



A Custom Fit: Using Web Content to Drive Sales & Leads

The honeymoon is over: Search marketing is a double-edged sword. It both gives and takes-away in a multi-channel environment. As you pour cash into traditional media a variety of parties are leveraging search engines to intercept customers en route to your site. They're capitalizing on your offline investments and enticing customers away from the path-to-purchase online. Savvy marketers are fighting back by investing in gutsy, new tactics. They're publishing and syndicating customized content. As a result, they're attracting and netting customers. They're dramatically increasing affiliate, e-mail and search program ROI too. Here's how you can do it on a shoestring.



As I attend conferences across the globe I'm hearing a loud buzzing. A serious problem is emerging for multi-channel marketers: Search marketing is just as disruptive as it is helpful when it comes to acquiring customers. Marketers are waking up, smelling coffee (through improved measurement practices) and looking for answers to a serious problem. That is, digital customer poaching. The answer is good old fashioned "custom publishing" with an interactive twist.

Problem: Search is Navigational

It's a fact: much of what goes on in that little search box is "navigational." Customers are using search engines to *find your site*. Engines are selling ads to just about anyone who's paying and allowing anyone with a Web browser to create pages popping up in the "natural" (un-paid) search engine results page. And pop they are – making any kind of statement about your company or product. Some urge your customers to consider other options!

Whether you're using catalogs, direct mail, call centers or broadcast media today's Web-savvy customer is more likely to use search engines when they're ready to buy than ever before. That spells trouble in a world where search is a *navigational agent*. Why? Because it's enabling everyone from your affiliates, marketing partners (like comparison shopping engines), competitors, affiliates of competitors, knock-off manufacturers and others to make a grab for your marketing dollars and customers.

Microsoft's Young-Bean Song recently stated, "The issue we have with navigational search is that... it completely obliterates the value we're creating from other digital marketing we're doing...the idea that search is this magical fountain of customer acquisition – in many cases it's not."



Solution: Fighting Fire with Fire

Marketers should establish and enforce business rules for affiliates, search agencies and marketing partners to follow but more is needed to solve the customer poaching issue. It's time to reach beyond comfort zones to net new, *incremental* customers/leads/sales at a manageable cost. It's time to fight back with custom publishing.

Here's the strategy: produce and syndicate high quality, authentic, trusted, emotionally-focused content that ultimately drives qualified customers to your Web site and landing pages. Tactically, you'll use new (blogs) and traditional (e-mail) publication and syndication tools. You'll fight fire with fire.

Now before you think it's either too costly, overly ambitious or something that your company can't pull off hear me out. Yes, there's work involved yet fighting this fight is *required* for Web marketing success. It's time to can "the butts."

"But I don't know where to start" or "but I have no resources or don't even know how to find a good resource." Excuses only delay and that means more customer poaching at your expense. Ready? Let's go.

Getting Feet Wet: Blogs

The fastest way to test a content-based strategy is to partner up with other bloggers who need content. If you're not blogging get started now. Use a free blogging service that's linked to your front page. Have your resident geek set it up at www.blog.yoursite.com.

Once blogging about topics relevant to your product or service niche it's time to hunt down external bloggers you'll share content with. In return, they'll share content with you. Some call it "guest blogging." The idea here is create valuable content for your partners' readers and *link back* to your content *within the context of your story*. Make your stories engaging and peppered lightly with keywords relevant to your niche. Do the same for your partners. Everyone needs content.

Most importantly, when selecting words to link, focus on phrases typical to how customers search for your ecommerce offering. Search engines approve highly of such relevant use of links and rank everyone's content accordingly! Properly (based on relevance and keyword choice) optimized and linked pages boost both your SEO and paid (PPC) search rankings. Link purposefully but not overly gratuitously.

Paying for Content

Implementing a simply blogging strategy involving content-swapping and strategic linking is effective but combining this with custom publishing is pure dynamite. Affiliates have known this for years and its given rise to a black market for links which search engines are forced to address so beware of “link buying” schemes.

Today, savvy marketers are finding ways to produce and place custom content on the Web in ways search engines approve of. Some marketers are buying up domains/URLs and building content-rich sites on them. Is it possible to invest in such a tactic on a shoestring or experimental basis? You bet... but be careful of paid content services like ReviewMe and PayPerPost whose bloggers have been targeted for de-listing by search engines.

Operating a handful of *your own* free-standing, content-rich Web sites sounds daunting but it's within your grasp and a better investment. Using software like Wordpress is simple and you can run a handful of blogs on a \$4.99/month hosting platform. Hire a geek to install software, tweak a design template and you're off and running for a few hundred dollars.

Yes, you'll need an editorial plan for each of your blogs but that's easy. After all, you know your product niche – and the needs, desires and curiosities of target customers better than anyone. Let this drive your content plan and consider low-cost, work-from-home human resources available to you through services like E-lance. Start small and grow slowly but act now.

Become the Authority: News Filter Sites

It's been said that the most powerful sites on the Web today are those that provide aggregated and “filtered” (edited by a human) content – making them authoritative, easy-to-use and popular. While it's not for novices it should be considered.

TheIndustryRadar.com is an example of such a site providing healthcare industry HR and benefits news and opinions. That's right, it's owned by a consulting firm in the same industry that's now positioned as the central point for respected news and information in the industry (and all the linking and search marketing power that goes with it!).

Operating such a site isn't a trivial venture but RSS-powered (real simple syndication) technology works behind the scenes to do the heavy lifting. ROI can be significant.

Custom Publishing Start-up Tips

1. Research and qualify potential content sharing partners using blog search engines like Technorati to find good partners
2. Consider non-competitive sellers of educational materials in your industry who are typically active bloggers and hungry for fresh, relevant content
3. Create a monthly editorial plan and share it with partners; let them influence yours and ask the same of them
4. Everyone should commit to deadlines; only partner with those as serious as you are
5. Share segments or slightly re-written versions of content with your affiliate partners
6. Don't be afraid to venture into audio podcasts or video

Revive E-mail, Affiliate and Search Tactics

Using an integrated approach to custom publishing is critical. Any content you own, are creating regularly or customers create for you (i.e. testimonials, reviews, fan mail) should be leveraged across marketing disciplines. An article or video that is being used to send traffic from a strategic blogging partner can be used by affiliates to “pre-sell” or motivate potential customers.

Measure Your Success

Content-focused strategies are effective but not a silver bullet. Do create goals but don't expect instant success. If you're willing to take action you will be able to reap *measurable* benefits but only if you actually measure. Keep costs down by using existing tools like Tagman.com or your Web analytic tool's “action/conversion beacon.” You'll get the job done easily and at low cost. Good luck!

Measure with Ease

Use your Web marketing analytics tool's conversion tracking to see increases in

- ✓ Natural search sales/lead conversions
- ✓ Paid search sales/lead conversions
- ✓ Sales and leads coming from your blogs and those of marketing partners

Use a free search engine penetration/ranking monitor to see increasing

- ✓ Coverage and improved ranking on search engine results pages

Use your affiliate program system to see increasing

- ✓ Affiliate leads/sales output of affiliates
- ✓ Number of new, productive affiliates

Use Google tools

- ✓ Google Toolbar helps visualize improved Web page PR scoring (relevancy that powers SEO and paid search placement)
- ✓ Google Alerts tracks increased placement/mentions and reputation in the blogosphere

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