
SEARCHING FOR THE ANSWER



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For agencies, the explosive growth of search marketing is like *deja voodoo* all over again.

As the huge numbers turning out for conferences such as Search Engine Strategies attest, search marketing is hot. By some estimates, all current growth in online marketing expenditures is attributable to search.

And why shouldn't it be so? Search is the number two online activity (number one

is porn—just kidding, it's email). Search is, well, how people find things. Without search, the Internet is just a big, inscrutable, foreboding ... thingamabobber.

Speaking of big, inscrutable thingamabobbers—agencies are approaching search with the same trepidation previously heaped upon the Web itself.

Agency people, you know what I mean. Close your eyes and regress back to the mid-90's. Surely, you kept telling yourself, this Internet thing is going to blow over. Let's hang tight and pretend it's not there. And then when it could no longer be ignored, many agencies did jump in, making some wildly ill-timed and ill-chosen investments. The only people who got rich were the court-appointed bankruptcy trustees.

So you got burned once. That doesn't mean your analysis—"the Internet is important"—was wrong. Look at all the categories—e.g., automotive, electronics, financial services, high-tech, pharma, travel—in which the Internet has become a critical

part of the purchase process—that is, your clients' customers' purchase process.

Now let's fast forward to the present. In just the last month, three executives from interactive agencies have told me, in essence, We're not selling search, we don't know how to make money from search, we don't have the technology.

Insert the word "Internet" in place of "search" in the previous sentence and it's 1995 all over again. This head-in-the-sand thing seems to work for ostriches, but it's not a great client growth and management strategy.

Search marketing isn't about technology, it's about—get this—marketing. Understanding an audience's needs, how your product addresses those needs, and making a smart, persuasive connection between the two. The technology component—tracking performance, automating submission and reporting processes—is, as technology always should be, just an enabler. Agencies don't need to execute the technology any more than they need to have in-house directors, production companies and editors to execute television production.

Don't get me wrong; creatives are not likely to get famous writing search engine copy, and agencies are not going to put today's text-based "sponsored links" on their reels, but any agency true to its commitment to its clients can't reasonably ignore the importance of search. Nor, from a self-interest standpoint, should any agency ever want to suggest to a client that another company insert itself between the agency and the client's brands.

So, agencies: Bring search strategy and creative in-house. Make friends with search infrastructure companies. And stop ignoring the importance of search to your clients'—by which I mean, to your—business.