

Beginning in mid 2009, I undertook a self-taught crash course in SEM for my own business, aided by input from knowledgeable marketing peers. It's early *but I have a few thoughts others may find useful for web marketing of a small or medium sized business*. I won't address herein the prerequisite need to have a clean, crisp website with a clear call to action and a simple flow-through to solution and contact pages.

Here are my initial 10 Tips for SEM:

- 1) **Search Engines:** By even most conservative estimate Google has >70% of the search engine market and it's growing weekly; indeed some sources suggest it's closer to 85%. Focus there as your single point of entry. Learn it. Monitor it. Any incremental gain by expanding to Yahoo and Bing, for example, is *probably* not worth the added overhead for most small businesses unless you have clear facts about your prospect base to warrant it. Remember the old 80-20 rule.
- 2) **Venues:** Google Adwords has two primary venues: Search Results placement and Content placement. Search Results placement means your ads will appear in specific Google (and a few subordinate sites, e.g. Ask Jeeves) keyword search returns, either at top of page in shaded text, or on the right margin of the page. Content placement, on the other hand, goes beyond simple keyword or phrase search logic and places your ads in any of thousands of potential sites in Google's "affiliate network".

Hint: Focus on Search Results for starters and turn off Content placement. Why? Because Content placement can get you in over your head with useless, out of context oriented click charges unless you really understand it. I have seen this happen. You can target key Content sites later. My favorite and one of very few targeted Content sites is *mail.google.com*. Why generally avoid Content placement? It will tend to generate 10-100x more ad impressions than Search Results alone, but the placements may be completely out of context to the audience you had intended. For example, just because my business (for product managers to plan product direction over time) had a search phrase like "feature enhancement selection", my ads were *also* ending up in Content pages for all manner of male and female anatomical "enhancement" pages, alongside breast enlargement/reduction services and male sexual performance aids. Funny except that some people who were clicking through to my landing page obviously weren't focused on my business solution, and those clicks cost as much as meaningful clicks.

- 3) **Keywords:** Develop a buyer/user persona for your product(s) in which you consider what they would use for search keywords and phrases. Make a list. Try them all out and see what comes back. Refine your list. Learn about the differences between *phrase match*, *exact match*, and *broad match*, and use them appropriately. Don't worry; you can Google those terms to build your understanding.

- 4) **Ads:** Use your buyer/user persona to develop 2-3 three-line ads in the Google text ad format (1<sup>st</sup> line = 25 characters including spaces, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> lines = 35 characters each including spaces). Think about what would make *you* click on that ad, in context to your search as a web user, and ensure that it is gripping. Be wary of “cute” ads or double meanings because you might get the wrong audience and it will waste your money. Look at Google ads that are smart and effective, and you will have some useful guides. Many ads are terrible; many are quite clever and attractive. If you have and wish to use multiple ads (no more than 2-3 for starters, with a max of 5-6), consider auto-rotating them based on click-through popularity. It works. Then cut it back to the most popular one(s) so brand recognition begins to be developed.
- 5) **Landing pages:** In order to gauge the effectiveness of your ads, separating out those who key in your web address directly from those who click through your ads to get there, you will need at least one “landing page” for each ad campaign. You might even want a different landing page for each ad. A landing page can either have special, ad-specific content, or simply act as a transparent auto-forward springboard to take the user immediately to your home page or other call-to-action page. The landing page allows your web hosting vendor’s analytics to count visits to each page so that you can get an idea of what’s bringing people to your site. It also helps you understand how many are coming in through ad click-throughs versus family, friends, coworkers, and existing customers who are simply visiting your website directly. You need this detailed page hit information to know whether your SEM is working or just draining your funds and pumping up Google’s share price.
- 6) **Audience:** Use Adwords’ demographics features to control age groups, time/day windows (if pertinent), and geographic location. For example, I target only US and Canada, ages 18-64 for my business, 24/7 ad appearance schedule. You can target regions, countries, states, cities, towns, zip codes, and radius in miles from selected center points. It’s quite amazing. Use it!
- 7) **Activity:** There are Clicks and there are Impressions. The former cost you money; the latter are free. Large numbers of either can be either a good or a bad thing. What matters is that you pay for Clicks and so Clicks need to generate business at some rate. For my money, if you are getting 1-2 clicks per 100 impressions, you’re probably getting into a reasonably effective zone. If you’re getting 1-2 clicks per 1000-10000 impressions, that’s probably a waste and you should review the ads and keywords you’re using, as well as the sources of those clicks and impressions. Understand that there are accidental clicks and curiosity clicks as well as intended clicks, and they will all cost you money.
- 8) **Budget:** Decide how much you are willing to spend per day in SEM and be honest. Then don’t panic if you hit that limit. Keep a conservative cap you can afford, and monitor and tune. It took me about a month to tune my max Click and max Daily spend limits so that I feel comfortable. As a rule of thumb, I suspect most small businesses wouldn’t want to

spend more than \$20-30 per day max in web ads, but that will be up to you to decide; it's completely business, cash-flow, and risk dependent. How much is each click worth to you? If you're willing to spend \$2 per click, and it takes an average of 10 clicks to get you a phone call or other contact request, and then it takes 10 such contacts to generate \$1000 in business, only you can decide whether \$200 in advertising costs is worth it. Do the math and then start small and tune. And don't let my random example scare you, but rather let it arm you with information. Keep in mind that some of your initial web exposure is generating intangible name impressions upon a future audience of prospects; all is not immediate cause and effect.

- 9) **Continuity:** There should be a great degree of continuity between your business, your website message, your ads, and your search keywords and phrases. If there isn't, you're wasting your time and money. If there is, your ads will begin to generate effective visits to your website leading eventually to business opportunities. A by-product is that the more continuity there is between all the above aspects, the more people will visit your site. The greater the traffic from all sources, the greater the likelihood that your site will begin to move up in the general (i.e. "free") search results, eventually leading to your site appearing in the first page of search results without the need for sponsored ads. Once you build that momentum, you may be able to tune down the emphasis on your ad campaign, perhaps lowering your click bids and daily spend limits. After all, you don't want prospects clicking on your sponsored ad when your free web listing is just below it! But don't get excited about such potential outcomes too early in your SEM campaign unless your business is the only game in town.

10) **Before you Launch:** A few reminders...

- a) Ready your website to be the face of your company on the web. Have some friendly people review it. Have them play devil's advocate. Don't take criticism personally, but resolve any issues before you bring busloads of prospects to your front door and risk alienating them. Bad reviews hurt.
- b) Monitor! Monitor! Monitor! Web hosting tools are quite useful and included in your hosting agreement. Learn and use them daily. It'll take 5 minutes per day once you're up to speed.
- c) Stick to Search Results first. I've already commented about Content placements, which tend to generate truckloads of misplaced impressions with very few clicks and most of those clicks are useless but still cost you money. Also note that when you open up to Content placement, your ad could appear not just in a few *appropriate* places but also on any of thousands of poorly constructed, badly managed, frivolous third-party ad and search lists whose only purpose is to make pennies from Google per click, all passed along to YOU, the victim. Particularly in this challenging economy, every fly-by-night scheme is being investigated by unscrupulous people all over the world, and if they can exploit thousands of unsuspecting business website

## Search Engine Marketing (SEM) – 10 Tips

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owners and skim their income by pimping your clicks from the comfort of their home office, they will gladly do it. Just be careful out there.

Best of luck to you with your web marketing efforts!

I would appreciate all feedback, corrections, or other *constructive* input. *I hereby thank those who have already done so.*

-gq

George Quebbeman

[gquebbeman@4sqsolutions.com](mailto:gquebbeman@4sqsolutions.com)

[www.4sqsolutions.com](http://www.4sqsolutions.com)

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