

Why Broad is Flawed

By Laura Bergells

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A few weeks ago, a potential customer called me. A low-to-no-cost internet service provider, he had what he thought was a great idea: he wanted me to get his site listed in the top ten of all the major internet search engines for the key word "internet".

It's February, so I knew this wasn't an April Fool's joke. He was dead serious.

Sometimes, a call seems to come from so far out of left field, that I take it as a sign I need to develop better empathy skills to learn where my customers are coming from! I had to bite my lip before I explained why this idea wasn't so great.

Sure, getting your site listed at the major search engines can be a great idea. But getting a top ten ranking for a very broad term is almost worthless. Why? Well, for example, go to Google and type in "internet" and hit the search button. Not only will Google list over 109,000,000 pages (that's a lot!), you'll see that each link is very broad, indeed!

What does "broad" mean? Well, when I did this particular search, the number one link was Microsoft Corporation, touting their internet browsing software. The next listing was for internet.com, a premiere "all things internet marketing" information site. The third listing was for - get this - an internet movie database.

Huh? What's the connection between these three sites? Browsers, Marketing, and Movies???

Not a whole lot. The connection between the three is too broad to be relevant for the searcher.

Upon viewing this, anyone who is interested in low-to-no cost internet services is bound to say,

"Duh! 'Internet' is too broad a term! I'd better type in exactly what I want. How about 'free internet hosting' instead?"

After searching under this term, two things happen:

The sheer volume of pages listed at Google decreases by over 98% to 1.8 million, so there is much less competition to get a better ranking. (This is still a huge number with lots of competition: a tip that you'd better have other methodologies in place for people to find your site than just a great search engine ranking!)

More importantly, the search results are way more relevant for the person who is looking for low-cost hosting. On the internet, as in life, you stand a better chance of getting what you want if you know exactly what you want and how to ask for it. . .

So, before you get your heart set on optimizing a certain keyword or keyword phrase for optimal search engine placement, consider doing three things:

1) Make sure your keyword phrase isn't so broad that it will be virtually meaningless. This is pretty easy to do: simply enter your phrase into your favorite search engine and see what happens. Lots of pages served? Little relevance between the top 20 links? These are hints that your term may be too broad.

Conversely, make sure your term isn't too narrow! Find out if people are actually searching with the keyword phrases that you brainstorm. Use a service like wordtracker.com to discover how many times people actually search for your keyword phrase. This lets you know whether spending the time and effort optimizing your pages for number one search engine placement is actually worth the effort.

2) Check out your "competition". The word "competition" is in quotation marks because I've discovered (more than once) that "competitors" can actually end up being strategic partners. Let me explain: first, visit some sites that have optimal ranking for your desired search term. Chances are, a few of them may not be sales or directly competitive sites: they may be information sites about your product or service. If they are, you can contact them to inquire about opportunities for advertising. If they're getting good traffic (especially for your search term), you can quite possibly work with them to get a link to your site or a mention in their newsletter. Perhaps you can offer them a commission for sales that they refer. . . can you spell "affiliate candidate?"

3) Also, check out your real competition. These are the sites that have a good ranking for your search term and are selling your product or service. Ask yourself: "What are they doing right? How did they get top placement with that particular combination of copy, headline, meta-tags, alt text, etc.? How can I do it better? Is it worth my time?"

After I briefly discussed these strategies to my would-be client, he pouted that if I couldn't get him listed in the top ten for "internet", he would take his business elsewhere.

I sighed.

Some clients are really not worth having, and this was certainly one of them. I'm not in the habit of going through a great deal of effort for very little reward. I politely told him that he really should talk to someone else.

Irritated, he asked why none of us "search engine guys" seemed very interested in helping him achieve his "goal".

I told him that hopefully, search engine placement firms and internet marketers are becoming more reputable and thoughtful. We realize that our "goal" is not to get a number one placement for a particular search term, it's to get high-quality traffic for our clients' sites so that they can become more successful.

Overall, I was happy this fellow called me. He gave me some insight into a metaphysical issue that some people still seem to face: not knowing where their true goals lie! "Being number one in the search engines" isn't a goal: it's just one of many methods to reach a real goal (like financial security or prosperity!). Becoming obsessed with one methodology to reach your real goal can easily keep a person from exploring other avenues to reach their dreams.

My profound wish for the day? That we all take time to discover where our true goals and dreams lie, and that we discover winning ways to make our dreams come true.

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