

# Not showing up in natural search? Here's how to set goals and get a bigger SEO budget

By Nathan Safran and Seth Dotterer

**W**e have examined many aspects of natural search while helping companies with their search engine optimization efforts. In the fourth quarter of 2009 we studied the SEO success of the online merchants in the Internet Retailer Top 500. The results weren't pretty.

To measure how successful each retailer is in natural search visibility, we first had to decide which terms were most important to each merchant. We assumed search marketers voted with their wallets in prioritizing the keywords they bid on for paid search ads, and we gathered each Top 500 retailer's 200 most

expensive paid keywords from Internet research firm SpyFu. Then we analyzed where each retailer showed up in Google natural search results for each of its 200 most important keywords.

In total, we studied 88,758 keywords, on which the retailers spent more than \$2.4 million per day for paid search ads. In terms of natural search, these retailers suffered from poor visibility. Only 33% of the keywords appeared in the top 50 natural search results and on average a retailer showed up on page six in

natural search results, where a listing is not likely to be seen very often. A mere 7% of companies showed a significant number of keywords at the top of the natural search results (position 1-50, or the first five pages of Google results) and 38% of companies were completely invisible.

That sounds bad, but there's no need to panic. There are tactics that

We suggest following a three step, metric-driven process to identify the size of the market opportunity:

## 1. Discover non-branded keywords.

Each retailer must determine the most important terms to prioritize for SEO. For instance, if you sell patio furniture, which terms do consumers use when looking to buy that kind of

product? One of the best of the keyword discovery tools is Google's Adwords Keyword Tool. Several retailers have found it best to be conservative in this early step by setting match type to "exact" rather than "broad" to avoid irrelevant keyword suggestions and to focus on the

words that will drive the most traffic.

We've seen some clients taking on too much, while others are overly cautious. Some retailers take on too many keywords, and find they are unable to compete outside of their sweet spot. Others don't capitalize on opportunity within their reach. We worked with one major Internet retailer that sells tens of thousands of products and only tracks 500 keywords.

The best approach is to bite off what you can chew initially, then look to continuously expand the zone



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can improve results, such as linking product terms on a retailer's site to related content on other web sites and populating site content with the keywords shoppers use to search the web for a retailer's products. But first you need a plan, and a way to measure your success.

## Define the opportunity

A crucial first step is to figure out the market opportunity—in other words, how much more business you could get if you moved up higher in Google search results.

of coverage as the SEO campaign progresses. There is no arbitrary number of keywords you should manage; rather, take on the volume of keywords you can manage and track now, then expand as you can.

Analyzing a pay-per-click campaign can be a good way to begin exposing the keywords that generate the most visits, conversions and page views. And search marketers should continuously use pay-per-click throughout the SEO campaign to discover new keyword opportunities.

## 2. Gather search volumes and ranks.

Once you've identified the keywords to prioritize, gather the monthly search volume for those search terms from the Google Adwords Tool. Many retailers recommend using Google's global monthly search volume (12-month average)

site for each keyword. This will give you a sense for what improving your rank position for a given keyword could mean in potential additional visitors to your site.

In the example below, we plugged in the Google search volume of 24.9 million and current search rank of 25 for "digital camera." We lopped 40% off the search volume to conservatively account for searchers who click on a paid search result or do not click on any search result at all to arrive at the factored Google Monthly Search of 14.94 million.

Using the AOL click-through rate (derived from click data AOL released several years ago), we estimated the number of visits that the digital camera keyword would generate for the search rank positions of 25 and 1 (see chart).

keyword search position by an average of 15% in Q1 and 20% in Q2" or "grow natural search traffic by 15% in Q1 and 20% in Q2."

There are numerous ways to keep staff abreast of how they're approaching these goals. One search marketer we interviewed among the Internet Retailer Top 500 keeps his firm's search engine optimization progress front and center by displaying key metrics on a big screen TV in the "SEO pit," where the search optimization team works.

Another marketing manager from a smaller retailer says he allocates a minimum of three months from the start of a search engine optimization campaign before expecting positive results. But, once three months have passed, he sets specific search

## How 'digital camera' racks up visits

| Keyword        | Current Rank | Google Global Monthly Search Volume | Google Monthly Search Volume (Factored) | Estimated Current CTR* (Share) | Estimated Current Annual Visits | Projected Google Rank | New CTR* (Share) | New Annual Visits (Estimation from CTR) | Change in Annual Visits |
|----------------|--------------|-------------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|---|-------------------------|
| Digital Camera | 25           | 24,900,000                          | 14,940,000                              | 0.20%                          | 358,560                         | 1                     | 42.40%           | 76,014,720                              | 75,656,160              |

\* Click-through rate

Source: Conductor Inc.

rather than the local monthly search volume (last month's search volume) for the most accurate view of a keyword's activity.

Then note where you currently rank on each keyword. Now you are ready to quantify how much business you're not getting by not ranking higher in natural search results.

## 3. Estimate the potential traffic lift.

After gathering search volumes and rankings, plug them into a spreadsheet and use a click-through rate curve to define how many consumers could be directed to your

Moving up from 25 to the top spot would generate nearly 76 million additional visitors per year. That kind of data can help obtain management buy-in. Approaching management with "We have an unrealized opportunity of 76 million visitors" is far more powerful than "I need budget for my SEO campaign."

### Set a metrics timeline

Setting specific goals and timelines is important to maintain focus during the long haul. This might include goals such as "increase

position and traffic goals for each keyword. "Even if we don't hit every goal, we have to have something concrete we are aiming at," the manager says.

Despite the progress that has been made over the last several years in industry awareness, tactics and technology, search engine optimization is still a relatively immature industry. Entering a campaign with a guiding framework will help search marketers successfully monitor and execute their campaigns and keep SEO front and center companywide. ●