

DigiChat with Andrea: Search engine marketing

 By [Andrea Mitchell](#)

29 Sep 2014

Search results are vitally important for businesses with an online presence. Studies also show that people tend to give their business to the ads that appear near the top of the page, whether paid or organic. So how do brands go about achieving this, and which search engine marketing initiative works best, organic or paid?



What is the difference between paid and organic search engine marketing?

Morné Kahts, Lead Digital Strategist & Organic Search Marketing Specialist, [Pixel Power](#)

The simplest way to distinguish between paid search marketing and organic search marketing is to classify them into push and pull strategies.

Paid search marketing is in essence a push strategy to a highly targeted audience. Campaigns are planned around pushing a certain message to the consumer and driving them to a conversion focused landing page. Campaigns are relatively quick to build and deploy; adjustments are quick to make and results are almost immediate, and measureable. Rankings are determined by a keyword bidding system and Google provides a closed feedback loop providing insights into keywords and ads sending traffic and their conversion rates.

Organic search marketing relies on a pull strategy where consumers are targeted through search queries, and the search engine results page listings are determined by a ranking algorithm which takes into account various on and off site elements. Results listings and rankings are controlled entirely by Google's organic algorithm; which in its simplest form takes into account the credibility and foundation of the platform as well as the amount of relevant and contextual "digital noise" referring to the webpage pertaining to the particular keyword or phrase. Results take time to achieve for each and every targeted keyword or phrase and adjustments are made over a period of time in order to measure success.

Unlike with paid search, Google does not provide full insights into keywords sending traffic and their various success rates for organic search. Organic rankings will continue to exist (albeit at lower positions) after an active SEO campaign has ended. Rankings will deteriorate, sending less traffic for the keywords over a period of time, which will be determined by the competitive nature of the keyword in question. It is thus crucial to ensure that your SEO efforts remain constant.



Karen Muller, SEO Lead, [iProspect](#)

Paid search delivers placements for a direct cost.

Organic search is determined by a search engine's algorithm and while there is a cost involved in catering for organic search, it is not a direct cost for placement.



André Wilkinson, Head of SEO, [Saatchi Synergize](#)

In a nutshell: When a search term is entered into Google, the user is presented with links to information that Google thinks best serves the query. These are the organic results. Google also allows for websites to put adverts up around these organic results based on the keywords entered into Google.

Where SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) comes in, is in how Google decides which results best suit a search query. SEO is the process of making sure that when Google "looks" at your site, it believes that the content on your site is the most

authoritative content to display to users based on their search queries.



Maon Seidel, Chief Operating Officer, [National Positions SA](#)

Search marketing is all about building credibility and relevance online. Whilst paid search allows the advertiser to "buy" this relevance quickly, organic search requires a continued effort to build trust with both searchers and search engines.

Paid ads, typically labelled as "sponsored ads", appear at the top and to the right of the results page and operate on a pay per click basis. When the budget runs out, the ad disappears. Organic results are placed immediately after the paid listings and tend to be more trusted by searchers and once you're ranking, traffic is free.

In short, paid search delivers instant, more targeted traffic, whereas organic brings free visitors, a greater degree of trust and a smaller long-term financial commitment.



Allen Jaffe, Managing Director, [ROI Media](#)

Organic search is referred to as Free Traffic or "Free Search". These are the search engine result listings that are ranked based on a specific query, and how relevant they are to a user. Paid search ads are ads that search engines charge the advertiser for, on a pay per click basis.

Most users are aware of the paid ads, and when speaking at conferences I'm amazed at how few people claim to click these ads. Organic search is still responsible for the lion's share of traffic via search engines.

Both come at a price, but which is most cost effective?

Morné Kahts: The competitive nature of the keywords and competitor activity in either one of the two types of search marketing will determine the cost of success.

With paid search it is easier to start with a smaller budget and increase the spend as you start seeing results. Your paid search specialist will be able to provide guidance in terms of what the minimum spend should be in order to get enough exposure for a given campaign to be able to generate conversions and get an accurate indication of ROI. Once you start generating conversions from the lower price base you can start increasing your budget.

Organic search marketing requires an investment into an initial setup during which the foundation for organic ranking factors are considered and optimised. In addition to the setup it can take a couple of months before you start seeing results and measuring conversions. Due to various levels of involvement required from developers, copywriters and strategists there will again be a minimum investment required in order to achieve success. Your SEO agency will usually provide guidelines on what this cost would be for either an aggressive and moderate approach. The requirements for involvement from your SEO agency will also differ depending on your internal resources and capabilities.

In the long-term though, sustaining good rankings will require less effort in terms of organic search than it would cost to keep bidding on the same keyword continuously in a paid search campaign.

Ideally though, there should be synergy between your paid and organic search marketing strategies.

Karen Muller: Essentially both are cost-effective as you wouldn't spend more than you're willing to pay to gain leads through search. Determining which is most cost-effective depends on the aggressiveness of the industry you're playing in, how effectively you're optimising your bought media and how effectively you're managing your earned media (SEO, Content, Social Media).

André Wilkinson: There is no hard and fast rule as to which is more cost effective. Both approaches have their merits and

shortfalls but a very simplified way of thinking about the two is: If I spend X amount on paid search, I will be getting Y amount of clicks through to my site. There is a cost involved to this traffic - if I stop the payment, the traffic stops. With SEO; the budget is not spent on driving Y amount of traffic, but rather pushing the site higher up in search results so that people click on the result naturally and in turn increase the traffic.

We do know that some keywords (search terms) are more valuable than others as they drive traffic to websites. These terms will be more expensive to have an "advert" appear next to as many people will be bidding on having their website appear here (supply and demand). In some cases, it may be a more cost effective approach to try and get the site to climb higher in the organic results for multiple search terms.

Maon Seidel: That depends on what you're trying to achieve. For a short term campaign, paid is more effective. In the long run, however, organic is the most cost effective. It all depends on what you're trying to achieve and what your campaign's objectives are.

High-ranking organic results carry with them a sense of authority and respectability, which is particularly useful if your company is service-oriented. For companies that are product or brand specific however, paid ads can help to drive clicks and, by extension, conversions. For quick turnaround, short-term tactical campaigns, paid search is more cost effective, whereas in the long run, organic is more affordable.

Allen Jaffe: Both have pros and cons. Organic search does convert better than paid search, and has substantially higher volumes of traffic. The upside is that you don't pay Google for every click, so over time a well executed SEO strategy can yield far better ROI.

Keep in mind though that SEO takes months to gain decent traction and is contingent on dozens of variables. These include original content, great site architecture and structure, as well as earned authority from credible sites. It can be a costly waiting game.

Paid search is instant traffic. Literally within minutes your site can get traffic. The issue is you are paying per click and your site needs to convert that traffic to generate ROI over time, competition increases and so does the price per click which means you get less traffic for the same price.

Do brands need to invest in both?

Morné Kahts: I would most definitely encourage brands to invest in both paid and organic search marketing strategies. The keyword strategy should be shared in order to optimise the total investment in search marketing.

Paid search keywords should ideally not be the same keywords that you generate top 3 position rankings for in organic search however. On average, between 60% and 75% of search queries generate organic traffic while the remainder go through paid search traffic. That being said, market averages differ per region, industry and search query.

The most important concept to grasp here is that of volume. If the total market size for a search term is 100,000 searches per month, and at the very least 25,000 of those search queries are paid search advertisements - are you really okay with missing out on 25,000 impressions that could generate leads to your site, and ultimately conversions?

Karen Muller: Yes, definitely. We've found that having high organic rankings alongside paid search placements enhance your brand affinity which results in higher click through rates overall. Paid search can be quite agile in delivering results for campaigns quickly and organic search can often take a little longer to gain tracking, but together they deliver amazing results.

André Wilkinson: This is entirely down to budget. In a perfect world, both strategies can complement each other and allow for maximum coverage in the SERP's (Search Engine Results Pages). But in reality, it can be quite costly to try and run both concurrently.

With smaller budgets, an approach I have seen that works very well is to run paid search from the beginning, but taper off the spend as the organic search slowly takes hold through small prioritised SEO implementations and allows for more budget to be spent on content.

However, when a site is being built or re-built, SEO should be considered out the gate. Sites should be built to accommodate SEO best practises to avoid costs down the line.

Maon Seidel: Again it depends on what you want to achieve. There is research to support the value of investing in both and sure, if the budget permits, then why not. It stands to reason that the more coverage you have on the results page, the greater your brands visibility.

But if you don't have the luxury of big budgets then choosing the right channel depends on your objectives. If you have a brand new website that will take time to rank organically or if you need a quick turnaround, then go the paid route first and consider organic efforts further down the line.

It is also important to consider the specific keywords that you are targeting - branded keywords typically rank well organically, so investing in paid is often a waste of budget. There are, however, some exceptions to this, especially in the highly contended financial and insurance verticals where competitors tend to target each other's brands.

Allen Jaffe: Absolutely, if an SEO or PPC (Pay per Click) strategy is working. You need both because users have different clicking and search habits. Running both PPC and SEO enables you to take up more real estate in the search engine results page.

Can brands do SEO themselves?

Morné Kahts: It all depends on the internal capacity and capabilities of the organisation. There are certain elements of SEO that brands can accomplish themselves, but it's always a good idea to have an expert at arm's length to provide guidance and accurate measurement interpretation.

An agency with vast industry knowledge and experience can be invaluable in defining objectives and providing best-practice guidelines in implementation as well as bridging the gap between the business goals, the marketing strategy and the developers jargon. The ideal role of the SEO agency is to ensure that all internal and external digital efforts provide optimal input and alignment with the organic growth strategy.

Also keep in mind that there are also bad ways to attempt doing SEO and that these methods can incur penalties that can get you excluded from the search engine index altogether!

Karen Muller: Yes they can. But agencies offer an environment of fast-paced learning and integrated strategy development, especially agencies with close relationships to Google and those with international partners. Why not take advantage of that?

André Wilkinson: There is a general feeling from brands that they can do SEO by themselves without the need of an expert. While there is a wealth of information and guides around SEO freely available online that can be read up on and implemented by brands themselves, this approach is akin to attempting a realistic oil painting portrait because you have researched and painted the walls in your guest bedroom.

Even with the most tech and internet savvy clients, I have noticed that there is a level of insight that only SEO experts can provide.

Heed this warning though: there are many agencies and people who sell "SEO Service" but are actually snake oil salesmen as they fall into the group of people who think that reading the correct blogs makes them an expert. There are sadly more of these entities out there than there are good, ethical SEO's. This is a big reason as to why the industry has the seedy

reputation it has today.

Maon Seidel: Yes, but it requires a very specific focus and a rather large investment. Should they? The fact of the matter is that SEO consists of a lot of moving parts; a lot of very specialised skills and every area of SEO requires some level of specialisation. Gone are the days where one person can cover all the specified areas.

Allen Jaffe: There are a lot of small technical details that need to be taken into account when doing SEO, and because SEO is so complex, it might be very challenging for brands to look after their own optimisation efforts.

Google's algorithm rewards sites that offer good usability, great content and have external credibility through social signals and other authority sites that naturally link to them. PR also helps. If you have a great brand that does cool things that people love, they'll naturally link to you, talk about you and enjoy the experience on your site. This is Google's goal.

Should brands in SA only cater for Google (which has majority market share in SA), or are there other search engines they should be considering?

Morné Kahts: We have measured increasing growth across all our clients on both Bing and Yahoo within South Africa over the past couple of months. It is always a good idea to go with volume (Google) first, but by the same token it's a good idea not to place all your eggs in one basket. The Google algorithm changes frequently and although best practice SEO may safeguard your rankings, it's still best to diversify your risk by optimising and measuring for all search engines with prominent market share. Yahoo's increase in integration into Apple's mobile products as well as Apple's constant increase in market share is enough to keep me tuned to the numbers.

Karen Muller: Google does lead the way in terms of delivering quality search results so if you optimise for them, the rest will follow. Even though Google does have majority market share in SA, your target audience may not all be from South Africa. It's always prudent to be aware of where your website traffic is coming from and nurture the channels that bring you quality traffic, leads and engagement.

André Wilkinson: While it is true that Google is undeniably the market leader in SA, I believe that brands and SEO's should not focus all their activities on the search engines. Users are the most important link in the product chain regardless of the industry you are in. Without them, you have nothing and your marketing efforts amount to deep money sucking wells.

Ultimately, Google wants to present the best information to users. If users are not responding well to the content presented to them, they will leave and not engage with the brand. This is monitored by Google too. So, ironically, SEO for users and NOT search engines is better for ranking well in search engines.

Maon Seidel: I think there's little point in making a specific effort to target anything other than Google in the South African context. This of course changes when we cross the borders into Africa and beyond, where we need to look at Yahoo and Bing. There are also certain standard SEO procedures that target and comply with all search engines.

The other point to bear in mind is that Google itself now has a vast ecosystem that requires different techniques to ensure your brand is visible. Local listings are important, mobile search is growing exponentially and YouTube (another Google service and the second largest search engine worldwide), is another growing opportunity for brands.

Allen Jaffe: Google is up there with majority share. Bing is gaining traction, but for now it's only Google. If Facebook and Bing merged, we could see some competition for Google, but that's another story. However, most search engines work the same way, so when optimising a website it should be made search-engine friendly, not just Google friendly.

What tips would you give brands to ensure their sites are SEO ready when they're built?

Morné Kahts: Get an SEO expert in from the start. Creating a solid technical foundation is key to getting your site ready for SEO success and if you can successfully implement the basics of on-site SEO right from the specification phase, you

can decrease the cost and time involved in getting your site ranking on the search engine results pages.

Aside from the technical component, involving your SEO agency in planning the content for your new website is equally important.

Content is, and always will, be king!

Karen Muller: Begin with setting out what you want to achieve with your website and how it fits into your business objectives. Then consider what media channels you're utilising and map out how these channels will interact with the website. If you can't answer these questions, you're going to find yourself constantly trying to fix a website instead of optimising it to drive performance.

Get your SEO agency involved as early in the process as possible, as they will be able to flag any issues in the structure of your website before you heavily invest in building it. Your SEO agency will also be able to advise on any latest Google supported code that will give your search results an edge over others, e.g. using Schema.org.

André Wilkinson: There are a number of technical elements which should be accounted for in any build of a site, and these can be researched and implemented rather easily. The one big area that should be focussed on, is the content of your website.

Make sure that you have content, not for the sake of having content, but for users to engage with. Try and understand what questions are being asked in your industry and what topics people are talking about. Then give them this content. Make it worth their while to read and, more importantly, want to share your content. Ignoring the humans you want to sell to is a fatal flaw in any marketing campaign.

And finally, if it feels like you are overdoing it, you probably are: Keep your keyword mentions to a realistic number of repetitions, don't buy links or shares and constantly monitor your analytics software to see how various sections of your site are performing. There is no quick win in SEO. It is an ongoing activity that builds on itself over time.

Maon Seidel: Consider SEO in every step that you're taking. It's advisable to get a reputable SEO company involved from the start, while you're busy building your site and not only after it's live. This way you have a better chance of ranking well from the get-go.

Some other tips include:

- Keep in mind that what's good for visitors to your site is generally good for your SEO. So ensure that your website has a clean and uncluttered design, that the content is engaging and original, and that you have a logical site structure. This is the basis for a successfully optimised site.
- Ensure that Google understands your site; make use of Google Webmaster Tools and Google Analytics to check for errors in reports. Submit sitemaps to Google for the main site, mobile version of the site and videos (if you have any).
- Run your site through an optimisation tool like www.moz.com to pick up further errors in the site build. This will also highlight duplicate content issues on the site, which may not be obvious to users, but are to website crawlers.
- Get social and ensure that your Facebook, Twitter and Google+ accounts are interlinked with your site.
- Finally, backlinks. Ask your suppliers, sister companies or clients to link to your website. Backlinks have a long history with Search Engine Optimisation and are still very important to ensure top organic rankings for websites.

Allen Jaffe: By selecting the right platform/CMS (Content Management System), half the battle is won. Modern day CMS's come with all the SEO bells and whistles, and deliver a SEO-friendly website. The optimisation is the part that determines which pages will rank for which queries and how the site will be rewarded.

Conclusion

As is evident, it's crucial to engage with a reputable SEO expert from the onset if you hope to achieve results with organic search. Organic search however does take time to perfect. For campaigns that require quick results, invest in Paid Search, which will provide you with almost instant rankings, utilising relevant ad copy and measurable ROI which can be continually optimised to achieve the desired results.

ABOUT ANDREA MITCHELL

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