

Search Engine Savvy

Using Google and others to boost traffic and sales

BY BOB MCCANN



Research shows 87 percent of search engine users don't navigate beyond the first page of results on Google, Yahoo, Bing, and others, so your website needs to be as close to the top as possible. Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Search Engine Marketing

(SEM) can get you noticed and ensure that people who are looking for the very RVs you carry will find your store.

SEO improves Web page rankings organically, meaning that the pages appear in search results for free because their content was deemed editorially relevant by a search engine. SEM is pay-per-click advertising that you for based on how many visitors click on it.

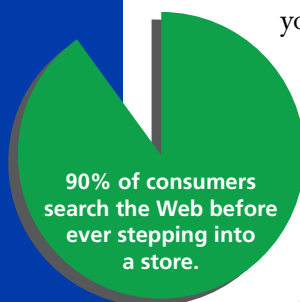
SEM produces immediate traffic returns but doesn't offer ongoing returns after a campaign has ended. SEO doesn't provide results as quickly but has long-term benefits that continue after the investment. Combining the two is a highly effective way to drive more qualified traffic and boost sales.

The art and science of attracting search engines

Search engines use technology called spiders to crawl through websites and scan content. The collected data is then matched with search terms to determine your site's ranking. When a spider indexes your website, it looks for keyword-loaded HTML text, as it can be easily read and

Online Ad Spending Leaps

Pay-per-click ad spending will increase by 15 to 20 percent this year, predicts Efficient Frontier, a Mountain View, California-based company that manages search engine marketing. eMarketer, which researches and analyzes digital marketing and media, estimates that Google's U.S. search revenues will grow 15.7 percent – to \$10.2 billion – giving the company more than 75 percent of the overall market. And it estimates that Bing's search ad revenues will expand by 16.4 percent, to \$1.47 billion by year end, after growing a whopping 47 percent last year. Close to 90 percent of consumers search the Web before ever stepping into a store.



understood. Your website should be designed according to several criteria to attract search engines and improve your visibility:

- **Content is king.** Keywords are the most commonly typed phrases that searchers use when researching a specific product or topic. Your search terms should be relevant to your business and geographical location, e.g., “RVs for sale St. Petersburg FL.” The more a given keyword is repeated within the body text of your website, the greater the likelihood of a higher ranking in search results. So embed target phrases throughout your website, including them in the headline, high up in the copy, and at the bottom of each page.
- **Code speaks to spiders.** Using appropriate meta tags on each page also boosts rankings. These are the HTML-coded information describing the content of a page. The meta title and meta descriptions are crucial to your SEO efforts, as they are often displayed in the search engine results. Tags must be used to describe what's in an image or video, since search engines can only analyze text. The same is true for Flash-based animations and graphics. Flash can add excitement to your site, but weigh its advantages against its downside – namely, that it won't be catalogued in a search.
- **Inbound links build credibility.** One important but often neglected piece of SEO is link building. Links from other, highly ranked websites increase your site's traffic and standing in the search results. Start with securing a link to your website from the manufacturers you represent. You can also create an account on Facebook, Twitter, and RV-related forums. This way, you can include your URL and also specific product pages for reference when interacting with potential online customers. Combined with careful content management, SEO ultimately comes down to a popularity contest. The more prominent websites that link to yours, the more prominent your site will become.

Advertising on search engines

Search engines don't all operate the same way and they continually evolve, so it's advisable to work with a solutions provider who understands the complexities of SEM, or

pay-per-click (PPC) programs and can help you increase ROI. A PPC program should start out small with a test campaign limited in scope (e.g., one product) and time (three months). That way, you can evaluate your strategy and refine your messages and keywords accordingly. Once the initial test campaign is successful, expand your efforts to other brands and products.

With PPC, you only pay the websites hosting your ad when a visitor clicks on the ad. Host sites and search engines charge differently; sites that contain content have a fixed price per click, while search engines use a bidding system in which you indicate the keywords you want and the maximum amount you're willing to pay per click.

Your PPC ad is displayed when a keyword query matches the list of keywords you "bought" or when a content site displays relevant content. It appears as a "sponsored link" or "sponsored ad" on Google, either above or to the right of the organic search results.

With Google AdWords, one of the most widely used PPC campaign tools, the ad position is determined by the bids of the other advertisers and what's known as the "quality score" of all ads shown for a given search. This is calculated using the relevance of the advertiser's text in the ad, keywords used, account history, the historical click-through rates of the ad, and other elements Google doesn't divulge.

Google AdWords also provides you with geographic or demographic targeting tools so you can focus on specific customers or markets. For example, you can target customers within 50 miles of your store, or run separate ads for each part of your business, linking each one to a customized, relevant landing page to maximize your investment.

Investing in ad-word campaigns is essential to help drive new, qualified traffic to your website. Choose an SEM solution that comes with performance-tracking reports so you can continuously analyze results, adjust your efforts to achieve the greatest return on your PPC advertising investment, and determine how to allocate future ad dollars.

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A Pay-per-click Primer

KEYWORDS: Resources for choosing keyword phrases abound. Free tools include Google AdWords, Keyword Discovery, and Microsoft adCenter. When compiling a list of keywords to test, explore tail terms – long, specific phrases that include one or more modifiers, such as "cheapest RV Park near Charlotte." They generate less traffic so they're less competitive and therefore more affordable, but they're also often more qualified and have a higher conversion rate.

ACCOUNT STRUCTURE: A well-structured account offers relevant keyword groupings. For example, if an ad is for Jayco RVs, the keyword you would advertise under is "Jayco RVs for sale," and anyone who clicks on the ad would be sent to the Jayco page on your website. This ad group would be separate from the other ad groups in your campaign.

Campaigns and ad groups should be focused on business or keyword seasonality, geographic targeting, branded terms and the buying cycle.

AD COPY: To persuade your target audience to click on your ad, use catchy and unique phrases, making sure to include some of your keywords ("Buy Your RV Here, New and Used RVs All At Discount Prices! Family Fun For All"). This will help improve your quality score, and the keywords will appear in bold when they trigger your ad.

Also, include a call to action to drive more clicks. Research what your competitors are doing, then highlight what makes your business different in your ad copy. For example, if your competitors are selling on price, counteract with a lower price, wider selection, better experience, or some other unique selling point.

Test different ad wordings. There's no magic copy formula, so start new campaigns with two to four versions to find out which generate more clicks. Google AdWords lets you see which ad performs better over time. Reuse successful ads and copy across other ad groups.

LANDING PAGE: Each PPC ad should lead to a specific landing page that continues the ad's theme. Limit the navigation and images to keep visitors' attention on your proposition. At the top left of the page, include your company logo with a link to your homepage, and place a call-to-action button above the fold. Use dynamic headlines targeted to what the user typed in the search, followed by a few paragraphs of easy-to-scan copy.

BID STRATEGY: Set your keyword bids high enough to obtain positions three through five, which have been proven to be better for ROI than positions one and two. Then determine which keywords produce conversions. For these, increase the bid price gradually until the cost per conversion levels out at, or below, the maximum you defined earlier.