

Time to Rate Last Year's Search Engine Predictions

By Kalena Jordan

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Those of you who are long time subscribers to our newsletter The Search Light (http://www.high-search-engine-ranking.com/free_newsletter.htm) will remember my article from way back in December 2001 titled Search Engine Predictions for 2002 (http://www.high-search-engine-ranking.com/Search_Engine_Predictions_For_2002.htm).

It's time to take a look at that article and the grand predictions I made for the search industry to determine whether I'm a "Nostradamus" or a "NoSuchLuckus".

Here were my personal predictions for 2002:

1. Increase in Pay For Performance (PFP) Options

My first prediction for the year 2002 related to pay for performance options: "I see this trend increasing, with the major engines and directories expanding on the range of PFP options they provide, whether in-house or outsourced".

Looks like I was right on the money with this one. By the end of 2002, all but one of the major search engines and directories had a pay for performance option available. Paid inclusion services in particular proved to be a popular addition to search engines in 2002, with Lycos, FAST / AllTheWeb and Ask Jeeves / Teoma each introducing a paid inclusion product for the first time. Pay per click services also gained in popularity in 2002, with Google introducing their AdWords Select Pay Per Click product in February 2002 (that recently!) and Overture spreading their market reach via major partnerships with AOL Europe in January, MSN in February and September, InfoSeek in March, Yahoo in April, CNET and AltaVista in May, Lycos Europe in June, Yahoo Japan in November, CNN and Freeserve in December.

The popularity of Google's AdWords grew quickly throughout the year, with AdWords becoming a major competitor to Overture, helped along by new partnerships with Earthlink in February, AOL in May, Ask Jeeves / Teoma and AT&T in July, InfoSpace in September and Yahoo Japan in November. In fact, AdWords became such a threat to Overture that they filed a patent infringement lawsuit against Google in April 2002. I believe the outcome is still pending on that one. Smaller PPC engines began to gain more market share in 2002, with eSpotting, FindWhat, Kanoodle and Ah-Ha each finding a market niche.

And who could forget LookSmart's disastrous entry to the realm of pay per click in April 2002? The deceptive nature of LookSmart's announcement and their decision to force existing Express

Directory Submission customers to rollover into the new PPC system instead of "grandfathering" their listings demonstrated a complete lack of market understanding and for some, forever etched the LookSmart brand with the word "untrustworthy". It seems LookSmart are still paying for their mistake months later, with a reduced market share and a devastated reputation.

As predicted, search engine optimizers have had to embrace this trend towards Pay for Performance and integrate it within their traditional site optimization services in order to offer clients balanced, measurable and successful search engine marketing campaigns. As a result, the term SEO has become increasingly eroded by the more logical term SEM (Search Engine Marketer).

Score: Nostradamus

2. Increase in Paid Submissions

My original article predicted: "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".

While the fairly new JoeAnt and GoGuides directories both introduced paid submission services late in 2002, they don't really counteract the fact that LookSmart dropped their directory submission option in favor of PPC and (thankfully), Google have refrained from introducing a Paid Submission service. So much for THAT prediction!

Score: NoSuchLuckus

3. Crackdown on Spammers

My prediction here was: "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."

Other search engines have indeed followed Google's lead against spam in 2002, by introducing more sophisticated search algorithms, (such as AltaVista's revamped algorithm consisting of 100+ ranking determining factors), by incorporating more spam filtration methods (such as those capable of detecting invisible text and hidden links), by providing spam reporting facilities and by boosting site relevancy factors such as link popularity when measuring sites against search queries.

Google still leads the War Against Spam, with their dreaded PageRank site penalty scheme and their crystal clear anti-spam stance publicized via their Webmaster Guidelines (<http://www.google.com/webmasters/guidelines.html>). The result has been a victory for searchers - more relevant searches, less bacon and ham. Even those search engines and directories renowned for providing irrelevant results recognized what Google had known for years: the need to keep searchers satisfied. Yahoo in particular got back to basics by the end of 2002, partnering with Google to combine Google search results with their own directory listings instead of serving them up separately.

Score: Nostradamus

4. Growth of the SEO Industry

Back then I said: "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".

No longer a niche market, SEO/SEM has indeed become mainstream over the past 12 months and is now recognized as a vital part of the marketing mix in both the U.S. and the U.K. Thankfully, search engine marketing has also become increasingly in demand in European, Asian and Australasian markets with scores of new specialist SEM firms springing up regularly and more media coverage than ever before.

Score: Nostradamus

5. Death of Two Majors

My prediction here read: "I think 2002 will signal the demise for at least two of the major search engines and directories".

In 2002 we said goodbye to industry veterans Excite (<http://www.excite.com/>) and Northern Light (<http://www.northernlight.com/>). Excite ceased to be a major player in January 2002, when new owners InfoSpace replaced Excite's search database listings with a mixture of Overture paid results and Inktomi search results. Excite UK shut their doors around the same time. These days the Excite portal still exists, but nobody searches there anymore. Perhaps it's because Excite now uses a mixture of regular and PPC listings from Google, LookSmart, Inktomi, Ask Jeeves, About, Overture, FindWhat and FAST, with no disclaimers to help searchers identify which are paid results.

In January 2002, Northern Light closed its public search service. A week later, Divine, inc., a provider of content management and delivery solutions for enterprise customers, bought the search site. In a separate deal at the same time, Yahoo partnered with Divine to make Northern Light's Special Collection documents available in a new service called Yahoo Premium Documents Search.

Technically we could say that HotBot (<http://www.hotbot.com/>) also "died" in 2002, given it lost its own search database and became a META search engine in December to display search results from search FAST, Google, Inktomi and Teoma under the ownership of Terra Lycos.

Score: Nostradamus

6. One or More Major Partnerships

My prediction was: "I see some major rivals combining in 2002, just to stay alive. I also see some more major partnerships between online and offline firms".

The Yahoo deal with Google in October 2002 to provide combined search listings and Yahoo's purchase announcement of Inktomi in December 2002 spring to mind here. So do the many partnerships between Google and search rivals Ask Jeeves / Teoma, AOL and InfoSpace for the provision of AdWords paid listings (as listed in 1. above) in 2002 and the expansion of Overture via

partnerships with various search engines, directories and portals worldwide.

Let's not forget the Lycos / FAST deal for paid inclusion services either. Yahoo's 2002 move into the ISP market and Ask Jeeves' provision of an offline "butler service" are relevant to the latter half of this prediction.

Score: Nostradamus

7. Move away from In-House to Outsourced Services

My original article predicted: "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'."

A year ago, if you had gone to a major employment site such as careerbuilder.com or monster.com and conducted a search for "search engine optimization", you would have been hard-pressed to find many jobs in this field. Do a search today and you'd be amazed at the increase in demand for SEO specialists - just as predicted.

Score: Nostradamus

8. SEO industry Shake-Up

My prediction was: "With consumer watchdogs keeping a close eye, 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."

You could say that 2002 gave rise to the ethical SEO. A line in the sand was drawn between so-called "ethical" search engine optimizers and marketers (SEM's) and "unethical" search engine optimization firms, nicknamed "Search engine deceivers" (SED's) by some. A number of long-time SED's found themselves permanently banned for search engine spamming by Google in 2002, to the sheer delight of many in the industry. As more search engines introduced or tightened their anti-spam filters in 2002, many shady SEO cowboys were forced to pack up shop as they realized their spam techniques were no longer effective.

Google's unprecedented decision to publish their definition (<http://www.google.com/webmasters/seo.html>) of "ethical" search engine optimization on their Webmaster Guidelines page forced many search engine marketing firms to rethink their SEO techniques. It was also the start of what many believe is a new era in the industry, where search engines and professional SEO's start to communicate openly, creating an information exchange for the possible development of an industry-wide set of acceptable search engine optimization standards.

Score: Nostradamus

9. New Technologies

My final prediction read: "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."

Sure enough, developments such as Google News, Gator, LookSmart LookListings, the SEO Consultants Directory, Overture's Auto-Bidding Tool, Froogle, Wireless Search, TopText, Link Loader, MPZ Format, the Chinese Government's ban on Google and Search King's PR Ad Network resulted in some frantic forum activity in 2002.

But none of these compare to the storm in a teacup caused by a little green bar. Yep, Google Page Rank^{#8482}; gets my vote for the most talked about technology in search for 2002.

Score: Nostradamus

So with a final score of eight out of nine, it looks like I'm ninety percent Nostradamus after all (-:

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