

OPTIMISING FOR USERS NOT SEARCH ENGINES:

**BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE BRAND IN A
CONNECTED WORLD**

AN ICROSSING WHITEPAPER BY NILHAN JAYASINGHE

BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE BRAND IN A CONNECTED WORLD

There are two long-term trends that digital marketers need to bear in mind when thinking about their approach to search engine optimisation.

“Google is not a search engine. Google is a reputation-management system... radical transparency is a double-edged sword, but once you know the new rules, you can use it to control your image in ways you never could before.”

Clive Thompson, Wired, March 2007

For one, while not perfect, search engines (led by [Google](#)) are getting better by the day. Google's explicit aim – to develop its services for users, rather than for advertisers – has successfully guided it to dominate search.

Second, the web is becoming dominated by social media. Data research specialists [IDC](#) expect that, by 2010, 70% of the web's content will be created by individuals. It marks the end of the industrial media age – and the emergence of the network as the system by which people will disseminate information.

Both these trends have profound implications for the role of marketing in the future.

BETTER SEARCH ENGINES

In the early days of the internet, search engines were heavily reliant on the information provided by websites about themselves. For a time, search engine optimisation (SEO) seemed simply to be about loading a website's content and metadata with the correct keywords. Appearing at the top of the search results was not about what you did, but about what you said you did.

The industrial media age was about “mass media” – it took a corporate effort to produce and distribute content via channels like the press and TV.

The control of content production and distribution is now shifting to the individual – it's simple – and the success of this content is dependent upon its usefulness to the rest of the network.

If we think about Google as a machine and focus on the algorithm itself, it is easy to forget that what it is really trying to do is to read human clues to the reputation of individual pages. At its simplest, it is looking for people linking to or visiting web pages and taking those two things as clues to the usefulness of the site.

As search engines become more sophisticated, they will increasingly incorporate user data to validate their results. The numbers of people visiting a site; the time that users spend on a site; the depth of their engagement; whether they return over a period of time; how many people add it to their social bookmarking tools such as [Digg](#); all will potentially be taken into account.

The closer that Google and others get to reading real interaction, the better they will become at separating the sites that look relevant from the sites that are relevant. Inevitably, it will become ever more difficult to fake the quality of a webpage.

At the same time, the monolithic 'search results' page is fragmenting. Personalised search results and vertical search engines (including the various Google services and virtual search engines such as [Amazon](#)) are increasing the area over which terms are contested, and varying the contexts in which they might be considered.

Natural search should be a design consideration and not an afterthought. Information architecture, usability and design should be a process that works together to provide the best user experience. In a connected world, Google is your site navigation.

Given that this is the case, by far the best way to rank highly for a given term is to offer what the search engines are getting progressively better at finding – content that is genuinely useful to those people searching for that term.

The same principle applies whether it is a product name or a commercial term that is important to your business. For either, you must earn the attention.

THE RISE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The increasing prevalence of social media, means that there is now an abundance of individual clues to reputation – through blogs, forums, comments, video responses, customer feedback and so on.



As this 'social web' matures, search engines will rely more on these human clues to understand how they can best rank those sites that compete for the attention.

Effectively, it gives search engines a rich, self-regulating, rapidly responsive source against

which it can verify the claims that a website makes about what it does.

In the short but eventful life of the social web thus far, the "wisdom of crowds" has proved to be remarkably effective at creating and organising information.

With 70% of all digital content going to be generated by individuals in the next few years, connecting with social networks has the potential to have the greatest impact on link reputation. Social spaces will help you to understand the needs of your customers and provide a place for two-way dialogue.

Those who misunderstand the importance of this network effect see the glass half-empty – it's worth noting that those who initially dismissed [Wikipedia](#) because anyone could edit it were citing precisely the same quality that drew others to embrace it. Detractors saw its vulnerability to ignorance and vandalism; proponents saw the opportunity to revolutionise the ownership of information.

Meanwhile, social networks such as [Facebook](#) and [MySpace](#) are complementing and sometimes displacing search, as they create highly focused, trusted networks of recommendations. The advent of open source networking applications such as [Open Social](#) looks likely to push this to a whole new level. As Jeff Jarvis has been saying for some time on his [BuzzMachine](#) blog, we don't need any more social networks on the internet – the internet *is* the social network.

ADOPTING AN EFFECTIVE PHILOSOPHY FOR SUCCESS IN NATURAL SEARCH

Many search marketers talk about 'ethical search engine optimisation' when what they really mean is simply compliance with the search engine's acceptable user policies. This is misleading and doesn't help brands to fully appreciate the digital environment. Search engines are not the gatekeepers of morality, nor are they the law. For most marketers 'ethical' means 'risk aware'; not getting penalised or banned from search engines for breaking their rules.

2007 saw the most aggressive attack thus far by Google on reputation traders. Many low-quality directories were prevented from passing on reputation; several big publishers (including the [Wall Street Journal](#) and [Forbes](#)) had their toolbar PageRank (Google's indicator of reputation) reduced; and several high-profile sites found to have bought reputation were penalised by a drop in rankings.

Optimising a site for key messages in offline advertising, including TV, can greatly increase cross-media traffic.

Press release content that is focused for consumer consumption, optimised and distributed through the right digital channels, will attract much greater attention, and deliver link reputation benefits to improve natural search visibility.

Unfortunately, those sites that were penalised were re-included after a relatively short period in the sin bin, leading many brands to consider faking reputation as a risk worth taking. The revenue generated from winning the ranking war was well worth a few months' relegation.

So while search engines have seemed unable to police their own rules and regulations, economic forces have dictated that breaking the rules and managing the risks far outweigh the cost of losing market share to the competition. This understanding maintains the existence of the 'silos' that exist within companies, whereby the brand guardians are not the same people responsible for new customer acquisition and are far removed from those responsible for looking after the existing customers. When you have targets to hit every month, everyone's under pressure to produce results - even if they are short-lived ones.

Meanwhile, as online link reputation continues to be faked, bought and traded, the majority of users continue to regard search engines as the best measurement tools for judging that reputation.

In an increasingly connected web, where content and the users that generate that content are inseparable, genuine reputation that is earned is a brand's greatest asset. Links created by real people who like you, and who like to talk about you in a positive way, provide benefits beyond search engine rankings.

In this connected world, there's nowhere for a brand to hide. You may fake it for Google, but Google doesn't buy your products and services; your customers and their friends do. The more time and resources you waste on faking it, rather than earning real attention, the

further you will be left behind by your customers.

Online, attention is an ongoing conversation and, just as in the offline world, those that are useful and engaging get all the attention. For a brand, it means earning the opportunity to listen to your customers and prospects, and properly understanding and facilitating their needs.

The future of Natural Search Engine Optimisation is, therefore, the art of connecting people and content in a world where reputation is earned by those brands that are the most useful in their network. That reputation is earned through having the best products and services developed through collaboration with your customers. Reputation is earned by being an invaluable source of knowledge and inspiration.

Over the last two years, Google has put a lot of effort into changing its technical infrastructure to seamlessly adjust the way it defines relevance. Whilst the current algorithm favours static link reputation, other factors such as social and user signals are already incorporated to some extent. Personalisation already allows people to override the regular ranking mechanisms based on personal preference, and blended search looks at user data to determine the context of a query in almost real time. Ultimately people will be the most important part of the algorithm.



PageRank is Google's view of the importance of this page (0/10). PageRank relies on the uniquely democratic nature of the web by using its vast link structure as an indicator of an individual page's value. Votes cast by pages that are themselves "important" weigh more heavily and help to make other pages "important".

Targeted display campaigns can increase link reputation and awareness for key content areas. Targeting display to your digital neighbourhood will not only improve brand recognition but again help users who are more likely to want your offering. Aligning your display and natural search messaging will also help customers find you.

THE CHOICE FOR MARKETERS

From a marketing perspective, the old models of SEO are rapidly running out of juice. Many of yesterday's cutting-edge SEO techniques are set to become mere matters of good technical hygiene.

Paid search can be used to increase awareness of useful content, which can help increase natural link reputation.

Inexorably, brands will be increasingly judged according to their engagement with the network, an environment that is largely powered and shaped by search. In the medium- and long-term, search equity will become synonymous with brand equity.

However, as long as paid linking methods are permitted by the search engines, digital marketers will be faced with a stark choice. They can embrace the better, more authentic future and concentrate on helping their clients to have responsible digital relationships and to be genuinely useful to their customers. Or they can continue to game the system for however long it lasts and hope that they – and their clients - don't get caught out before the party's over.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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A regular speaker at industry events, Nilhan is one of the leading thinkers on ethical search engine optimisation (SEO) in the UK.

Nilhan began his career in electronics and software engineering. After stints with major blue chip firms, he became interested in new media and joined a fast-growing internet firm as a web developer. While creating software for websites he found that he was fascinated with the evolution and potential of search engines.

In 2001 he was asked to join Spannerworks to help develop its SEO services for clients. Since joining he has helped grow iCrossing in the UK from a handful of employees to one of the largest natural search specialist teams in the industry. In 2006 the company was voted number one search engine marketing firm in the UK in a survey of clients by Marketing, Marketing Direct and Revolution magazines.

Nilhan has advised brands and organisations of all sizes in the UK and globally on their search marketing strategy. He is also a strident advocate of taking an ethical approach to search marketing strategy, focusing on delivering a good user experience and earning long-term search equity by making web sites more useful.

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