

What Makes Search So Strategic for B-to-B?

Serious business-to-business marketers are taking notice of their companies' search engine performance. And for good reason: several recent studies have shown that a large majority of B-to-B buyers begin their research into new technologies or products by going to a search engine.

More importantly, they're finding that prospects are using search at all parts of the buying process—not just the end, when search functions as a virtual catalog or Yellow Pages for *ready-to-buy* prospects, but also at the beginning, when they're looking for possible solutions to the problems or issues they are confronting.

Search engines are where B-to-B prospects and buyers are. And B-to-B marketers are earning a significant reward from their efforts to improve search performance. However, the path to better search engine performance has, for many, been shrouded in a fog of uncertainty.

Search Performance Decoded

When you cut through all the jargon about complex algorithms and proprietary technology, you discover that search is designed with one goal: making it easier for users to find what they're looking for. The complications have arisen because a few less-scrupulous companies have attempted to *fool* search engines to gain higher search rankings.

Search engines have fought back fiercely, devising more ingenious ways to detect fraud. That single-minded devotion to the user is an unmixed blessing, forcing B-to-B marketers to focus on clear communications and a solid understanding of markets and technologies.

B-to-B Strategic Search

B-to-B Strategic Search is a customer-centric, content-driven approach to successful B-to-B search performance. It uses all available tools to help B-to-B marketers achieve a presence in the search results of users who are looking for their technology or product. It thus includes both search engine optimization (SEO), the practice of modifying your site to improve organic search results, and search engine marketing (SEM), or paid search.

The important elements of Strategic Search include: keyword analysis, content development, integration and analytics for continuous improvement.

Keyword Analysis

Combining various keyword analysis tools with an understanding of your market and your technology helps you develop a list of strategic keywords. It's important to get outside your internal world and discover the words users in your industry actually type into those little boxes. It's not about having a lot of keywords. It's about having the right ones.

Content Development

The search engines are designed to favor sites that offer relevant information—and reward them with higher rankings. As a result, the real key to improving search performance is solid content. Especially, the development of keyword-rich content and the appropriate use of key words and phrases, not only in each web page's meta data, but in the page content as well. Of course, this assumes that programming best practices are used so that search engine spiders can find your content as easily as humans can.

Integration with Your Program

Because of its growing use by buyers in all phases of the buying process, search now has an important role in any B-to-B marketing strategy. What you've learned about your target market's use of keywords, for instance, should be reflected throughout your communications.

Suppose, as a result of your keyword analysis, you've discovered that your audience is more likely to call your product a *widget* than a *gadget*. That means you should be making sure you use the term *widget* in your ads, PR releases, brochures, direct mail. And when these documents are posted on the web as PDFs, as they often are, the keywords should be incorporated into the meta data.

Analytics for Continuous Improvement

Good search results require a commitment to a process of continuous improvement. That means looking at the results constantly and making changes in an attempt to improve the results. You can also use information you gain from search to improve web pages—adding keywords and improving the pages' relevance to the user.

Search Engine Marketing

Much of what has been described here relates directly to search engine optimization (SEO), or optimizing your site and your program to improve performance in the organic searches that appear in the center of the search engine results pages. But the *sponsored links* that appear in the right-hand column (and at the top of the page in a shaded area in Google) offer another way to reach users who are searching for your subject matter.

This approach, called search engine marketing—SEM—allows you to purchase placement for specific keywords in these sponsored link areas. Originally SEM was promoted when organic search results were not satisfactory. So you paid to be present when you weren't ranking very highly. But now, SEM has become much more—a very cost-effective source of leads. And, thus, SEM has become an important new marketing technique in its own right.

**B-TO-B
STRATEGIC SEARCH IS
A CUSTOMER-CENTRIC
APPROACH
EMPHASIZING:**

- Keyword analysis to find the keywords prospects are using.
- Content optimized for search.
- Integration with the rest of your program.
- Analytics to allow continuous improvement of search performance.

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