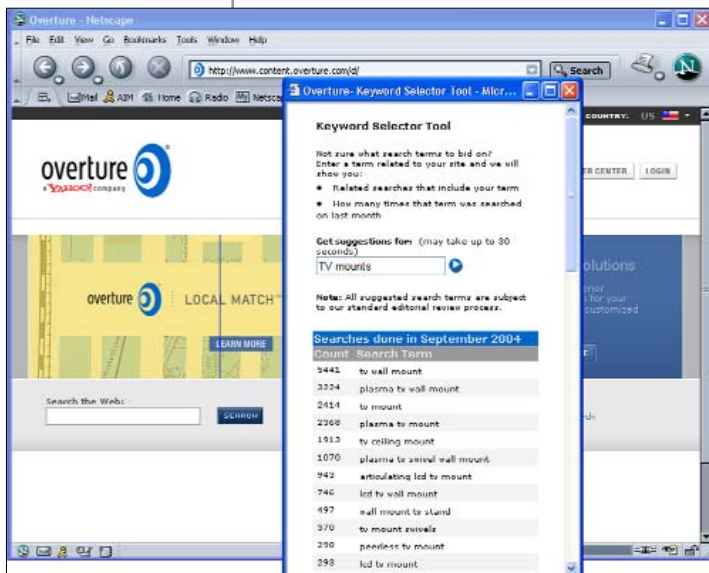


SEARCH ENGINE MARKETING, PART 1

Optimizing your website's content for search engines can help direct new customers to your site.



Advertising can be very effective for AV integrators if you put your first effort into finding the publications that reach your target market.

by Don Kreski

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"The Internet is the number one source of information today for people purchasing AV products," says Walt Dibbern, partner at Des Plaines, Illinois-based Dibbern and Dibbern, a search engine optimization firm that works in the audio-visual industry. "And if you're going to use the Internet to find new customers, you have to market to the search engines."

Search engines can direct a lot of traffic to your company's website. A dealer site I used to manage logged over 10,000 visitors a week, with about 250 resulting email and telephone inquiries. Dibbern says an average campaign should bring 5,000 or more weekly visitors.

But marketing to search engines can be difficult. "The problem is that the search engines keep changing the way they work," Dibbern says. "There was a time when you could easily manipulate them, but they've gotten smart to the tricks."

Google and Yahoo, which together are responsible for about 85% of Internet searches in the United States, make major changes to their algorithms at least three times a year, Dibbern says. MSN Search, a relatively small player who has based its searches on other companies' databases, recently launched an all-new engine with a proprietary database that's larger than Google's. Consequently, what most people consider the most important steps in maximizing hits on their websites often aren't effective.

There are two types of listings in the major search engines: free listings and sponsored links, or pay-per-click ads, which we'll discuss next month.

Free listings

Terri Spence, president of Oak Park, CA-based optimization firm W3PR, says tailoring your websites content to search engine's spiders –programs that "crawl" through sites on the Internet, index each word, and rank the site according to algorithms intended to make the most interesting and useful sites come up first– is key. "You need to make sure that, a) you submit to the search engines and b) you have content on each page that their robot programs, or spiders, can index," she says.

Submission is easy. Simply go to submit.search.yahoo.com or www.google.com/addurl.html and follow the instructions. Preparing your pages is more complex. Spence says there are three keys to the indexing process. "First is content. Next is incoming links, and then the underlying structure of the site, including your title tags, meta keywords and meta descriptions."

Dibbern agrees that content is the primary focus. "The content of the page is really what's most important," he says. "The engines assume that a good site with lots of information about a particular topic will be one that people are going to be interested in, so they'll rank that site highly. But they also gather other clues as to the quality of the site, and that goes into the ranking too."

For example, search engines look at the window title tag –the line that appears in the blue bar at the very top of the Windows or Mac OS window that contains the page– and weight it highly. "The last thing you want to do with that tag is say, 'Welcome to Gidget Electronics,'" Dibbern says. "Instead, try

try to describe your business in about 12 words."

Those key words, which should be repeated in the metatags for each page, also need to appear in the page's content. "If you tell me your focus is university sound systems, and your content has everything but, then you're not about university sound systems and you're not going to get listed for them," Spence says.

Choosing a list of keywords that describes your company's business and the products or services you provide is crucial to the optimization process. Overture, the paid-advertising arm of Yahoo, offers a helpful tool at www.overture.com. Click on "Advertising Center" and then "Keyword Selector Tool" to see how many people search Overture-related sites for any keyword and related words.

For example, a manufacturer or dealer of monitor mounts might try the term "monitor mount" in this tool. I just did that and learned that 468 people searched for "monitor mount" in September. On the other hand, 1301 searched for "lcd monitor mount." If I type in a new term, "TV mount," I find 2414 searched for that and 5441 for "tv wall mount." So with a little effort, I can fine-tune my keyword list to include those that potential customers actually use when they think about what I sell.

To make sure spiders read your keywords, your content must appear in a form that the spiders can read—simple HTML text that includes your keywords. For example, if you include a copy block as a GIF or JPG graphic, spiders can't read it. The same is true for Flash animations, which is why a large number of pure Flash sites are never indexed. If the pages are generated dynamically—say from a database using Microsoft SQL—you could have the same problem. It's a major issue if your goal is to generate sales leads.

Links from other sites

Google and Yahoo index each link on every website and then track how many link to your site. Google, which weights these links much more heavily than Yahoo, even tracks the rank of the linking site.

"If you think of the search engine as a person, it can help you understand they way they'll react to your site," says Dibbern. Every search engine now realizes that an authentically good site—one that should be ranked high—will be identified by other websites as such and link to it."

"An authority site in the health care field might be the Mayo Clinic," says Dibbern. "A link from them would be tremendously important if you were a doctor, whereas a link from another doctor's office would do little. In the AV field, you'd want links from larger manufacturers—big sites with lots of traffic," he says. "But the spider asks how many other links go out from this one page. So there's a dilution factor if the manufacturer has hundreds or thousands of links, say one to each of its dealers."

The big-site advantage

Because content is the largest factor that goes into search engine rankings, large sites have an inherent advantage over small. Yet many small sites do compete successfully. If you have a small site, how can you expect to build rankings?

First, don't be shy about putting up pages. "You want to focus on one or two keywords on a page," says Spence. "Using this rule, divide up your keywords and write as many pages as necessary." Consider a programming technology that makes adding multiple pages economical. All things being equal, a 30 page site is going to rank better than a 10 page site, and a 100 page site better still.

Consider narrowing your market. "A small dealer isn't going to ever beat Sharp or Sony, but he probably could be the number one Sharp website in Milwaukee," says Dibbern. "People say, 'I can do business anywhere in the country,' but focus is the word."

"You're going to have to work at making alliances to get some links," adds Spence. "Be creative. Do you have some content that's unique on your site that you can offer to someone else in return for a link? Maybe you sell projectors and he sells screens."

"The thing you have to watch out for," cautions Dibbern, "is going after a quick fix. Some of the link farms will actually subtract value from your site." Watch out any time someone makes radical promises or guarantees high placement. "I can't guarantee anyone first place unless I'm doing something unethical," says Spence. "In which case I run the risk of getting the client banned."

Finally, consider a pay-per-click program or a hybrid program, which will work for small sites and work right away. We will talk about both next month.



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