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Death Of The Yellow Pages:

How to Use Local Search Marketing To GET and KEEP More Customers

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Introduction

Once upon a time, small businesses were somewhat bound by geographical limitations. If they wanted to serve a larger market, they would have to start doing business by mail order. But many did not want to go to the trouble, and of those that did, many found that it wasn't very profitable. Printing and sending catalogs and other marketing materials can be expensive, after all. So for the most part, small businesses kept to their immediate areas.

The Internet has changed all of that. Any business can set up shop online without a large amount of capital. Customers from across the country and around the world can see what these businesses have to offer. And the small businesses can profit from a larger customer base.

That's all fine and dandy for some businesses, but there are certain types of businesses that can't effectively do business in far away places. Take mechanics, for example. You would be hard pressed to find someone who would send his car thousands of miles to get it repaired. Even if you're the best mechanic in the world, the transportation costs would be prohibitive. The same is true for hairstylists (unless you're one that caters to the rich and famous).

Many such businesses are uninterested in building a web presence. They figure that since their target market consists of people in close proximity, they are better served by advertising in the Yellow Pages and local media outlets. What's the point of making your business known around the world if you're only serving customers in your own backyard?

This way of thinking is flawed for a few reasons. First of all, even if your business model requires customers to visit in person, people who live nearby are probably not the only ones you'll serve. What about tourists, passers-by, and people who come to town to visit family? They need products and services too, and they often think of these needs before they leave home. And they often go to the Internet to find businesses that can meet those needs.

There's also a movement away from those age-old marketing methods. More and more people are searching online for all of their needs, local or otherwise. Why drag out the phone book when you can find what you're looking for on the good old Internet? You might be surprised at just how many people toss their phone books because they don't feel that they need them.

Nobody is saying that you should abandon all of your offline advertising efforts in favor of a web presence. But building a website and getting it listed in local search results can complement those efforts. A successful online marketing campaign can bring great

results at a much lower cost than offline marketing and advertising. This report will take you step by step through the process of creating and marketing your local business's website for maximum benefit.

Getting a Domain Name and Hosting

The first thing you will need for your website is a domain name. This is the address that Internet users will type in to visit your website, so take the time to come up with something good.

Business owners often assume that they should register their business name as a domain, but this is not always the best strategy. When it comes to getting good rankings in search results, it is beneficial to have a domain name that contains the keywords you will be targeting. It might seem a little early to be thinking about this, but it can pay off.

If your business name is something descriptive like Jonesville Party Supply, it would make a good domain name. That includes the type of business and its location, so it would help with search rankings. But if it's named Micelli's, it's going to need a little help.

The trick is to be descriptive, but not to make your domain name so long that it will be hard to remember. So instead of Micellis.com, try MicellisItalianRestaurant.com. But MicellisSpaghettiLasagnaRigatoniZitiAndMore.com would be a little much.

It is possible to point more than one domain to a single website. So if you want to use your business name for branding purposes but still have the SEO benefits of a keyword-packed domain, you can. Domains are inexpensive, so getting more than one won't put a big strain on your budget.

Once you've secured your domain name, you'll need hosting for your website. Larger websites often have dedicated onsite servers, but if you're setting up a site for a small local business, an inexpensive shared hosting plan should meet your needs just fine.

All domain registrars and hosting providers are not created equal. It's important to find one that has good customer service and service plans that suit your purposes. You can find both domain registration and hosting plans at www.HostOne.ca.

Building Your Site

Now that you've got a domain and hosting plan, you're ready to build your website. Don't know the first thing about web design or programming? That's okay, neither do a lot of website owners. You can work around that.

Website building software is one option. You can get it through your web host or buy it separately. There will be a learning curve, but if you have the time and inclination to become familiar with the software and learn the basic principles of good web design, you can do it yourself without going back to college. This approach will cost you more in time than in money.

If you're like most small business owners and don't have a lot of extra time on your hands, hiring someone to do your web design might be a better idea. An experienced web designer can take your vision and turn it into an aesthetically pleasing and functional website. You'll still need to take the time to consider what you want to include on your website and what qualities you're looking for designwise, but a web designer can do the bulk of the work for you.

Depending on what functionalities you want to offer on your website, you may need a programmer. If you're not sure, your web designer can help you assess your programming needs. And if you're really lucky, he can either do the programming himself or recommend a good programmer.

If you're going to be selling goods online, you'll need a shopping cart set up. This is a program that organizes your products and allows customers to compile and pay for orders. This rarely requires custom programming, as there are ready-made shopping cart options out there that you can install and use with ease. You can find a great one at <http://www.HostOne.ca>.

Content Really Is King

Whether your site is informational in nature or you're selling online, your site needs quality content. This content needs to be rich in relevant keywords to help your search engine rankings and get the right kinds of visitors to your site. It serves the obvious purpose of providing the information people are looking for, and it is a crucial part of search engine optimization (which we will get into shortly).

Good content will not only get people to your site, it will give them the incentive to stay there. It might even make them want to link to you from their own websites, which is also good for your search engine positioning. But your content must be relevant in order for it to do its job.

Think about the kinds of things the people who buy your products or services would want to know. If you sell gardening supplies, they might be interested in knowing the best times to plant different types of flowers or vegetables. If you do refrigerator repair, maybe they would be interested in a troubleshooting guide they can use to eliminate

simple problems before contacting you. This might attract visitors who aren't ready to buy yet, but if they like what they see, they will come back when the time is right.

If writing is not your forte, don't worry. You can have articles written for your website at reasonable prices. There are writers who specialize in writing web content, and they can even work in your keywords effectively for SEO purposes. But if you don't mind writing and want to do your own search engine optimization, read on to learn how.

Search Engine Optimization

Getting good rankings in search engines is important for any business website. While you can list your site manually on most local search engines, it's still vital to make sure people can find you using keywords related to your business. And the only way to do that without pay per click advertising is to use SEO.

Search engine optimization is the practice of determining which keywords searchers would use when looking for your site, and utilizing those keywords in ways that will cause your pages to rank highly in search results. The most crucial part is finding the right keywords. If you're targeting the wrong ones, you can do a stellar job optimizing your site and still not get the visitors you're looking for.

SEO has changed significantly over the past several years. It was once mostly a matter of placing keywords in meta tags in the HTML of each page. But that made it too easy for unscrupulous webmasters to manipulate the search results, and the search engines began to change how they did their ranking. Here are the things that are most important today.

Content

Content is one of the most important considerations when it comes to SEO. Search engines weigh content heavily in their algorithms because it is usually the best indicator of what a given page is about. There are still sites that stuff irrelevant keywords into the text to boost their rankings, but search engines have taken this into account. If the keyword density is too high, or the keywords have little to do with anything else in the content, the page will be penalized.

So how often should your keywords appear in a page? Opinions vary, but most experts agree that density should be around 2 to 6%. If you keep your keywords in mind when writing your content and use them where appropriate, this should come fairly naturally. But there are online keyword density checkers you can use if you are unsure.

Headings

Headings make your content easier to read, and they can help with SEO as well. HTML coding allows for six levels of headings, with h1 being the top level and h6 the bottom. Their importance to the search engines also runs in that order.

Page Titles

Your page title appears in the title bar of the visitor's browser when your page is opened. It is placed in the heading area of the page's HTML. The title is considered by the search engines, so it's a good place to add in your keywords. If you can fit them in near the beginning of the title, that's even better.

File Names

Remember what we discussed about keywords in domain names? It's also helpful for SEO purposes to have them in each page's file name. This may not be possible with shopping cart software that creates dynamically generated pages, but it's easy to do when creating static web pages.

Links to Other Pages on Your Site

In your navigation menu and any other links to pages on your own site, be sure to use your targeted keywords for those pages as the link text. This will also help your search engine rankings.

When it comes to getting visitors to your website, good SEO is critical. It is possible to do it yourself, but it takes some time to learn and to implement. An experienced SEO firm like Sudbury Search (www.SudburySearch.com) can help you determine the most effective keywords and put them in the right places to get you great search engine rankings.

Link Building

Getting incoming links from relevant sites can result in more traffic for you. Obviously visitors to the other site might click your link if they are interested, but there's more to it than that. Inbound links are quite important to your positioning in the search engines.

Link popularity is a major factor in the algorithms of many search engines. If your page is optimized for the same keywords as a page on another website, and keyword usage is exactly the same, the site with the most incoming links will usually get a higher ranking. So link building should be high on a webmaster's list of priorities.

One way to go about getting relevant links is through link exchanges. You simply find other websites that are related to yours and ask the owner if he would like to link to your site in exchange for the same from you. Blogs and information sites are good places to start.

If you're a member of any online forums, you could also add a link to your signature on them. While forum-goers and owners do not take kindly to blatant advertising, it's usually perfectly acceptable to have links to your website in your signature. You could also add links to your profile on social networking sites. We'll discuss both of these in more detail in the next section.

It's also possible to buy text links, but be forewarned that this strategy could backfire. Certain search engines (particularly Google) frown upon this practice and sometimes discredit links that appear to have been paid for. While paid links can still be beneficial to your rankings, they are becoming increasingly like any other form of paid advertising. If you choose to go this route, try to buy your links from sites that also have the potential to send you click-through traffic.

Getting inbound links takes some work, but in most cases, the links themselves do not cost a dime. The right kinds of links can bring traffic to your website for years to come, both from click-throughs and by way of higher rankings in the search engines.

Using the Social Aspects of the Web to Your Advantage

Once little more than a pool of information, the Internet has evolved into a highly social environment. New ways for web surfers to interact with each other are coming into play every day. This trend is a wonderful thing for businesses large and small.

It's now easier than ever for business owners to reach out and connect with their markets. They can easily announce new products, services, and events. They can

receive feedback from customers. They can form alliances with other businesses. And that's only the beginning.

There are many ways you can interact with your customers and potential customers. Here are some to consider.

Social Networking

Social networking is often used to keep in touch with friends and family, and to meet users with similar interests. But it's also a valuable tool for businesses. Large businesses often put a great deal of effort into building profiles on sites such as MySpace, but small benefits can benefit greatly from social networking without spending a lot of money.

Sites such as MySpace, Facebook, and LinkedIn provide an avenue for businesses to share information about themselves and interact with the public and other businesses. Members can find other members by location, so this is a great way for businesses with a local focus to connect with their target markets.

Most such sites offer easy to use page builders that do not require users to know HTML, so just about anyone can build an attractive page. All you really need to set your page apart is some custom graphics and compelling content. Once your page is done, you can add some friends and take advantage of the other features the site has to offer to promote your business.

Blogging

Blogs are wonderful vehicles for sharing news and information. Blogging for business allows you to keep your customers and potential customers in the loop. They can provide feedback and ask questions by leaving comments, making a blog a highly interactive medium.

Blogs are favored by the search engines because of their tendency to be updated frequently. Don't let them down – posting at least a couple of times a week will keep the engines and the visitors happy. If you don't have time to post that often, you could hire a ghostwriter or guest blogger to help you keep it updated with fresh, relevant content.

Another great thing about blogs is that readers can subscribe to them using RSS readers. This way they can read new posts soon after they are published. This keeps them coming back, giving you infinite opportunities to make sales.

Forums

Participating in forums is a great way to build a rapport with your target market. Offering your expertise on subjects related to your business will help you build an image as an expert in your field, increasing consumer confidence.

There are lots and lots of forums out there in cyberspace, but if your business has a local focus, it's probably best to concentrate on forums that are geared toward your local area. This will give you exposure to the customers and clients you're looking to attract. There's no reason you can't participate in forums with a national or global audience, it's just best not to concentrate all of your marketing efforts there.

If there aren't any forums dedicated to your local area, why not create one? There is plenty of free forum software available online that is easy to set up on your website. Hosting a forum is a great way to get repeat site visitors.

Twitter

Twitter is where blogging meets instant messaging. Users can post short text messages, and their "followers" can subscribe to these messages via SMS or through desktop applications. Businesses often use Twitter to announce company news, sales or blog posts, and to offer coupon codes to followers.

In order for Twitter to be effective, you need to have as many followers from your target market as possible. There is a handy search feature that you can use to find users in your area, and you can narrow the list down with several other parameters. This makes it easy to identify users that might be interested in your products or services.

Once you've found users from your target market, you can follow them. They will receive a notification that you are following them, and they may view your profile. If they like what they see, chances are they will reciprocate and follow you.

All of these applications offer the opportunity to connect with your target market easily and inexpensively. They can, however, eat up a lot of your time if you let them. So it's important to set aside a certain amount of time per week to spend on them, and not to go over that. These social tools can help you make an impact without requiring constant maintenance.

Using Video as a Promotional Tool

A growing number of Internet users have broadband connections. This has made the use of online video more practical, and more profitable. Video can add a new dimension to your website, and with the use of video sharing sites, it can also serve as a valuable promotional tool.

There are so many ways that you can use video to promote your site. Here are a few:

- Produce informative how-to videos that feature your products or relate to your services.
- Offer live webcasts that allow viewers to learn and interact with you.
- Do a daily or weekly video podcast. Viewers can subscribe to these, giving you multiple opportunities to make an impression and encourage repeat business.
- If you have popular television commercials, you could post them on YouTube. These have a tendency to go viral, ending up embedded on lots of blogs and websites.

When it comes to online video, quality is important. Home videos from the average Internet user are often popular, but viewers expect more than that from a legitimate business. SWAT Media Group (www.SWATMediaGroup.com) can help you create professional-looking videos that will pique the interest of your local market and increase your sales.

The Beauty of Email Lists

Email is one of the least expensive ways to reach your target market. If you write your own messages and use a free autoresponder or list management application, out of pocket costs are practically nonexistent. And best of all, email is a highly effective promotional tool.

Email lists can take on several forms. One of the most popular is the ezine. This is simply a newsletter sent out on a regular schedule via email. Ezines are great for keeping in touch with your current and potential customers and sharing news and information that relates to your business.

Offering free courses via email is another great way to make repeated contact with your market. These are sent out via autoresponder, usually consisting of one message per day or week until the course is complete. They may be offered alone or accompanying a subscription to your ezine.

Some businesses prefer to only send out emails when they are having a sale or other event. These types of lists can be managed using the same type of software used for ezines. While you don't have to follow a regular schedule, it's important to maintain frequent contact with your list so they don't forget about you.

When you're getting started in email marketing, you may find that free mailing list software and autoresponders meet your needs. But as your lists grow, you may find that you need more features to manage them effectively. Many free applications also have a limit as to how many subscribers you may have. So paying for a good autoresponder (often available from your web host) could be money well spent.

How to Get Subscribers

In order for any email campaign to be successful, there's one thing that's always needed: subscribers. This is a no-brainer, and most list owners do think to set up an opt-in page and link to it in their site navigation menu. But there's more to getting subscribers than that. Here are some ideas for adding more names to your list:

- Submit articles to article directories, and add a direct link to your opt-in page to the resource box. Those who enjoy your articles are likely to be interested in subscribing to your list.
- Trade articles with other ezine publishers, again adding a link to your opt-in page to your bio. You can also do this with ads.

- Offer bonuses. These could include such things as free ebooks or reports, trial memberships, or discount coupons. Other webmasters are often willing to supply these bonuses in order to get added exposure for their sites.
- Provide bonuses to other ezine publishers and online marketers. These bonuses could include an invitation to subscribe to your ezine.
- Submit your ezine to ezine directories. This will make it easily accessible to people who are looking for a publication like yours.
- Post archived issues of your ezine on your site. This will give potential subscribers a chance to see what you have to offer before subscribing.

Subscribers may come slowly at first, but if you provide interesting and helpful content in your mailings, word will get around. Your list will grow, and you will have the opportunity to repeatedly contact people who are interested in what you have to offer, increasing your chances of making sales.

Getting Listed in Local Search Engines

Local search engines are relatively new on the search scene, but they have become very popular with people searching for businesses in specific areas. They may also supply results to standard search engines, making it easier for you to get exposure there. And best of all, submitting your site is usually quick, easy and free.

Some of the larger local search engines, including Yahoo Local, allow a business owner to submit a listing without manual verification and edit it freely. That means that you can make changes to your listing as often as you like. Many include maps of your business location, and they make it easy for users to get directions starting from their front doors.

Here's the lowdown on some of the most popular local search engines:

- **Google Local** – Google is the leader in online searching in general, and it's also a major player in the local search game. You can edit your listings as you please, and you can even offer printable coupons. One drawback is the requirement for manual confirmation. They send you a postcard with a confirmation code that you must enter, and that can take up to 6 weeks. But if you're serious about benefiting from local search, it's worth the wait.
- **Yahoo Local** – Yahoo is Google's biggest competitor in local search. They do not require manual confirmation, and they allow you to edit your listing any time. They also offer paid options that will get your listing more exposure, starting as low as \$9.95 per month.
- **Microsoft Live Search** – Microsoft's local search offering is not as huge as Google or Yahoo, but it is well worth getting listed there. It offers a clean interface and useful features that many users like. Like Google, Microsoft Live requires confirmation by entering a PIN number sent to you via postal mail.
- **YellowPages.com** – The Yellow Pages are the granddaddy of print phone directories, but YellowPages.com is a relatively minor player in the online local search market. Still, creating a free listing is worth the effort.
- **InfoUSA.com** – This actually isn't a search engine, it's a data collection company. But InfoUSA supplies information to lots of smaller local search engines including AOL local and Dogpile.

These are the most visited local search engines and directories, but there are plenty more out there. Some cities and regions have their own directories that are popular

with the locals. There are also review websites such as Yelp.com that allow businesses to add or edit information in their profiles.

You can add your listing to most local search engines by filling out a simple form. In some cases, mail or phone confirmation is required to prevent people other than the business owner from placing or editing listings. In most cases, you can add your business information whether you have a website or not, but adding a link to a well designed and informative website will work to your advantage.

Are Web Directories Worthwhile?

Unlike search engines, web directories sort sites by category. Most require sites to be submitted, reviewed and approved before listing them. In most cases, manual submission is required. This leads many webmasters to the conclusion that directories are not worth their time.

But in some cases, getting your site listed in directories can be beneficial. If your submission is accepted, it provides a valuable backlink from a trusted site. This can help your search engine positioning. And the categorization offered by these directories gives businesses exposure to their target markets.

Some directories, such as the Yahoo Directory, require commercial webmasters to pay a submission fee, as well as an annual fee to maintain the listing. Others, including the Open Directory Project (which provides listings to the Google Directory), accept submissions for free. Still others operate on a pay per click type model in which listings are prioritized by bid amount.

There are lots of directories out there to choose from. Some can bring your site lots of targeted traffic, and others are just a waste of time. If you plan to do your own directory submissions, it's probably best to stick with the most popular directories and more specialized ones that are frequented by your target market. If you're more interested in quantity, you could outsource your directory submissions.

Advertising Online

So you've optimized your website to the hilt, obtained lots of incoming links, and carefully crafted listings and submitted them to the local search engines. These things should eventually bring you a great deal of traffic at no additional cost. But you're probably looking for some visitors right now. And even when that traffic you worked so hard for comes, you might want more.

Online advertising can help. It's less expensive than you might think, and when properly targeted, it can bring plenty of quality traffic to your site. Following are some online advertising methods that work.

Graphic Ads

The graphic ad is something that Internet users see every day. Graphic advertising includes those flashing banners that you see at the top of many websites and blogs, the square buttons with pretty pictures on the sides of web pages, and any other type of visual advertising on the web.

The bad news is that many Internet users have started to tune these ads out. After all, they visit a site to be entertained or informed, not to look at advertising. But if you advertise on the right sites and create ads that are eye-catching but not annoying, graphic advertising campaigns can bring good results for the money.

How much you'll pay for a graphic ad varies greatly from site to site. Sites with more traffic charge more than sites with less, but they also offer greater exposure. But the most important thing is to place these ads on sites that your target market will visit. If you don't, you could run the best advertising campaign in the world and still get horrible results.

Pop-ups and Pop-unders

Pop-up and pop-under ads are advertisements that appear in a new browser window. Pop-ups become the active window when they appear, and pop-unders minimize themselves so visitors do not see them until they minimize or close the active browser window.

These types of ads are notorious for annoying Internet users, and all of today's popular browsers offer the option to block pop-ups. But certain types of pop-ups may bypass

these blocks. Still, if you choose to use pop-ups or pop-unders, it's important to target them carefully and make the offers presented as appealing as possible.

It's a good idea to test a pop-up campaign before spending a lot of money on it. Buying 10,000 impressions at a time will give you a chance to evaluate results without investing too much. If your campaign fails, you could try altering the offer or adjusting your targeting.

Ezine Advertising

Ezines tend to reach a more targeted audience than websites, because recipients are required to opt into them. An ezine may have fewer readers than a website has visitors, but it's safe to assume that these readers are very interested in the topics discussed. So it stands to reason that ezine advertising gives you lots of value for your marketing dollars.

Finding an ezine that is geared toward your target market might seem like a daunting task, but it's really not. There are plenty of ezine directories online that you can use to find ezines that might be a good fit for your ads. And you can always subscribe to an ezine first and read a few issues to determine whether you want your ads to appear there.

Podcast and Video Advertising

Podcast and video ads are the online equivalent of radio and television ads, respectively. These also tend to reach a well-targeted audience, and although more expensive than ezine advertisements, they are affordable. Most outlets charge by the thousand ad impressions.

There are also less expensive options that let small businesses take advantage of the popularity of online audio and video. Some outlets offer text ads that are featured on or underneath the audio or video player, as well as graphic ads. These options are great for businesses that are on a budget, as they do not require the production of audio or video spots.

Pay Per Click

Pay per click advertising is known as one of the most economical paid online marketing methods, because advertisers only pay for actual visits to their sites. You can set a monthly budget with your pay per click provider, and your ad will be shown only until

you have received enough site visits to deplete it. Prices per click vary depending on a keyword's popularity.

Google is one of the most popular pay per click providers. They offer placement alongside regular search results, as well as placement on third-party websites through AdSense. Yahoo and other search engines also offer pay per click search placement. There are also some marketplaces such as Bidvertiser.com that only deal in placing pay per click ads on websites and blogs.

Don't Get Left Behind

In years past, only large businesses had a web presence. Then smaller businesses realized that they could expand their markets by going online. And today, more and more businesses that are focused on serving their local areas are building websites.

With consumers of all ages and backgrounds accessing the Internet, and in fact depending on it to keep them informed, no business can afford to overlook the marketing opportunities that the World Wide Web has to offer. Not only can a business reach more of its target market online, it can reach them less expensively than is possible through many offline methods. It's also easier to track campaign results, providing much greater efficiency.

Chances are your competitors have already realized the merits of taking their businesses online and are reaping the benefits. If so, you could be losing potential customers to them. If they haven't made it online yet, getting there first could increase your market share. So what are you waiting for? Now is the time to get started developing a web presence.

Remember, you don't have to enter this new territory alone. SWAT Media Group (www.SWATMediaGroup.com) specializes in helping small businesses get online. They can help you get your site up and running, and get it noticed by your target market. With the help of such an experienced group, your business could be online and reaching new customers in no time.

About Rick Comtois

Rick Comtois is an innovative, creative and strategic marketing expert with a broad and highly successful 25 year track record in consumer marketing, sales, promotions and brand management. He has a variety of strategic coaching skills in small business marketing, financial planning, personal motivation and goal setting.

Rick has been very fortunate to have worked with a diversified group of people in a variety of professions throughout his working and entrepreneurial life. As a senior executive with a Fortune 500 company in the beverage and entertainment industry, Rick was responsible for a variety of strategic marketing initiatives including several Major National and International Sports and Entertainment properties.

He has intensive contacts in the Entertainment business and has marketed many of the major acts including the Rolling Stones, U2, Springsteen, Tom Cochrane, and The Tragically Hip and has been involved at some time or other with all of the major Canadian and US sport venues and entertainment promoters.

As an independent entrepreneur for the past 10 years Rick continues to use his marketing skills and contacts to advise and consult with local small business enterprise owners to help improve their business processes, implement leading-edge technologies and help grow their revenues.

Over the past few years Rick has applied his marketing knowledge to the online world and is constantly learning and applying new strategies to automate and grow his online presence. He has been blessed with many successes, some gut wrenching failures and both have provided him with the skills and resiliency to accept any challenges, risk and uncertainty.

Currently Rick is the owner of SWAT MEDIA Inc. a small new media and digital marketing firm focusing on online results for Local Small Business enterprise owners including self employed individuals, independent professionals and home based business owners. Rick is a graduate of Laurentian University, a widower and father of two girls Carly and Breanna.

Contact SWAT Media Group At: www.SWATMediaGroup.com