

Questions to Ask Your Prospective Natural Search Agency

Before choosing a firm to manage your search engine optimization, be sure to ask them the following questions:

Do you prefer to start with paid search or natural search?

There are some major differences between Paid Search and Natural Search. A notable difference is that with Paid Search, one can (and should) advertise on a wide variety of key phrases (at least in the hundreds) and track the results of their efforts on a key phrase by key phrase basis. With Natural Search, one should focus on a small set of well trafficked, effective key phrases.

By starting with Paid Search, one can gain explicit data on which key phrases convert into leads and/or sales, and then use this data to target key phrases for a natural SEO campaign.

Unfortunately, most of our industry fails to lead with Paid Search, preferring instead to launch Natural Search efforts first. Why is this? Two potential reasons present themselves. This could be due to simple incompetence. A less charitable interpretation of industry behavior would be that Natural Search is typically FAR more profitable for the search marketing firm. With Paid Search, most of the client's money goes immediately to Google and Yahoo in the form of media buys.

In our view, the only legitimate reason a business should focus on Natural Search before proving out key phrases on Paid Search is that the company is in an industry niche that is non-competitive and has fairly obvious primary key phrases with significant search volume. In virtually every other case, you will be well served by running a Paid Search campaign, at least at the start.

How extensively do you perform key phrase research, and what factors do you consider when evaluating key phrases?

Unlike Paid Search advertising, where one can advertise on thousands or even tens of thousands of key phrases, Natural Search requires focusing on a relatively small number of key phrases. Also, with Paid Search there is no charge unless someone actually clicks on an advertisement. The effort and cost of Natural Search is expended simply to have the website listing shown.



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Ideally, the effectiveness of particular key phrases has been measured via a properly configured and managed Paid Search campaign. This provides both Click Through Rate (CTR) and Conversion Rate (CR) data on a key phrase by key phrase basis.

This data can be then married with various metrics indicating the relative competitiveness of key phrases, so that the most effective key phrases can be chosen.

Even without running a Paid Search campaign, there is considerable research and analysis one can do on the competitiveness and value of prospective key phrases. If your SEO agency does not perform this analysis, you should wonder why.

How do you test and measure results?

Testing and measuring for Natural Search is more difficult than it is for Paid Search, but it can still be performed well. Most agencies simply track rankings on key phrases. Some even talk about vague metrics such as visibility and reach.

This is not good enough, in our opinion. We prefer to talk about tangible things like measurable traffic (visitors) and conversion events (leads, sales, etc.).

SEO efforts must be tied to the specific goals of the website. If a website's purpose is to generate leads, those leads must be able to be tied back to the specific key phrase and search engine. Similarly, if a website's purpose is to generate sales directly, the sales (and their value) must be able to be tied back to the organic listing from which they came. There are a number of tools available that will allow you to tie such transactions to the specific key phrase and search engine using referring URLs.

How do you submit your clients' sites to the search engines?

Many agencies offer search engine submission services. Sometimes these services can be quite expensive, as they promise to "hand submit" you. Here's a little SEO secret: all that is required to submit your site to the search engines is a link from a page on another site that has been indexed by the search engines. And the engines seem to prefer to find you this way, than to receive websites via submission.

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There are also services which promise to “submit your website to thousands of search engines for \$49.95 per month.” Notwithstanding the fact that there are only about four search engines that actually matter and only a dozen that might ever generate traffic for your site, such automated submission services can actually be seen as SEO spam by the search engines and result in your site being de-listed for the search engine’s index.

How much link building do you do?

Link building is extraordinarily important to Google, and fairly important to Yahoo and MSN. Unfortunately, a decade into the Google revolution (which made what other web pages say about you—links—much more important to rankings than what you say about yourself) parts of the search engine marketing industry still focuses on on-page factors to the virtual (or even actual) exclusion of external link building.

Even those agencies that do provide link building services often do so in a minimalist manner. Ensure that your agency is going to engage in material link building efforts, and be prepared to hold their feet to the fire.

Apogee Results puts significant effort into the building of both free and paid links.

Do you perform SEO copywriting?

SEO copywriting is the creation of web page content that is written so that the page will hopefully rank highly in the search engines. If you’ve seen web pages that seem to repeat the same phrase (or similar phrases) over and over again, you’ve probably seen SEO copywriting.

The first problem with SEO copywriting is that content created for search engines rarely performs well with human beings. You can have all the traffic in the world, but if it does not convert in some manner (e.g. to leads or sales), you’re effort is wasted.

The next problem is that each search engine has its own preferred key phrase density level, and is changing it regularly. This is a good deal for the SEO copywriting agency, as it is ensured continual business from its clients as re-writing of the content is always needed, and it can hire inexpensive journalism school grads that couldn’t find another job, and can now churn out copy written to specific key phrase density ratios. It’s not such a good deal for the

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client, as there is an on-going charge for chasing specific, always changing, key phrase densities.

Apogee Results does not believe in SEO copywriting. We suggest that you use your key phrases within the content of the page in a natural manner, and use additional methods to ensure your rankings. While we do offer a small selection of copywriting services, this content is geared towards performance with human beings, not search engines.

Have you ever managed the purchase and/or rental of links?

For competitive key phrases, on-page optimization and free links will often be insufficient to achieve the desired ranking. In such cases, purchased and/or rented links will be needed.

It is critical that your SEO firm be experienced in the purchasing and renting of links, so that you receive economical, properly formatted links that will push your website to the top of the rankings.

Apogee Results has successfully managed paid and rented links for dozens of companies.

How many #1 Google rankings have you obtained key phrases with over 50 million pages in the Google Index?

A basic measure of the competitiveness of a key phrase is the number of Search Engine Results Pages (SERPs) for the key phrase. Many SEO firms will focus on non-competitive key phrases for which even a blind squirrel could achieve a top ranking.

Apogee Results has received dozens of top rankings for key phrases with over 50 million SERPs in Google.

Do you actually optimize my site in the search engines or simply drive traffic to my site?

Certain so-called SEO firms actually build their own websites, and use these to drive traffic to your site. While there is not anything inherently wrong with this approach, you should certainly be aware that this is the actual service being provided, as all "SEO" benefit will go away should you cease your engagement with the firm.



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In addition, an unscrupulous firm can then turn around and sell that traffic, the creation of which you funded, to your closest competitor.

Apogee Results's SEO services are designed to drive traffic directly from the search engines to your site.

Have any of your SEO clients ever been penalized or blacklisted by one of the major search engines?

Certain SEO techniques are high risk (and hopefully, but not always, high reward) and can result in penalties being given by the search engines. In a worst case scenario, the website can actually be removed from the search engine index entirely.

Apogee Results does not engage in risky techniques has never had a SEO client penalized or blacklisted by any search engine. We have, however, been hired to clean up the messes of other SEO firms.

How many W-2 employees do you have? Do you have an office outside your home?

Many so-called search engine marketing firms consist of nothing but a principal (chief salesperson) operating with a cell phone and a home office, reselling a handful of 1099 sub-contractors. As the largest search engine marketing firm in Texas, and one of the largest in the southwest United States, Apogee Results is currently bursting at the seams with over fifty full time employees occupying a 13,000 square foot office.



ABOUT APOGEE RESULTS:

Apogee Results is a leading online marketing agency that develops and manages customized search engine optimization, paid search, and website effectiveness consulting programs for B2B and B2C clients. Apogee Results uses proven techniques, powerful web analytics tools, and a deep expertise in statistical evaluation to generate solid, measurable results at every stage of the search marketing process.

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