



*Keith Nealon, Chief Revenue Officer, M5 Networks*

*"It isn't the strongest or the fastest that will survive, but rather the most adaptive to change." - Charles Darwin.*

It doesn't seem that long ago when many of us had finally started exploiting best practices in email marketing. We put effort into such things as "lead nurturing" and "lead scoring." We could walk around proudly explaining that we were the kind of marketing department that could scientifically measure a prospect's interest in our services. We were forward thinking enough to deliver those "hot" marketing leads to sales, while nurturing any "cold" leads over time by engaging with them in a personalized email conversation until they were "ready to buy."

The time to bask in this glory was short lived. Now we are told by vendors, spending gobs of money to get the message out, that, in fact, "outbound marketing" tactics, such as email, are passé. It is now all about "inbound marketing," and if you don't understand that most B2B purchases begin with a search on Google, and you haven't deployed an effective search engine optimization strategy (SEO), then you and your business are going the way of the dodo.

This presents an interesting challenge. As B2B marketers, we think in terms of sales cycles lasting months. We think in terms of having the time to evolve a relationship based on a buyer's "considered purchase." Don't we have time to find our buyers by effective targeting, purchasing lists and personalizing content? Not anymore.

The reality is that search engines have disrupted the classic B2B buying process as buyers now start their journey online and so, our sales and marketing processes must adapt as well or we risk extinction. Why the panic? Because, according to a variety of well-known online marketing sources, at least **75%** of all B2B purchases begin with a search engine, and at least **80%** of all those searchers only click results on the search engine's the first page. (When is the last time

you went to the page two results?) Winning in SEO has become a zero-sum game. You are either on the first page or you are not. Generally, depending on the search term, the first page of search results in Google contains about ten results. So if you are not in the lucky ten, then you're not in the money.

How do we adapt? Well, luckily our B2C counterparts have been honing their skills in SEO for years because they must find a low cost way to attract buyers to their offer and complete transactions online without the need for human intervention. In short, they've been engaged in the SEO war for years and we have much to learn about this top of funnel experience and mastery.

It seems that there are some defined stages in an organization's SEO evolution. If you are beginning your SEO journey, it makes sense to hire an experienced agency to get you started. While there are many reasons for this, the main two are; access to expertise in a subject you may know little about, and help with the many basic blocking and tackling issues you need to get out of the way before you move into the fun stuff, like keyword strategy and selection. These issues include things like; indexation with Google (does Google even know to look for you online?), "crawl-ability" of your site (when Google finds your site, can it understand what you are saying), and an analytics package to measure any progress made based on these efforts.

### Education

This early stage or "**Educational**" phase of SEO is quite tactical. The focus is on a small number of keywords to show success. Your goal is to improve your rank and therefore, visibility of keywords. Selecting the "right" keywords is paramount for this initial test. There are many factors that drive the "smart" selection of keywords. These include but are not limited to:

- Search Volume: With what frequency is the keyword actually searched by buyers?
- Competitiveness: Is the keyword easy to boost in rank on or will you need to work very hard for very little gain?
- Conversion Potential: What is the intent behind the keyword? Searcher's intent can tell you if they are in an exploratory educational phase about products or if they are getting ready to buy soon. An example of this could be "intrusion detection system ROI," vs. "intrusion detection system next day install." The former could be a buyer who is trying to determine if they should implement a solution at all and the latter one who needs to move now.

### Measurement

You will likely find some success with these early keywords and be pleased with your new

ranking results. The management team may get very excited. So much so, that you're likely to get more demanding requests, especially, given that you have made a financial investment in SEO. Thus begins the next stage in SEO, the "**Measurement**" stage. You'll move now from "tactical" SEO to "strategic" SEO. At this point you go from deciding which of your key words you can get into the top 10 to deciding on which keywords you should get into the top 10. You move from reporting on ranks and "backlinks" to reporting on traffic.

During the Measurement stage, you should move from reporting specifically on "branded" terms (it should be fairly easy to rank high in searches that include your brand or company names, i.e. "ACME Cyber Security"), and "non-branded" terms (general or category terms which typically have more competition, i.e. "Intrusion Detection Systems"). You'll likely also have the data to show your CEO or superiors the "lost opportunity" in SEO. This is the traffic you are not getting. You might also have some data to show regarding your investment vs. the return in terms of traffic and conversions (i.e. form fills).

### Scaling

At this point, you may have decided to secure an in house resource to make SEO, just like email marketing, a core-competency. They may perform the SEO tasks themselves, or they may manage the agency. However as you move to the next phase, it's highly likely your SEO operation is in-house. This is the "**Scaling**" phase of SEO, where you will have definitely purchased an SEO optimization platform and you are likely to have split an in-house team or in-house resource and agency into specialist resources. These resources include one or more; content writers, link acquisition specialists, and I.T. resources.

You can prioritize your keyword selection based on anticipated effort and corresponding rank changes, coupled with search volumes and "click-thru curves." This is more commonly known as keyword forecasting. For example, would I get greater return moving keyword X from position 5 to 3 on page 1 or from position 13 on page 2 to position 8 on page 1? By this time, you will likely have the data to better answer this question. You will also be continually expanding your keyword set by looking at longer-tail terms, terms which have more words in the search query and usually correspond to a buyer deeper in the buying funnel. Studies also show searchers are becoming more advanced and therefore more detailed in their search queries, given the breadth of information available. You are also likely to be more proficient at attribution modeling. For instance, if a buyer found me via SEO, came to the website, then during another session clicked on a PPC ad, filled in a form and eventually bought from a salesperson, how much credit do I give SEO in this process? Many folks who are quite adept at marketing and even proficient at online marketing, struggle with this question.

### Competition

The last phase in the evolution of SEO is the "Compete" phase. You have recently started reporting with statistics such as conversion and revenue on a per keyword basis. Now you are moving from a position of offense with your core terms doing well, to a position of defense on these terms. Remember, someone just like you is now looking at your results and trying to decide how to unseat you so they can rank better. It's a zero sum game, don't forget that. You are also looking at your "share of voice," (your estimated share of all clicks for a large set of keywords) vs. your competition's share of voice. You are actively working to steal share of voice from each other. You have systems in place to tell you about any important changes in your competitor's performance, such as; their backlink count on a keyword, any structural changes to their pages, or any changes in keyword search volume due to seasonality. (Some changes in search queries are simply due to their temporal nature. The increase in searches for "tax software" during January to April is a good example.) Your "quality scores" in Google, i.e. how highly Google regards you as an author for this search term, has had significant impact on your paid search spend. Your SEO efforts have paid off and your investment to maintain position has been reduced due to this increased quality score. You are now in the elite "black-belt" club of SEO marketers.

SEO, as you can see, is a journey. It's one that is most definitely not for the faint-hearted. But the long term rewards are obvious; higher quality traffic, competitive superiority, lower paid spend, better conversion and better brand recognition online. Although the gap in time between effort in SEO and results, due to the time it takes Google to adjust rankings, has prevented many from trying, SEO technologies have definitely helped link effort with return. For you forward thinking online marketers out there, SEO represents a solid opportunity to grow your business. Ignore it at your peril.

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