



"turning data into dollars"

Tom's Ten Data Tips – November 2006

Search Engines

Search engines are the window to the web. In May 2004 there were 50 Million websites, in October 2006 this doubled to 100 Million websites (Netcraft research). Google recently counted 8 Billion unique pages. Given some 6,5 Billion searches per month, it becomes clear how important search engines are to organize and get access to these oceans of data.

Visitors can type in your url, follow links to your site, or use a search engine. The first two, you have no control over. For "free search" however, the search engine determines which pages are returned, and it is crucially important to show up as high as possible. And this you *can* influence.

1. Write Copy For People, *Not* For Search Engines

Although it is very important to write your web content with an eye out on the search engines, it is more important that people who visit your site, like it and find it enjoyable to read. If the site is easy to use, they might even consider revisiting. You develop content for visitors, after all.

2. *Before You Build Your Site, First Do Keyword Analysis*

Keyword analysis is the process of discovering the words that users type in most frequently when searching for content similar to your site. It is extremely important to connect to the exact same language as your prospective users.

An example of this might be that airlines speak about "budget airfares". However, customers rarely type this in. Instead, they search for "cheap tickets". If you want to draw web traffic with your search engine strategy, you'd better connect to "cheap tickets"!

3. Wordtracker Is The Preferred Tool For Keyword Analysis

Although there are several free tools for keyword analysis, there is one tool that stands out. It is more user friendly and has comprehensive functionality. All serious professionals use wordtracker.com, and the

license fee (\$53/month, \$267/year) is easily offset by faster and superior results.

4. Incoming Links Have A Big Effect On Search Rankings

The fundamental technology that gave Google its advantage over competing search engines came from the reliance on *hyperlinks*. Sergey Brin and Larry Page invented their proprietary algorithm while at Stanford together. It is constantly being updated, but the cornerstone is still that incoming links signify importance of a page.

Another reason why incoming links are so important is that they "automatically" generate additional traffic. And more traffic means the page appears more relevant and important to search engines.

5. Nurture Both On Page And Off Page Factors

A distinction is made between "on page" and "off page" factors. On page factors are elements like the site's code. In earlier times, for instance, meta tags had quite an influence on the search rankings (not anymore). But still, the web site's make up is quite important.

Off page factors are things like incoming links. There are two things to attend to: the link itself (see tip #6) and its placement. By selectively choosing where they come from (if you influence this through a link campaign) and where they point to, page rankings are heavily influenced.

6. Use Links Smartly

If you can influence the formatting of a hyperlink, this is highly desirable. Instead of "newsletter", this page is referred to by "search engines", for example. The worst choice is wasted anchor text (the underlined words) like "read more", etc.

But also the text in the box that appears when you hover over a link with your mouse is interpreted by search engines, and determines relevance of the destination page. If you suggest this, in many cases a referrer may be happy to make use of html code you supply.

7. You Can Buy Or Sell Traffic With Paid Search

For *buying* traffic, Google Adwords and Yahoo Sponsored Search are the largest services. An alternative is to deal with so-called affiliate

networks. In all cases, there's an exchange of money for incoming traffic. As business models get smarter, you'll begin to pay for results (PPL – Pay Per Lead) in stead of clicks (PPC – Pay Per Click).

To *sell* your web traffic, Google AdSense and Yahoo Publisher Network offer the possibility to rotate outgoing links on your site that lead your visitors elsewhere.

Arbitrage is (currently) possible, but few have had the 'muscle' and technology to pull this off. Google and Yahoo don't like this.

8. Focus On Google, Yahoo, And MSN – Forget The Rest

Although there are many search services, there are only few sources you need to focus on. This is for two reasons: most are quite small, and the smaller ones "borrow" (and recombine) results from the larger systems. Therefore, look at Google foremost, because it is so dominant (50%+). Then, possibly consider Yahoo and MSN, because they produce original results.

A little known source is DMOZ.org that is very important because it feeds many other systems. Google and others rely on its taxonomy. It's a directory where you can try to get your site listed (not easy but worthwhile).

9. Developing Web Content With Search Engines In Mind Is Like Writing Modern Poetry

The essence of good copy writing that is optimized for search engines, is that you need to 'stuff' the text with specific key words. These are the outcome of your keyword analysis (see tip #3). But you never want phrases to appear convoluted (see tip #1).

So although the words don't rhyme, the writer is guided by very tight boundaries as to which words to put in, and where. The most important keywords should be headings, come early or possibly first in the sentence, and be in boldface type. As an example: "Search engines are the window to the web", works better for the keyword *search engines* than "The window to the web are search engines."

10. Natural And Paid Search Go Hand In Hand Very Well

Natural search results are the listings that show up on the left hand side. Paid search results show up on the right (and sometimes along the top).

For short term results, paid search is more appropriate. Natural search results take much longer to influence, and the relation between your effort and placement is less direct.

Interestingly, you can often combine efforts. Keyword analysis will inspire *both* paid and natural search efforts. Also, when you optimize pages for specific keywords, this can tie in the keyword campaign with dedicated landing pages.