

Mastering the Art of Online Marketing

The Met Store draws increased shopper traffic with search-engine optimization tool

BY M.V. GREENE

Your good name goes only so far in the world of Internet commerce, even when you're a boutique retailer for a renowned not-for-profit institution. Competing against well-funded mass retailers means you have to fight through the clutter of online commerce and drive

too have efforts by retailers of all sizes and stripes to refine marketing approaches that attract buyers.

In the fall of 2004, the museum accelerated its e-commerce efforts by instituting search-engine marketing, a concept that markets a website through heavily used search engines. Online stores use search-engine marketing to align the site's architecture and improve its rank for hits through "natural" search. This optimization of a site typically is coupled with the use of paid listings.

Janice Yablonski, manager of e-commerce at the Met, calls the deployment of a search-engine marketing approach "a wonderful thing for us." As a not-for-profit, the museum doesn't have access to the same level of funding for

marketing and analytics that many mass retailers enjoy. Online profits from the Met Store always are ticketed to support and serve the museum, its collections, exhibitions and educational programs.

"We like this kind of program," Yablonski says. "It brings our content and our name right to the forefront of what people are looking for when they're looking for museum products." The Met long has had an understanding of the importance of the online experience for its visitors, supporters and benefactors. It began selling museum memberships and

merchandise at metmuseum.org in 1996, and a major redesign in 2000 further improved its online offerings.

"In the way that a visitor comes to the museum and has that experience of being here and seeing things that inspire or delight them, we want the same experience when you come to the museum's website," Yablonski says.

Like many tourism-dependent New York institutions, the Met has some 700,000 fewer annual visitors today than prior to Sept. 11, 2001, increasing the necessity for a vibrant merchandising operation. The museum's operating strategy for merchandising, which includes online sales for the Met Store, produced a 10 percent growth in fiscal year 2004.

Yablonski says cross-channel marketing is key to the museum's merchandising efforts. "We are a specialized boutique gift store," she says. "If you are unable to walk into a Met Store in the 20 locations across America, the website is your next logical place to find many of these offerings. So we do try to work with retail in that way."

Top revenue generator

Search-engine marketing is proving to be the key method for retailers to reach more customers on the web. Mark May, an analyst for New York investment banker Kaufman Brothers, notes that retailers rushed headlong into search-engine marketing in 2003 and 2004 — so much so, in fact,

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SEARCH-ENGINE MARKETING

increases search-engine friendliness through the natural search process

manages paid search-engine campaigns

assesses results through tracking software

Photo by Brooks Walker

prospective buyers to your URL.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City — "where the art of the past is cared for, studied and displayed" — is one of those retailers. The 135-year-old museum attracts more than 4.7 million visitors annually and seeks to extend the experience of guests through the sale of products such as fine jewelry, framed prints and books at 20 retail outlets across the country.

The museum's Met Store also offers more than 2,000 products on its website. As the online experience continues to mature, so

that retailing has supplanted travel as the top revenue generator.

According to May, surveys show that the online operations of traditional retailers are beginning to take Internet market share away from web-only retailers. "One of the first things a company does when they launch a website or



RETAILING ON TOP
Retailing has supplanted travel as the top-spending segment for search-engine marketing

decide to put resources behind their website is to start to use search engines to direct traffic to their site," he says.

Search is tied to keywords, and search-engine marketing works the same way. When a user searches via a particular keyword tied to product offerings at the museum, the results page include the museum's website or those particular products. Lacking the staff resources to institute its own search-engine marketing program, the Met Store outsourced the function.

"It is important for us to be frugal and to be careful that the investments we make in the website are not merely for bells and whistles and experience, but that they're really functional," Yablonski says. "The return is for the museum."

The museum selected **MoreVisibility**, a search-engine marketing and optimization firm in Boca Raton, Fla., to increase traffic to its site and conjure up new prospects. **MoreVisibility** president **Andrew Wetzler** says search-engine marketing optimizes the client's website to increase search-engine friendliness through the natural search process, manages paid search-engine campaigns and assesses results through tracking software.

Aligning the site for natural search is vital, Wetzler says, because websites "are architected in fashions that make it difficult for search-engines to find content on websites that will drive where you show up in the search results. You need to do particular things in terms of how a website is architected to create the likelihood of getting natural results in Google" or other search-engines.

Search engines charge sites for the users they forward in one of three ways: cost per click; cost per action, where the search engine gets paid for advertising if the user purchases something at the advertiser's site; and cost per lead, where payment is based on referrals.

eMarketer.com, a New York-based Internet researcher, forecasts that paid search will continue to dominate online advertising in 2005 and predicts a spending growth rate of 21 percent for online advertising. Paid search makes up about 35 percent of this spending.

Battle intensifies

Wetzler says the battle for top

search-engine listings has become more intense as more companies understand the importance of capturing top positions on search-engine pages. "Search-related marketing is critical for the online store in much the same way that foot traffic is critical for the store that's in a physical location."

One technology that has fueled search is dynamically generated pages — web pages that "don't really exist until the searcher looks for something," Wetzler says. "If you are looking for a pair of shoes in a certain size in a certain color by a certain manufacturer, they don't have a page sitting there with all of that. They create the page on the fly. It's all done through software that's based on all the different things the person is looking for."

Since the search engine seeks a page that doesn't exist, search-engine optimization allows the search engine's spider to be able to find the appropriate content while not harming the user experience at the same time.

These techniques have put the museum's e-commerce offerings in more competitive territory, Yablonski says. "It's really helped us in an area where it's very difficult to prospect, and it's very difficult to bring new customers online if you're not placing television advertisements, or if you're doing limited broad market media. That's not the kind of advertising we can do." **STORES**

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