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Using Search Engines To Pump Up Business

by Wendy Gauntt

Have you ever Googled your business? You may have been frustrated at how far back you were in the results. Listings on the first few pages of Google or Yahoo! can skyrocket your business with worldwide exposure. But if you think that's all a search engine can do for your company, read on...over the past few years, as we turned the word "Google" into a verb*, the major search engines have been busy expanding their services with some very nifty tools.

Cheap Online Ads

Looking for cheap and effective advertising? Check out those boxy little ads over on the right when you do a Google or Yahoo! search. These work on a pay-for-performance bidding system, almost like an eBay for advertising. Your ad shows up when someone searches on the words you select; you pay only when someone clicks on your ad and visits your website, as little as a nickel per click. Popular search words—real estate, financial planning, web hosting, etc.—cost more, sometimes several dollars per click. These tools are extremely sophisticated, giving you the ability to carefully target your ads, estimate traffic, and set a budget to prevent surprise expenses. I wish cell phone minutes were this easy to monitor! Sign up at <http://adwords.google.com> or <http://www.overture.com>.

Search Toolbar

Search engines are great for research—competitive intelligence, supplier information, business analysis, you name it. If you, like me, are dependent on the power of search, get a toolbar from your favorite search engine and save a few clicks. It's a two-minute free download, with bonus

features like pop-up blockers, spell-checkers, and ability to automatically fill in web forms. Pick your favorite at <http://toolbar.google.com> or <http://toolbar.yahoo.com>.

Desktop Search

Hard drives are getting so big they are like bottomless filing cabinets. I try to keep things organized, but occasionally documents get saved somewhere unexpected. Google and Yahoo! both offer new desktop search tools, speedy and smart alternatives to the sluggish Windows search feature. Early security glitches have been largely addressed, but make sure you have a good firewall in place, just to be safe from those crafty hackers. Google's version came out first and is available at <http://desktop.google.com>. Yahoo!'s competing version can be found at <http://desktop.yahoo.com>. Like the toolbar, these are both free downloads. If you have a large network, check out Google's enterprise version for easy distribution and maintenance.

Free Email

Yahoo! email is a popular service that's been around for years. Google recently created a buzz with Gmail, its a new email service that offers a gigabyte of storage (that's tens of thousands of emails). But I hesitate to recommend either for business use. As a business owner, you need an email at your website address. A free email address—mycompany@yahoo.com—doesn't have quite the same panache as me@mycompany.com. Even if you aren't ready for a website, it is easy and inexpensive to get your own business email address.

Price Comparisons

Ever shop online? You can save thou-

sands of dollars if you take a few minutes to compare prices. I especially like <http://froogle.google.com>, which seems to list nearly every product under the sun. Yahoo! has come a long way as well; check <http://shopping.yahoo.com> for variety of price information. Make sure to check store ratings as well—after getting burned a few times in the early days of e-commerce, I find these invaluable.

Local Search

A major trend in search is location-based intelligence. If you ask "Where's the beach?" the answer could be "a few miles away" if you live in California or Florida—or "3 hours by plane" if you live in a Midwest city such as St. Louis. Search engines want to be smart enough to give you the right answer. Early evolutions on Google and Yahoo! are called local search (you'll find this on either home page by clicking on the word "local," near the search box). The best part? If your business isn't listed yet, you can add yourself, free of charge, in a matter of minutes.

Maps

I used to carry maps around in my car and still get lost. No more! Before I go somewhere new, I make a quick trip to <http://maps.yahoo.com> and get exact directions along with a printable map. It even tells me how long it will take to get there, so I have no excuse to be late. Google recently added its own version that can be found at <http://maps.google.com>.

Search on the Go

If you have Internet access on your cell phone, you can Google or Yahoo! from anywhere. Think about the power of local search when you are out with your cell

phone and need quick information. And how about the convenience of maps (well, the directions, anyway—those screens are still a little small for maps!) when driving around town. Visit <http://mobile.google.com> or <http://mobile.yahoo.com> to get started.

Still Want First Page Results?

If you want those high search engine rankings, you need to enhance your website with a search engine optimization (SEO) project. Start with basics, like page descriptions and useful titles. Taking your optimi-

zation to the next level becomes much more complex, part art and part science. Avoid services that promise to get you listed everywhere—those are the search-engine equivalent of spam, and a big waste of your money. Proper SEO requires patience, skill, detailed analysis, and continuous maintenance.

What's Next?

These billion-dollar dorm-room startups from the mid-90s continue to innovate. Search is becoming more flexible, more focused, and more intelligent. Curious?

Check out the very latest examples, still in beta test, at <http://labs.google.com> and <http://next.yahoo.com>.

So, what do your customers see when they Google you?

*Google Yourself!

Google: v. to search for something at www.google.com; e.g. I Googled your business for more information.

Wendy Gauntt (wendy@cioservicesllc.com) is president of CIO Services, LLC, a technology consulting company that specializes in small business solutions.