SPECIAL REPORT

Agency Perspectives on Search Engine Optimization and Online Ad Networks

Creating and capitalizing on a rich end-user search and advertising experience

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AGENCY PERSPECTIVES ON CREATING A RICH END-USER SEARCH EXPERIENCE

A rich end-user experience has become a hallmark of search marketing. Searchers now receive instant, real-time, personalized and local information. Blended search supports these developments by generating results pages that include not only blue links, but also video, images, news, press releases, customer reviews and real-time social media content.

To achieve good organic rankings and ensure that they are found in all search formats, organizations must be ever-savvy with the creation and optimization of content and digital assets. Those that do so create and capitalize on a rich end-user search experience.

It comes as no surprise that agencies and clients rated content creation as the most effective SEO tactic. Content marketing also sits at the intersection of search and social – two important components in successful inbound marketing programs.

This Special Report looks at SEO tactics and other search engine optimization considerations from the unique and valuable perspective of agencies. Agencies can offer many benefits to client organizations either considering or choosing to outsource their SEO programs.

Special Reports

MarketingSherpa Special Reports provide marketing executives with concise research, insights and actionable advice, derived from unique market segments for guiding strategic and tactical decision making.

External SEO companies have a steady eye on emerging SEO strategies, which is an important consideration as SEO evolves. Reputable SEO companies will also have tools at their disposal to ensure they get results, not to mention repeat business. Many of these tools could be cost-prohibitive for in-house groups, and come with a learning curve to use effectively. One of the most important benefits an agency provides is experience with working within an industry vertical. Through trial and error, agencies have learned which SEO techniques and tactics are most effective, thereby saving time, resources and money.

Highlights of this report include:

- Clients' perceptions on the ability of SEO to produce a return on investment at budget time
- Budget forecasts for clients' SEO program expenditures
- Organic rankings for targeted key terms on client campaigns, including insights into the best methods for improving rankings
- Most effective SEO tactics for achieving a client's marketing objectives, backed with examples from successful campaigns
- Suggested approaches for developing a link building strategy and choosing link partners
- Ad network and format effectiveness, including tips on selecting an ad network

SEO BUDGETS DRIVEN BY ROI PERCEPTIONS

How do clients perceive the business value of search engine optimization? And how does this perception influence spending decisions for this inbound marketing channel?

CLIENT INVESTMENT IN SEO IS DRIVEN BY MEASURABLE ROI

Chart: Client perception of search engine optimization's ability to produce ROI

Q. Which statement best describes how your typical client organization perceives the ability of search engine optimization (SEO) to produce a return on investment (ROI) at budget time?

Statement	Percentage
SEO is producing a measurable ROI. Let's continue to invest in this tactic.	43%
SEO is a promising tactic that will eventually produce ROI. Let's invest but do it conservatively.	43%
SEO is unlikely to produce ROI. Why invest more?	3%
SEO is basically free. Let's keep it that way.	12%

Source: ©2011 MarketingSherpa Search Marketing Benchmark Survey
Methodology: Fielded April 2011, N=1,530

When it comes to convincing clients who control agency budgets for SEO, perception is everything. Fortunately for agencies, their clients' confidence in the business value of SEO is high.

For 43 percent of agencies, their clients perceive ROI from SEO programs as a reality, prompting additional and growing investment in this channel. For an equal percentage of agencies, the opinion of their clients is that search engine marketing is a promising tactic that will eventually produce ROI. Driven by this perception, these organizations are also investing in their search marketing programs, albeit conservatively.

TWO-THIRDS OF AGENCIES EXPECT CLIENTS TO INCREASE SEO BUDGETS UP TO 50%

Chart: Expected change in clients' SEO spending for 2011

Q. At what rate do you expect your typical client organization's expenditures on search engine optimization (SEO) to change in the next 12 months?

Category	Percentage
Increase by more than 50%	7%
Increase by 20% to 50%	28%
Increase by less than 20%	37%
No change	18%
Decrease by less than 20%	1%
Decrease by 20% to 50%	2%
Decrease by more than 50%	1%

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Source: ©2011 MarketingSherpa Search Marketing Benchmark Survey
Methodology: Fielded April 2011, N=1,530

Seventy-two percent of agencies expect their client organizations to increase their SEO expenditures in 2011. And about half 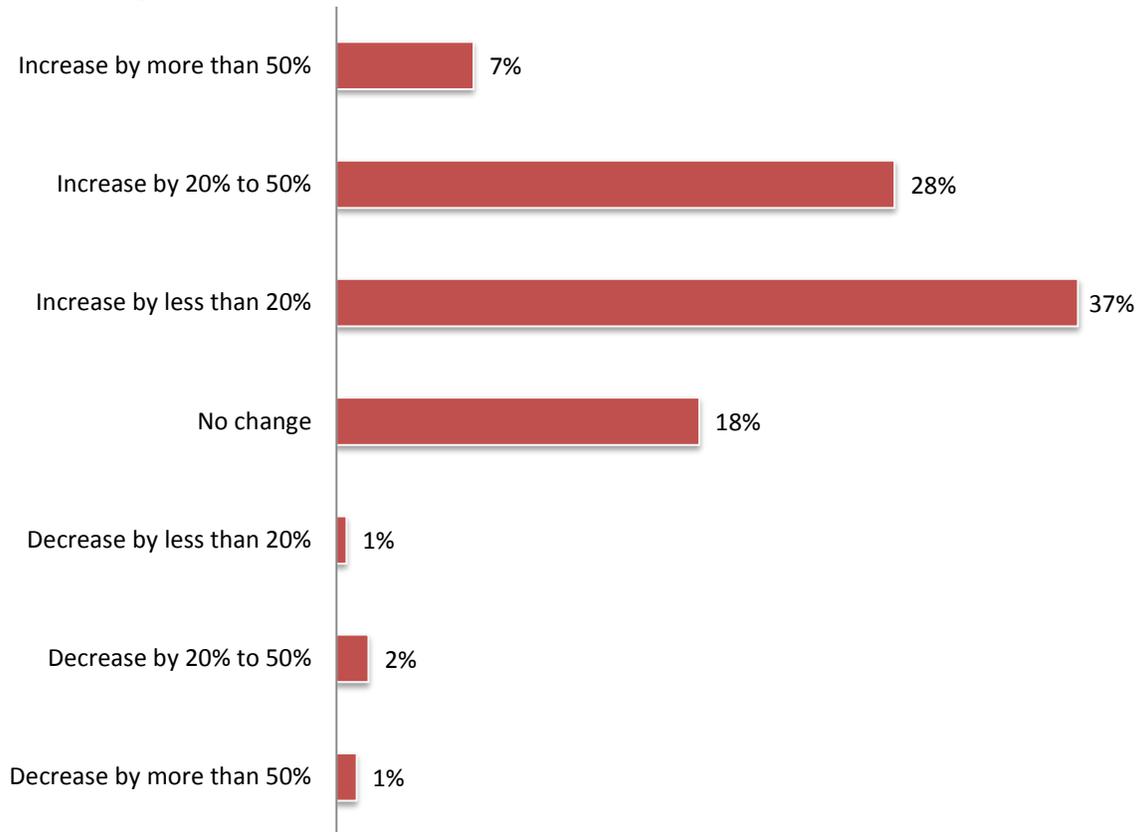of those agencies expect budget increases by at least 20 percent. While an insignificant percentage of agencies expect clients to decrease SEO budgets, 18 percent of agencies expect clients to make no budget changes from last year.

SEO spending by clients of all sizes is increasing as marketers move beyond trial and error to include proven tactics in their marketing planning. The companies leading the way are also integrating SEO initiatives and budgets into brand marketing, customer relationship management and social media.

"The key for clients is to get them to invest at the appropriate level. For low competition engagements, we can often get to our goals with the right title tags and a few other basics. However, in competitive situations, ongoing content creation and other tactics are essential." – Agency insight

Agency insights on their successes with SEO campaigns

Q. If your agency has achieved an extraordinary result for a client organization using SEO, please briefly describe the campaign strategy and tactics.

- For small local businesses with small marketing budgets, amazing results are highly achievable with local link building campaigns that include the map/Yellow Page-type sites. A good 90 percent of the time they will be found locally under the main keyword phrase used by searchers for their services. While other areas of SEO are very effective, we've seen the most amazing results across the board for more clients. It seems there is less competition on the optimization level for this area. Examples: In Google, search on "Dallas Foundation Repair" and Advanced Foundation Repair is in the top results. Search on "Houston Skylights" or "Houston Solar Roof Vents," and Innovativeskylights.com is in the top results. Search for "Ardmore mortgages" and countryhomefinancial.com is in the stop results. Another is "soft window treatments ny ny" and you'll see DFB Sales at the top. All of these clients have done both SEO and Local, so it might be the two combined, but the results have been excellent.

- A client that had used three different SEO companies with little to no results came to us, and within six months we had achieved a Page 1 rank for most of their primary keywords. This resulted in a 75 percent increase in their sales in the first year after optimization. We did this through extensive competitor research and by developing targeted landing pages and creating supporting content.

- Since 1999, our firm has never focused on rankings. Rankings are not what clients really want. Traffic and conversions are, and that is how we measure project success. Despite this, in 2009, as a favor to a long-time client, we attempted to get them a top ranking for a specific security industry term of three words. We warned the client that this was difficult and the results could not be counted on to persist. After about 60 days we were able to achieve this (and unintentionally) for a much more competitive two-word version of the phrase. With no further work, that client is still enjoying the results.

- Our consultancy produces a mind map cataloging every known site, hashtag, discussion thread, forum, trade industry, and vertical directory where qualified prospects in a known target industry actually frequent. We then target publishers via their editorial focus, pushing our own high-value content where we find fits in discussion threads, trade shows, magazines, blogs, etc. The key is that we target the exact buyer types and their industries which matter to our clients. Because we focus on quality communications, content and audience types, we mitigate our need to focus on algorithm changes.

- Clients innately think internally. So we've had clients ask us why they weren't showing up for phrases like "Heating Oil Dealers" and we had to educate them that none of their consumers would be searching for "dealers;" rather, they are looking for "companies." So we start every client project out with an SEO grid. This grid first lists all website audiences and then lists all keyword(s)/keyword phrases this potential audience might search to find a company's products by name, SKU and description, by product benefit , and by consumer need. We saw how important this was when creating a site for a corrugated cardboard box manufacturer. Each audience called the same "box" something different. A home owner might call it a "storage box," a moving company might call it a "moving box," a direct mail company might call it a "dimensional mailer," an e-commerce company may call it a "shipping box," etc. We built the site with content/URLs/browser titles etc. to support what we learned during the SEO grid process.

TACTICS FOR INCREASING ORGANIC RANKINGS

Agencies need to deliver on their promises. This section examines how agencies deliver practical value through SEO services.

ONE QUARTER OF CLIENT ORGANIZATIONS GET PAGE 1, TOP 3, ORGANIC RANKINGS

Chart: Typical client organization's organic ranking on targeted key terms

Q. What is your typical client organization's organic ranking for the majority of their targeted key terms?

Organic Rankings of Client Organization

Source: ©2011 MarketingSherpa Search Marketing Benchmark Survey
Methodology: Fielded April 2011, N=1,530

Achieving a top-3 position in search engine results is no easy feat. It requires an understanding of which SEO tactics perform best and, more importantly, which SEO tactics perform best for a client's unique competitive situation. More than 25 percent of agencies help their clients lay claim to these top spots, with an additional 50 percent landing solid Page 1 rankings.

Typical search engine users will navigate to one of the websites listed on the first search engine results page (SERP) because they perceive high SEO rankings to be a strong indicator of relevance and quality. In turn, website owners benefit from high rankings, because these clicks drive more website traffic.

AGENCY INSIGHTS ON MOST EFFECTIVE TACTICS FOR IMPROVING RANKINGS

Q. In your experience, what have you found to be the single most effective tactic for improving organic search rankings?

- My only business model is to look for UPCOMING products or technologies that are related to my specific niche. These keyword phrases have no competition right now and not much traffic, but they will. You can SEO for these phrases very, very easily. Future keyword phrases for future traffic and profits!
- A keyword-rich domain name or URL along with a strong focus on the title tag (homepage) for the main keyword. This has to be well supported 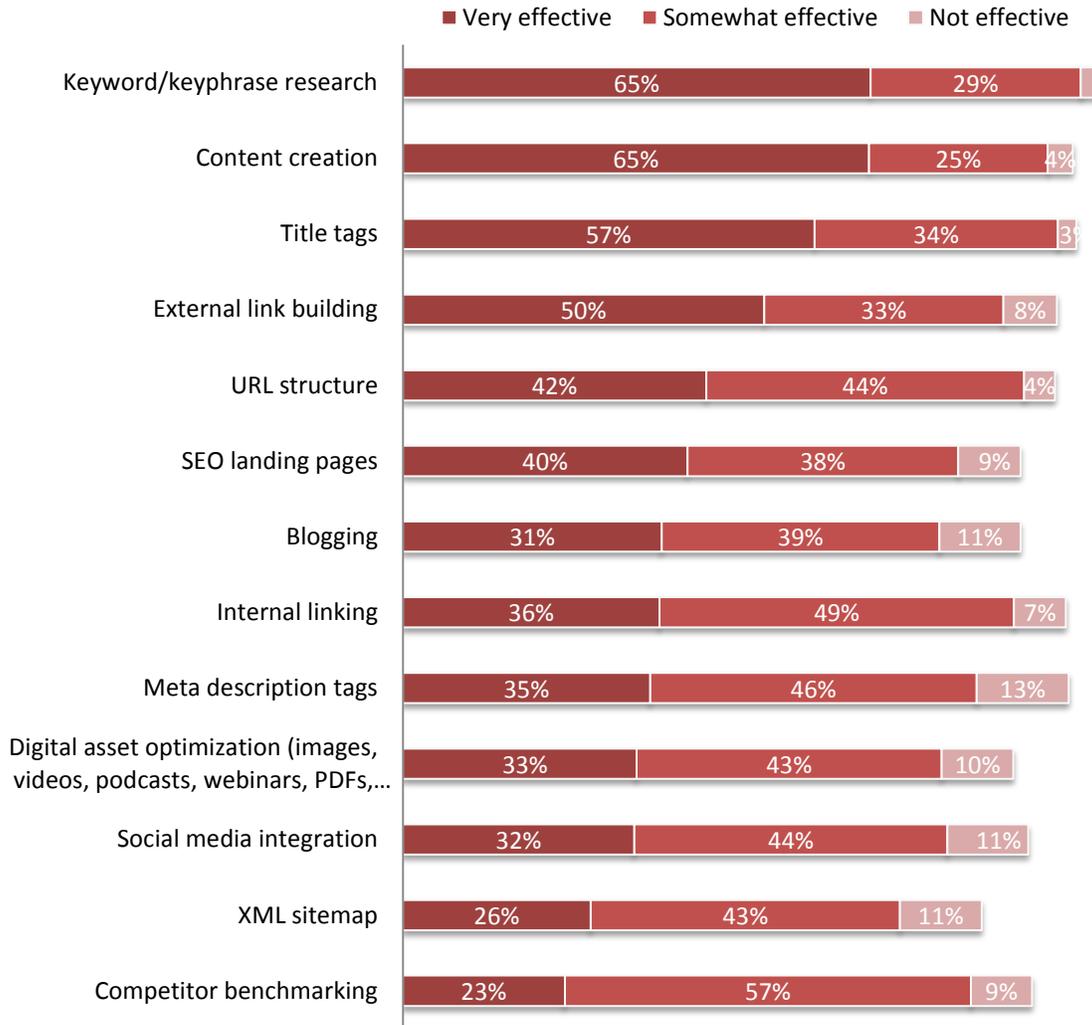by strong backlinks from varied IPs and websites, most of which need to be anchored with the primary keyword. Boosting existing links to ensure that they stay indexed is getting more and more important.
- Most clients who come to us for SEO need assistance with just getting the on-page SEO elements completed with the right keywords and phrases. Once the foundation is set, it's about building relevant and quality inbound links.
- Content is still the key for organic rankings. Spreading unique content across the web provides multiple positions for organic search rankings.
- Continually monitoring the algorithmic changes by Google and Bing, simply interpreting these changes and adjusting the mix if needed. In other words, there is no single tactic that covers everything. It's about understanding the complete mix of tactics.
- Most effective tactic is to create content about the page with keywords embedded in the content. Keywords in the title tag, meta description etc. helps as well.
- Making the search engines dig through your entire site's content and EXCLUDING JavaScripts from loading first gives keyword priority to important assets by not watering it down with non-relevant code.
- Creating a steady stream of original, well-optimized content. The blog is one of the most effective ways to do this.
- Synchronizing the different elements like keyword structuring, meta-tags, content, etc. Most clients/agencies tend to prioritize one over the other to optimize on short-term goals.
- Creating valuable content that people actually want to read (and link to). Keyword research helps, but the quality of the writing is crucial.
- Relevant and qualified keyword phrases integrated throughout properly themed pages with exceptional copy and good calls-to-action.
- Structuring a website around a single theme with all categories related to that theme. Combine this with a good internal link structure and lots of relevant original content.
- High-quality organic one-way links received from industry-specific blog commenting (with no-follow disabled). Blog and article writing and submission to directories and social media avenues.
- Correcting the titles and the headings (h1).
- It is always best to plan SEO strategies before site development, but clients typically think it's something you can do after and often it's much more expensive and not as effective then.
- Writing unique product descriptions for e-commerce sites is critical. It not only helps engines distinguish your site against others using the same boilerplate copy, but also helps your customers distinguish this as well so price is not the only differentiator. Good copy can be the difference in not just ranking, but making the sale.

FOUR SEO TACTICS RATED "VERY EFFECTIVE" BY OVER HALF OF ALL AGENCIES

Chart: Level of effectiveness of SEO tactics, rated by agencies

Q. Please indicate the LEVEL OF EFFECTIVENESS (in terms of achieving marketing objectives) for each of the SEO tactics a typical client organization is using.

■ Very effective ■ Somewhat effective ■ Not effective

Tactic	Very effective	Somewhat effective	Not effective
Keyword/keyphrase research	65%	29%	
Content creation	65%	25%	4%
Title tags	57%	34%	3%
External link building	50%	33%	8%
URL structure	42%	44%	4%
SEO landing pages	40%	38%	9%
Blogging	31%	39%	11%
Internal linking	36%	49%	7%
Meta description tags	35%	46%	13%
Digital asset optimization (images, videos, podcasts, webinars, PDFs,…	33%	43%	10%
Social media integration	32%	44%	11%
XML sitemap	26%	43%	11%
Competitor benchmarking	23%	57%	9%

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Source: ©2011 MarketingSherpa Search Marketing Benchmark Survey
Methodology: Fielded April 2011, N=1,530

A majority of agencies indicate that keyword research and content creation are the two most effective SEO tactics for achieving marketing objectives. Keyword research is fundamental to the success of any SEO campaign. This tactic drives content creation, because it answers the questions of what the target audience wants to find, and how they phrase their queries. Good content is also important for link building and can be leveraged for social media purposes.

> *"Optimize the client's point of difference by creating relevant digital (and real-time) content for competitive search phrases."* – Agency insight

AGENCIES AND CLIENTS AGREE ON TOP 3 MOST EFFECTIVE SEO TACTICS

Chart: "Very effective" SEO tactics, rated by agencies and clients

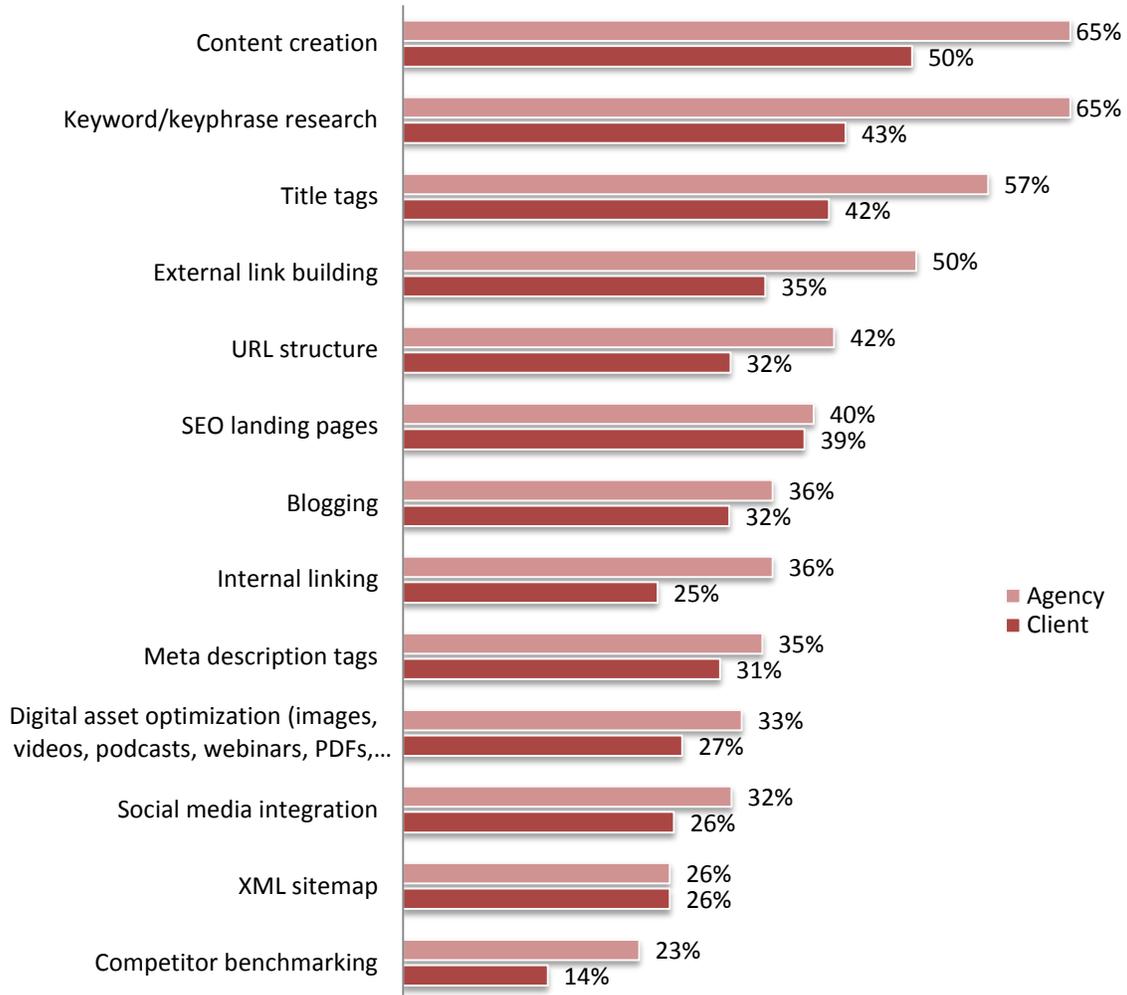| Tactic	Agency	Client
Content creation	65%	50%
Keyword/keyphrase research	65%	43%
Title tags	57%	42%
External link building	50%	35%
URL structure	42%	32%
SEO landing pages	40%	39%
Blogging	36%	32%
Internal linking	36%	25%
Meta description tags	35%	31%
Digital asset optimization (images, videos, podcasts, webinars, PDFs,…	33%	27%
Social media integration	32%	26%
XML sitemap	26%	26%
Competitor benchmarking	23%	14%

Source: ©2011 MarketingSherpa Search Marketing Benchmark Survey
Methodology: Fielded April 2011, N=1,530

Agencies and marketers agree on the most effective SEO tactics, but to varying degrees. For example, the percentage of agencies that deem external link building a very effective SEO tactic is 43 percent greater than the percentage of client marketers stating the same. These gaps speak to the deep SEO experience agencies gain from working on multiple SEO campaigns, for multiple companies and verticals. In other words, agencies have more opportunities to see which SEO tactics work best for achieving their clients' marketing objectives.

"Link building is still the only thing that that really matters. You can have everything else perfect but no link building and you will fail. Or you can have everything else wrong and good link building and you will succeed. This is unfortunate, but still true." – Agency insight

FIVE TACTICS FOR GUIDING LINK STRATEGY AND SELECTING LINK PARTNERS

SUMMARY

Marketers with good SEO strategies often pay attention to links. They create great content to attract links. They pitch bloggers to score links and write-ups. They avoid shady strategies such as link buying.

Forging a link-sharing partnership with a website is a lesser-used tactic, but is a tactic that can improve natural search performance. Rather than hoping to attract a single, one-time link, companies can partner to regularly point to each other's websites on an ongoing basis. Such partnerships set guidelines for the links' target pages, anchor text, context and other attributes.

Partnerships can be forged with multiple websites, but your team must find relevant partners and follow a set of guidelines. Otherwise you risk hurting, rather than helping, your natural search performance.

Tactic #1. Thoroughly evaluate potential partners

Your team may want to improve natural search performance through a partnership, but this goal must be secondary to improving your audience's experience. The "golden rule" is that your audience's needs remain the highest priority.

Look for partners that have a natural fit with your company's mission. The content to which you link must provide your audience with true, relevant value; otherwise you'll risk damaging your brand. Furthermore, if your partner's audience is not interested in your content, then the natural search benefit of any links will be hamstrung by low performance.

Once you've created a short list of potential partners, audit their websites by looking for:

- Clean organization

Make sure the company has a website with which you'd be confident to share links. View the website from a user's perspective and perform tasks your audience would want to accomplish. The tasks should be very easy to complete.

Be wary of:

- Broken links
- Broken images
- Confusing navigation
- Obnoxious advertising
- Offensive user-generated content

Have your team's SEO expert evaluate the site and look for red flags such as:

- Excessive linking
- Keyword "stuffing"
- Duplicate content
- Poor structure

- Reputation

Conduct searches on the partner's brand and read the results, making sure most media mentions and online comments are positive.

- Link analysis

Use tools such as Yahoo! Site Explorer to see who is linking to the site in question. You want to see links from prominent, trusted organizations. An abundance of links from "spammy" sites that lack relevant or trustworthy content should raise concern.

Also, check the potential partner's outbound links and whether those sites' content is relevant to your audience.

Tactic #2. Maintain control and veto power

Partnerships can be loose, with each company linking to each other's website at will, and tweaking after the fact. However, it's wiser to have a more controlled approach to better focus on results.

Establish control over these areas:

- Anchor text

The hyperlinked words in a text link are known to influence a target page's relevance in search engines. If your team is trying to associate a certain page with a specific keyword, you'll want to be able to ask your partner to use that keyword in the link's anchor text.

- Structure

Links from partners should not be marked "nofollow" in HTML code, as this will void any SEO value the link could provide for your site. Also, text-based links are preferable to image-based links because of the ability they provide to adjust anchor text.

- Context

You do not want your partner to add a link to your site from a page hosting many other links. The PageRank of that page will be split among all of those links, so each link (including the one back to your site) is only going to pass along a small amount of PageRank. You'll likely also want to test linking from different parts of their site.

- Target page

You will also want to know – and have some control over – pages your partner chooses for links. For example, you may want to promote specific content. It's not necessarily the most relevant to link back to a homepage. If you're trying to provide your users with relevant information on one topic, you want the partner to include a link that specifically speaks to that one page on your site.

- Veto power

Regardless of how a partnership is organized, your team should reserve the right to ask for a link to be removed from the partner's website, if necessary. You can include this in your agreement and update your website's linking policy if applicable.

Tactic #3. Have an in-house expert

Even if your team uses an agency or vendor to guide your SEO program, you should have an SEO expert on hand to oversee link-exchange partnerships. The expert should be involved from the first step in the process. After a partnership is established, your team will want someone who can:

- Evaluate steps taken by your partner
- Make suggestions to maximize a link's value
- Keep the program on an even pace

The last consideration is especially important. Suddenly adding dozens of inbound links to your website is likely to have an adverse impact on your team's natural search performance. Your team's expert should ensure that links are added in a way that benefits both sites' audiences, and avoids appearing to be spam.

Tactic #4. Forge ongoing and open partnerships

These partnerships are not quick, one-off relationships where each team is pushing for as many links as possible in short time span.

Teams should start small, perhaps linking to each other's sites from two or three highly relevant areas, and monitoring traffic and search ranking on the related pages for a month.

- Keep communication lines open

The gradual nature of these relationships may cause communications to go stale. You'll want to maintain a regular, open dialogue with your partner. This way, if a link needs to be removed or tweaked it will not seem like a demand from a distant business contact.

To keep communications fresh, your teams can share traffic, ranking and other performance metrics around your links. Also, regularly call your partner's attention to any new content on your website to which you'd like them to consider linking.

Tactic #5. Monitor results and adjust

You are unlikely to see a major improvement in your overall natural search performance through a single partnership. Typically, you'll see increased visibility on a particular keyword or a particular webpage the partnership has focused on.

Give your partnership approximately three months before making a solid evaluation. Examine your:

- Website analytics for improved traffic to targeted pages
- Referring domains for a lift in visits from people using search engines and your partner's website
- Site's natural search performance for keywords you've targeted
- Customer feedback about the partnership (remembering your site exists to serve your audience)
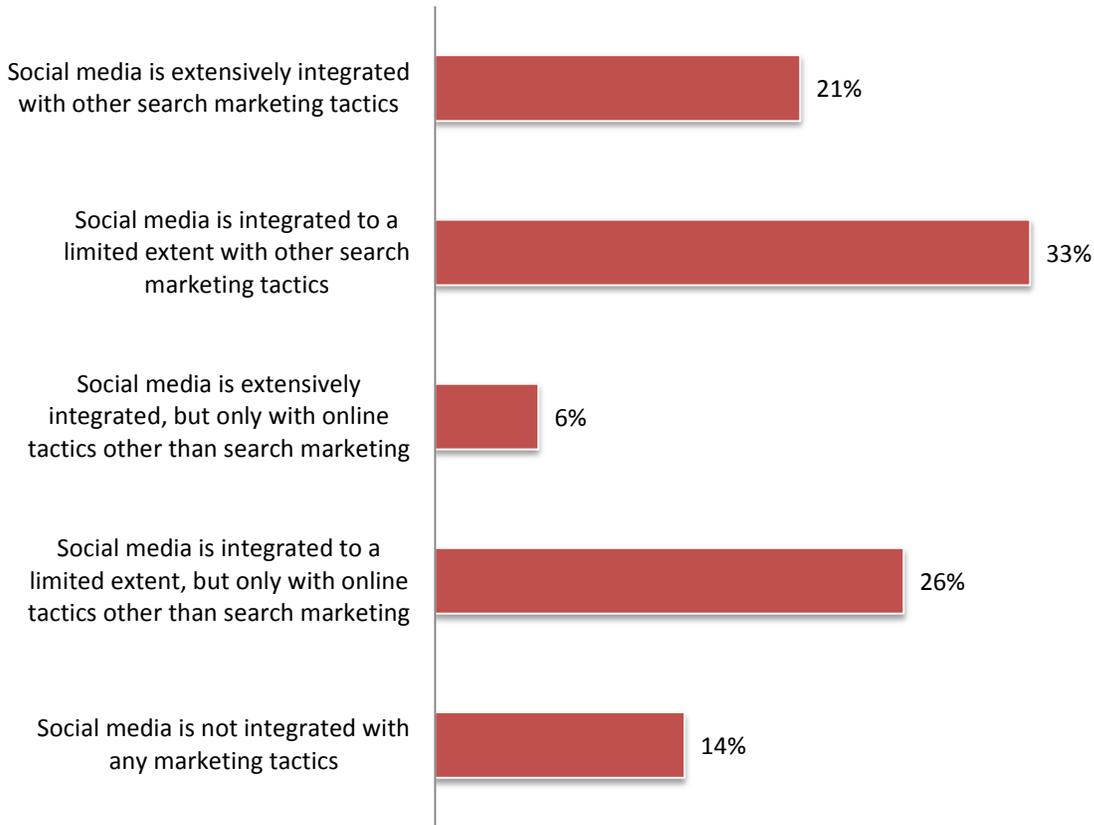
HOW CLIENTS INTEGRATE SEO AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Are clients integrating social media with their SEO programs and other marketing campaigns? To what degree? In this section, agencies weigh in with their observations and insights on these questions.

SOCIAL MEDIA IS COMPONENT OF SEARCH MARKETING MIX FOR OVER 50% OF CLIENTS

Chart: Extent of social media integration by clients

Q. To what extent does your typical client organization integrate social media tactics into the search marketing mix?

Social media is extensively integrated with other search marketing tactics — 21%

Social media is integrated to a limited extent with other search marketing tactics — 33%

Social media is extensively integrated, but only with online tactics other than search marketing — 6%

Social media is integrated to a limited extent, but only with online tactics other than search marketing — 26%

Social media is not integrated with any marketing tactics — 14%

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Source: ©2011 MarketingSherpa Search Marketing Benchmark Survey
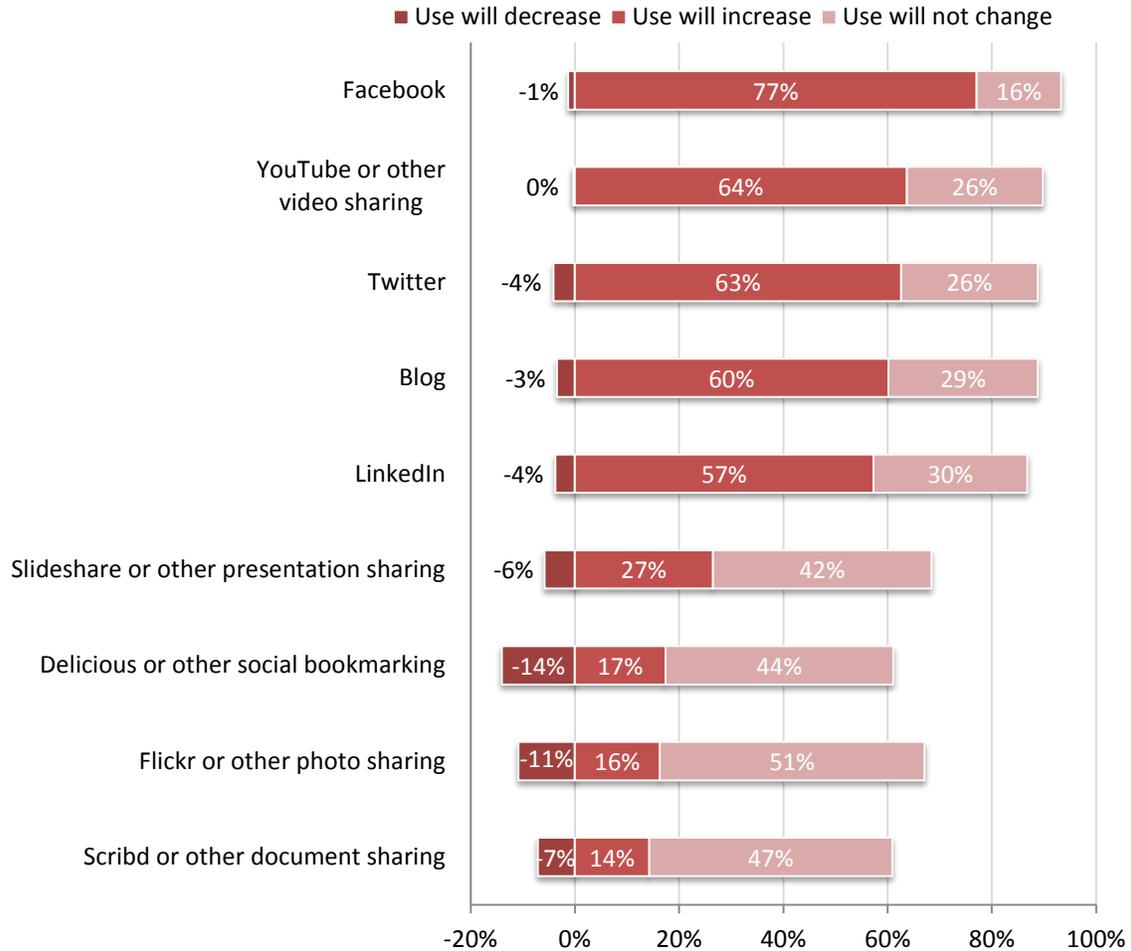Methodology: Fielded April 2011, N=1,530

The benefits of integrating social media with search are vast, and go beyond the SEO spectrum. Social media can improve an organization's product awareness and brand reputation. It can enhance customer service initiatives and reduce customer acquisition costs. Social media can also influence lead generation activities and contribute to sales revenues.

The majority of client organizations already reap the benefits of search and social media integration to some extent. However, choosing to not integrate social media into search campaigns, let alone any marketing campaigns, is a missed opportunity for 14 percent of clients.

CLIENTS EXPECTED TO INCREASE USAGE OF FACEBOOK, YOUTUBE, TWITTER

Chart: Expected usage levels of social media platforms by clients

Q. Based on the impact the following social media platforms have had on a typical client's search marketing campaigns in the last 12 months, how will the use of these platforms change in the next 12 months?

■ Use will decrease ■ Use will increase ■ Use will not change

Platform	Use will decrease	Use will increase	Use will not change
Facebook	-1%	77%	16%
YouTube or other video sharing	0%	64%	26%
Twitter	-4%	63%	26%
Blog	-3%	60%	29%
LinkedIn	-4%	57%	30%
Slideshare or other presentation sharing	-6%	27%	42%
Delicious or other social bookmarking	-14%	17%	44%
Flickr or other photo sharing	-11%	16%	51%
Scribd or other document sharing	-7%	14%	47%

(x-axis: -20%, 0%, 20%, 40%, 60%, 80%, 100%)

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Source: ©2011 MarketingSherpa Search Marketing Benchmark Survey
Methodology: Fielded April 2011, N=1,530

Social media integration may be slow for many clients. Nevertheless, their results with the tactic over the last year are expected to drive an increase in their participation across all social media platforms. Most agencies anticipate that their clients will be more active on highly popular social platforms like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. Only a small percentage of agencies think it's likely that clients will decrease involvement on social platforms where they are currently active.

"Multi-party blogging for technically-oriented clients helped foster the client's brand benefit of thought leadership and provided strong lift to the website's traffic, especially from new, highly engaged visitors." – Agency insight
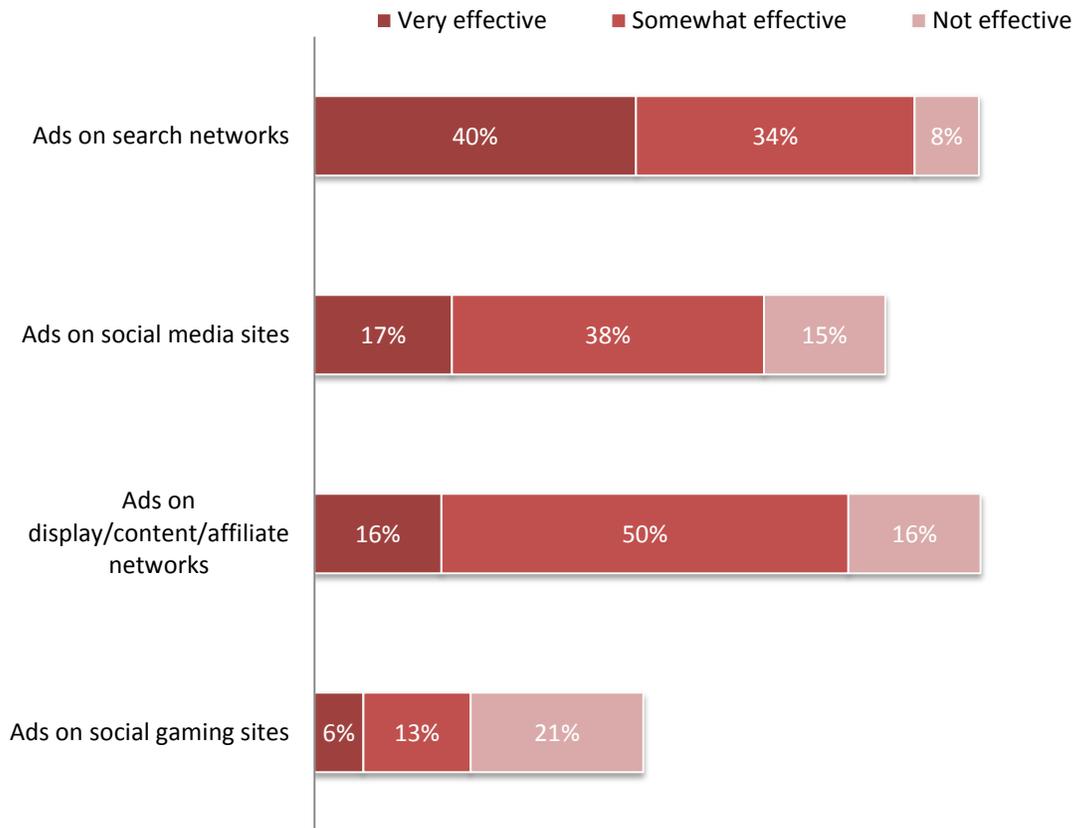
AD NETWORK AND FORMAT EFFECTIVENESS

Today, a variety of ad networks and ad formats exist which give users more useful ads, and provide clients with better results. But which ad networks and formats do agencies actually consider most effective?

ADS ON SEARCH NETWORKS VOTED MOST EFFECTIVE BY AGENCIES

Chart: Level of effectiveness by advertising network, as rated by agencies

Q. Please indicate the LEVEL OF EFFECTIVENESS (in terms of achieving objectives) for each of the advertising networks a typical client organization is using.

■ Very effective   ■ Somewhat effective   ■ Not effective

Network	Very effective	Somewhat effective	Not effective
Ads on search networks	40%	34%	8%
Ads on social media sites	17%	38%	15%
Ads on display/content/affiliate networks	16%	50%	16%
Ads on social gaming sites	6%	13%	21%

Source: ©2011 MarketingSherpa Search Marketing Benchmark Survey
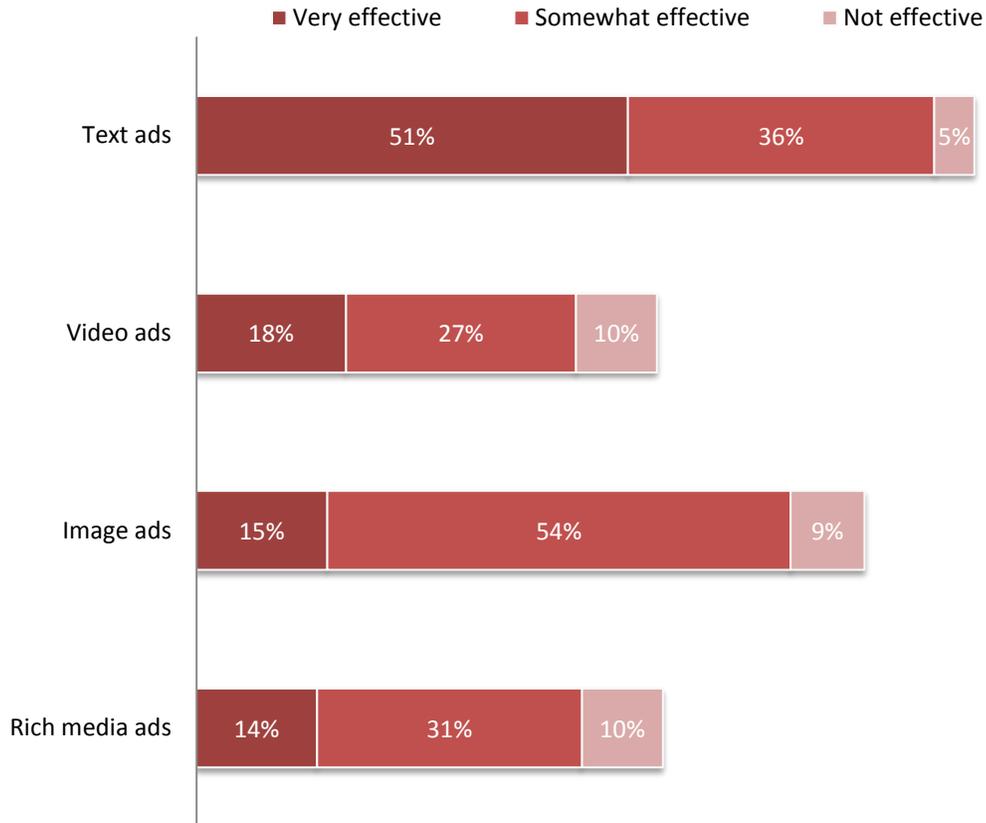Methodology: Fielded April 2011, N=1,530

Exposure across various online advertising networks can increase a client's return on investment. More than twice as many agencies state that ads on search networks are very effective, when compared to ads on other networks. The brand impact of ad network use, especially ads on search networks, has proven to:

- Drive brand lift more when using branded terms than generic terms
- Increase purchase intent and likelihood of recommendation
- Counter positive attitudes about competitor brands

DESPITE CHOICE IN AD FORMATS, TEXT ADS STILL REIGN SUPREME

Chart: Level of effectiveness per ad format, as rated by agencies

Q. Please indicate the LEVEL OF EFFECTIVENESS (in terms of achieving marketing objectives) of each of these ad formats a typical client organization is using.

■ Very effective ■ Somewhat effective ■ Not effective

Ad format	Very effective	Somewhat effective	Not effective
Text ads	51%	36%	5%
Video ads	18%	27%	10%
Image ads	15%	54%	9%
Rich media ads	14%	31%	10%

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Source: ©2011 MarketingSherpa Search Marketing Benchmark Survey
Methodology: Fielded April 2011, N=1,530

The majority of agencies surveyed favor text ads as the most effective format for achieving a client's marketing objectives. Text ads offer a number of advantages, as the format is readily offered by advertisers and can be configured to blend in with site content. The downside of text ads is that these look bland and generic compared to some of their more elaborate counterparts.

To this point, 54 percent of agencies consider image ads to be somewhat effective in achieving a client's marketing objectives. Image ads are visually attractive, and usually larger and easier to see. Because fewer can be displayed on a Web page, a client benefits from the reduced level of competition in a visual field. On the other hand, visitors may be "blind" to image ads, having become conditioned to ignore banners.

A smaller percentage of agencies find video and rich media ads effective, likely explained by how these are still growing in usage. Because these ads are more eye-catching compared to other formats, they can help a website or business stand out from the competition. Video ads also hold the potential to go viral, which can help clients increase the reach and scope of their advertising without additional expense or work.

FIVE TACTICS FOR CHOOSING THE RIGHT AD NETWORK

SUMMARY

Marketers have more online display ad networks to choose from than ever. But with many of those networks using the same online inventory, you may be tempted to think they're all the same. Actually, they're not.

This continued expansion gives marketers more flexibility when choosing networks, and it is driving more networks to differentiate themselves in other areas such as:

- Customer service
- Technology
- Targeting
- Reporting

Tactic #1. Question networks thoroughly

Often, when you're on the phone with salespeople, they will say their network features "premium" inventory, your ads will never be paired with "offensive" content, and you will receive monthly reports on your campaign's performance.

You have to dig down to find out exactly what these claims mean. "Premium" and "offensive" are relative terms, and reports vary in usefulness.

Questions to ask:

- How does your back-end technology work?

You should have a thorough understanding of how the network's operators match your ads to relevant content and how the network categorizes content.

- What types of targeting do you deploy?

One key differentiator is the level of targeting the networks offer. Ask the network operators how their targeting works and whether it's supplied by a third party (more on this below).

- What exactly do the reports look like?

Ask for sample reports so you can understand the level of campaign insight you'll receive. Some networks have surprisingly sparse reports.

Tactic #2. Understand targeting and its costs

Some networks differentiate themselves by enabling marketers to target ads based on demographic, geographic and/or behavioral user information. The networks typically charge a premium for this service.

If you're interested in targeting, find out exactly how the network targets audiences. For example, if a network offers the ability to target "soccer moms," find out exactly what traits qualify someone as a member of that group.

Beware of:

- Poor targeting

You may be surprised to find that someone who visited a parenting forum and a sports news website once in the last six months qualifies as a "soccer mom," which is obviously insufficient data on which to base a profile.

- Old data

Targeting may be based on data collected as far back as 18 months.

- Small audiences

The size of your audience will decrease as you add additional layers of targeting. Make sure you're not segmenting your audience into the single digits.

- Overpricing

Targeted ads typically cost more than broad-reach ads, so make sure you're getting additional value and better performance for your money.

If the network uses a third party to handle its targeting (which is becoming increasingly common), contact the vendor and ask them about their processes.

Tactic #3. Look for strong reports

The strength of a network's reports is a key differentiating factor. Networks increasingly offer granular reports on where ads ran and how they performed.

- The most common type of report is a list of five to 10 websites that contributed the highest level of ad impressions in a given month. Advertisers can make assumptions about the audiences they're reaching based on the sites' content and user demographics.
- Stronger reports offer more information on people who clicked ads, such as which sites they recently visited and their presumed demographics.
- On the other hand, some networks offer much less. Some networks have hardly any reporting. Some have none at all, at least none they can show to us.

Tactic #4. Ask for case studies and check references

Some networks have been around for years and have established reputations. Some are better known for customer service. Others are better known for premium targeting technology.

Ask your colleagues about their experiences with ad networks, and ask any networks you're considering for references and case studies. When you call references, ask for their overall impressions of the network's performance, their favorite aspects of the network, their least favorite aspects, and any other specifics you find relevant.

In case studies, look for examples of how the network helped optimize a campaign over time and boosted its performance from average to stellar.

Tactic #5. Run a test campaign

Before diving into a network with a full budget, run a smaller test. This will prevent major headaches and lost money while your team learns in a controlled environment. Then, you can expand upon a solid foundation.

Also, be sure to not target too narrowly in your initial campaign. And be sure to be patient and test several networks. Finding the right fit for your team's media strategy is certainly worth the time.

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MarketingSherpa LLC is a research firm publishing Case Studies, benchmark data, and how-to information read by hundreds of thousands of advertising, marketing and PR professionals every week.

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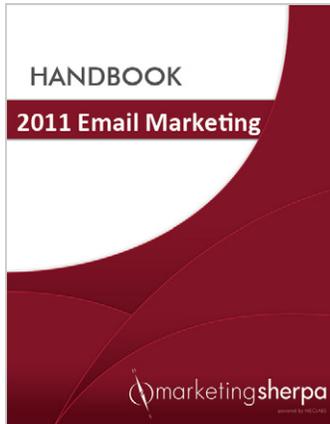*• Email Summit 2012*
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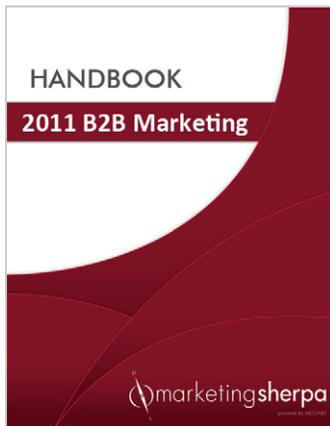Service@MarketingSherpa.com
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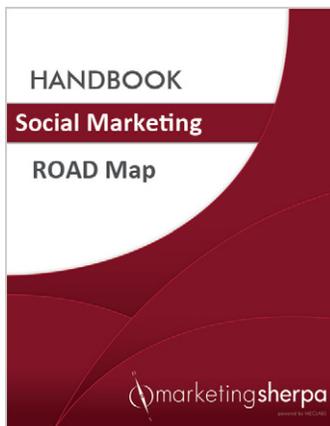
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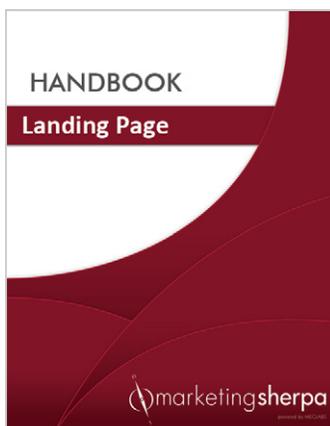
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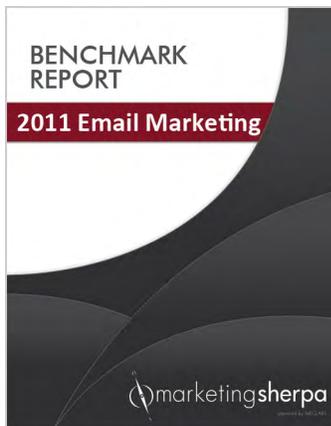
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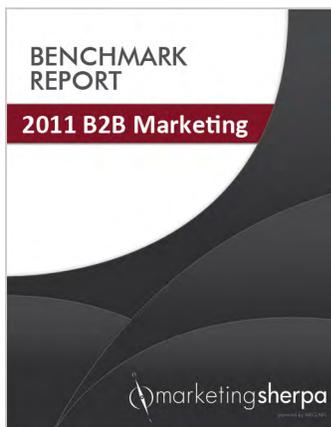
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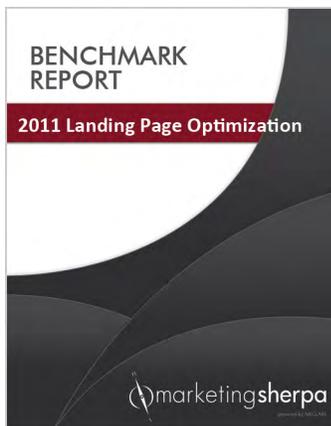# Practical Research and Benchmarks From MarketingSherpa

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