

Tracking rival's analytics becoming key piece of puzzle



Gary Capreol of Cronin and Co. LLC, says search engine algorithms are helping improve results for both advertisers and end-users.

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If your business hasn't made it on a Google search, you haven't made it. At least that's how a growing number of regional media consultancies are thinking these days.

With more firms including web analytics in their growth strategy, dancing the tango with the search engine has gotten complicated. The frequent tweaks in Google's algorithm, while improving user experience, are pushing companies to be more agile in their web response.

As the top search engine — over 70 percent of all web searches are on Google — its every move is affecting companies that are learning to grow their brand online.

"You need to be very aware of how Google's algorithms are changing to be able to help clients optimize their brand in a Google search," said Sheila LaPierre, an independent account manager in Glastonbury.

Larry Miclette, president and CEO of Zag Interactive LLC, also in Glastonbury, said his firm recently invested in software that tracks what's being said about his clients in social media networks such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter, so Zag could help anticipate a marketing response strategy if required.

"Search engines are monitoring what people are saying about company brands in social media sites. It's a good thing Google's algorithm changes frequently because they index so quickly," he said. "But now we have to proactively monitor what's being said on social media sites about our clients so we can catch something before it hits Google."

That's a business response that small and medium-sized firms did not consider even a year ago. But this has changed with the frequent launch of newer, cheaper, user-friendly social media monitoring software that enable executives to listen to what customers, potential customers and competitors are saying so they can respond effectively and quickly.

"The best results are when a company has an internal monitor to manage and address complaints in social media networks," said Carmine Morra, director of interactive media at the Donaldson Group, an image communications firm in Simsbury.

Firms are not only monitoring their web analytics — page hits, Google ranking and so on to assess return on investment in market-

ing campaigns — but that of their competitors as well.

"Using tools to see what competitors' search results are is an extremely important part of business strategy. For example, if a customer decides to buy a particular car after seeing a TV commercial, he would still search for best prices (at local dealerships) on the internet before making a decision," Morra said.

"We certainly keep a close watch on our clients' competitors' analytics," Miclette of Zag Interactive added.

For a lot of firms, a large part of this strategy is driven by concerns surrounding Google AdWords, the search engine's advertising service, which sells keywords to companies. When a user types in a keyword in a Google search — for example "best pizza in Hartford" — web links to paid advertisements by pizza shops appear on the page. The problem is when a user types in a certain product — a hypothetical example would be Pepsi — and a paid Google ad pops up saying "Buy Coke."

In 2009, New Haven-based law firm Stratton Faxon filed a lawsuit against Google over its keyword advertising practice in the county's Superior Court. Stratton Faxon alleged that a keyword search of its name in Google brought up a paid sponsored link by its competitor.

"While the lawsuit was dropped in 2010, it seems to have resulted in the practical effect of causing the competitor to stop paying Google to produce advertisements based on use of the term Stratton Faxon," said Diane Duhaime of the Connecticut Bar Association and an attorney at Jordan Burt LLP in Simsbury. "Connecticut firms should conduct periodic Google searches on their own trademarks to learn whether their trademarks are being used in an illegal manner. The firm should consult with experienced trademark counsel if they uncover Google listings they believe violate their trademark rights."

But everyone is seeing this as a trademark infringement.

Steven Wilf, a professor at the University of Connecticut School of Law, said Connecticut has the highest trademark registration per capita, so there's a real stake in protecting trademarks. But on the other hand, consumers benefit when more options and choices show up in their web search.

"It's a long-standing concern and there are

two ways to look at it. One, search terms are like directions and should be separate from trademark protection. The other, search terms are deeply connected to a company's brand and its trademark must therefore be protected," he said. "The government has stepped back with regard to search engine procedures; most search engines are relying on their algorithms. But if the search engine itself become skewed, that's when anti-trust questions will arise."

As of now, companies are relying on each other to do the right thing because it makes business sense.

Search engine algorithms are helping improve both advertiser and end-user results," said Gary Capreol, senior vice president at Cronin and Company LLC, a marketing communications agency based in Glastonbury. The firm is in the process of expanding its client services to include web analytics.

"There are rules (at Google) that state you can't mimic a competitor and use that name in the body of a copy. If you do your competitor may turn around and do the same thing," he said.

Capreol believes there's nothing wrong with online advertisers buying ad space. "It's like a guy carrying a McDonald's banner walking in front of a Burger King. It's freedom of speech," he said.

Not all internet marketing consultants think Google search has the power to make or break brands. They recommend a cheaper strategy that works better in the long-term — building a loyal community in social media networks.

Leslie E. Silverman, principal of SmartSite Consulting, an internet marketing company in West Hartford, said firms should focus on other tools besides Google.

"There's more to online success than wooing Google spiders to your website," she said.

Silverman advises organizations to cultivate their overall web presence through well-optimized, online directories relevant to one's business, LinkedIn profiles, Facebook pages, Google Places listings slide-share presentations, Flickr albums, and participation in online forums that customers use. "These can all be equally worthy of your marketing attention and investment. Taken as a whole, they can give a bigger payoff than investing too much in poorly conceived pay per click Google AdWords campaigns," she said.

Caitlin Thayer, a social media consultant in Bristol, agrees.

She monitors what's being said about her clients online, including nonprofits Interval House and HYPE (Hartford Young Professionals and Entrepreneurs) in Hartford.

Using the software SproutSocial, she types in a keyword, such as the name of her client's organization. The search pulls up a list of all conversations about the organization on social media sites. Thayer then reaches out to users, befriends them online, and builds a community that is loyal to her client.

For example, Thayer worked at the Mark Twain House & Museum previously, where she built an online community. "We saw direct results in nine months into implementing the social media strategy. As high as 75 percent of people who came to events at the museum said they came to know of it on Facebook or Twitter, and decided to come because their friends were going," she said.

Thayer said building a brand on Facebook and Twitter involves a two-way conversation between organizations and their customers, whereas a sponsored ad on Google is just one-dimensional. "Two years ago organizations were just thinking that maybe they should do this. Today they're hiring consultants to develop a social media strategy as part of their overall business plan." ■