

Auto Dealer Monthly

YOUR DAILY OPERATIONS MAGAZINE

Keeping Your SEO on Track

NADA Must See Exhibitors



Top 10 SEO Factors

**Finish Line Ford
Laps the Competition**

**Landmark Ford
Achieves
100% Service
Absorption**

SEARCH ENGINE
OPTIMIZATION

SEO Need to Know

Keeping your SEO on Track

Jennifer Murphy

Successful search engine optimization (SEO) is ever-changing, which is why many dealers enlist the help of third parties to properly optimize their Web sites. And choosing a reputable provider can be a challenge. If you've recently evaluated providers, you've likely learned a little about SEO, but your education on the subject was probably embedded in a sales pitch.

To provide dealers with a more in-depth explanation of SEO, information on what's successful now and insight on what's to come in the near future, *Auto Dealer Monthly* sought out top management from leading technology companies to get the 411 on all aspects of SEO. The industry professionals who contributed information for this exposé include Dean Evans, chief marketing officer at Dealer.com; Mike Fitzpatrick, vice president of sales and marketing at DealerTrend; Sarah Mooneyhan, co-founder and vice president of marketing at eBizAutos; George Nenni, vice president of Dominion Dealer Solutions and general manager for Dealerskins; Erin O'Conner, Web account manager at DealerHD; and Jason Walker, vice president of sales at AutoDealerTraffic.

What should dealers know about SEO/SEM?



Dean Evans

Dealerships must understand that the search engines drive the overwhelming majority of traffic to their Web sites. When

looking at the metrics from our thousands of dealerships, we consistently see the search engines delivering the most traffic. Google explains that having representation in both paid and organic results will result in a higher percentage of people clicking through to your Web site, so it's critical to have a presence and strategy in both areas.



Mike Fitzpatrick

Dealers should know the basics of SEO. The difference between on-site versus off-site SEO, the underlying concept of white hat vs. black hat techniques, and most of all the main desire of the search engines to provide value to the end user. Fortunately for dealerships, Web vendors have been forced to build better Web sites over the last year-and-a-half as marketing dollars have

been shifted to digital while being reduced.



Sarah Mooneyhan

The most powerful "aha" moment for any dealer I talk with is when they realize the greatest tool for results is already in their own hands. The SEO game is actually played on two fields, these being on-page and off-page optimization—on-page meaning things you can do to your own Web site and off-page meaning things that occur away from (or off) your Web site. The majority are already familiar with the on-page concept, that their Web site's pages can be improved with techniques such as keywords usage or naming pages uniquely. But, and here is the big miss and the element that makes one dealer a ranking superstar while the other is anonymous, only one in 50 dealers knows about link building.

Link building is not complicated. It is the process of getting other Web site pages to link to your pages. These links should use text within the link that best describes the page that it is pointing to. Dealers are surprised to hear that link building is five to six times as powerful as

anything they can do on their Web site itself.

So a Chevy dealership, for example, wanting to rank well for searches such as "Chevy in Las Vegas," might ask a charity they sponsor to link to their dealership Web site from the charity home page. The charity's link and surrounding text to the dealership might say something like, "We here at [Charity XYZ] appreciate the efforts and contributions from the staff at [ABC Dealership]. Since they support the community we hope too that the community will support them. If you are looking for a Chevy in Las Vegas please consider [ABC Dealership] for your next car or truck purchase. Thank you [ABC Dealership] for your continued support to our efforts."

Links such as these are "crawled" by the search engines and the included text is a signal as to what the page pointed to is about.



George Nenni

SEO/SEM is an important piece of a business plan because these techniques help car buyers find dealer Web sites. SEO and SEM are two different disciplines.

Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of increasing ... or improving the quality of traffic to a Web site from search engines via "natural" or unpaid search results. SEO primarily involves development of keyword-rich content on the site. Search engine marketing (SEM) allows businesses to pay for specific placement on search results pages.



Erin O'Conner

It's important for dealers to know that a hybrid approach to SEO and SEM is essential for success. Employing a number of strategies will distribute

efforts evenly and increase online presence. Optimizing a dealer's site is as important as making vehicles available for customers, and like all good things, optimization takes time, patience and hard work. Without site optimization and directory listings, [a Web site] can be near-impossible to [find], which is exactly why SEO and SEM are such an integral part of an online campaign.



Jason Walker

SEO and SEM should be leveraged to generate Internet visibility and brand awareness, deliver relevant new and return Web traffic, and meet conversion expectations.

Conversions may consist of the number of unique visitors watching a video about the monthly promotion, the number of visitors opening a PDF brochure for the latest model launch, the number of lead forms submitted, or the number of incoming phone calls originating from SEO and SEM click-through traffic.

At the very least, what should dealers be doing

to maximize their Web sites with SEO/SEM?



At the very least they should be thinking about why they have a Web site. Do they

have a Web site to wow consumers with glitz and glam, or do they want to engage customers, generate leads and sell more? If the answer is to sell more, then it's important that they first consider the basic architecture of their Web site and stack that up against Google's Webmaster Guidelines. If they are not sure what they should be looking for from an architectural standpoint, they should reference the ASMA report put out by Brian Pasch from Pasch Consulting Group. This study outlines the four key pillars to basic SEO architecture. They are proper URL structure, optimized HTML page titles, description tags, and 301 redirect.

Once the basic architecture is in place, the dealer needs to be thinking about content ... [that] is optimized and well-put-together to highlight the products and services that dealer offers. From there, dealers should build links to their Web site. Links are how search engines like Google understand what sites and pages are important and valuable.



Every dealer should be performing their own Web site audits to make sure that

the on-site SEO is as good as possible. Every page should have a unique page title, meta description and meta keywords (keywords aren't as important, but it still makes sense to have them) that are relevant to the content of that page. Dealers should be adding content that has value to their clients on a weekly basis ... There has been a lot of discussions on the automotive social sites lately regarding the need for dealerships to hire in-house content writers, and this is definitely the

direction that dealerships need to be thinking.



A short "very least" list includes one thing to do and one thing not to do. Top of the

not to do list would be stuffing keywords and links. If your dealership is in Hudson, New Jersey, there is absolutely no reason to list on your home page every city and county within 100 miles ... Reading your Web site, people living in these areas can easily tell you are close by ... Search engines are extremely adept at recognizing this type of keyword stuffing, and it does nothing for your Web site. In some instances you can even be penalized in the search rankings. The same goes for long lists of models on a single page [and] links in the footer. Stuffing is for turkeys. Write for humans.

[The one thing] to do? This one is easy—link building.



For SEO, dealers should consult with their Web site provider regarding

best practices for page titles, meta tags and content updates. SEO is not a one-time thing. Although adhering to SEO best practices during the building process is important, every site needs to be reviewed periodically—at least once every quarter. Content designed for your specific business and Web site is key. For SEM, you'll want to check with your provider to see if they provide marketing services, and work with them to determine the most cost-effective keywords and phrases you should purchase to compliment your Web site... Keep in mind that what a user types into a search engine is usually based on something he or she has seen in another form of advertising.



In our opinion, at the very least dealers should be taking advantage of what is

in their control for their Web site, which typically extends to content. Web site content should be keyword-rich and relevant to their brand and dealership. This information gets indexed with their sites and is the most basic form of SEO.



The success of SEO and SEM campaigns is dependent upon the following:

1. Web Site Analytics – Entering into SEO and SEM engagements requires dealers to outline what is considered a success and what historical data exists to measure that success moving forward. Google Analytics is the most commonly used, free Web site analytics package, but there are others from which to choose. In the case of Google Analytics, this package offers detailed information—when code is implemented correctly—regarding keywords, traffic sources, content, conversions, etc., that will help set expectations around key performance indicators (KPIs) as SEO and SEM launch. More importantly, Web site analytics provide insight into the effectiveness of the Web site from a user perspective and make a case for testing usability prior to launching SEO and SEM.

2. Web Site Usability Testing – If the Web site does not provide a positive user experience based on the unbiased opinion of the average consumer ... then the implementation of SEO and SEM campaigns is irrelevant. Assuming your Web site is effective because it is aesthetically pleasing or built to support your dealership's vision is the primary flaw that leads to a dissatisfied dealer experience with respect to SEO and SEM.

3. Proper Implementation of On-site and Off-site SEO Tactics – As a baseline, dealers should optimize all Web pages with unique tags (title, META, description, ALT, no-script, etc.) that complement

on-site HTML content while producing a strong off-site link-building campaign ...

4. Proper Implementation and Management of an SEM Campaign – At the very least, dealers should implement a regionally-targeted, promotion-specific pay-per-click campaign that is updated periodically. In addition, dealers should review their SEO campaigns and determine which keyword phrases do and do not result in competitive organic rankings. Dealers should be concerned with bidding on terms that will generate visibility without duplicating efforts where SEO already possesses a stronghold.

What are some out-of-date SEO/SEM practices that dealers should no longer be paying for?



An obvious one is meta keywords. While Google does not take meta keywords into consideration for rankings, recently Bing and Yahoo! have also come forward to state that this plays no role in actually ranking results, although there is still much debate on the topic. This does not mean that meta data is not used.

Dealers also need to be wary of programs which guarantee placement. Any firm that guarantees placement you should run away from instantly. Since no SEO firm controls the search results, these guarantees are often a sign of a scam. Another warning sign is guaranteed traffic. It's easy to purchase Web site traffic, but these visitors are not targeted, will not convert and are often delivered via pop-ups or spamming, which hurts your customers' experience online.

On the PPC side, it's now all about transparency and dynamic campaigns. Dealers should know exactly where their dollars are going in paid search, and should have a system to

automatically create campaigns around their inventory. Your PPC strategy needs to be ROI-based. Any company just setting up AdWords and manually making changes now and then is not effectively investing your advertising dollars. To make effective decisions regarding your campaigns, you need details on cost-per-click for each key phrase and how successfully they generate leads. Otherwise, much of what you are spending is wasted and will never convert.

Lastly, dealers should not be paying for manual campaign management. The number of hours required to do this adequately makes for a large bill to the dealer. By utilizing a system which adjusts bids and key phrases automatically based on performance, dealers get the best ROI without paying for the manual labor.



More than anything dealers need to be educated enough to not pay for worthless services regarding SEO/SEM. They need to utilize services like Google Alerts to monitor the companies that they pay to ensure that actual work is being performed.



The SEO industry is filled with snake oil salesmen preying on a business in need of sales with promises of "number-one ranking tomorrow." So, the first practice dealers should no longer be paying for are people or companies that promise anything of the sort. There is no secret sauce, no shortcuts, no super-duper mystery edge ... Even though most dealers don't want to hear it, grandpa's rule that you get what you pay for still applies.



Be wary of third-party vendors who place too much emphasis on the keyword section of the Web site. It is usually in your best interest to write your own Web site content because you know your business best.

Also, watch out for vendors willing to place your links on link farms. By having a link to your Web site appear on a discredited site, you can actually hurt your ranking with search engines.



Out-of-date and black hat practices dealers should not be paying for include: keyword stuffing, computer-generated content, adding meta keywords and link building. Customers and search engines want to read what your business is all about and generated content does not provide the information they need. Search engines no longer use meta keywords in their indexing. It is important for dealers to avoid black hat practices as they may work for quick results, but in the long run when discovered, it can hurt your page ranking.



Packages that guarantee clicks or impressions—clicks and impressions are not primary success measures. A dealer should look at SEO and SEM as long-term, progressive strategies that will deliver measurable conversion results. ... "Built-in SEO"—Web site vendors (i.e., designers and developers) sell the Web site from a creative and programming perspective and then quickly respond to questions about SEO integration by saying, "You are already paying for SEO with the Web site because we build that into the cost." Search engine optimization is not a set-it-and-forget-it product. If your Web site vendor does not provide a detailed approach that discusses pre- and post-launch recommendations/strategies, then chances are high that the vendor has not prepared a full SEO plan for your site. We recommend you hold a discussion on how SEO will be handled, the strategies, and the cost from the up-front and monthly fees, to be sure that your site will deliver the best results possible on the search engines. You may also want to

get a recommendation from an SEO specialist so that you can compare approaches and make the best investment choice.

Local Submissions—if local submissions are purchased as a stand-alone service, then the dealership is wasting its monetary resources. Dealers should claim and optimize their business listings (Google Maps, Yahoo! Local, etc.), because the time commitment is minimal and the interfaces supporting these resources are extremely intuitive. Plus, owning your listing has long-term value.

Where do you see the future of SEO/SEM headed?



I believe we will see many dealers turning to multiple Web sites rather than just one for their dealership. Many will begin to use free tools like WordPress blogs to showcase inventory and drive more traffic for relevant key phrases. Dealers will also further embrace the social Web. With so many people participating in sites like Twitter and Facebook, it only makes sense for dealers to have a presence there. While many have made this jump, there are also those who are reluctant to join the conversation.

All of the above, from microsites to social profiles, will feed into a dealer's main Web site. This increases relevant and converting traffic and reinforces the importance of having a strong core system to deliver the results.



SEO is going to continue to be an important factor in any business, but ultimately instead of SEO, which still comes across as this mystical thing, "relationship optimization" will become the major focus and the new X factor ... Online business will separate the honest, hard-working ... dealerships from the "let's make

a quick hit on every customer"-type dealers. The transparency that is being created on the Web will no longer be something that can be ignored, so doing business on the Internet is really no different than anywhere else ... This is why Google has become the leader in search, because they were able to put the companies on top of the search engine results pages that deserved to be there based on consumer feedback (i.e., backlinks).



Search engines are getting smarter day by day, while technologies are advancing minute by minute. The future of SEO will add the importance of new factors in ranking: social graph metrics, usage metrics and optimization with verticals.

Social graph metrics is data from social media sources such as Twitter and Facebook. What is trending in popularity on these platforms will influence how rankings appear day-to-day versus today's weight toward the importance of longstanding links.

Including usage metrics in search will allow Google and others to include the volume of queries on particular terms and also visitor tracking to particular sites as factors in their ranking. The search engines themselves and platforms such as Feedburner and Friend Connect are potential sources for this data.



SEO is all about making your site more user-friendly to both car buyers and to search engines ... SEO practices continue to evolve to target different kinds of search, including image search, local search and video search.

Additionally, social media has become a big trend and [it] looks like that will only continue to grow. Consumers prefer to do business with people they trust, and [they] pay attention to what

they read on consumer Web sites. Social networking sites allow car dealers to develop relationships with car buyers and influence their decision to become customers. Social networking sites are also great for press release and news distribution—not only about your dealership but also about automotive trends or anything that influences your customers' buying decisions.



The transition from traditional media to interactive has been taking place more steadily in the last few years. I believe SEO and SEM practices have accelerated that transition because of their minimal investment and high returns. As we continue to go digital in all aspects of our lives, SEO and SEM practices are going to soar and become a much larger part of media budgets for all businesses.



Within the industry, we believe that the future lies in detailed statistical analysis with an emphasis on ROI. No longer should a consumer have to take the word of their SEO/SEM vendor as the only means of measuring the success of their campaign. There will be an increased emphasis on tracking quantifiable data to prove/disprove the relative success or failure of an SEO/SEM campaign.

How is SEO success measured from your standpoint?



Success is measured by SERP (Search Engine Results Page) rankings, which deliver targeted traffic that converts to Web site leads, phone calls and ultimately sales. To get there, SEO begins with educated research into the market area, effective keyword targeting to increase rankings and then creation of relevant content to generate leads from those visitors. Anyone can deliver traffic; the art is delivering people who will actually shop at your store.



Of course quality traffic and leads is the measurable outcome of SEO success ... I

think success is also when a dealership makes a commitment to creating content and value to their site which ensures long-term success by building relationships with their clients.



The success of SEO can be measured a number of ways, but the most practical way for a dealership to measure success of their SEO campaign is answering one question: are organic visits to the Web site increasing versus a similar time period? Visits up, good. Visits down, bad.



Some standards in the industry include Google Analytics, which offers plenty of detailed statistics on site activity. We also provide advanced web ranking (AWR) reports that show a specific list of keywords and where our dealers rank with various search engines for each of those key phrases.



Success from our standpoint is delivering the results and traffic for the keywords and phrases our dealer is targeting. We work with dealers before we start the optimization process to set goals and work towards them with their campaign.



SEO success is measured by a number of factors, including but not limited to increased Web traffic and/or rankings, page rank, inbound links, pages indexed, etc. Some metrics are relative to the target market (i.e., national versus local) and should be considered with the Web site's intent in mind.

Do you optimize just for Google, or for other engines also? If not, why?



Much of our strategy is focused on Google since that's the source of the majority of the

potential traffic. However, we optimize for all of the major search engines, taking specific action to address results from particular engines when necessary. We also register sites and submit XML sitemaps to Google, Yahoo! and Bing, which provides the SEO team with useful information on each Web site.



Google is of course a main focus just because of the market share that they command, but we pay attention to the big three—Yahoo!, Bing and Google—so our sites consequently do well in the other engines too.



Trying to optimize for a specific search engine is never a good idea. Although Google gets over 80 percent of the world's search traffic, SEO best practices are established, universal and should be targeted to all search engines. More importantly, our Web sites are optimized for people—the first rule to any solid SEO strategy.



We primarily optimize for Google because it is the strongest player among the search engines.



We optimize and submit site files for all major search engines. We follow the Google Webmaster guidelines closely and as other engines gain greater market share, we will be following those more closely as well.



Although Google possesses the majority of the search engine market share, we optimize sites using best practices/requirements, etc., established by Google and other search engines. Most SEO tactics are universal; however, some Web site elements may be preferred in one engine more than another. **ADM**