

Online advertising Search/Social media

Through the digital looking glass

Search is usually thought of as a tool for driving web traffic, but forward thinking brands are beginning to mine its vast commercial potential

Meg Carter

While traditional forms of media are starting to feel the effect of the slowdown in advertising expenditure, latest evidence shows search marketing is on a roll, with its share of brand owners' online budgets rising faster than the current rate of growth experienced by online advertising as a whole.

Simply put, search marketing is the business of buying keywords relevant to a particular product or service so that, when that word is used in a search, the product or service gets a higher position on the search engine results page. Typically a campaign using search marketing has a brand owner paying the search engine for a high ranking. So Toyota would buy keywords "Toyota" but also "car" and maybe "sporty" or "affordable" to increase its ranking in a search for "affordable cars" or "sporty cars". This is known as "paid search". Alternatively, a brand can boost its ranking without having to pay by rearranging its online content to make the keywords associated with its brand easier for search engines to pick up. This practice is called "natural search" or "search engine optimisation".

Healthy expenditure

Search is a robust and expanding tool used by brands and agencies and it already represents 58.3% of total UK online advertising spend.

While total UK online ad spending for the first six months grew at just over half the rate experienced a year ago, latest figures from the Internet Advertising Bureau show that search spending was more resilient, up some 28% year on year and worth £981m in the first half of 2008.

Until now search has been a business focused around driving online users to particular websites as well as identifying users who might be inclined to buy certain products, either online or offline. The turmoil in the financial markets, however, is sharpening interest in how to use search to achieve more subtle advertising and marketing goals like better branding for companies.

It's only logical because as both advertisers and agencies recognise, brand val-



Under scrutiny: rival search engines are keen to weaken Google's hold on the market

Strategic thinking More Th>n

Insurance company More Th>n is developing social networking activity around its own content platform, as part of a new approach to using search more strategically to build the brand.

"Paid-for search remains important, but we want to increase our natural search ranking over the long term," Roberto Hortal, More Th>n's head of e-business, explains.

"We saw an opportunity to add to consumer conversations on social networks. Eighteen months ago there was a clear gap in online conversations about financial services and insurance – though people were happily discussing the items they insure and their environmental concerns.

"So we created a source of information about daily issues and information about each, designing content that would be picked up and passed on."

Launched in the summer of 2007, living.morethan.com is an editorially-

independent – though branded – online platform where people can talk about how they can live smarter and greener, with an emphasis on cars and homes.

Original content is structured to ensure search engines can find every element, image, video and press release. An early result saw a More Th>n article on flood precautions appear high up on Google's first page of natural search results within a day of being posted on living.morethan.com; a year later, the article still ranked in fourth position.

"It's just one example of how we are using search to create engagement as well as brand impression, associating ourselves with people's current interests to ensure we're noticed – even when potential consumers aren't actively looking to buy insurance," says Hortal. **MC**

Weblinks

More Th>n: living.morethan.com

ues are reinforced every time a brand comes into contact with a potential consumer, whether that is in the grocery aisle or online.

"Search is a fantastic complementary medium, although we're yet to see brands fully embrace it as a brand-building tool," says Google's UK sales director Mark Howe. "Every keyword – not just a brand's name, but also keywords associated with a brand's territory – represents a potential audience for that brand. And consumers now expect top brands to feature at the top page of any search [they do online]."

Howe's enthusiasm for broadening the power of search advertising is not surprising, given that Google already dominates the search market (over 90% of UK searches are done through Google) and paid-for search (the sponsored rankings on the right side of a Google search result page) is Google's biggest revenue earner.

"The big question for brand owners today is how to move beyond direct response to building brand recall, purchase intent and brand awareness through search," says Andy Mihalop, search director of digital media agency i-level.

To do this, brand marketers must think beyond the "direct response" result that buying certain keywords provides. One fundamental challenge to expanding search is metrics – how do you measure the effectiveness of search marketing in raising awareness of a brand or altering perceptions about a brand? And to what extent do each of these make someone more likely to buy that brand's products?

"Search is changing with the move from text-only to images, audio and video," says Arjo Ghosh, chief executive of digital agency iCrossing. "As a result, brand owners must re-think their approach to content and online evaluation too." iCrossing is working closely with several of its clients, including insurance company More Th>n, to optimise their search strategies and make them into brand-building experiences as well.

Ghosh believes that search marketers must think differently about the entire online user experience, especially as user behaviour evolves in line with the rise of online social networks like Facebook and the evolution of so-called rich media –

'Search is changing and brands' approach to search must, too. It's no longer just about what Google thinks'

online content that includes video and audio as well as text. Today brand owners tend to manage content creation and online user experience separately from search marketing. Both, however, must become more closely aligned.

The most obvious recent evidence that brand owners' approach to search is evolving has been a shift in emphasis. They have moved from optimising search results for brand names and keywords immediately relevant to the brand to a new focus on encompassing broader keywords and subtler elements of what makes up a brand, including everything from advertising strap lines to certain emotions that a brand may evoke.

New opportunities

This is one reason why Google's decision earlier in the year to change its policy on trademarks and allow British advertisers to bid for the first time on the trademarked "keywords" of someone else's brand has had less of a negative impact than many originally envisaged. In fact, according to Finlay Clark, senior strategist at search engine optimisation specialist Bigmouth-media, it's thrown up new opportunities.

"Take the demise of airline XL in September," he says. "Within hours, rival brands had bid on [the keyword] XL to get top-ranking, paid-for positions on Google to tell travellers: 'If you're stuck because of XL, we can get you home'."

Other forward-thinking brand owners are working with partners to maximise their brand impact through better thought-through search marketing.

"Sky, for example, has developed a strong affiliate search marketing strategy," says Clark. "This ensures that Sky ranks top in natural search results by allowing designated partners to use certain Sky keywords to ensure that Sky – rather than its direct competitors – come out on top."

Arguably the greatest opportunities in evolving the branding potential of search, however, are only now starting to be explored.

Ghosh points to social networks – which, as yet, do not have especially sophisticated search engines – as one area to watch. Others, meanwhile, cite the alternative business models now evolving such as Microsoft's Live Search Cashback in which customers can get a cash rebate for finding and purchasing favourite products from retail sites including eBay, Barnes & Noble and Sears.

"Search is changing and brands' approach to search must, too," Ghosh adds. "Because it's no longer just about what Google thinks."

Campaign conversations

As consumers shift towards communities and interaction, agencies are breaking traditional ad moulds. It's not about the message anymore

Kate Bulkeley

There is a boom going on in what the advertising world calls social media, basically the practice of joining or creating conversations that will attract consumers to your brands and hopefully get them interested in buying your products.

It's a risky business because the "broadcasting" model of traditional media, where advertisers buy the opportunity to tell you their message, breaks down online. "Social media is not just about putting ads onto social networks like MySpace," says Leo Ryan, co-founder of digital media agency Ryan MacMillan. "What's important is what people do on social media."

Ryan says that the trick is to create reasons for people to choose to interact with a particular brand or product: it's about brands being involved in conversations with consumers rather than just telling them how it is; the theory is that you cannot buy social media, you have to earn it.

The Connected Agency, a recent study from research company Forrester, says: "Consumers have replaced trust in advertising with trust in individuals. Turning to communities and away from mass media, consumers will ignore messages, insist on involvement, maintain control over their privacy and prefer peers' endorsements."

All this sounds great, but how do you get your brand message across in a conversation that you don't control? And given that

there is no accepted metric for social media, how do you know it's working?

Perhaps the first big social media example is the filming of Sony's Bravia's Balls campaign for which Sony rolled thousands of coloured balls down hills in San Francisco. That was in 2005 but San Francisco already had a large population of bloggers, many of whom documented the shooting on their sites. Initially Sony was concerned about losing control over the PR for its big TV advert. However, the experience turned out to be a good lesson. "The Balls campaign was the best thing that could have happened to us," says Ruth Speakman, head of consumer PR for Sony Europe. "We learned that involving the consumer in fact gives you a lengthened campaign."

Since then, Sony has honed its skills on creating "platforms for conversations" online with its Bravia Play-Doh Bunnies campaign and the recent Foam campaign which saw 122m gallons of foam released in central Miami. Agency Fallon created the Foam campaign and digital agency Immediate Future "amplified" the campaign online, flying a group of bloggers to Miami and creating extra videos and graphics. "We call it social currency and it's like the bottle of wine that you take to a dinner party. It's an exchange of information," says Katy Howell, from the PR firm Immediate Future.

According to Sony, 95% of the online coverage from the Foam campaign was positive. And significantly the campaign created a good buzz around Sony. "It's great for us not to be just talking about products but to talk about an entertaining experience," says Sony's Speakman. "Because that's what we are selling really, an entertainment experience."

Weblinks

The Connected Agency: tinyurl.com/26v4xg



Ideas running wild: Sony's Bravia Play-Doh Bunnies campaign was a successful creative platform for conversation

Brand awareness Cravendale's Milk Matters

Social media campaigns, which emphasise talking with, not talking at consumers, work best when they tap into communities that already exist. Such is the case in Cravendale's Milk Matters campaign, where digital agency Outside Line tapped into the tea-drinking community.

"Milk and tea go together," says Lloyd Salmons, director and founder of Outside Line. "Up and down the country people argue all day long about who should put the tea on." So, Outside Line built a tea-making widget – a group of people, say in an office, can sign up at makethetea.com

and log their tea preferences (milky; one or two sugars) and the widget will choose the next person responsible for making the tea.

Since the application launched in April, some 216,000 cups of tea have been brewed. That is against a total of 77,000 visits to Cravendale's website since May 2007. "Why [else] would people come to the website to learn about milk? We tried to introduce some excitement," says David Cherrie, Cravendale's brand manager. And Cravendale isn't stopping with one social media application. At the end of September its Talk Like A Pirate widget (based on the

Cravendale pirate character) was offered for Apple's iPhones and so far some 30,000 copies have been downloaded.

"We are trying to drive awareness of the brand," says Cherrie. "It's difficult to pinpoint the impact on sales but it's making people aware of the brand and we are bringing new customers to Cravendale." **KB**

Weblinks

Cravendale: milkatters.co.uk
Make the Tea: makethetea.com