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MARKETING REVIEW

SEO vs SEM: Which will serve you better?

Because patients are increasingly on the web to find medical care, you should know the right answer.

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In 2012, JAMA published a survey involving 2137 people exploring their views on physician rating sites, and how influential those ratings were to them in selecting a physician. Of those surveyed, 19% considered a physician's rating very important; 40% thought it somewhat important; and 41% thought the ratings not important.

The following year, German researchers asked the same questions of 1505 people. Here, 65% visited a doctor because of the physician's positive web ratings; and 52% didn't call a particular physician because of "the publicly reported ratings."

In 2014, a Software Advice survey showed the percentage of those relying on the Web for physician reviews climbing higher, to 68%.

Your patients are increasingly on the Web — and relying on the Web — to find you.

Witnesses to change

Yes, we've come a long way since the days when determining a practice's marketing budget was figuring out how large the ad should be in the Yellow Pages.

Today's marketing challenge, in some ways, is no different: How does one attract the attention of a desired segment of patients? What has changed is the approach. Over the past 15 to 20 years, physicians have witnessed the evolution of digital outreach, ranging from "old school" websites and e-newsletters to a constantly morphing social media landscape. Remember MySpace? Maybe not. But you know Facebook.

SEO vs. SEM

One source of confusion among physicians is the difference between SEO and SEM. While sounding similar, they are vastly different in both cost and impact.

Search engine optimization refers to how high on the screen your practice appears when someone conducts an Internet search. It is a function of how "present" you are online and your ability to climb in your ranking based on the links made to and from your website (as well as on blog and review sites). Think of SEO as "earned response."

New Patient Lead Data



Comparing lead types, organic vs pay per click. The key metric isn't the number of generated leads, but how many turned into a scheduled procedure. Hands down: the lead method to the left.

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In contrast, search engine marketing is an investment in keywords that, when typed into the search bar, causes your site to appear at the top or side of the list and on the first page of results. Think of SEM as "paid response."

Which one will bring you more business?

Intuitively, it would seem that SEO is preferable to SEM, similar to how exposure via public relations is (generally) superior to that achieved through paid advertising. However, it is tempting to simply bid using Google ad words to have your site appear first when someone types "best LASIK surgeon in (name of your city)" or "laser cataract surgery." (For a quick lesson on SEM bidding, go to <http://www.wordstream.com/articles/what-is-google-adwords>.)

Depending on the exact word or phrase you want to buy as well as the competition from other practices that want to achieve the same goals, SEM can become a very expensive proposition. Like advertising, you control how much you want to spend on a "pay per click" (PPC) basis. Unlike advertising, you have no control over the message you want consumers to receive.

Let the data in

Until recently, we didn't have sufficient data to make a more objective decision about which generates a better return. Thanks to Red Spot Interactive, a firm that specializes in managing digital advertising for doctors from various specialties, including ophthalmology, we now have a robust set of data from which we can do a head-to-head comparison.

Red Spot's service offering allows it to precisely track the source of each lead coming into the practice (and uses unique toll-free numbers to measure response from each digital marketing campaign). Response to advertising campaigns from practices across the United States resulted in a data set containing more than 60,000 leads generated by organic search (SEO) and nearly 2,000 leads generated by pay-per-click search (SEM).

The key metric is not how many leads were generated but rather what percentage of those leads actually convert to a scheduled procedure? For SEO, it's 31%; for SEM it is 23%.

Step by step

By measuring each step in the process from lead to contact to schedule to procedure, the analysis focuses strictly on performance. No weight or impact was given to the cost to purchase key words under search engine marketing. If one were to factor in the return on investment (ROI), the true cost-per-lead under SEM would be four times higher than the actual dollars paid for that lead, as the data findings suggest that one-in-four of these leads generates revenue for the practice.

By comparison, the ROI on search engine optimization can be viewed as infinite. There is no hard-cost paid to generate an organic search lead; these leads come as a result of investing steadily in digital outreach that helps push up one's ranking.

Also worth noting is that, regardless of method used (SEO or SEM), a better response is uniformly achieved on telephone-based leads over those that come in via email. This makes sense, as the intimate nature of a phone call and hearing someone's voice for tone, passion and empathy are difficult to duplicate in written communication such as email.

The impact to your practice's decision making should be meaningful as the message is clear. While the cost-per-lead via SEM may seem low relative to other paid advertising, the actual cost is much higher than what can be achieved by a long-term approach to optimizing your presence on the Internet.

I've long maintained that the best advertising is the one you don't pay for directly, including referrals resulting from an outstanding customer experience. In that same vein, investment in SEO seem a far better use of resources than paying for leads via search engine marketing.

About the Author



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