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OPTIMIZE ME: A REPORTER'S JOURNEY INTO THE WORLD OF SEO AND SEM

MySpace, Squidoo, Twitter Help Juice Matthew Creamer's Online Presence

By [Matthew Creamer and mcreamers@adage.com](#). Published on December 03, 2007.

Illustration by Joe Zeff Design, Inc.

As with many stories about the internet, this one begins with porn.

Deep into an October drinking session with the management team at Reprise Media -- a firm you might not have heard of but one that works for huge corporations such as Microsoft and recently sold for a huge bundle of cash -- we came to a favorite subject of theirs: what happens when corporations, even those who spend hundreds of millions of dollars a year to craft their brand images, ignore their profiles on search engines. Case in point: A huge consumer-goods company running a high-profile, youth-focused online promotion for a major brand discovered after launch that when people Googled the web

address of the promotion -- a mistake a lot of consumers make -- the top results took them to something rather off-brand.

Firing up the web browser on his iPhone, one of the executives showed me the website where they ended up. Its central image is a few well-built men cuddling, their enormous genitalia on display for any kids who might have strayed there in an effort to see if they had won a prize from the maker of their favorite processed-meat treat.

I had been working with Reprise since mid-summer in an effort to both shore up my own search performance and take a look at the practice of search-engine optimization. Throughout the experience, cautionary tales like this were common.

Hindsight

"There's often a lack of consideration for [search-engine optimization] and what role it's playing for a brand," said Dan Kashman, a senior VP at the company, toward the end of the project. "Are companies doing all the upfront research that needs to be done? I know that they're not doing it, because we get a call six months later when there's a problem on the crisis-management side."

Mr. Kashman, my main contact on the project, was referring to corporate titans like the one above, not journalists, but he was also describing me. And that's why I turned to his company for help. When it came to search, I too had a crisis. I had made the faulty assumption that all the bylines produced in my six-year career as a journalist would be enough to allow me to just about own the Google results for my name.

To see how wrong I was, I surfed over to Google one day in July, entered my name, and in less than a quarter of second I had my answer. Delivered in those 10 links on the first page of results was a chilly portrait of Brand Me, or at least the online version of it.

'Impostors'

Happy as I was to find links to others' blog posts on my work, a few other high-performing results were less cheering. One result sent readers to GayNZ.com, a website for gay men living in New Zealand, where there's a Matt Creamer in a high-profile position at an AIDS organization. (I'm neither gay nor a Kiwi.) More worrying was a Delaware blog about a Matt Creamer whose appointment to a county government post sparked controversy. Seethes the author, "I will also get the details of Mr. Creamer's little foray into the world of slumlords. In the meantime, those of us who are concerned should just keep our powder dry." That link, I would later note with horror, turned up first on Yahoo, the second-most-popular engine.

Turns out that merely pumping hundreds of articles into the world isn't enough to hog Google results these days or crowd out all those "imposter" Matt Creamers, especially if many of those articles sit behind walls that require payment or registration. Good old-fashioned news stories to be bought for good old-fashioned money don't stand up well next to content that's free, open to links from others and created with tools that are essentially built to perform well with the bots the search engines use to survey the internet, giving Google and company the data they need to act as supreme arbiters of how we come to the information deposited in unimaginably large amounts on the internet. My failure to get this meant I'd ended up with a search profile that was not only crawling with "impostors" but also failed in every way to represent me.

Put simply, I wanted optimization, and, for my sins, Reprise gave me Twitter. And Facebook. They gave me MySpace and something called Squidoo. And, best of all, they gave me my own blog.

Social media key

In short order, Mr. Kashman had me spending large chunks of my time using all of these web-based services, many of which I'd been studiously avoiding because a) they sound like children's toys, and b) the payoff from using them was never clear. More and more, however, it's becoming clear that that payoff is better search results. The concept of social-media optimization has become a hot bit of jargon in the past year, even if everyone's still debating whether it's something new or, as Reprise tends to hold, it's an extension of long-held SEO principles.

What's not in doubt is that the social has been at the heart of search since Google's main innovation took root in business and in culture. Its PageRank algorithm made off-site criteria a crucial determinant of search results for any website. In other words, the number and quality of links flowing into a site is hugely important in determining how high in the results it shows up. By extension, that makes the social-media ecosystem of blogs and other sites that are all about linking to other content important.

Going into the project, I didn't quite grasp this. My understanding of SEO was too limited, shaped as it was by the SEO spam that crowds my e-mail inbox. In his book "The Search," journalist John Battelle allows that some firms are reputable businesses but writes that many others "sport loud come-ons reminiscent of late-night television, replete with garish promises, many written in poor English. ... Many SEO practitioners share the same genes as hawkers of Ginzu knives, miracle vegetable juicers and Ponzi schemes."

Mr. Battelle's book, which appeared in 2005, did a lot to frame the importance of search-engine marketing in a broader marketing world that saw it as a low-rent discipline that was either about buying search ads or, worse, about gaming the search engines. SEO was -- and still is -- denigrated in much the same way as direct mail: effective but kind of cheesy and not nearly as interesting as flashy ads.

Searching through a mess

"Ad agencies clearly were not embracing the channel and were still consumed with old ways of hitting consumers over the head with messages they didn't ask to see," said Josh Stylman, one of Reprise's founders. "Then there were technology companies that get the channel, but they don't realize that marketers don't have the budget to buy their software or the expertise to implement it."

Reprise, formed by Mr. Stylman and Peter Hershberg in 2003, was an attempt to "bridge that gap." The firm, headquartered in spartan digs off Manhattan's Union Square, has grown to 65 people working in three offices and has a client list that includes Microsoft and Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, among other brands and media companies. In April, Interpublic Group of Cos., the third-largest owner of ad agencies and marketing-service firms, announced that it had purchased Reprise. No one has revealed the terms of the deal, but industry executives have said the price tag was comparable to Aegis Group's \$50 million deal for iProspect, a search-engine-marketing firm.

One of Reprise's rationales for doing the deal is the idea of better integrating search with other marketing functions, something that becomes clearly important even after very little exposure to the practice of SEO. For instance, that consumer-package-goods promotion sabotaged by porn clearly had the potential to turn into a PR nightmare that could bludgeon the brand in question. Reprise ended up choosing not to work with the brand, but one way to head off the publicity firestorm was to pump enough ownable content of the sort that indexes well with search engines onto the web.

Three things

It's easy to get lost in the arcane corners of a detail-oriented, highly technical practice, but Reprise's founders are good at explaining in a simple way how it all works. They typically deride the notion of "algorithm chasing" or efforts to "reverse engineer the Google algorithm" and instead distill some principles that guide a lot of the practice



"The search engines give you the blueprint," Mr. Hershberg said. He then rattled off the three main principles: Make sure you have keyword-rich text or, in other words, say what the page is about. Make your site navigable. Make your site popular by getting a lot of quality links coming in from outside the site.

In my case, that translated into creating a social-media presence. At the time this all started, I was still allowing much of the Web 2.0 hype to blissfully bypass me, content as I was to express myself in the pages of this magazine and on its website. But that was feeding directly into my own search deficiency.

It's all him: This is what you get when you plug our optimized editor at large's name into Google.

"There's a dichotomy between those who have accepted that content has been freed from the container and those who haven't," Mr. Stylman said. "It's those who have embraced the notion that consumers are going to consume content the way they want vs. those who still believe in the walled garden. I don't want to say [the latter camp] is going to fail, but they're certainly going to lose in the search-engine-optimization world."

Thick web of Matt

Reprise created for me no fewer than 13 social-media accounts that would link to each other and, where possible, be loaded with keywords including my name and words like "advertising" and "Ad Age" that would turn them up high in relevant searches. The overall effect, ideally, would be a web of content that would push to the top of my search rankings -- and, in the process, drive traffic to my stories on Ad Age, all the while pushing the impostors out. The hub for my brand would be MattCreamer.com, a brand-new blog that hosts links to my work for Ad Age as well as posts about news in the marketing and media world.

Success in social media, I quickly discovered, is being comfortable with the proposition that every single waking thought and feeling you have is important enough that other people will want to read it. What else explains Twitter, a microblogging platform that allows short posts? Until my SEO experience, Twitter for me was something to be mocked, to be held up and derided as a symbol of a new wave of irrational dot-com exuberance. But something changed as I started to use it and use it in conjunction with other sites Reprise prescribed for me.

First off, there was a Sally-Field-wins-an-Oscar moment. Even though my entries were few and far between and lacking in content ("Watching football."), my list of followers grew. They like me, I beamed. They really like me. More importantly, I realized that I could use Twitter to promote my blog, as well as my writings for Ad Age. Before long, the act of posting on MattCreamer.com or filing a story for AdAge.com was followed by a Twitter post, or tweet, and a link on Facebook, at the very least. The big picture became clear. In isolation these sites are kind of a waste of time, but in the aggregate there's some real utility.

And it was working on my readers. "I am a freak," wrote one contact in an e-mail message after the launch of my blog. "I got suckered into seeing your Flickr photos of jelly beans, cute dogs (yeeeahhhhhh) and signs giving marital advice."

The activity, too, helped with the search-engine performance. My blog and some Ad Age articles started to rise -- the real objective in all this -- and

were on many days the top results for a search on "Matt Creamer." Also performing well were the social sites themselves. Even my page on something called Rollyo -- which I never even managed to log in to -- cruised up the results page.

The project came to an end in mid-October and, at that point, Reprise issued me a report finding the following: 85% of top results are now about me. (That figure improved still. As of last week, 100% of Google results were about me.) That meant the "impostors" had been demoted down the results chain. Already I'm feeling more like myself.

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