

An Experiment In Organic Search

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By simply following the SEO experts' advice, we were able to significantly improve the positioning of several of The DMA's Web pages for key phrases. And it didn't cost us anything.

SEO or Search Engine Optimization, has been capturing the attention of marketers for some time now. SEO involves two approaches. One is “paid search”, where marketers pay for their listing to appear when certain search words are used. The second is called “organic search”. This is where the marketer optimizes their web site to appear as high in the search results as possible.

For the past several months we have been conducting some experiments in organic search. These experiments were based on the recommendations in “*Search Marketing De-mystified: A Marketer's Ultimate How-to Handbook for Prime Positions and Conversion*” produced by the Search Engine Marketing Council of the Direct Marketing Association.

Search Marketing De-mystified is a compendium of the best practices for achieving results in search engine marketing. This paper will show you how we put those recommended practices to the test and, by following the guidelines in the book, we achieved real results.

Our plan was to choose a few phrases we thought people might type into a search engine that should lead to us. Our goal was to see if we could make one of our Web site's pages show up on the first page of the search results for each phrase.

There were three steps we took to accomplish our goal:

1. Choose the phrases we wanted to use and the pages we wanted to be found.
2. Look at the structure of our Web site to be sure search engines could find the designated pages.
3. Modify the copy and “tags” on the pages that would affect search engine ranking.

Choosing Phrases and Pages

First, we focused on search phrases rather than just single search words. 30% of users search by using two word phrases and 24% search by three-word phrases.¹ The reason for this behavior is simple. Users find that one-word searches return too many irrelevant results.

Next we made sure we were using phrases people actually used. We did not want to use vague “marketeese” or company specific jargon. We did this by using [Word Tracker](#), a tool that allows one to see how often a set of words are requested in search tools such as Google. This allowed us to drop phrases that we thought were important but were of no interest to the world outside of The DMA. Word Tracker also suggested alternative words and phrases.

¹ Search Marketing De-mystified: A Marketer's Ultimate How-to Handbook for Prime Positions and Conversion, Search Engine Marketing Council, Direct Marketing Association: 2003.

Here are the phrases we finally selected and the original results in Google:

Phrase	Ranking in Google
1. Direct Marketing	Page 1, Position 1
2. Marketing	Page 2, Position 4
3. Marketing White Papers	Not in first 5 pages
4. Marketing Research	Not in first 5 pages
5. Marketing Events	Not in first 5 pages
6. Marketing Conferences	Page 4, Position 5
7. Marketing Seminars	Not in first 5 pages
8. Marketing Jobs	Not in first 5 pages

After selecting the phrases, we turned our attention to our Web pages. We looked at how the pages were structured.

Page Structure

Search engines have trouble reading pages that are in “frames”, where the content is deeply nested in tables, on “flash” sites, or where the pages are deeply linked within the site.

Frames is a way of coding pages that allows for a persistent header or left bar navigation. We don’t use frames. Instead, we use *Includes* – a way of adding snippets of information from other files – to achieve the same effect. Includes are search engine friendly.

Sites with complex layouts sometimes need to use tables within tables within tables to achieve their look and feel. The actual content that the search engine needs to find can be buried very deep within that nesting. Our layout is very simple so our content, while in a table, is not deeply nested.

Flash is a particular kind of Web format developed by Macromedia. It is popular for sites that like to do movie-like presentations or page design that normal Web coding will not handle. We do not use flash.

Our site is built *flat and wide* so most pages are within three clicks of the home page rather than being deeply linked.

Our existing page structure appeared to be search engine friendly. Next we looked at our meta tags and our body copy.

Meta Tags

Meta tags are code that appear at the top of Web pages. They are mostly unseen by the user but are used by search engines to index and rank pages. The ones that concern search engine marketing are the Title tag, the Keyword tag and the Description tag.

The Title tag contains the title of your document. This shows up as the linked title of the page in the search results. It also shows up at the very, very top of most browsers, above the File, Edit, View options. We were careful to incorporate our phrases, where sensible, into the title of our pages.

The Description tag is the description of your document. This shows up after the page title in the search results of many search engines. Again we tried to incorporate our phrases into the description, remembering that people would be reading them. We made the descriptions syntactically correct English sentences. There are only a limited number of characters that a search engine will use, so we consciously tried to eliminate marketing adjectives and jargon. They are useless in this context and waste valuable space.

The Keyword tag is a list of comma-separated words and phrases that are important to the content of the document. These are the things that users might be typing into a search engine to find the specific content of your page. We made sure to use about 20 words as suggested in *Search Marketing De-mystified*. Again, we made sure to include the key phrases we wanted to test.

Body Copy

The Body Copy is the part the user sees in his/her browser. It's your Web page. Where possible, we used our selected phrase, or a part of it, in the page title (the one users see on the page, not the meta tag title). We also tried to use our words at least twice within the text on the pages.

It took about two weeks for the changes to begin to show up in Google's search results. The pages began to appear higher and higher in the results over about four months.

Here are our selected phrases and the results in Google four months after we made our changes:

Phrase	Ranking in Google
1. Direct Marketing	Page 1, Position 1
2. Marketing	Page 1, Position 2
3. Marketing White Papers	Page 1, Position 1
4. Marketing Research	Not on first page
5. Marketing Events	Page 1, Position 1
6. Marketing Conferences	Page 1, Positions 2, 8 & 10
7. Marketing Seminars	Page 1, Positions 1 & 2
8. Marketing Jobs	Page 1, Position 5

We made changes in our meta tags and body copy over time so we could see what the results of specific changes. The body copy appears to be the most important element in determining a page's ranking. The meta tag titles and descriptions seem to come next in importance. The keywords appear to affect ranking the least.

It took some careful thought and a little work, but we achieved results. We were pleased that doing some of the simple things recommended in the Search Engine Marketing Council book worked so well. In fact, it exceeded our expectations. And we did not need to pay a huge amount of money to achieve these first page results.

You may get a copy of *Search Marketing De-mystified* from the DMA Web site: <http://www.the-dma.org/whitepapers> or by calling the Direct Marketing Association at 212.768.7277 x1406.

Other books that might be of interest are:

- Search Engine Optimization on an Extreme Budget, by Nonstop Internet
- Search Engine Visibility, by Shari Thurow
- Streetwise Maximize Web Site Traffic: Build Web Site Traffic Fast and Free by Optimizing Search Engine Placement, by Robin Nobles, Susan O'Neil

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