

The Power of Understanding: Switching Paradigms with Your Target Customer in Search Marketing

By Gord Hotchkiss

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I'm 44 years old. I think I'm getting wiser, but opinions differ on that subject. One of the things I think I do better than I used to is look at things from another's point of view. Or, in new age speak touchy feely terms, I've learned to shift my paradigms. Maybe it's because your paradigms get lighter and easier to move as you get older. Heaven knows nothing else is getting lighter and easier to move.

This ability has served me well in my chosen field of work: search marketing. I'm constantly reinforcing the importance of looking at search results through the paradigm of the target customer. It's my new mantra. I talk about it way more than I should. It makes me a sought after speaker on the search marketing tour, but it's been awhile since I've been invited to a cocktail party in my neighborhood.

However, I'm a firm believer in sticking to your message, so I haven't been swayed. And, it seems to be working. Four years ago, when you went to a search marketing conference, you would have heard about the tactics of managing a search campaign: how to manage your bids, drop your cost-per-clicks (CPC's), bid trap your competitors and a host of other detail heavy do's and don'ts. Today, it's a good chance that the person up front will be talking about profiling, behavioral targeting and determining where your prospect is in the buying cycle. Who knows, the person speaking might even be me!

Evolving Search Strategies

In the beginning, we were obsessed about position. Being number one was paramount. Search marketing was a no holds barred contest to crawl up the ranking ladder. This still marks much of what we do on a day to day basis, but increasingly, we're discovering the importance of determining what it is that our target customer wants. For the past year, every search marketing strategy we've created at Enquiro has been built on a 5 part foundation:

Get the right message in front of the right person in the right place at the right time and deliver the right experience.

As you read this over, you'll probably notice something. This could apply to any form of marketing.

Exactly!

Search is a marketing channel, no different than any other channel. It's purpose is simply act as a bridge to connect a potential consumer with a product or service. The fact that search grew up as a technical tool obscured this fact for a long time. We became obsessed with the tactics of the bridge, and ignored the really important things at both ends of it: the consumer and the thing they were looking for. But, if we're using search as a marketing tool, we have to treat it as such. And, that means paying more attention to the two things we're trying to connect.

Okay, Everybody Shift Now...

Before we go on, let's try a quick little paradigm shift. Go to your favorite engine and search for "Until I Find You". This is John Irving's latest book. If you are not a John Irving fan, the results probably mean nothing to you.

Now, let's shift your paradigm. You have read a couple of John Irving's previous books and enjoyed them. You've just seen a reviewer mention this book on TV. The review was mixed. You're looking for a new book and you're planning a shopping trip out later today. You know you'll be by a bookstore and you were going to pick up something to read on an upcoming trip. You're unsure whether you want to pick up the book or not. Now, with that paradigm in mind, look at the results again and see what catches your eye.

Time for another shift. Your brother-in-law is an avid John Irving fan. He's read everything that Irving's ever written. His birthday is coming up and you've forgot. He lives in another city and no matter what you buy; shipping is going to be an issue. The goal, find a gift that he'll like, then get it to him as quickly and cheaply as possible (I never said he was your favorite brother-in-law). Now, with that in mind, take another look at the results.

It's amazing how different the same set of results can look when you have different intentions. And, that's just with two scenarios. Millions of people use search engines every day and each has their own paradigm. Imagine how differently they see those same results.

The ability to analyze your search campaign through your target customer's paradigm is the most important thing you can learn to do in search marketing. If marketers can master the skill, they'll be way ahead of the game. Of course, it requires some homework. First, you need to define your targets, profile each and really work to understand their paradigms. We find building personas is an effective tool to help in this process. Although the use of personas is more common in software and product design, they can be tremendously effective in helping to create your marketing strategies as well.

For more on personas, see the following resources:

- A good introduction in a Web design perspective, http://www.steptwo.com.au/papers/kmc_personas/,
- Another basic how to article, http://www.cooper.com/newsletters/2001_07/perfecting_your_personas.htm,
- A note on the origins from the man who invented the concept, Alan Cooper, http://www.cooper.com/content/insights/newsletters/2003_08/Origin_of_Personas.asp
- and finally, Microsoft's case study of personas in action, <http://research.microsoft.com/research/coet/Grudin/Personas/Pruitt-Grudin.pdf>

After you work through defining your targets, creating a profile for them and then bringing those profiles to life with well crafted personas, you can begin stepping through what a typical search interaction could look like. It's an expanded version of our little John Irving exercise. You can begin answering the big 5 questions in our mantra:

Who is the right person?
When is the right time?

Where is the right place?
What is the right message?
Which is the right experience?

Like most important things in life, these questions are deceptively simple but surprisingly powerful. If you answer them right, your search strategy will build itself.

As you work to understand your target and see things through their paradigms, here a few things we've learned through our research that will help you define the right strategy for you.

The Anonymity Threshold

We feel anonymous online. As potential consumers, we like to be in control. So, we use online research as a way to narrow our consideration set without initiating contact with the vendor. We're online because we don't want to talk to a sales person yet. And, we want to control the time when we do contact the vendor, not the other way around.

So what do most sites do? Force us to surrender a lot of contact information before they tell us anything. And, why do they want the contact information? So, a sales person can contact us.

See why this approach is doomed to failure?

We identified the Anonymity Threshold and its importance in an early study. For more, look at <http://www.enquiro.com/net-profit/Inside-Searcher's-Mind.asp> or download the pdf report, Inside the Searcher's Mind at www.enquiro.com/research.asp.

Semantic Mapping

The act of searching is a complex process with a deceptively simple result. We take our concepts of what we're looking for (which often include the content we're looking for, existing brand relationships, features that are important, our current intentions and hundreds of other factors, all defined by words in our minds, our semantic maps) and distill them into a few words for the search engine. This act of distilling down to the simplest phrase doesn't replace the original concept. It still exists, and we use it to determine the relevancy of the listings returned. It's hidden, not stated in our search query, but still vitally important. We have to understand the semantic maps that may be in our target's mind.

For more on semantic mapping, see <http://www.enquiro.com/net-profit/Love-to-Search.asp>.

SERP SWOTs

Your target customer doesn't look at one search result on a page. Our eye tracking study showed the average user looks at between 4 and 5 results before making their choice. Even after that first click, odds are good that the target will come back to the page and scan further. So, it's important to see how your listing stacks up against the other listings that the user may look at. We call it a SERP (Search Engine Results Page) SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis. From the target customer's perspective, we look at what the messaging is and what promises to best match their intentions. Then, we click through to the sites and see if the promise is delivered on. This allows us to refine strategy in the context of the other messaging our target customer will be seeing.