

CASH FOR QUESTIONS

These days, many search engines want payment for putting your site's name at the top of their list of replies to browsers' queries. But, with so many engines available, each with its own requirements for pages to be indexed, handing over the money is the easiest part of search-engine marketing.

According to search-engine expert Danny Sullivan of searchenginewatch.com, not considering search-engine marketing in your marketing mix is like ignoring a major medium such as TV, radio or newspapers in the offline world. However, search-engine promotion can be bewildering. Search sites can contain editorial and/or paid-for results. Editorial results can be from a computer-compiled index or a manually edited directory, while paid-for results come in a wide variety of guises.

Major search-engine databases, such as Inktomi, AltaVista and FAST, charge small sites for frequent indexing by their search spider on an annual fee-per-URL basis. Annual charge listings have a wide variety of requirements. For example, Yahoo! charges \$299 (£193) annually for commercial listings that want an express review.

Then there are the cost-per-click directories. In May, BT LookSmart began charging customers for each click-through to their web site. Cost-per-click keyword sponsorships from Overture, Espotting, Google and Lycos are slightly different. They offer bid-for-position systems, in which advertisers bid against each other for particular keywords or phrases, with the highest bidder securing the top ranking in the search results.

Cost-per-click XML feeds, meanwhile, are suitable for large database-driven sites listing products, services or content (such as catalogues). They are available via resellers such as Did-it.com, Inceptor and TrafficBos.

A multitude of distribution and supply partnerships also makes the search engine arena confusing for marketers. For example, MSN.co.uk receives its paid-for search results from Overture, editorial results from Inktomi and directory listings from BT LookSmart. A major portal company can also use different paid-placement-providers in different regions, for example, Yahoo! partners with Espotting in Europe, but with Overture in the US.

But even if you are not considering pay-for options, there are a number of issues to consider when submitting your site for inclusion in the free editorial listings. Having ensured you have optimised your site for indexing (see 'Stand out in a crowd', *IWR*, October 2002, page 16), decide which URLs to submit. Then identify and submit important keywords to the search engines. Some search engines and directories allow sites to specify the terms with which they would like to be associated. Others don't.

There are a variety of inexpensive web site submission tools that can be used to submit your



Pay for content search providers

Google first began offering advertisers positions on its site in January 2000 with its Google AdWords product.

The company claims to have been profitable for the past 21 months. It opened its first non-US office in the UK in Sept 2001 and now has offices in France, Germany, Italy, Japan and Canada.

In August, it signed Lloyds TSB bank for a year long sponsored links deal worth more than £1m. Lloyds TSB has sponsored 1,000 insurance-related search

terms, to ensure prominent placement for its online insurance brands. Other big-name UK advertising clients include BT, British Airways, British Gas, Ford, Expedia, Comet and Virgin.

Google will monitor companies acquiring rivals' brand names for their own campaigns, but, according to Omid Kordestani, senior vice president of sales at Google, they would only actually remove the ads of a company sponsoring such keywords if the injured party actually filed a complaint.

Espotting Media is Europe's largest pay-for-performance search provider, and is based in the UK. It has a client

base of over 9,000 advertisers, including household names such as British Airways, Orange, Procter and Gamble, and Opodo.

Like arch-rival Overture, the company serves its clients ads via a distribution network of search engines and major portals such as ISP sites.

It provides paid-for search results at Yahoo! Europe, Lycos Europe, AltaVista France, Spain and Italy, Ask Jeeves and others. Revenues are shared between the company and its distribution partners - its recent two-year deal with Lycos Europe will be worth €17.5m (£11m).

Overture Services was founded in 1997 as GoTo. It is US-based and posted

almost \$143m (£92.4m) in sales, and profits of \$30m (£19.4m) in the first quarter of this year.

However, during the summer it incurred two high-profile losses to Google in the US, losing distribution partners Ask Jeeves and AOL, thus curtailing some of the market reach that its 60,000 clients world-wide demand. The company still retains Yahoo! as a distribution partner in the US, while in Europe its distribution network includes MSN, Tiscali (France, UK and Germany) and AOL Europe.

Its first non-US office opened in the UK in November 2000, followed by offices in Germany, Austria, Switzerland and France during 2002.

Lycos InSite AdBuyer was launched in August by Terra Lycos and FindWhat.com, as a direct competitor to Overture, Espotting and Google Adwords, offering an integrated platform of paid inclusion and keyword advertising services on the Lycos and HotBot search sites.

BT LookSmart acquired search engine WiseNut and later launched its Bidsmart featured listings product in mid-June.

Although it has high-profile advertisers such as Barclaycard, it had only 70 advertisers at launch - way behind rivals Espotting and Overture. Non-profit organisations can sign up for consideration to be included in its directory for free.

site to search sites and boost your rankings within the free editorial results. This software can produce reports verifying that the search engine accepts each submission made and analyse the effectiveness of your web pages, giving advice on improving their rankings. They can also track the number of visitors to your site, where they came from, and what keywords they used to find you.

Examples of such products include SubmitNet, WebSeed, PositionPro and WebPosition Gold. Be careful to avoid any tool that may violate the policies of certain search engines with the improper use of 'doorway' pages or the use of cloaking. Doorway pages are pages designed specially to do well in search engines by concentrating on particular phrases. These pages are also called 'bridge' or 'jump' pages. Cloaking is the practice of sending search engines pages that are different from the ones human readers see.

And be aware that submitting your site will not render any immediate change in your rankings as search engines and directories may take a few months to index newly submitted pages.

Paid-for searching is not new. It has been around since 1995. However, early attempts were crude, resulting in irrelevant commercial messages being foisted upon disillusioned site visitors. Some companies employed questionable practices that eventually became illegal (such as citing a competitor name in the now redundant keywords meta-tag field). Paid-for placement was also

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innocuously integrated within editorial results, until a recent recommendation from the US Federal Trade Commission for greater disclosure.

Today, paid-for-performance is a booming market. Kevin Kerrigan of BT LookSmart estimates that the UK paid search market could grow to be worth £500m a year. Paid-search operators such as Espotting and Overture get paid when a site visitor clicks through to the advertisers' site. Revenues are split with the search site distribution partners that publish these keyword sponsored ads with their editorial search results.

Paid-search operators also provide advertisers with sophisticated web-based purchasing, reporting and campaign optimisation tools (for example, real-time keyword tracking and auction budget management). Advertisers are attracted to paid-for placements due to measurability, accountability and cost-effectiveness – campaigns can be carefully tracked and costs controlled.

For example, bids can be managed in real-time, which is important when prices keep changing. During the working week, for example, sponsored keywords are worth most during lunch time. This is particularly true for travel, financial services and lifestyle (such as horoscopes) searches.

As there is no single dominant player in any market, any broad advertising campaign needs to use the services of all the major pay-for-performance providers – but each provider will have different editorial rules, such as number of

characters allowed in the title and description fields. Providers can also exert control via their editorial review of your keyword relevancy.

Expenditure tracking and measurability are most important. However, search engines must be careful not to go too far in appeasing internet marketers. US-based Public Information Research filed a complaint with the Norwegian government that search engine FAST's use of web-bugs (single pixel GIFs that act as electronic tags), in partnership with Lycos and ad technology company DoubleClick, violated Norwegian privacy laws. Web bugs gather data on the user's search behaviour and IP numbers and quietly transmits this data to DoubleClick.

There is growing concern amongst privacy advocates that 'anonymous' profiles gathered by web bugs can increasingly be linked to personally identifiable information. FAST claimed to be 'newly aware' of the problem and rushed out a new privacy statement on its site and has stated it may remove the offending web bugs. It's not the only search provider to use web bugs and privacy concerns remains an important issue.

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