

## What's Rank Got to do with Brand?

**The real measure of success is not just the number of visitors at your web site, but conversions to sales or more qualified prospects.**

In the world of search engine optimization (SEO), the focus is getting the top ranking position in the results index for a search phrase related to your product or service at search sites like Yahoo!, Google, or MSN. This top position is important because typically the most determined searcher for your products or services will not spend time looking beyond the first 30 search results. Getting rank in this coveted top spot is what SEO is all about. But just how much should you be concerned about ranking and integrating this effort with your branding message?

The short answer is: "A lot." In all of the over-hyped prospects of the Internet, this is one opportunity still open to opportunity. Obtaining a high-ranking position in search engine sites will increase your web traffic and even sales. Real success stories are commonplace and often attributed to the early excitement of joining in the dot-com boom of becoming an overnight e-commerce success. What is often overlooked with all this attention regarding search engine ranking is how it relates to a company's brand strategy.

The effort it takes to develop search engine ranking is similar to building a brand identity. In fact, they have many similar traits. They both require an investment in time to develop, advertising costs to promote, and share the same objective as an influencing tool in the buying process. The key difference is the direction of the message. Instead of you promoting your brand outwards, the reverse happens in search engine ranking where your target market is projecting back a generic brand message.

Let's use an everyday example to illustrate this concept in practice. I'm shopping for a high-end espresso machine, one that grinds, steams and cleans itself. I have an idea of the features I'm looking for, along with some bias against general consumer machines from Brand X. So how do I find the right fit for me? Fire up the web browser and connect to my favorite search engine (Google for me) and enter a search phrase, "high-end espresso machines."

The technical reason these entries are at the top is because they repeat those three words often. Important: when you drop the qualifier "high-end" to simplify the search phrase, a new set of results appears. Without "high-end" the search relevancy is based only on espresso and machine. The intense competition for this top spot means the search engine sites have to incorporate more advanced algorithms aside from counting keywords. They employ other techniques, including link popularity and quality, which counts the number and prominence of relevant links pointing to your site. Well-established firms with a recognized brand and lots of web site referrals enjoy high link popularity. This improves their rank position. Notice a pattern here: the two efforts begin to contribute to each other.

Where there is sensible integration there is also diverging direction. Typical brand messages are broadcasted in a one-to-many format and target a projected demographic market. In the Internet marketing world, developing a brand identity is more of a one-on-one effort. By including the word "high-end" to the espresso machine search phrase, I've sent out a couple of messages. I'm asking "who makes the best at high-end espresso machines?" but I'm also expressing the notion that low

price is not my primary buying motivation. Consider this as my reverse brand message back to the manufacturers and sellers.

This has important implications. If you sell only high-end espresso machines, and you spend huge amounts of time and money trying to get top rankings for "espresso machines," you will find that most if not all of the visitors you finally get will simply bounce off your site when confronted with the price. But, you will probably find that getting a top ranking for "high-end espresso machines" is much easier and cheaper, and someone searching explicitly for a "high-end" machine will arrive at your site and say, "Finally, THIS is what I was looking for."

How should you begin integrating your Internet marketing strategies with your brand identity efforts? Research and understand the search keywords that will support your brand strategy. Think of these search keywords as the reverse brand message that is coming from your target market. Everyday, millions of these phrases proliferate in the search engines. Studying the frequency of these phrases helps determine the creation of a new brand strategy.

Next, be sure you are leveraging these search keywords to support or develop your brand message after they arrive at your web site. Returning to our previous example, once I've landed at an appealing web site selling espresso machines, how are they influencing me with their brand identity. Is there a unique name or service that stands out? Is there a section of your web site supporting your brand identity? The "About Us" or company section of a web site is a great location for a brand message. Even better, make sure your brand messages across the web site link back to this brand identity section for consistent messaging.

One of the most important aspects about linking your brand identity with SEO ranking is to be wary about becoming obsessed with getting rank without purpose. In the SEO consulting services marketplace there are many firms who will offer you high rankings, sometimes with guarantees, but for which terms? Before engaging them, ask yourself if these search phrases really support your brand image. What evidence proves it before you invest in those keywords? Once you have achieved a high-ranking position, will it bring in the targeted audience the brand message is best fit for?

As we said in the beginning, the real measure of success is not just visitors at your web site, but conversions to sales or more qualified prospects. Conversions are the real measure of how successfully you communicated your brand message to the target audience. If they click but don't convert, then you either have the wrong message or the wrong target audience.

One final thought. Branding both in the online and offline worlds requires equal strategic thinking and investment. The online world offers an extra benefit for quickly tuning a brand message by closely monitoring the results.

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