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SEO IS ONLY HALF THE BATTLE....

If you don't improve both your Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) and your usability - you only improve your findability, not your chance for extra conversions.

It's no great revelation to say that for any business to be truly successful online, they need to spend time and money on driving traffic through a good Search Engine Optimisation strategy. But perhaps less well understood is users' behaviour once they have found a website – and how to stop them from returning to Google and trying a different website. Quite simply, it doesn't matter how much money you spend on helping users find your site, if they can't complete their desired tasks or goals then the effort and money spent on SEO was wasted. SEO can promise increased visits – but cannot guarantee improved conversion rates. But if you think about SEO and usability as part of the same strategy you can double your chances of new, converting customers.

In a large-scale test run by web usability guru Jakob Nielsen, for his 2005 book *Prioritizing Web Usability*, 88% of web users started the tasks they were given with a search engine query – and according to UKOM, in 2010 UK internet users are spending 64% more time using search than they did 3 years ago. Add that to the fact that in April 2010 alone, Google received 4.1 billion search page views just from the UK – and it's clear that search is now well and truly embedded in our default internet behaviour. The opportunities available for savvy businesses to reach their target audiences online at every stage of the buying cycle are phenomenal.

SEO is the process of optimising a website to increase organic (ie free) traffic from search engines. The reasons for creating a search engine friendly site are simple: to attract natural search traffic from the search engines, to allow a website to easily target particular keyword searches, and to create a flexible and future proof platform that is accessible to all search engines and users. With over 200 factors affecting the SEO performance of a website, reliably getting users to your website through search requires in-depth knowledge of a variety of technical, marketing and development related fields.

Successful websites need to focus on keywords that have the highest relevance and conversion rates, it's critical that you understand what users are searching for, and how they are searching for it. This might include: brainstorming and mind maps to determine what your customers might search for; customer surveys and user research to discover the biggest traffic drivers directly from a site's audience; and various data analysis using powerful statistical tools to analyse 'search volumes' – which provide details on which keywords are searched for more often than others.

But no matter how much SEO work you do – if your site offers poor usability, your hard-won users will leave.

Long term studies of user behaviour have shown that, apart from the top couple of percent of trusted internet names, users rarely search for any website in particular – instead, they simply search for any place where they can achieve their goals. According to Peter Pirolli, in his 2006 book *Information Foraging, A Theory of Adaptive Interaction with Information*, users will 'forage' across multiple websites (usually the top few results of their search) until they find a site with a reliable 'information scent', or path, through to achieving their goal.

It takes a matter of seconds for most users to decide if a site offers this strong path – which means that it doesn't matter if your site is the top result on Google for all of your key search terms, if users can't do what they want they will leave quickly, and try your competitors' websites instead. In other words: it sounds obvious but, of the top few search results, the site with the best usability is likely to be the one where visitors convert to becoming customers.

So when you consider your SEO strategy it's critical to also spend time looking for barriers in your site between the pages where you expect users to enter, the pages you ultimately want them to reach and the conversions you want them to make.

These barriers could be relatively technically complex – like making changes to a checkout process, or perhaps restructuring your entire information architecture.

But there will more than likely also be simple issues that are cheap and quick to change. Things like ensuring the messaging is effective when users reach your site, or the placement of key calls to action. These are things where you can test alternatives very easily, to see which version performs best. Split, or A/B testing, where half your visitors see a different version of a page is simple to set up and very reliable. A recent example on <http://whichtestwon.com/> showed a page that improved its conversion rate by 93% - simply by changing the tone of voice in a single headline.

The most effective strategies, and the best and most successful digital agencies, take a holistic approach to driving traffic through SEO whilst ensuring a great user experience is delivered to get users to their goals. A good website partner will understand that SEO or usability on their own are only half the story, and to succeed online you need to be experts in both.

Put it this way: you wouldn't lay on free coach trips to your bricks and mortar shop only to hide your stock and put barriers in the aisles when customers get there! Great usability ensures that visitors are more likely to stay, and to convert into paying customers. If you and your digital partner look at SEO and usability at the same time, you double your chances of getting new customers.

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