of confidence for a site. If your site is good enough to merit having a human being do some work to give credit to your site and its content, then your site must be something special. This is one of the more powerful measurements for Google. In essence, people vote with their links. This is also one of the most misunderstood techniques in SEO and thus one of the most abused. One good qualified link from a superior source is worth a lot more than a horde of links purchased from a black hat SEO firm. Link with care or Google may blacklist your site, setting it back in the search engines tenfold.

Another amazing element in the algorithm is User Generated Content (UGC). If a website is so good that it inspires somebody to actually take time out of their

swamped with data. Inbound links can appear in their thousands and UGC can blossom as people comment, share and spread the content. The content must be good, right? The content must have done well on the other 198 variables in the algorithm, right?

To answer those questions, type in "ha ha ha" in Google. Bet you see some video results being offered, one of which is a baby that was posted on November 1, 2006 in YouTube. Check it out and join the other 106 million+ people that have made this one of the most widely viewed content pages on the Internet. That averages at about 100,000 views per day. The amazing thing about it though is it's a video on YouTube. It's made with Flash. It's invisible to the search engines. So how does it get on page 1 of Google for "ha ha ha"?

Google can't see it, but it sees so much material around it (UGC) and sees so many links to it that describe it with the key words "ha ha ha" that it knows to place it number 1 on page 1 in its search results. This video went viral. Google trusts the people, saw 100,000 visits a day and gave it what it was due. Social Media is the voice of the people and the Search Engines must be paying attention. And they obviously are!

2010 will see the introduction by Google.com of a major adjustment to its algorithm called "Caffeine". Quietly developed in 2009 and being tested today, this under the hood tweak to the Google SERP (Search Engine Results Page), formula will allow Google to index pages even faster. The changes are being introduced to give more weight to Social Media, Facebook & Twitter content. Google hopes that it can now keep up with the frequency of changes in social media.

The rush by Google and BING also saw separate deals with Twitter, as the search giants know Social Media might begin to encroach onto search engines' turf and they need to be relevant. However, we still don't expect Facebook or Twitter to replace search this year! (Even though the 2009 year ended with a surprise. Facebook surpassed Google traffic (visits) on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, repeating the feat again on New Years Day as reported by HITWISE).

But what does this all mean in the big Search Engine and Social Media picture? Social Media can influence search results. Search has officially become "Social". If the people like it, they will spread it, give it kudos and Google will rank it accordingly. Too bad that baby wasn't doing some product placement at the time. He'd be set for life! **DM**

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perspective as well as from the broader and ultimately more relevant perspective of getting a conversion on your website.

To understand why Social Media is so powerful we need to do a fast overview of search engine behaviour.

In brief: Search Engines have many measuring sticks for rating a site. Various sources have suggested that there are roughly 200 different variables in the Google algorithm that are used to determine if a search result is worth presenting to a user. That's a lot of data crunching on the part of Google's search bots. Sadly, the bots don't get it right all of the time. However, the good news is that Google algorithms also rely on humans to rate a site for them through links and their own contributions.

Inbound links, meaning the act of a webmaster creating an actual link from their

busy day to add to the content- whether it is by adding a comment to a blog or by passing it along to others with some additional comments- then this must truly be a good bit of content.

For those paying attention you can detect a theme here. Google is looking for human behaviour. Adding a link, adding content, passing the item along to others etc., is a reaction that can be automated, and it is! But it happens naturally too- and it's measurable. This is where we come back to Social Media.

Social Media is, in theory, not controlled. It's SOCIAL media - society at large takes an interest and runs with it. When a group of people like something a lot they share it, talk about it and contribute to it. In other words it spreads on its own in an uncontrolled fashion ie: it goes viral. When that happens, search engines are

Case study: Invisible Fence® of Western Canada

Dmworks.ca provides visibility among customers for Invisible Fence of Western Canada

Effective marketing can mean the difference between business success and failure – no matter how large or small the organization. Small businesses, however, often face added challenges – from balancing both the cost and time it takes to assemble and execute a successful campaign with limited resource pools, to the implications of legislation such as the Do Not Call Registry that govern how organizations outreach to their customers.

As more SMBs look for do-it-yourself options, many are turning to online tools to economically reach out to both new and existing customers.

One such example is Invisible Fence of Western Canada. For the last 35 years, Invisible Fence® has been keeping dogs and cats safe at home by providing pet owners with trusted technology, proven training procedures – and total peace of mind. The company pioneered the concept of electronic pet containment, developed its renowned Safe Dog® and Perfect Start™ Pet Training methods, and is proud to be the industry's leader with the most experienced local dealer network, nationwide.

Cynthia and Greg Deitz are the owners/operators of Invisible Fence of Western Canada. The company sells Invisible Fence solutions as well as other product lines, such as collars, pet doors and behavioural solutions, for pet owners, reaching a territory that includes most of Alberta and interior British Columbia. In addition to overseeing a large territory, Deitz manages a fluctuating staff, employing six full-time employees throughout the year, and growing to 16 employees during its busy spring, summer and fall seasons.

The Challenge

Invisible Fence of Western Canada regularly relied on advertising, radio, e-mail marketing and direct mail to reach its current and potential customers. Nearly 70 per cent of marketing efforts put forth by Invisible Fence of Western Canada focus on awareness, with the remaining 30 percent centered on retention of existing customers.

As a small business, Invisible Fence

of Western Canada was always on the lookout for an effective way to reach its current and new customers that balanced cost and ease of use. After seeing an ad in an invoice from Pitney Bowes, Deitz decided to examine the company's dmworks.ca as a solution for its direct marketing efforts.

Results

Dmworks.ca (www.dmworks.ca) is a do-it-yourself online tool that is designed to make it easy for small or medium-sized businesses to harness the power of professional direct mail. The tool enables organizations to create and send direct mail right from their own desktop with access to easy-to-use templates, stock images, mailing lists, templates for personalised web landing pages and e-mail campaigns. Dmworks.ca also includes provisions for tracking and reporting.

"I used to work as a marketing manager at a large company and was used to having agencies create all my marketing collateral for me," says co-owner Cynthia Deitz. "Now as a small business owner, I have to do it all myself. Having a cost-effective application like dmworks.ca is a great alternative."

Deitz uses the online tool to promote events and field days, which are often co-hosted by local vet clinics. The tool and direct mail have been a particularly effective way for Invisible Fence of Western Canada to reach customers located in rural parts of Alberta and British Columbia, especially in areas where dial-up Internet connections are still prevalent.

"I can crank out pieces in one hour whereas it was more time consuming to do it before," said Deitz. "The entire process is very efficient, from proofing to merging mailing lists."

According to Deitz, dmworks.ca has had a positive impact on her business since implementation: "I'm seeing a 6:1 return on investment," she notes. **DM**

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