

# Preparing for a Competitive Holiday Season - StepForth Search

## Engine Placement

By Jim Hedger

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Christmas is a time of joy, family and a fridge full of turkey soup and sandwiches to fill your happy belly for weeks to come. It is a short but stressful break at the start of a long and (at least in most parts of Canada), normally bleak winter. It is also the time of the year that accounts for over 40% of most retail business sales and can either make or break a business depending on the retail success of the season. I don't want to be the one to break the news to most of you but someone has to do it; the holiday season is coming and this year it's coming sooner than you think. Many Internet based retailers, or E-Tailers have come to recognize that it is never too early to promote a good thing, especially if search engine placement is a cornerstone of their marketing strategy. Search engine placements can often take six to eight weeks to achieve. Six weeks from now the kids will be going back to school, the summer will be drawing to a close and, wouldn't you know it... the holiday season will almost be upon us. If you are not ready for the shopping season yet, you better get ready soon or you might find your competition making sales that should have been yours.

This year, the holiday season will be more important than ever for small retailers in North America. The past few years of meager economic growth has the retail sector desperate for strong numbers to bolster their bottom line. In other words, what should be the best time of year for all of us might actually become the worst of times for the local retailer. At times like this, conventional wisdom says the only way to succeed is to attract more customers to replace the ones who aren't spending as much this year. Merchants need to attract customers and to do that they need to advertise. For "brick and mortar" businesses, the most logical place to begin advertising is to place an advertisement in the local Yellow Pages telling people how to get to their store. The e-tailers' functional equivalent to a yellow pages ad on the Internet is the search engines. Used by almost every Internet user, search engines have become the standard way Internet users look for information and you don't have to wait until the next printing cycle to insert or change your ad. Even better, this medium is (in most cases) a level playing field where achieving a top position does not necessarily have to require a big budget (see our 10 Minute Optimization).

### Consumer Habits, On and Off the Web

Increasingly, search engine users are looking for Christmas related items. StepForth tracks the usage of various keywords month to month using the Overture search term suggestion tool. In April 2003, there were 58,267 searches conducted for "Christmas". That number jumped to 67,234 in May 2003. Now that summer is upon us and Christmas is getting closer, there were 252,480 searches for the keyword "Christmas" in June 2003! Clearly, search engine users are looking for Christmas

related items.

Several studies have shown that while sales for traditional brick and mortar retailers appear to be holding steady, there has been very little actual growth in consumer spending over the past two years. Online sales on the other hand have increased by 25 – 30% over each of the past three years. According to Los Angeles based Internet retail analysts, BizRate.Com, sales for electronic retailers on the Microsoft Network increased by more than 50% for Christmas 2002 over the previous year. Similar numbers have been reported from electronic retailers located in Australia, the UK, Canada and the EU. There are several reasons for the continued growth in online sales. Consumers are becoming more confident in spending money online, as security and shipping protocols have been refined year after year. Consumers are also starting to think of online shopping the same way they think of traditional shopping experiences by favoring sites they have shopped at before or can easily navigate through. In order to retain past and current clients as well as attracting new customers, E-Business owners should consider their websites from an “End-User” perspective. The aim is to make finding information as simple as possible. Often, this process involves re-evaluation of a website and its purpose, leading to website redesign or the re-ordering of information on a website. Keeping the coming holiday season in mind, some website owners might want to think about staging the redevelopment of their sites in order to begin promoting Christmas sales on the search engines as soon as possible but waiting to introduce seasonal graphics until the beginning of November.

If you rebuild it, will they come?

An honest answer is, yes but it might take a few months before your site ranks well on search engines. Search engines require time to find your website, read the information on the site and rank it. Once the site is in search engine databases, it can typically take 2 – 3 months for a website to achieve top10 placements, even after an effective optimization campaign. As your site is competing against thousands of similar sites, it is important to invest the time, money and patience into creating the strongest possible promotion for your business. This is going to be a very important retail season for many if not most retailers. After two years of stagnating sales and shaky economic numbers, most merchants are in the same position. If all things were equal in the world of business, one could ride their luck but, as we all know, things are not all equal. Put some extra strength in your business this season and be visible against your competition.

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