

Natural Search Engine Results and Website Consulting

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You scroll down past the banner ads and enter your search term. You pass the "sponsored results" without a glance. You ignore the shaded results to the right, as well as the additional "sponsored results" at bottom. Hiding somewhere in the middle of it all, you finally find the results you came for.

Welcome to the world of natural search- a world where mom-and-pop shops compete with million dollar companies, where million dollar companies compete with billion dollar corporations. And, while many will argue to the contrary, the playing field is more or less level. Small companies can and do dominate their behemoth competitors in this world, for a variety of reasons.

What Is Natural Search?

For those who aren't quite clear what the term means, "natural" or "organic" search describes the "editorial" search results on any particular engine. These results are purported to be completely non-biased - meaning that the engine will not accept any amount of money to influence the rankings of any individual sites. This is quite different than the paid advertising that appears in "sponsored" or "featured" results, in which higher positions are rewarded to the companies willing to pay the most per visitor.

Why Is Natural Search Important?

Savvy searchers who understand the difference between paid and natural results are more likely to hold the natural results in a higher regard, much like a person reading a magazine would probably be more positively influenced by an article about a particular company than by a paid advertisement from the company.

It is also likely that natural search will become more important in the coming months.

Yahoo's new Site Match program, which mixes some paid results with natural results, is certain to get some close scrutiny from the FTC (even though the fees paid are not supposed to influence rankings). This type of public attention will no doubt educate some oblivious users as to what "sponsored results" actually are. More importantly, other search engines are likely to use this as a means of differentiation from Yahoo. It is no coincidence that Ask Jeeves announced that it was getting rid of its similar program the day after Yahoo's new program was unveiled, claiming that it was impossible to produce unbiased results using this methodology.

Microsoft also recently claimed that they were taking steps to further differentiate paid results from natural results. No matter what the end result, one probable outcome of this new attention to paid search engine advertising is that more average searchers will learn the differences between paid and natural search results, and many will instinctively favor the latter.

What Advantages Do Huge Corporations Have?

Certainly, large companies do have some specific advantages when it comes to natural search.

Links

The primary advantage that large corporations have is their ability to obtain large amounts of inbound links, which can have a huge impact on search engine rankings. Often these links are given freely without the company asking (or being aware that it is happening).

Many of the huge corporation's vendors, affiliates, partners, etc. are eager to show their association with the company and link to the corporate site readily and non-reciprocally. Large corporations can also facilitate huge increases in link popularity through a simple corporate policy requiring inbound links from any companies wishing to work with them. In addition, very large corporations may have several websites, which can sometimes be effectively linked together for additional link popularity.

Budget

Although history shows that a large percentage of major corporations do not spend wisely in this arena, larger corporations typically have larger marketing budgets than their smaller competitors. However, this does not necessarily mean that they will readily allocate a portion of that budget for search engine optimization, as discussed below.

What Advantages Do Smaller Companies Have?

While the advantages of huge corporations, particularly in the area of link popularity, can be difficult to overcome, it is often unnecessary to try. A large percentage of such companies consistently seem to shoot themselves in the foot when it comes to natural search engine optimization, a primary reason why small companies can often outperform them. Specific advantages include:

A willingness to pursue the channel

Smaller companies are typically more willing to devote resources to natural search than large corporations. Huge things have to happen for a major corporation to get involved in this "new" channel, a channel far removed from the traditional marketing methodologies used to build the giant. Few corporate underlings want to be the one to put their neck on the line and recommend something completely new and "unproven". Even when a large corporation looks into natural search engine optimization as a potential marketing tool, it can take many months, and sometimes years, for a final decision to be made.

A willingness to change the company website

Huge corporations face similar problems when it comes to changing to the corporate website. Within such entities, a person can often not get so much as a comma removed from the text of a secondary page without holding several upper-level management meetings and, ultimately, making a board presentation. Smaller, leaner companies are able to approve necessary website changes more quickly, and are almost always more willing to quickly adapt to the needs of both visitors and search engines.

The willingness to outsource

Larger companies have more internal resources at their disposal, and are less likely to outsource this specialized service to someone with proven experience. Often, search engine optimization is treated as an afterthought and dumped on an IT person, who typically has too much to do already and will approach the problem solely from a technical standpoint.

Natural search engine optimization is by necessity a combination of marketing and technology. Newcomers to the field (especially those who treat the discipline as strictly a technical issue) often make fundamental mistakes that at best do not get results and at worst put sites at risk of penalization.

A lack of technical hurdles

Huge corporations are more likely to have technical issues on their website that can prevent search engines from indexing all of their pages. Often the pages of corporate websites are generated "on the fly" from large databases, and such pages (without modification to the URLs) are sometimes never indexed. In addition, (although usability studies are making this happen less often), some huge corporations have their sites built entirely in flash or use other technologies that are virtually invisible to search engines.

The Bottom Line

To most huge corporations, search engine optimization is often a very small piece of an enormous puzzle - and it is a piece they have been doing without for years. The necessary steps required to fully embrace the channel are often enough to stop any well-intentioned initiative in its tracks. As most search engine optimization experts will tell you, some of the most egregious search engine mistakes are consistently made by household name companies - leaving their smaller, leaner competitors the opportunity to take full advantage.