

Measurement & Optimization of SEM

By Gary Angel

I decided to post a few days late – just to make sure people saw last Tuesday’s X Change Announcement. If you missed the post on our Web Analytics Conference, check it out. This will be a unique, special event. I called it Top Gun for Web Analytics professionals and I was only a little tongue in cheek – it’s a rare opportunity to talk and work peer-to-peer with great web analytics practitioners. All in a lovely Napa Valley at a spectacular venue at a great time of year!

Also, if you are going to in San Jose this Wednesday for Searchnomics, I’m part of a Panel at 1PM on the relationship and cross-learnings between SEO and PPC. It should be pretty interesting – stop by if you’re there and say hello!

And on those same themes of hands-on discussion of how to really do web analytics and Search Engine Marketing, I’m going to start my second set of "how-to" posts. In the first, I covered analyzing Internal Search. In this set, I’m going to cover SEM Analytics – an even broader and potentially richer topic.

We’ve all seen the explosion of interest and dollars in Search Engine Marketing in the last few years. It was 2-3 years ago when a lot of our big clients finally stopped being afraid of Search and starting really committing to it. Since then, there’s been a vast amount of time and money spent on building Search Marketing programs.

Some of that money has been well spent and, of course, some hasn’t. But as Search becomes ever more competitive, most companies are realizing that optimizing a Search program is a real challenge. When our client’s first got into Search, they relied on Agencies to guide them (Semphonic does not do PPC Bid Management or SEO Optimization - only web and SEM analytics). Some still do. But whether they’ve taken Search in-house or continued to work with one or more Agencies, there’s a growing awareness that Search visitors don’t exist in isolation.

Search visitors are often the product of a complex set of sourcing interactions - including banner ads, TV, print, viral and even complex interactions between Paid listings of different types and Paid and Organic listings. What’s more, Search Visitors form a distinct subset of the site traffic - entering in different places and behaving rather differently than most other visitor segments. These complex sourcing and behavioral patterns insure that the silo approach to Search just won’t work well.

That’s where the web measurement aspect comes into play. Web analytics provides a view of Search as one channel among many - that can be tracked over time - and in terms of it’s interactions with the site and alternative sourcing mechanisms. This view isn’t the be all and end of all of Search Marketing. It won’t, for example, drive most bid optimization. But it is vital for helping an organization allocate resources between PPC, SEO and other marketing channels; insuring that proper goals for

optimization are in place; and for tuning the site experience beyond the Landing Page.

Here's how the series is going to layout (subject to change of course). In the next post, I'm going to cover some of the essential infrastructure to getting Search measured. Because there are many different varieties of search and search analysis, this is actually a pretty big topic. After that, I'm going to cover the basics of Search reporting – including how to think about some of the key terminology and the relationship between your web analytics reports and your Bid Management reports. The next step is how to start measuring the value of search visitors. This is a huge topic and very site specific, but I'm going to try and cover some of the biggest issues by site type; especially as they relate to search. This will include finding, validating and using Conversion Proxies – a subject that is at the heart of much Search measurement.

Once you can measure visitor value, it's time to start thinking about search optimization. I'll treat this at three levels – campaign, ad group and search term. Each of these levels is important and each has some unique advantages and disadvantages as an optimization point. And, of course, your web analytic solution has a different set of reports for each.

A key part of optimization is understanding channel relationships. I've talked about this before, but I'll cover both Organic and PPC self-cannibalization – how to measure each, how to think about each, and what the implications are for setting a broad SEM strategy.

Since most everything to this point will be about Paid Search, the next couple of posts will be on web measurement for SEO. A web analyst can play a significant support role in helping drive a disciplined SEO process – as well as in evaluating its success.

Finally, I'll wrap up with some of the analytic techniques useful to specific areas of Search Optimization. This will include tracking and optimizing creative, understanding the value of controlling the Landing Page, applying special templates to SEO landing pages and measuring and supporting Content Network buying.

Given the amount of money being spent on Search Marketing, it would be a huge mistake for web measurement professionals to assume that "someone else" is handling Search optimization. When it comes to issues like bid management, this may indeed be true. But web analytics provides a view of cross-channel, over-time and behavioral data that simply isn't available to search buyers. Analysis of this data can help shape, direct and manage a Search Marketing program, and can be the difference between money well spent and money down-the-drain.