

THE WEB

Pay Per View

By William Powell

Once the thankless workhorses of the Web, search engines are now set to control the most promising form of online advertising yet. Granted, that's not saying much. But this just might work.

A recent report from comScore Network's Media Metrix qSearch tracking system determined that 64 percent of U.S. Internet users who visit a search engine actually conduct a search on that site. If, like me, you're wondering why it was just 64 percent, you may be one of

an increasing number of Web users who rely, in large part, on search engine results to get where they're going. In fact, increased search engine usage has made searching so hot that many analysts are calling it the next killer app.

So, what makes it sizzle? First, consider this: The U.S. Department of Commerce ranks "product-service information search" second only to email in terms of top online activities. Next, take into account that the use of search

engines to arrive at a Website has nearly doubled since 2002, while Web links dropped by more than 50 percent. Finally, factor in that a user performing a search is unlikely to go past the second page of search results, and you can begin to piece together why a company would want to have its Website listed in the top handful of results—and why they're willing to pay for it. In short, more people are shopping online and using search engines to find what they want, and they're creating the need for a new kind of on-line marketing—search marketing.

How this form of marketing works can be a bit complicated. The most frequent form is a bid-for-position, pay-per-click model. A company pays a fee every time you select its site from the list of search results. Top results typically comprise sponsored listings and are marked as such. A sponsored Website's position within those search results is based on the company's bid for the keywords you entered. The higher the bid, the higher the placement.

At first, I was put off by the process; it's slightly reminiscent of payola. Even though pay-per-placement sites are marked as such, I still wondered whose

best interest is being served. So, I decided to do a little test, albeit completely unscientific and subject to my personal preferences, whims, and any hang-ups I might have. I took a look at FindWhat.com, Overture.com, Looksmart.com, and Kanoodle.com—all considered to be among the better PPC sites. (See the chart at right for a more complete list.) My test phrase was *Sony CD player*.

Let's just say I'm not impressed—yet. Though some sites delivered more relevant results than others, there's clearly no guarantee that the top site is the best site. And finding an online merchant that sells Sony CD players was much harder than it should've been. The top sites were

often companies exclusive to the Web, with little to no brand recognition. Many were just sites that listed other sites where I could purchase a CD player.

Can pay-per-click search engines lure Internet users away from their traditional counterparts?

These companies are eager to find out.

Google AdWords www.google.com

FindWhat www.findwhat.com

Overture www.overture.com

LookSmart www.looksmart.com

Kanoodle www.kanoodle.com

ah-ha www.ah-ha.com

Sprinks www.sprinks.com

ePilot www.epilot.com

goClick www.goclick.com

Search123 www.search123.com

An Odd Existence

I got a chuckle out of OddTodd.com www.oddtodd.com last year and assumed that Odd Todd's out-of-work creator, Todd Rosenberg, would quickly ride the wave of media attention into another job. But with the U.S. unemployment rate hovering around 6 percent and the site achieving something akin to Internet stardom, it doesn't look like Odd Todd is going back to his day job any time soon.

In the past year, the site has expanded considerably. There's a blog, mailing lists, and an online store. And though his unemployment checks have run out, the Flash animations keep coming. What began as a quirky Flash animation of a day in the life www.oddtodd.com/index2.html has now become a portal of sorts for the odd inner workings of its creator's mind and a peculiar look at one man's jobless existence.

Rosenberg survives off of merchandising and a tip jar that has brought in more than US\$10,000 to date. It's not much considering the cost of keeping up the Website, so he continues to update (pad) his résumé. After viewing a couple of his often-hilarious animations, you can't help but root for the guy to find a job. But he assures his fans that no matter what happens next, the site will be there for anyone who needs a laugh.

Just a couple of notes: I appreciated LookSmart.com's approach of listing sponsored sites first, then editorially reviewed sites ranked by relevance to the user (paid listings are included here), and finally crawled listings generated by Inktomi www.inktom.com, results that you'd typically find from a regular search engine. Kanoodle.com and Overture.com provide a well-designed interface that is a pleasure to use, though Overture.com's site looked more like a business site than a search engine. Find-What.com provided the best results for this particular search, but no site was clearly head and shoulders above the rest.

It's still early for this form of online advertising. (Make no mistake, that's what it is.) The larger, more established

companies have yet to throw their advertising weight around, leaving, as I found, the top spots to smaller companies with smaller budgets. That's not to say that these search marketing sites aren't making money. Overture alone is predicting year-over-year revenue to be more than US\$1 billion for 2003. That's not an error, and with numbers like that it's easy to understand the optimism behind the PPC approach. Keep an eye on this space for more on PPC in the months ahead.

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The Web covers Internet technology trends, news, and tips. Send comments, questions, and items of interest to theweb@astd.org.

Quick TIP

To save a Webpage for viewing offline, Internet Explorer users have a few options.

Begin by selecting File and then Save As. Just as you would with any file, select a destination and name. Now, here's where those options come into play. In the Save As Type box you can choose from Web Page, complete; Web Archive; Web Page, HTML only; and Text Only.

Web Page, complete lets you save the file in its original format complete with graphics, frames, and style sheets. Web Archive saves a MIME-encoded snapshot of the page. HTML, only doesn't save graphics or sound. And Text Only is self-explanatory. It's a handy way to save text from online articles for future reference.

Talk to the Orb

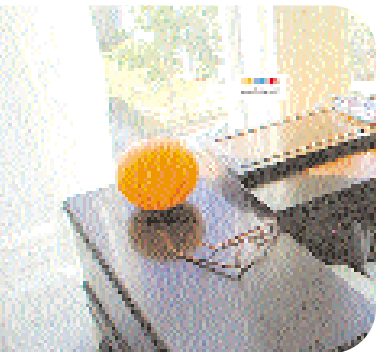
What is it with new technologies and the stock market? When I first read about the Ambient Devices glowing glass orb's ability to track changes in stock indexes, I thought, "Ho hum, another executive toy." Why not get stock quotes from one of the umpteen other technologies that offer the service?

And then it hit me: We're being bombarded constantly by information; it's not going to stop. So why not deliver it in a way that enhances our lives, not interrupts it? I've wanted one ever since.

The Ambient Orb is a frosted glass globe that changes color to reflect a change in the Dow, the weather, or traffic. It can even be customized to track more specific information for an additional fee. Want to track progress of

your latest learning initiative? It can be arranged.

The Ambient Orb receives information via a wireless network, which Ambient Devices claims 95 percent coverage U.S.-wide. Orb pricing begins at US\$150. Custom configurations are extra.



Just Email Me

If you've become averse to picking up the phone, you're not alone. An online survey from META Group www.metagroup.com polled 387 U.S. organizations to find that 80 percent of businesspeople prefer email for work-related communication. The reasons for preferring email over the phone include

- response flexibility **84 percent**
- easy communication with multiple parties **83 percent**
- paper trail **78 percent**
- faster communication **40 percent**
- more productive **29 percent**
- easier global communications **25 percent**
- proper context. **24 percent**

And what of the humble fax? The META Group study found that the number of faxed pages dropped 50 percent in the past five years.