

Search marketing is a must-have channel for marketers, being an ideal tool for driving leads and tracking customer preferences online. But can it be used for more strategic objectives? Alex Blyth makes a case for the importance of search in building today's B2B brands

CAN SEARCH BUILD BRANDS?



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Head of content & media,
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For B2B marketers who can't rely on retailers to attract new customers to their products and services, search marketing is particularly important and most are aware of how search can lead them to new customers in a measurable, trackable and scalable way.

However, some B2B marketers are taking this one step further and claim that search can even be used for brand building. The claim is controversial and not everyone agrees, but if true, the implications for B2B marketing are considerable.

Enthusiasts and sceptics

According to Warren Cowan, CEO of search marketing agency Greenlight, search is a potent, but often misunderstood, tool. He says, "Attempts by marketers to build brands with search merely highlight the fact that many still don't fully comprehend how the medium works. Brand development is about building a personal connection between the user and a company. Search delivers interested users to brands; it doesn't build them."

He adds that the main challenge for marketers is to, "firmly establish the brand in the mind of the user before they search. Strong brands command higher traffic as users are more likely to click on links they recognise. This means that brand-building activity must take place prior to search if marketers want to maximise traffic and profitability. Marketers attempting to build brand with search will ultimately lose out to their counterparts who grasp the true purpose of search."

Matt Mills, director of Unite Search Marketing, explains how he believes B2B marketers can use search to build brands. "Our own research has found that 85 per cent of business buyers search for a new supplier by product area rather than by brand name," he says. "If your brand has a strong presence in these generic search results then you will achieve a higher brand awareness amongst your potential customers. You will also be reaching them when they are most receptive and already considering the product area."

Antony Mayfield, head of content & media at online search agency Spannerworks, agrees. He says, "We are seeing a synthesis of technical search expertise with strategic brand communications. To be effective in a world where search is part of the marketing mix, you actually have to think about what people are searching for, what they are linking to on blogs, forums and wikis, and adapt the way you are representing yourself online. The future is not as simple as PR, brand marketing or search techniques being the best. What is required is reinvention."

Making search work for the brand

If indeed it is possible to build B2B brands using search, then it is not a simple reinvention – marketers need to get several elements right for it to work.

1. Know where your customers are. The first step is to understand the sales funnel and customer journey, all the way from awareness through to purchase. You need to understand customer behaviour at each stage of research, consideration and then sale.

Once you have this understanding, you will be able to plan search activity that will build your brand. For instance, if you know that your customers tend to research purchases using search on a generic product term, then you should ensure you come high in these listings.

Alternatively, if your customers tend to search for a competitor's brand name, then you should ensure your presence in their search results emphasises the relative benefits of your brand.

2. Support branding through other channels. Alexis Sitaropoulos, head of marketing at search marketing service provider, Miva says, "We are seeing a growing number of advertisers starting to look at pay-per-click as more than a pure acquisition tool. Canny brands are using search as a tool to reinforce and support offline branding campaigns. The key to doing this successfully is to be present at every touchpoint and to reach customers at every stage of the buying cycle. Analysis of search data from across our network reveals that a high volume of searches are being conducted for actual advertising

straplines. By not bidding on these straplines advertisers are not making the most of their branding investment. Advertisers are starting to wake up to this low hanging fruit by developing more integrated brand-building pay-per-click campaigns that tie in both offline and online campaigns."

3. Ensure the web experience you deliver reinforces your brand. For Richard Bush, MD of B2B marketing agency Base One, brand-building by search is all about the experience your customers have once they have found your website. He says, "By driving the right volumes of the right people to your site, using search and by delivering the right experience on your site, you can build a brand."

"You must offer a website that is designed around the needs of your target groups. The online experience must fit in with how they use search, engage and satisfy the various groups, position you and your products or services in relation to their needs, have an emotional impact, satisfy their immediate needs, and result in them leaving their details." Bush points to client Powwownow as a good example of how to do this. He says that the web-based voice conference provider has built its brand almost solely through a combination of search visibility and a clear online brand in the form of a well-designed website. The upshot is that the business is growing at 100 per cent a year.

4. Drive your brand's response to events. Search can be used to protect brands just as much as to build them. Nigel Muir, MD of search marketing agency DBD Media, says, "We use search as part of a brand protection and crisis management strategy for our clients. The key to good crisis response is to be proactive and to address the issue. If a company sees people online searching for stories such as



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'exploding Dell laptop batteries', 'Talktalk delays' or 'Tesco petrol', it can act to protect its brand by ensuring its message is at the top of the listings."

5. Experiment with branding messages. John Rodkin, vice president and general manager at online advertising agency Digital Advertising Solutions, says, "We've seen clients use search as a testing ground for different branding messages. One client used a lot of 'free shipping' messaging to drive clicks on its search ads, only to find the lifetime value of those clients was low. It took that information and updated all of its marketing campaigns to reposition the brand less around free shipping."

6. See the bigger picture. Finally, it's important not to measure in isolation when using search for brand-building. Andrew Hood, MD at web analytics software provider Lynchpin Analytics, says, "Online display such as banner advertising might have an impact on search results because users who are exposed to a banner ad may be more likely to search for, or click on branded terms. Measuring these interactions across the whole mix should result in higher online revenue and drive effective branding strategies."

The future

There is evidence to suggest there is a link between success in search marketing and brand strength. A study by iProspect revealed that 36 per cent of search engine users equate top positions in search listings with brand quality. However, this is not the same as search marketing helping to build brands. While the sceptics might be right about the exact nature of that relationship, one thing is certain – search is important and will continue to become more so.

The figures also suggest that getting search right is important. Jupiter reports that almost half of Internet users are often not finding results relevant to their queries when using general search and almost 20 per cent actually leave a search engine without getting the result they were looking for.

As Tim Gibbon, director at Elemental Communications, integrated media communications consultancy concludes, "I don't know if you can claim that search alone can build a brand, but I do know that not taking care of search will drown a brand faster than almost anything else."

CASE STUDY: PANNONE LLP

Pannone is a law firm based in Manchester and much of its work comes from businesses. It recently hired Internet marketing company I-Com to improve its search results. I-Com began by optimising the law firm's website for Google. It then secured listings for the website on high profile, bona-fide legal websites and web pages in Manchester, London, the rest of the UK and throughout the EU and the USA. It sent press releases, which on average, get into Google News in less than 12 minutes, and supported these press releases with pay-per-click activity.

The number of visitors to Pannone's website increased by 308 per cent in four months. One campaign on Google Adwords acquired 55 new clients for the company within 90 days. Pannone's managing partner Joy Kingsley was so impressed with the how I-Com helped the firm build its brand online that Pannone bought a 30 per cent interest in it.



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