

USING SOCIAL NETWORKS AND SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION (SEO) AS AN EFFECTIVE MEANS FOR IMPROVING ONLINE COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: Thanks to online communication, news and content production have increased: we consume news much faster than before, but they have also become more social and connected at interpersonal level. In this context, social media and Search Engine Optimization (SEO) are incredible online communication opportunities that should not be ignored. Through share buttons in social media, comment and reply sections on websites, blogs and forums, users can influence website rankings and thus online communication. This paper is aimed at analyzing how social media and SEO can be used in order to make online communication more efficient, through tools such as: generating new content, treating social media sites like communities for the purpose of link building and well performing keywords.

Keywords: online communication, search engine optimization (SEO), social media, social networks, keywords

1. THE ANATOMY OF GOOGLE: HOW ONLINE PROMOTION AND COMMUNICATION WORK

Searching the Internet has become part of the human decision making process. Whether you want to buy something, go somewhere or need to know more about a topic, the search engines are closer to you than the shops, travel agencies or libraries. The statistics about how many people search the Internet are impressive. Search engines are continuously improving, making sure that everybody gets a quality and relevant answer to their question.

The anatomy of a search page is very simple: whenever an internaut types a word in the Google search box, a page with a list of search results will appear. The organic search results (unpaid listings) are placed in the center section. Their order is based on Google's search algorithms. The ranking is determined algorithmically. In the upper section, above the natural search results, the paid search (sponsored listings, SEM, Google Adwords, Search Marketing) is displayed. These are listings that marketers can chose to bid on in order to show their advertisement to users who are looking for particular search queries. The ads running on Google can also be eligible to run on Google's search partner network, such as CNN, AOL, ASK. Google has relationships with its partner websites, which allows him to indicate ads to them, meaning that the message could get additional reach to potential customers (Digital Marketing Course, 2017).

The Google search ads only run on a Cost Per Click (CPC) basis. These ads are only purchased through an auction. Every time a search query is entered, Google runs an auction to

determine the ad that will show on the search results page and the order in which these ads will show. The ad campaign that wins the auction will show in the first available advertising spot on Google Search or Search partners (Digital Marketing Course, 2017). The search results are not only based on the price the marketers are willing to pay, but also on the market value of the search query (Nassim Kebbani, 2010: 81). The Ad Rank on search is evaluated through a simple algorithm, by multiplying the quality score with the maximal Cost per Click. The quality score, with a ranking from 1 to 10 is an approximation of how Google expects a keyword to perform and it is influenced by the Click-through rate or CTR, by the relevancy and by the landing page.

The CTR is the most important factor contributing to the Quality Score, because it indicates whether or not the users find the ad relevant enough to click it. CTR also contributes to the keyword quality score, which can affect the costs and the ad position (Digital Marketing Course, 2017). The historical CTR of a keyword and the match of the ad on the google domain is a key contributor to the quality score. The relevancy is measured by Google, which analyses how valuable the keywords typed in by the user are to the query and the degree to which they are related to the advertiser's ad copy. Google also uses the location of the users to determine if the keywords are relevant (Isabelle Canivet-Bourgau, 2014: 378, 598).

When you click on an ad, you get redirected to a landing page. Its purpose is a strategic one, as it has to provide the user with the information they were searching for and to build a relationship with them. Google analyses the quality of the landing page, its content and the loading time and generates a quality score. The landing page quality is used to police offenders, such as fishing sites of the landing pages guidelines. The score is based on the usefulness and the relevance of the information, ease of navigation, page loading times, number of links (Isabelle Canivet-Bourgau, 2015: 147-148).

The quality score influences: the eligibility (determines whether an ad is eligible to enter the auction for a query), the position (determines the relative position of an ad in relation to other ads on that result page), the price (the price the advertiser needs to bid to maintain a given position) and the top slot (only high quality ads are eligible to appear above the natural search results) (Digital Marketing Course, 2017).

The landing page quality and the quality score can be improved by making sure that the website has relevant, original, up to date content, that it is interactive (it should be easy for the user to contact the editor, the forms have to be easy to use, the messages sent by the users should be treated immediately), easy to navigate on (the structure of the website should be easy to understand for the user, a search box should be integrated on the website, the pages should load in less than 3 seconds, the hyperlinks should work and be efficient) and with an attractive graphic design (professional graphic quality, design adapted to the customers, all pages should have the same design, the design should be lightweight) (Jean-Marc Hardy, Gaetano Palermo, 2010: 40-110).

Eric Enge (2012: 629) says that “the technology that has driven today’s engines was based on two ranking signals - good keyword targeting and good links - but social media signals and user experience and engagement are now significant factors too.” Users are now given tools to influence the website rankings – like the shares buttons in social media or the comment/reply sections on websites, blogs and forums.

2. IMPROVING ONLINE COMMUNICATION: USING SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE INTERNET IN PROMOTING ADDICTION TREATMENT

Can these elements of online communication be combined and adjusted in order to ensure the online promotion of sensitive topics and help people in need? Whether guys or girls, men or women, rich or poor, young or old, everyone uses social media, regardless of age, status, religious orientation, nationality or skin color. So why not use promotion through social media and online communication overall in order to reach people in need more easily, in order to reach people who have conditions that they are afraid or ashamed to talk openly about, such as addiction.

Addiction is still a taboo subject in many countries of the world. According to the American Psychiatric Association, addiction is "a complex condition, a brain disease that is manifested by compulsive substance use despite harmful consequence. People with addiction (severe substance use disorder) have an intense focus on using a certain substance(s), such as alcohol or drugs, to the point that it takes over their life" (Ranna Parekh, 2017).

Many people who are addicted are ashamed of their disease and refuse to talk openly about it, because of the stigma surrounding it. As a result, they look for information online, in the comfort of their own homes, where they do not feel judged or ashamed. The website of Castle Craig, a residential rehab clinic that treats alcohol and drug addiction, offers information both on addiction and the treatment methods it offers. In this context, I analyzed the online presence of the clinic and then came up with optimization suggestions that can be applied to other treatment centers, regardless of the conditions they treat.

There are two main points to be considered when considering SEO and the online promotion of Castle Craig: link building and keywords.

Keywords, no matter how well thought out and targeted, are nothing without links. Links help Google and visitors come to one's website. A website without links would be totally ignored by Google.

The Castle Craig website loads fast, has a nice design which is simple and is full of relevant and quality information – all of which makes it an ideal candidate for getting more links. Link building is a time consuming process and needs to be planned over the long-term. Ideally a dedicated person should be employed to do this (and this should be their main priority). Quality prevails over quantity – 10 links from high ranking sites are worth more than 100 links from low value websites. There are many ways of getting links, like registering the website in online directories, publishing articles and getting the links inside or underneath the article, getting shares on social media (they get indexed by Google too), asking other sites to link to the website one owns, etc.

A good inbound link comes from a high ranking website (at least 4/10). The best link profiles have a good balance of branded anchor text (name of the company) and keyword-rich anchor text (keywords people might use when searching for online information). Anchor text needs to be diverse: rehab centre, rehabilitation clinic, addiction treatment (one should not use the same keywords in all the sites that link to their website, as Google might find it suspicious). The linking website needs to be relevant for the target public: it doesn't have to be all about addiction: a woman magazine, a news site or a personal blog are all suitable places to have links. It's good to have a diversity of domains: major media, blogs, even university or government

websites (it is believed that .uni, .gov or org suffixes have a high Google authority). One can ask a link from some sites if they have relevant content which the website editors might feel compelled to share. The best content (articles, videos or images) has a good striking title and an emotional trigger (funny, beautiful, worrying or a cause). If the published material is good it will probably get picked up, it will be mentioned on social networks or it might be quoted (which is good even if there is no link there – at least the name will be mentioned).

Eric Enge, the author of "The Art of SEO", says that link building is like relationship building, and it can reflect real relationships between people (for example one can get to know someone on a site and help then the two persons could help each other by swapping links) (2012: 452). The keyword here is interaction between business and clients, between webmasters and media, between people in general (The Beginner's Guide to SEO, 2015).

Social media also represents an incredible online communication opportunity that should not be ignored. The tweets, Facebook shares on public pages and the Google Plus links are all indexed by Google and can boost one's traffic, along with making their name (in this case "Castle Craig") more visible on the internet. By using social media, one gets user interaction which translates into immediate feedback from other users on the content that is posted. With a low outlay one can create an audience and reach prospective clients. Thus, the best way to proceed would be to hire a dedicated social networker, someone who is communicative, keen to learn and already active on social networks. Apart from the role in getting a higher ranking (through links on Facebook, Twitter, G+1), social media is also a tool for link building. Through social networks one can build relations with bloggers or other media representatives which may result in getting a link onto their page.

3. CASE STUDY: HOW CASTLE CRAIG SHOULD MAKE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media sites should be treated like communities (Twitter, Facebook, Youtube) and Castle Craig should consider being a contributor with news, tips, unique opinions in the future. It should interact with other members of the community through blog comments, social networking, direct messages and make sure there are people focused on each one of these channels.

SEOMoz's advice is to "make it super dumb easy" (The beginner's guide to SEO, 2015). The published content should be short, clear and easy to share.

Castle Craig should make sure that it is easy for everybody to share and follow the content of its website/ blog with only one click. If the counter of likes/shares doesn't put it in good light (they are less than 10) it should leave only the share button and disable the counter and make sure RSS and email subscription are available. Castle Craig should also share niche, quality, compelling content that would convince people to share with their followers.

A blog is a great place (and opportunity) to interact with ex-patients, potential patients, specialists, media people etc. All the posts on the blog are indexed by search engines. Google encourages publishing original articles and having people commenting on those articles. These will increase Castle Craig's credibility for both search engines and people. However, if there are zero comments on blog posts, chances are that people will think the blog is dead. So, for a while, blog comment counts should be disabled, before Castle Craig can build up an audience. In an ever-changing online environment, it is important for a company to keep up with the latest

updates in order to stay on top. In this context, it makes sense to either outsource this activity or get a dedicated SEO person working full time on the task. If Castle Craig chooses to hire somebody, that person does not have to be experienced in SEO but needs to be open to learn.

An addiction treatment center such as Castle Craig can also take steps for the purpose of maintaining a good ranking position and even overtaking the competition through additional activities than the ones outlined above, by permanently generating content.

The Castle Craig website already has some very good material online, which should be expanded (using mainly the blog and ideally creating a special section for recovery stories). In order to generate more content, I would recommend that Castle Craig published more personal stories of the patients.

"Customer generated content" is highly praised because it reflects the customer's experience with Castle Craig. It is the best recommendation one can get online. The personal stories collected from the "customers", who are ex-addicts are strong, emotional and an example for others. If published, these would generate more customer interest. On the Castle Craig website, there are articles and interviews with therapists and only very few with patients. While the therapists have deep insights and give great advice for addicts, I was more impressed by the patients' stories as they show the real struggle of addiction: suicide attempts, working under effect of the drugs, traumatised family, social stigma.

This type of interview should be published in video, podcast and article format. I think the best format for Castle Craig would be the podcast format – as this is the best way to protect the identity of the patients. The articles could be published in a „series” on a dedicated channel: one interview a week would ensure people would come back for more. After releasing them, they could be promoted in the social media, the whole story could be published on Scribd, a massive online library, and/or uploaded as a PDF on the Castle Craig website.

Also, this kind of content will bring more relevant keywords in the content of the website.

Castle Craig could as well set up a system in which therapists can guide patients (currently at Castle Craig) to keep a journal and/or write short stories (fiction) in which they are free to develop all kinds of characters. Not only could this be a potential source of good material for the blog but it may also help the patients in their treatment.

Castle Craig should send a strong and simple message for the published materials – that is the kind of message people feel inspired by and will want to share with their social environment. It should as well adapt keywords for published articles – these keywords should be the ones used by online visitors to get useful information about addiction treatment.

4. CONCLUSION

Online communication is expanding and new possibilities for online promotion, for improving one's online presence and for communicating fast, even instantly, arise constantly. In this context, there are uncountable opportunities for people to share and promote their business ideas, creative skills and opinions. Social media and online communication can also be used in order to influence and help those people who are in need and who hide their problems behind their online identity, behind a fake mask they will not be able to wear forever. One category of such people consists of those facing difficulties because they are addicted to a drug or destructive behavior. As I showed in this article, online communication can be used in order to better reach them and help them find the information they need and improve their quality of life.

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