

"Switching Domains - A University's .edu Story"

By Josh Sloan

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My name is Joshua Sloan. I work at the University of Advancing Computer Technology (UAT) in Tempe, AZ (<http://www.uat.edu>). Although my job title is Senior Web Analyst, my duties (and past work experience) fall more into the field of web-based promotions and traffic analysis. Rather than contract out the web promotions, UAT was innovative in its decision to create an in-house position for this. In the long run, this will be less expensive for them, and they will have better control of how/where they are promoted online.

Now for a little background. My position started in mid-March of 2002. UAT's site at the time had been up for 2.5 years. It received an average of about 19,000 unique IP visits per month, and had a link popularity/visibility of about 1600. At the end of June I was able to bring the link popularity up to 4400, and increased unique IP visits to around 36,000. This was done mainly through hand submission of individual web pages to the Search Engines, usage of Pay Per Click (PPC) engines, and through contacting various sites asking for links to us.

My strategy for increasing link visibility is, "If I can't be listed in the top ten, for a given search term, I want to be listed on sites that ARE in the top 10!"

Then came the bombshell...

The school was to change its identity AND its web domain in just six weeks!!! As we could only legally own one .edu domain, the other was scheduled to 'die' in mid-January. BTW - This transition would have been easier for those of you with multiple .com sites. Initially this domain transition struck a healthy amount of fear in me. I realized that we would be starting a totally new branding process, and it would take some time to build our link visibility and IP visits back up to the numbers the old site had. I didn't really know how long that would take.

At the time this was announced, mid-June 2002, I knew I had only six weeks before the new site went live, in which to figure out how to divert and increase traffic to the new site. I also knew that I really only had about 6 months to put my strategies into play. To offset the lack of traffic to the new domain, I did 6 very important things:

1. I increased our PPC keywords from 60 to 600.
2. I personally contacted over 3000 webmasters to request that they change the link on their page

from the old URL to the new one, and change the name listed to our new name (University of Advancing Technology).

3. I stepped up and better organized my hand submission of pages, on the new site, to the Search Engines.
4. We used a redirect page while both .edu domains existed, then later, I used server side redirection of traffic from the old domain to the new domain by tweaking the DNS server's entries.
5. Encouraged the use of email signature tags throughout the school to help build awareness of the new school name and URL
6. Began planning for microsites (unique keyword based domains) for specific university programs. BTW - These will be better optimized for Search Engines, than even our main site.

The outcome? The Administrators of the university and myself were pleasantly surprised when, after the site had been up only two weeks, the traffic to the new site was slightly greater than it had been on the old domain, about 40,000 unique IPs per month. Our traffic barely skipped a beat! Six months after the switch to the new domain, we now generate 50,000+ unique IPs per month, and our link visibility is up to 1400 (from zero). Just wait till I get it up to the 4400 that I reached for the old site!!!

Moving to a new domain can spell traffic death for well established companies. But a smart use of existing traffic generating practices made all the difference for us. Now I realize, that our small private technology school can't outspend the University of Phoenix and larger, more recognizable competitors, but we did dedicate a few thousand dollars per month to PPC, a couple highly targeted banner campaigns, and we bought paid inclusion through Inktomi and Fast, as well as buying our way into Yahoo! and MSN. We have don't currently believe in pop-ups, or general banner campaigns.

Is the work done? No way, it never is. My goal is to reach 80,000 unique IP visits per month by March of 2004., and 100,000 by December of 2004. As we establish new branding in our offline marketing, things are only going to get better. The new site does still need some work (mostly browser compatibility, and some awkward/chunky coding), but this is to be expected because it was produced in such a short time. It works best in IE, but then IE makes up 97% of our visits. Also some site's still link to the old domain, and must be asked again to change their link. A manual and somewhat tedious process, but increasing link popularity/visibility never really ends. Only cursory SE optimization has been done to date as we do more

Bottom line when switching domains. Leverage any and all strategies which have demonstrated measurable success, and look for new one's as well!

It has been working for us!

Best Regards,

Joshua Sloan

University of Advancing Technology - <http://www.uat.edu>

"Learn. Experience. Innovate"

PS - The learning I get from my full-time duties has helped me offer even better service to my private clients, and I have become a popular guest lecturer in the university's marketing and ecomm

classes!

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