

Search Engine Predictions for 2002

By Kalena Jordan

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Never try to predict the unpredictable. That's advice I have been given and advice I am going to completely ignore this month, by attempting to predict the movements of the volatile search engine industry over the next 12 months. Here they are, my personal predictions for 2002:

1. Increase in Pay For Performance (PFP) Options - when you consider that a year ago there were only a couple of search engines offering PFP options, you realize how important PFP has now become (by PFP I mean Pay-Per-Click options, paid inclusion, sponsored listings and keyword buys). All the most important search engines now offer some type of PFP option and every SEO campaign should have some PFP components for best results.

I see this trend increasing, with the major engines and directories expanding on the range of PFP options they provide, whether in-house (such as Looksmart's new LookListings range for small business), or outsourced (such as Yahoo's recent partnering with Overture). I also see more traditional SEO's embracing PFP for the first time in 2002, as they realize the benefits and results achievable for their clients and stop fretting over the perceived loss of "purity" of search results.

2. Increase in Paid Submissions - Looking back to November 2000, Looksmart was the only one of the major engines and directories to demand payment to consider a site for submission to their index. Yahoo introduced submission fees for commercial sites a month later. Both directories hiked up their price to USD 299 during this year, setting a new standard for the industry and justifying the value of their service via market share (Yahoo) and the formation of new partnerships with other search players (Looksmart).

I would hope that Paid Submission fees remain static for 2002, at least for Yahoo and Looksmart. However I believe we'll see other engines and directories introduce a fee for submission to their commercial categories. I think Google could be the first of these.

3. Crackdown on Spammers - In their quest for relevant results, Google recently introduced the Report a Spammer page, (<http://www.google.com/contact/spamreport.html>) as well as a beta page rating tool within their latest Toolbar (<http://toolbar.google.com/go?version=beta&hl=en>) that enables people to rate the quality of sites they find in Google's index. As well as enabling people to vote for

sites they find providing quality content, this rating tool gives people the opportunity to report sites using unacceptable spamdexing methods to try and obtain a high search ranking.

With engines like Google leading the way in the crackdown on search engine spammers, other engines should follow suit in 2002. As a result, there should be far less spammers and more relevant results across the search engines by this time next year.

4. Growth of the SEO Industry - Nothing too Nostradamus about this one. With the importance of search engines finally sinking in, the need for quality SEO services is booming in the U.S. and the U.K. I predict this solid demand will continue in 2002, especially in newly developing markets such as Australia / New Zealand and Europe.

5. Death of Two Majors - In any industry, there are always winners and losers. I think 2002 will signal the demise for at least two of the major search engines and directories, especially given relevancy and freshness of results are so important to the market at the moment.

6. One or More Major Partnerships - To survive in an industry as volatile as theirs, search engines often need to partner with others. I see some major rivals combining in 2002, just to stay alive. I also see some more major partnerships between online and offline firms, particularly between search engines, communications and media corporations such as the recent joint venture between Telecom New Zealand, AOL and Australia's Seven Network (<http://www.telecom-media.co.nz/>)

7. Move away from In-House to Outsourced Services - Optimizing for search engines now involves a lot more than just traditional site optimization. It involves PPC or PFP campaign management, site copywriting, keyword research, marketing and industry consultation. As search engine optimization becomes even more complex and time consuming in 2002, more businesses will realize SEO is a full-time job and not something their marketing or IT staff can do "on the side".

To get results, they will have to either hire a SEO specialist in-house OR (more cost-effectively) outsource their requirements from a professional SEO that has the economies-of-scale in place to get the job done quickly and effectively.

8. SEO industry Shake-Up - With the growth of PFP & PPC, search engine specialists will have to keep their skills sharpened constantly in 2002 and keep up with industry developments to ensure they remain competitive. With consumer watchdogs keeping a close eye (see here: <http://www.marketingsherpa.com/sample.cfm?contentID=1897>), developing industry standards and ethics, as well as the crackdown on spammers sure to continue, the SEO industry is sure to experience a major shake-up next year, with only the most successful and ethical SEO's left still standing.

9. New Technologies - Finally, just like in previous years (think 67 character domains, Ezula, Zeus, MS Smart Tags), I'm sure there will be some significant technological developments in 2002 that will impact the search engine industry and make us all head for the forums and chat rooms in a panic. But that's the beauty of this industry - they don't call it cutting edge for nothing!

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