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Slave To The Algorithm: Are Keywords Killing The Creativity Of SMEs?
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Abstract

Opportunities for SMEs to describe themselves creatively are restricted by the impact of writing content for search engine optimisation (SEO) purposes. The use of keywords imposes limitations on the ways businesses can differentiate their product, service or offering (PSO) from others operating in similar areas.

The ability to be found online through the use of keywords/phrases is restricted by search engine algorithms, with training in 'good' SEO focusing on how to say what search engines expect, rather than on the ways business would ordinarily (or would like to) describe themselves.

These restrictions are two-fold: as businesses master keywords in order to be found online, search engines reiterate the same keywords as dominant, creating a self-perpetuating cycle in which creative, unusual or novel descriptors become unhelpful or ineffective. This is significant because digital marketing knowhow for SMEs is predicated in part on mastering keywords. This leaves SMEs little scope for effectively promoting through search engines the unique skills and expertise they often rely on to succeed.

Linking to the conference theme, Marketing The Brave, the limitations of keywords are analysed and ways SMEs can use the growth of the semantic web to increasingly personalise their offering online are explored.

Introduction

With 5.7 million SMEs in the UK alone in 2017 (Rhodes, 2017), competition to be found online by potential customers is fierce. Digital training for SMEs often focuses on effective use of SEO and the tools and techniques needed to be found online ahead of competitors. Commercial entities of all sizes are highly reliant upon search engine marketing efforts to attract prospective customers (eMarketer, 2017). Recent figures continue to establish the importance of SEO to the ecommerce sector (OfCom, 2017). For example, in 2017 the majority of the £21 billion UK digital advertising spend went to digital display and search engine channels (IAB UK, 2017).

Problematic within this, however, is that 'good' SEO requires descriptions based on frequently-used keywords and phrases, whilst many SMEs rely on specialist skills and expertise to succeed in business. The differences that set many SMEs apart from their competitors are neutralised by effective SEO, leaving them little scope for promoting the unique offerings they often rely on to be found effectively through search.

In particular, SMEs with limited marketing budgets are reliant on utilisation of search engine referrals to their websites to sell their products and services online or to promote brand awareness. In doing so, these firms are required to engage in digital marketing techniques grounded in part on mastering keywords (Nabout, 2015). This leaves SMEs little scope for promoting their websites in other ways. Therefore, in relying on SEO techniques to ensure continued customer visits to the website through use of search engines, brands are restricted in the phrasing of their offering, inhibiting creative communication.

Accordingly, the aims of the proposed study are two-fold. First, it will gather data that supports the claim that the use of search engine-friendly keywords restricts opportunities for businesses to promote themselves in potentially creative or innovative ways that reflect their own descriptions of their work. Second, this paper looks towards the semantic web and the growth of personalisation in search to explore ways SMEs might transcend some of the restrictions of search and claim space in SERPs on their own terms.

Literature

This research applies traditional semiotics theories within a digital marketing context (Elisabeth et al., 2017). Furthermore, this proposed study seeks to examine the viability of search engine friendly keywords on digital presences which has seen recent attention by scholars (Joo et al., 2015; Nabout, 2015; Jung and Valero, 2016). Whilst some scholars have adapted semiotic theory to analysis of digital marketing campaigns (e.g., Mehmet and Clarke, 2016), this has generally been promoted in a positive manner, reflecting the emphasis in other literature on 'mastering' keywords for effective practice. As such, the rose-tinted view of SEO is pervasive throughout the majority of scholarly research in this field. However, this research takes a different approach, by suggesting that semiotic theory can help to identify the negative impact of reliance on keywords for SMEs' marketing communication strategies. This is a clear gap in the literature, as critical analysis of keywords is under-researched in the field of digital marketing.

Proposed Method

This paper proposes an investigation of the topic by performing a content analysis of fifty top-ranking tattoo artists' websites. This area of business has been chosen as a popular, contemporary and personalised activity that relies on artistry and individual service for its success. Content analysis will assess the volume/breakdown of search engine-friendly terms on the websites, finding commonly used descriptors (Bryman and Bell, 2010). This type of business is the focus of this research because offline descriptions of their services and products are not necessarily search engine-friendly and therefore they have to adapt, or moderate, the descriptions of themselves to meet search specifications. The analysis will provide an overview of the influence of specific search engine-friendly keywords on the promotional content of the websites of tattoo businesses.

Later research will include interviews with leading tattoo artists and a comparative analysis of their own descriptions of their activities in relation to the initial findings. Semi-structured interviews with business owners will be performed to further understand the

impact of search engine-friendly keyword strategies upon communication of the tattoo businesses' creative offerings.

It will also examine possible opportunities open to SMEs to personalise their content online more effectively. While Google has become more adept at personalising individual searches using knowledge of location, language, previous searches and social profiles (Jackson 2016), this research investigates the agency of SMEs within this to optimise search at least partially on their own terms.

Anticipated Outcomes

It is anticipated that by the time of the AoM Conference, data for this study will have been collected and analysis completed and that it will be possible to present preliminary findings. The data collected will reveal the range of different approaches to using SEO keywords strategies on tattoo parlour websites.

It is also expected that insights will highlight the impact of such strategies upon the creative communication of their services, as well as any influence on customers. Finally, this study will attempt to further develop our understanding of the limitations of search engine marketing in a specific industry context. In doing so, this work advances the theoretical areas of semiotics, online consumer behaviour, and search engine marketing strategies.

Keywords: digital marketing; search engine optimisation; keywords; marketing communication strategies; small to medium sized enterprises; SMEs; semiotics; semantic web

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