

“Thought Leader Summit” on Search Engine Optimization

February 28, 2005

Moderator: Roy Young

Panel Leader: Stephan Spencer, Netconcepts

Panelists: Cam Balzer, Performics
Christine Churchill, KeyRelevance.com
Mike Grehan, Smart Interactive
Ammon Johns, Propellernet
Brian Klais, Netconcepts
Barry Lloyd, Make Me Tops
Ian McAnerin, McAnerin Networks
Alan Rimm-Kaufman, Rimm-Kaufman Group
Eric Ward
Jill Whalen, High Rankings

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Roy Young: Hello everyone and welcome to the first MarketingProfs Thought Leader Summit. I'm Roy Young, Director of Strategy at MarketingProfs.

MarketingProfs Thought Leader series is designed to give you cutting edge insight in today's most dynamic areas of marketing. We bring together top experts in specific areas of marketing for an in-depth discussion with a focus on practical application.

Thus, these Thought Leader summits advance the MarketingProfs mission of providing marketing know-how you can trust.

Today's topic is the rapidly changing and exciting area of search engine optimization. To bring us all up to date on this important subject, we are thrilled to have a panel of experts representing the top professionals in the field.

The leader of the panel is **Stephan Spencer**. Stephan is the founder and president of Netconcepts, a ten-year-old multi-national web agency specializing in search engine-friendly web design and e-commerce as well as e-mail marketing through Netconcepts Gravity Mail division.

Stephan is the senior contributor to MarketingProfs.com. He has contributed to Catalogue Age Unlimited, New Zealand Marketing Magazine, Building Online Business and others. He is co-author of the Analyst Report's *The State of Search Engine Marketing 1.0: New Strategies for Successful Cataloguing*, published by Catalogue Age.

He is a sought-after speaker at conferences around the globe for organizations such as IIR, IQPC, the DMA, SMEI and Internet World. Stephan, take it away.

Stephan Spencer: Thank you very much, Roy.

Well, it is indeed an honor to have such a distinguished panel of experts with me today. We have with us **Cam Balzer**. He is an online marketing expert with a proven track record for driving results and delivering innovation in the search engine marketing arena. Cam's expertise is based on nearly ten years of experience across all online marketing channels. Cam is currently the director of search strategy for Performics, the performance-based marketing division of Double Click and leading search engine marketing firm.

We also have with us **Christine Churchill**, president of keyrelevance.com, a full-service search engine marketing firm offering organic search engine optimization, strategic link-building, usability testing and pay-per-click management. She was on the founding board of directors of the search engine marketing professional organization Sympho and is the vice president of the Dallas-Fort Worth Search Engine Marketing Association.

Mike Grehan is CEO of Smart Interactive and author of *Search Engine Marketing: The Essential Best Practice Guide* and I should say it is absolutely essential. That is a great book. He is a sought-after speaker on the subject of search engine marketing and has worked with major brands both in the U.S. and Europe. Mike is also the editor of the e-mail periodical *E-Marketing News*.

Ammon Johns is the marketing director for propeller.net, a leading UK-based search marketing company. Aman has been a thought leader and innovator in creative and cutting-edge SEO techniques for many years and is held in high regard within the SEM industry. Aman is a member of the working party set up to found the Search Marketing Association UK – that’s SMAUK – and is an administrator at the Create-A-Site forums.

Brian Klais is vice president of e-business services for Netconcepts, helping retailers and cataloguers hone their natural search optimization and e-mail marketing strategies. He is a frequently published author and contributor to publications like Catalogue Age Magazine, MarketingProfs.com, American Marketing Association and Opta News Online. Brian also presents conferences such as ACC – that’s the Annual Catalogue Conference – and the DMA Annual.

Barry Lloyd runs the Make Me Tops Search Marketing Services division, which has been assisting companies worldwide with search engine marketing since 1999. He moderates, posts information and writes articles for several major search-engine related information sites on a regular basis. He is also acting president for SMAUK, UK Trade Association for Search Engine Marketing Professionals.

Ian McAnerin, founder of McAnerin Networks Inc., is a moderator for the high rankings in the search engine watch forums and has been vetted by the standards watchdog seoconsultants.com and SEO Prose Directories. He is a founding member of the Search Marketing Association of North America – that’s SMANA – with published articles in many international newsletters and website

news reports. He has a special interest in SEO legal issues due to his legal background.

Alan Rimm-Kaufman leads the Rimm-Kaufman Group, a marketing services firm specializing in online and multi-channel marketing. Prior, Rimm-Kaufman was VP of Marketing at Crutchfield, a 220 million dollar consumer electronics e-retailer. A frequent conference speaker and columnist, Rimm-Kaufman holds a PhD in applied statistics from MIT's Sloan School of Business. It sounds pretty impressive, Alan.

Eric Ward founded the web's first service for generating links and publicity for websites in 1994. That's quite a long time. Clients past of present include amazon.com, discoverychannel.com and pbs.org. Eric trains ad agencies, PR firms and site developers in the art of link building and online publicity. In 1998, *Website Magazine* named him one of the world's hundred most influential people in the web.

And finally, but not least, **Jill Whalen** of *High Rankings* is an internationally recognized search engine optimization consultant and host of the free weekly *High Rankings Advisor* search engine marketing newsletter, a fantastic newsletter I strongly recommend. She specializes in search engine optimization, SEO consultations and seminars. Jill's handbook, *The Nitty Gritty of Writing for the Search Engines*, teaches business owners how and where to place relevant keyword phrases on their websites so that they make sense to users and gain high rankings in the major search engines.

Thank you to everyone so much for joining us today. Let's go ahead and get started with our first question.

What should one do to make a solid business case for SEO – for search engine optimization? Any statistics, for example, that folks should be using to guide their plans? Cam, why don't you start?

Cam Balzer:

Sure, Stephan. Our clients are typically large retailers and a lot of direct marketers and when they started investigating natural search opportunities, they typically have large paid placement programs in effect already like Google Ad Words or Overture sponsored listings and for that kind of marketer, a number that is very telling is that anywhere between 50% and 75% of all search clicks still come from natural search listings.

So these are folks that have, you know, they are driving a large volume of sales through paid search and may not be aware that there's an equal if not greater number of clicks and sales available through the natural channel. So that can be very compelling for them in building their business case.

One other metric that we have found useful in helping clients build a business case – and those cases need to be built internally to sell this in – is from a tool called Hitwise. Hitwise gives you competitive intelligence on the sources of traffic to a specific website and one of the pieces of data that Hitwise can give on any given site is the percentage of their total traffic that a site is receiving from search engines. Again, this helps clients very clearly benchmark their own success or opportunity in search, so if they see that their percentage of traffic from search is much lower than what other sites in their competitive set are receiving, it clearly outlines the opportunity for them and helps them build that case internally.

Stephan Spencer: Thank you very much, Cam. Brian, how about yourself? **What do you think someone should do to make a solid business case for natural search optimization or SEO?**

Brian Klais: Sure thing, Stephan. I would piggyback on what Cam mentioned. Our clients tend to also be used to catalogue retail environments and they typically can get some good insight in terms of what SEO can yield from their paid search program but they can also get insight from doing some keyword research in terms of looking at the – we would usually look at like the 80/20 and look at the products or the categories of products that are their big drivers and conduct some keyword research on those terms and related terms to come up with some estimated marketplace on a daily or monthly basis. What is the potential prospect universe out there?

And then once you've got that number, if you can start to apply some metrics towards it in terms of applying your conversion or average order of values assuming that you can achieve various ranking slots in the major engines, so that's really a key piece that you need to conduct is to understand what is the potential out there.

Once you have that – the reason that is important is that you have to be able to convince your colleagues, the website stakeholders – whether it is IT or merchandising or marketing or copyrighters – the importance of the initiative that they are going to undertake and if you don't have that business case, then it is nearly impossible to push that agenda through internally.

So piggybacking on, again, what Cam said with the paid search results, coupling that with some keyword research from WordTracker or even from Overture in terms of estimating the market size is really the place to start in combination with also understanding what kind of effort needs to be put forward to conduct the SEO campaign. If there are ten things that need to be done, 30 things that need to be changed on the website, how much time is that going to take?

So you need to balance that all out, understand the investment you are going to make and what the potential payoff is.

Stephan Spencer: At the end of the day, it is all about return on investment, isn't it? So let's hear from Barry now. What would you say, Barry, is sort of the thing that one should do to make a solid business case for SEO?

Barry Lloyd: Well, Stephan, we are in the U.K. where we are somewhat fortunate in that the United Kingdom government makes some very interesting statistics available which basically we presented to potential clients to sock them in the eyes.

It certainly socked me in the eyes when I heard the last batch of figures which were released by the Department of Trade and Industry here. About sixteen billion pounds were spent online in the business market in the U.K. in the last measured quarter, which was up to October 2004.

That's something like 13% of all business – or business sales – were conducted as a result of someone finding information on a website. That is published government information.

When I then go and couple that with the statistics that 70% of people find a website for the first time through search engines, one doesn't have to do an awful lot more to convince people that search engines are probably a very important search medium.

Certainly we have companies that come to us who have no experience with search engine marketing whatsoever – not even paid search. In fact, although several large companies are using paid search, most medium and smaller enterprises aren't really aware of what it is and how it works.

So we have to actually introduce the whole concept of using search engines as a marketing medium.

What we then go and do is go and do a competitive analysis to go and show what their competitors are already probably spending by using sponsored listings. We then go and indicate to them that through keyword research there are niches in the market which can be filled both on sponsored listings, but more importantly through natural optimization.

And as Cam and Brian have already said, the 80/20 split between 20% clicking on sponsored listings and 80% clicking on organic listings is a crucially important factor in making a case for natural search engine optimization.

Statistics are a crucial point in being able to show the cost effectiveness of search engine marketing. Every single client that we take on board we ensure has full tracking enabled so that they can ascertain the true return investment of any search marketing campaign.

Basically what we do is then provide some benchmark statistics from specific market areas that give an indication of the kind of return that a client would expect to get.

All in all, the combination of being able to show that search marketing is such an important part of day-to-day commerce coupled with product figures that we've gotten from clients in the past can indicate, I think, very satisfactorily that there is always a solid business case for SEO.

Stephan Spencer: Thank you, Barry. Now Aman, what would you say makes a solid business case for SEO?

Ammon Johns: Well, I think the guys before me have covered the really specific stuff. What I would like to do is kind of back up a step with the things that really kind of hit them in the eyes.

The first one is you wouldn't possibly build a website that didn't work with Internet Explorer because it is 95% of your customers and yet most sites are built to ignore 80% of their customers that are using Search.

It really is that important. It's the most important browser out there after Internet Explorer and most sites aren't built to work with natural search engines – with the spiders coming around.

I think once companies realize that, they really start to get to grips with the idea of how big Search is and how important it is to them.

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Yes, 70% of people find a site through a search engine the first time.

Once they have done that, then they can start to look at the differences between paid optimization and natural optimization, which comes down to the fact that still one-third of people do not click sponsored listings. In the studies made, one-third of people said that whenever they are aware of sponsored listings, they just tend to avoid them.

So if you really want to reach your market, the only place that reaches them all is the natural search listings.

Stephan Spencer: Right, and then you've got to be – that implied endorsement of being in the natural or organic search results as well – that's sort of...

Ama Johns:: Absolutely. There is a huge PR benefit to being there naturally.

Stephan Spencer: Great. Thank you, Aman. Mike. How about yourself? What would one do to make a solid business case for SEO?

Mike Grehan: Hey Stephan, I was just enjoying a martini there.

Stephan Spencer: **[laughter]** Sorry to disturb you.

Mike Grehan: That's what happens when you come last. I just need to add something to my bio, by the way.

I am actually a founding member of the Search Marketing Association in the UK – SMAUK – and last year, along with Danny Sullivan, I was voted as one of the 100 most influential people on the internet in the past ten years by national opinion polls in the UK. I just wanted to get – pad you with my credentials there if that's alright.

Stephan Spencer: Okay, well, so sorry Mike.

Mike Grehan: **[laughter]** What can I add? The great thing about coming last in this is I just get to say I agree with everybody else.

It is true if there are more people clicking on natural listings than those who are clicking on paid listings, then of course that proves the point. That's where you really want to be.

You are going to get distance out of that. You are going to get better return on investment. One of the ways to make the case – I

mean, I think somebody mentioned Hitwise before – that’s a good tool but if you are talking to a client and you have been able to do this before, take the budget which was being used on paid search and convert them back into natural search effectively and demonstrate that to your client that you have done that before, that you have been able to do it and obviously it builds a great case.

I guess the other thing is as well is when you look at, in terms of the amount of traffic that you can drive, we talk about return on investment. The cost of the acquisition of a new customer, even with direct marketing or – offline – is something like five or six dollars or something and online, you are looking at 25 cents. I mean, if that’s not a case then I don’t know what is.

Stephan Spencer: Great point there, Mike. Let’s move on to question number two: **any tips for managing expectations for the outcome of a SEO?** Christine, how about we start with you.

Christine Churchill: Alright. I was rather enjoying listening to all those little Brit accents over there.

Stephan Spencer: Were you having a martini as well?

Christine Churchill: No, it’s too early for me. **[laughter]** Let’s see. Managing expectations. This is so fundamentally important and I think it is something that a lot of SEO shops just – they jump in to, you know, making declarations of what they are going to do before they do some really fundamental communication with the client.

To me, the communications part is so fundamental. Before we even sign a contract, I usually have what I call The Talk with a potential client and we kind of discuss their goals, what they want in the program, their deliverables. We even talk about how we are going to get it going and we document these things up front and then there is no miscommunication later on.

To keep the lines of communication open, we usually have regular reporting and meetings and all these things are very, very important to, you know, keep the client happy and avoiding any kind of problems down the line.

I have a little saying and I think – I didn’t originate it by any means but it is “Under-promise and over-deliver.” This is how you get a customer for life. They love that kind of thing.

So we have – we try to put some realism into our program.

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Stephan Spencer: So what sort of realism do you think a lot of potential customers of an SEO need to get?

Christine Churchill: Unfortunately, a lot of them will walk in the door thinking that they are going to be Number One next week through the most competitive term on the internet and it is just not going to happen, so we have to bring a little bit of realistic thinking into the picture. If that's what they want, we suggest PPC.

The way our approach is its long-term success; a long-term goal to increase the client's business, not to try to cheat and get the client up there in different ways. We want to add value to the customer's site and that's the basic approach and that's a long-term view and marketing strategy is what it's all about.

Stephan Spencer: Good. Barry. How about yourself? Any tips for managing expectations for outcome on SEO?

Barry Lloyd: Christine said something I think is very important is every client comes in the door expecting that they are going to be Number One for hotels or loans or whatever and you really have to go and point out two things to them.

The first – and again, I can't remember who originally said this, but it is a very, very valid point – I say that natural search engine optimization is – now we are just to writing PR releases.

Basically you are submitting information about your clients to – in this case – a search engine as opposed to a journal and it is up to their editorial review as to how they display it.

Therefore, there are no magic tricks of coming up Number One for the most important word. Basically what you have got to do is design a methodology by which the editorially-reviewed process albeit algorithmically made – goes and views the site of the client as one of editorial merit and have it ranked accordingly.

Point number one is to show that we don't control the search engines. All that we can do is endeavor to create content the search engine will find worthy and rank accordingly.

The second is the crucially important point of the expectations on coming up from the most generic keyword possible. We go through – at some length – to go and show that – with hotels as example – if the person is running a hotel in New York and getting queries for hotels in London, more people looking at hotels in London, it is a completely worthless exercise and as such what we then do is

try and refine and point them in the direction of how we should actually structure the content of the site to reflect the products and services that they are actually offering and targeting that – their target market.

Providing you can actually get these two things across to the client and they understand that what we are doing is working together to A: give content to search engines which the search engines find useful; and B: equally importantly, providing content that is useful to actual surfers. Those two combinations should then provide a satisfactory search engine optimization experience.

Stephan Spencer: Good. Now Brian, how about yourself? Managing expectations for outcomes on SEO?

Brian Klais: Sure. Well, I think I would look at this: One angle I would look at it from is from a business perspective to make sure that we are looking at SEO or natural search optimization, whatever term you want to use, as an investment and not an expense.

Paid search is useful to kind of gauge by proxy a business case for SEO but that's really where the analogy ends. SEO is not predictable. It is... there is more risk. You don't have control over Google or MSN or Yahoo and what pages they decide to index off your site or how they are going to rank them; obviously those things are influenced by the other items that have already been mentioned.

But, you know, that fact makes a lot of marketers... makes many marketers squeamish because it is... when you share that, it sounds like you are hedging for failure but that is the reality of the game and, you know – and the evidence is clearly there – of the payoff.

I think SEO is a bit like CRM was. It's not a technology. It's a mindset. It's sort of a culture. It's a site requirement. It can't be an afterthought but getting to that stage, you know, the results that you are going to see... they depend on things like what percentage of the "to do" list are you going to implement or, in some cases, the cure might be worse than the symptoms. You know, we certainly have had experiences dealing with retailers that have highly branded websites – very graphic-oriented – and there is a lot of resistance to making some of the fundamental changes that, you know, beyond getting those pages indexed can actually help drive a lot of traffic through the natural search listings and there is resistance to that because they are not sure what the impact of that would be on their brand or, you know, they want to make

sure that the terminology that they are using on their website, you know, even though they want to try and balance – they want to try and balance out the branding experience and the user experience with the search requirements.

So those are issues that you need to address. The point being that the result that you see in terms of incremental traffic and sales from natural search, it is in many respects very dependent upon your willingness to implement the sorts of changes that need to happen and that again goes back to the importance of having a business case that you can use to get all of your colleagues on board and again make the changes to the various stakeholders.

Stephan Spencer: Great. Thank you, Brian. Ian, how about yourself?

Ian McAnerin: I think that the people coming before me obviously did a very good job of outlining a lot of the issues so I am going to go off onto a little bit of a tangent and talk about some of the things that I warn clients about as potential problems.

As everybody has pointed out, the most common issue for a new client – and expectation – is over-expectations. Sometimes they actually have worse expectations than what you might be able to deliver for them.

Many people will have an outstanding business and be able to offer an amazing product and they are currently thinking only of the local market.

One thing that you can do is point out that, you know, it's a big wide world out there and that they might actually be able to aim a little bit higher. Of course, I usually temper that with, you know, the fact of the matter is that there can only be – out of millions of sites – ten sites in the top ten places.

Generally, the sites that are there deserve to be there and if a client wants to be in there, then they will be competing against sites that deserve to be in that position, at least currently.

So they have to make sure that their site also deserves to be there. One thing that many clients tend to think is that, you know, we do some black magic in the background and, you know, sacrifice a chicken or two and the next thing you know, you are up in the top ten and many of them don't want to make changes to their websites. They have to go through several levels of management; they've got to go through a legal department; they've got to go through a marketing department and in many cases, their hands

are tied as to how many changes they can actually make to their websites.

Yet, that has no effect on their expectations as to what positions they want in the search engines. So sometimes you have to kind of sit down and figure out with them exactly what they can do and what they are prepared to do and then match that to the expectations that they want. If they don't want to make any changes and don't want to add any pages, then, you know, you've got to use different tactics in order to get them into a position.

The other thing is that if I did some sort of a black magic thing and got a local mortgage company that only specializes in this town to number one worldwide for mortgage, it wouldn't stay there very long because honestly, that is a bad result. Your site should be a good result for the keywords that you are looking for and if it isn't, it is extremely difficult to maintain a position. You might get it temporarily but it is unlikely you are going to maintain a position there, so the client has to, you know, make sure that they are aware that typically with some work and some smarts, you will get a position that you deserve to be in.

So one of the things you need to do is make sure that your site actually deserves to be in the position you are aiming for and is on topic. Otherwise, it is short-term only.

Some other issues, of course, are many sites will run into duplication issues. They are forced to use – catalogue sites are really bad for this where, you know, the manufacturer gives you a specific description of the product and you can't really deviate from that very much. I've got one pharmacy client where he – it is illegal for him to tamper with the information about the drugs that he is selling, so, you know, you now have that exact same thing being used across every single pharmacy site on the planet – at least the ones that care about being legal.

So you run into duplication issues and the client needs to know about those and you need to be able to outline certain tactics to be able to deal with those – things like testimonials and so forth.

Let's see. Also, I like to also tell them about the fact that there are different types of keywords. There's three basic types of keywords. There are what you call your volume keywords and those are your things like, you know, *pharmacy*, *online pharmacy*, *sex*, *buy computer*. Those type of things.

They will very often, if you are ranking well, bring in a ton of traffic but sometimes a very low percentage of actual buyers. But, you know, that percentage based on the amount of traffic can be significant so you certainly don't want to avoid that but it is – it is also important to point out there are other types of keywords that you can aim at too.

For example, you can aim at niche keywords where there are only, you know, 20 or 30 a month on each one of these but almost every one of them convert into a paying customer.

If you are selling things like cars, 20 or 30 a month is a pretty big thing.

And then, of course, there is a blended approach where they basically have not a lot of competition and a fair amount of traffic and those are really nice areas to aim at as well and by pointing this out, sometimes you can manage the client's expectations for what kind of keywords that they actually want to aim at. They might actually get excited about aiming for some niche keywords or some keywords that you find in their logs that ordinarily they wouldn't have thought of but now think is a great idea.

Stephan Spencer: Interesting. Eric, do you have anything to add on to this question?

Eric Ward: Yeah, just one or two very brief comments. I think for me personally what I find is that when I am working with a client for the first time, it is very useful to find out what their history has been with previous firms they may have worked with. In other words, is this a brand new site we are working with? Is it a site that has been around for a while? Have they worked with other SEO firms and what were... what is it that they have been told previously? What types of things have they learned from their experience, as opposed to a client who is completely green coming in for the first time. There are fewer and fewer of those. Most people, even if they are launching a new website for the first time, have been involved in websites previously over the years and have some bit of knowledge about SEO but I think it's very useful to ask the client to talk more than me just sitting here and saying "I can do this; I think I can do this; oh, I can't do that."

I think it is very useful to get the client talking about – and learn as much as you can about what they really know about – SEO even if you throw some questions out there that you know are kind of like trial balloons to see if they bite, so to speak, so see just what they do and don't know.

And then the last comment would simply be don't be afraid to walk away from business and even let the client know that you are not afraid to walk away from it if they seem to be wanting things that you know in your heart are just going to end up... I would rather tell the client I can't do it or I don't want the business than take the money knowing that in a month, we are going to have that conversation where the client is not happy with the results. So don't be afraid to walk away from it.

Stephan Spencer: Good point. Let's move on to our next question. **What can or should be done to get rid of search engine spam that isn't already being done?** Eric. How about you?

Eric Ward: Interestingly, I think that the timing of the question is great considering what many search engines have been doing in the past month specific to blogs – and that is the no-follow tag – and I think the interesting thing about it to me was the ease with which that happens. I mean, trying to get anybody to agree on any sort of standard in this industry has been about impossible but here something popped up and almost like a grassroots... it was almost like a viral campaign amongst the search engines to decide how to... because it actually meant, impacted their bottom lines perhaps, but I think that that shows that there can be things that are done.

The difficulty is that the people – in the case of blogs – who controlled it were the very... were the people that were in control of the blog itself; the editor or author of the content where – and that's far different where – than web pages where the editor actually wants to try to get the search engines to rank his page higher, whereas within blogs, it's to the editor's best interest to keep the comments to – spam to a minimum.

Stephan Spencer: Thanks. Okay, Ammon. How about yourself?

Ammon Johns: I think the biggest missed opportunity in controlling spam is, one thing that on the surface, the engines seem very good at public relations. But on the other hand, they are not really yet good enough for customer relations management to try and get the community on their side to make people understand the issue of creating spam.

If the information had come out early enough, you know, "if you keep abusing metatags we will stop paying attention to them," it would have slowed down the amount of spam.

I don't think you are ever going to stop it. There are always going to be people that – a short term – that did the same thing with stuffing keywords into alt tags. There are a lot of issues that really the search engines could do with putting out a little bit more information, letting people know that they are actually polluting their own future. I think that is probably the biggest missed opportunity.

Stephan Spencer: Alan?

Alan Rimm-Kaufman: Yes, hello. Thanks. I think as the search engines mature and become even more important, which is clearly going to happen, there is going to be a combination of spam solutions that will emerge that will involve technology, community and the marketplace. I think that the search engines want to determine what is a reputable site. The page rank algorithms do that and better technology – who is referencing who, who can be trusted – will come along. I think the search engines' other technological developments will be looking at the actual links that are clicked off of the search engines and bringing people the relevance – the click survey's relevance. I think on the community side, we are probably going to see more whitelisting, professional certification, more professional organizations, more Better Business Bureau stamps of approval.

And longer-term in the marketplace, I wouldn't be surprised if there were even ways to purchase credibility, like a Better Business seal or like an SSL certificate – a central authority for a nominal fee that might say these people are straightforward.

I think you are going to see a combination of technology, community and the marketplace helping the engines sort out noise from quality content.

Stephan Spencer: Mike, how about yourself?

Mike Grehan: Yeah, I think we have already seen from a technological point of view that the search engines have had to adapt and move with it. It's something they didn't really expect. I talked to Andrew Broder, who is one of the best-known researchers in the field, some time ago. He wrote a paper called *Mirror, Mirror*, which was all about detecting duplicate pages when everything was about on-the-page criteria. Now they have blogspam that they have to deal with, or the comment spam. You have to remember the problem belongs to the search engines. It is up to them to do something about it.

Certainly when we go into the third phase of search, which is where they are heading now into personalization, then that certainly will make a great deal of difference as to whether adding a no-follow tag to a link – as I recommend they should be called there, to be perfectly honest.

There are that many people who set up a blog with the best of intentions and just leave them. There are millions of them out there, so it would be very difficult, I think, to implement that one either.

Stephan Spencer: That's a good point. That whole href real no-follow tag that Google came up with and got Yahoo and MSN on board to support as well so that certain links can be ignored, as far as passing on that search engine juice and, you know, it will be interesting to see if all the different blogs out there actually implement it because, of course, if they don't all do it, it is not going to be that useful, is it?

Mike Grehan: Well, there are thousands and thousands of inactive blogs out there. If you go and have a look at them, not to go too far on a tangent, but a friend of mine in the industry started a blog-spamming campaign just before Christmas. I went to have a look back at where those links were – whether we are pointing back – and there were age-old blogs that were just full of spam and nothing else. Nobody's tending to them. Nobody cares.

Stephan Spencer: Mm-hmm. Okay, let's move on to the next question: **What is the definitive list of no-no's that an SEO must refrain from in order to be considered ethical?** Jill, let's start off with you.

Jill Whalen: Well, really there's no definitive list at all. I mean, in simple terms, really, if you just simply don't do anything to deceive the search engines, you won't have to worry. You don't even have to read search guidelines that the search engine/webmaster guy minds or anything like that if you are not doing anything that is trying to trick the engines, you will be good to go. That's as simple as that.

Stephan Spencer: Mike. How about yourself, Mike?

Mike Grehan: In terms of no-no's, it is very difficult because here in Europe we are a bit more liberal about what we do so one man's spam here is just another guy's great strategy, so, you know, you have to determine what it is about what is ethical and what's not.

You figure the quick example, you know, cloaking, was often seen to be the major crime that you should never, ever do at a search engine.

I heard Tim Mayer say recently at – he is from Yahoo – say recently at a conference that he understands that there are different levels that people expect, you know, when they get involved in this game. If you want to be Number One for Viagra, as he said himself, on the natural side, then if you are just going to do it according to classic SEO, it is a bit like turning up at a gunfight with a sword. It's not going to work, you know?

I did a campaign for a TV company. I mentioned this at the last conference – where the site that we were optimizing for was about a TV program, so it was all audio-visual. It was all, you know, streaming media and that kind of thing, so we cloaked it.

Now if you type the name of the main character to that site at Google, then sure enough, it comes in at number one. So they have a situation here where everybody is happy, Google served up the right kind of result, the end user is absolutely delighted, my client is delighted.

Some people would say that is unethical, but if everybody is so happy, why would it be?

Stephan Spencer: Actually even Google says that cloaking is okay in certain circumstances, particularly if you are fixing URLs to make them more spiderable and not really playing any games with the content itself. Mike, why don't you...

Mike Grehan: **[crosstalk]** as long as I buy them a drink.

Stephan Spencer: Mike, why don't you **define cloaking** for those of our listeners who don't know what that term means?

Mike Grehan: Okay, cloaking is a method of showing search engine crawlers a different page to that which you would see with your browser. So for instance, if you have a list of all the IP addresses, say, for all of these search engine crawlers for Google bots, when you see that particular IP address come in, you show them one page which is text-heavy and full of all the keywords that you want and then when you see somebody coming in that's not a crawler, then you show them the page that had the flash movie on it.

Stephan Spencer: Barry, how about yourself? What would you say would be the definitive list of no-no's?

Barry Lloyd: Really, it is all about client disclosure. Basically, every single client should be fully aware of any tactics there to utilize an optimization of their site and the potential benefits and/or pitfalls that occur.

Basically if a client comes to me and says “I am in a very competitive area and I don’t care what you do,” I turn around and say “Oh yes, you should care because I am touching your website.”

So Jill is absolutely right. If you want to be ultra-safe, you should adhere to search engine guidelines and optimize sites accordingly. Any deviation from this must be imparted to the client and if the client says “I want you to do this,” get it signed off.

Nondisclosure of potential pitfalls in any optimization strategy is, to me, possibly the most unethical thing an SEO company can do.

Stephan Spencer: Okay. Let’s move on to the next question: **Are there any SEO tactics that you think are misconstrued as unethical but are actually quite acceptable?** We talked briefly already about cloaking. Any others? Christine.

Christine Churchill: Yes, search engines like to take kind of hard lines on things. They like to categorize things as either black or white. In some cases, things are actually grey. One of my pet peeves is their opposition to link-buying.

Let’s take an example from... like the brick-and-mortar world. Say you are an artist and you have a local frame shop that you like to recommend and in turn, the frame shop might give you a slight referral fee for sending all these wonderful clients their way.

The online version of that is a link from the artist’s website to the frame shop’s website. It makes sense. It’s good marketing. It’s good business and that is what link-building and link buying is all about.

Many times, a link is a great lead generator. For instance, you might have a client that is related. Let’s take the artist and the frame shop example online again. You might get tons of traffic from that artist’s shop. It is a great business link.

You also get links – you might buy links for credibility. I mean, taken to an extreme, your link from the local Chamber of Commerce could be considered link buying.

So I guess I have a little pet peeve with the search engines’ hard stance on “No link buying; it’s evil.”

Since we have several speakers, I am going to cut off right here.

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Stephan Spencer: That's a great point and I think there is some confusion sometimes in the marketplace where you are putting out the word that you are selling page rank – or page rank score, but actually what you are selling are text link advertisements and maybe some page rank goes along with it, but if you are not actually buying that ad for the placement in itself, then what are you doing that for?

So let's move on to Barry. How about yourself? Any SEO tactics that are misconstrued as unethical in your point of view but are actually acceptable?

Barry Lloyd: Right, I just wanted to – Christine covered really the main one, which is something I was going to cover, which was what happens about linking, but I will go on very quickly to another one, which goes back to what Mike was saying about cloaking.

Cloaking is totally acceptable to search engines if they allow you to do it through a commercial arrangement. To be frank, trusted feeds are cloaking. This is where you actually go and take content and put it in XML format and send it to a search engine and ask them to actually rank the page that it relates to according to the text that you have sent in.

This isn't even showing a different page to a particular search engine spider; it's actually showing content in an XML feed.

So providing you actually pay a search engine and then send them cloaked content, they find it totally acceptable. So the whole nuance about "cloaking is always bad" is, frankly, completely incorrect.

Stephan Spencer: Jill, anything you would like to add?

Jill Whalen: Yeah. Actually, there are a lot of techniques out there that are not misconstrued by the search engines as being unethical but there are a lot of SEOs out there who think certain techniques are unethical that actually aren't, but the search engines have no problem with them such as certain techniques that can be used for good or evil like the no-script tag, for instance. It is a perfectly legitimate tag to use to help search engines and other browsers that can't read script or JavaScript. You can put, you know, your links in the no-script tag if you have, say, a DHTML menu that can't be read. There is absolutely nothing wrong with putting your links in that no-script tag so that the search engines can read it but you will see sometimes other SEOs are on forums and people

will say “No, you can’t do that. That’s cloaking,” or “That’s evil. That’s spam.”

But it’s of course not at all, and the search engines have no problem with it. The same with the no-frames tag. It can be used for good or evil. You can – if you don’t have a frame site but you just stuff a no-frames tag with keywords, then you will probably be considered spamming; but if you have a frames site and you are just helping the search engines read the information that they should be reading anyway, not spamming.

Stephan Spencer: What if it’s – I will give you again an actual example without naming any names – page rank eight home page – it is a client of an SEO – has frames but yet what they have done is in the no-frames tag inserted a text link to their own company – to the SEO’s company with search engine marketing and the link text. But, of course, that appears nowhere on the homepage itself for the users. It is basically a hidden link.

Jill Whalen: Right.

Stephan Spencer: Is that unethical?

Jill Whalen: Well, again, that relates back to that last question about the no-no’s. It’s – you are being deceptive, so under my definition, yeah. Anything that you are doing to deceive a search engine is – would be considered spam, so yes, that would – I would consider that spam and I believe search engines would as well.

Stephan Spencer: Okay. Our next question: **How would a buyer of SEO services go about ascertaining whether a potential vendor is ethical?** Brian. Let’s start with you.

Brian Klais: Sure. Well, I don’t know if it is an interesting sign of the times or what but when you have to ask a vendor whether what they are doing is ethical or not then that’s – it’s interesting that we have gotten to that point so I, you know, how do you confirm or, you know, confirm that – obviously, they are going to say “Yes, of course what we do is ethical.” How do you confirm that?

I think there are probably a couple of things you can do to connect the dots and verify that. One is just to talk with other existing customers or ask an SEO company for a list or a couple, you know, customers who have left so that you can talk to them and find out why did they leave. Obviously, their response to that question will probably be telling.

I – but there are other ways, just sort of low-tech – there are other ways too to take a look under the hood. If you are using the Firefox browser, there are extensions that you can use to sort of fake the Googlebot user agent, meaning that you can look at a website as Googlebot sees it and it is very important that if you, I mean, obviously as Jill and others have stated that one of the most common – I mean, obviously that SEO spam comes down to deception.

If you are serving up to search engines something completely different than what you are serving up to users content-wise, then that is the definition of spam – SEO spam. One way that you can verify what an SEO is saying is take a look at what are they showing, what are their client sites showing the search engines either by looking at those websites through the eyes of Googlebot, through the Firefox browser extension or looking at the cached version of a page that, you know, Google has indexed or MSN has indexed and comparing and contrasting that to that same corresponding page off of the native website.

If there are significant differences, you know, typically things to look for are, you know, if the title tag is significantly different and if keywords have been stuffed into the metatags and into the – into various parts of the website to help the version that was shown to search engines rank better, then that would be a sign to run the other way.

Stephan Spencer: Okay. This is interesting, actually, Brian. You are describing cloaking, which we discussed in an earlier question – as in some cases, or actually, it is okay with the search engine if you have an arrangement with them in place already. So it's actually quite interesting. There can be some fine lines or some grey areas in some of these areas or – just differences in opinion. Christine, how about yourself? What do you think a buyer of SEO services should do to go about ascertaining whether a potential vendor is ethical or not?

Christine Churchill: I think the best thing that a client can do is just do a little bit of education and basic research before they spend their money on SEO. I mean, if you are buying a car, you are going to do a little research on the car before you spend the money, you know, get a look at gas mileage, the safety record of the car, and you should do the same when you are looking at an SEO vendor because it is an investment so you need to do your homework up front. I actually love having a client that has been educated on SEO because they really appreciate the complexities of what you are doing and they seem to be a much more – I mean, they love it

because they don't have to do this stuff and they know what is involved and they are very receptive to your ideas and stuff.

I often suggest potential clients go to some of the industry conferences, you know, learn a little bit about SEO basics just so you can look at some of the examples, you know, some of the work that a vendor has done.

I also tell them to ask some really hard questions, you know, ask the potential vendor "Do you do doorway pages? Do you do deceptive reader X? Have you ever had sites banned?"

If they start talking about short-term tactics, you know, they might want to reconsider. SEO is a long-term investment. Done right, the benefits of SEO should last for years.

There are some real key warning signs. I mean, if you get spam email from an SEO, you know, they are probably the lowest of low. I mean, you shouldn't have to advertise in this business. Also watch out for SEOs that, you know, offer rank guarantees because obviously, that is kind of a warning sign that they are having to resort to unethical tactics. You can't guarantee something you have no control over. The only way you can get a guaranteed rank is through pay-per-click.

Stephan Spencer: Alan. How about yourself?

Alan Rimm-Kaufman: Christine was talking about clients that are sophisticated and have some background and can actually engage a vendor in tactics. When – just to address – folks are just getting into it and might not have the knowledge to ask the hard questions or evaluate the shades of grey that we talked about earlier.

I would follow up on what Brian said about the importance of references; particularly references from clients that have been with the vendor for a long time, and also references from folks that have left the vendor if the vendor is willing to provide those. What didn't work out with that relationship and why.

When you are buying a complicated product and you don't have much background in it, you need to talk to other clients. I think it also behooves retailers to look for transparency and cultural fits and while we would all agree that search was – excuse me – while we would all agree that search rankings results can't be guaranteed, that that's not an ethical practice to guarantee, number one, sometimes the work can be guaranteed – that the

work promised can be delivered to spec and if the client is not satisfied, the vendor will either refund the money or make it right.

So while you can't guarantee a ranking, solid vendors can actually guarantee that what they promise to do – not achieve – but the work promised to be done can be done accurately and timely.

Stephan Spencer: And Jill?

Jill Whalen: Basically, what the others have been saying – I think it is really important to talk to the potential SEO vendor extensively, you know, get a feel for them. I think you can kind of tell – kind of relate – are they giving you some kind of hard sales pitch, you know, I mean, that's a little bit of a warning sign.

Do they explain the techniques they will be using? I think that's important as well. They don't have to tell you exactly what they are going to do on your site, but tell you the techniques in general that they use.

If they are telling you they are using proprietary techniques and things like that, that's another little warning sign. You know, do their techniques involve any kind of deception? Again, a warning sign.

Talk to their previous clients, their current clients if you can. Are they happy with them? Have their – have those clients' traffic and sales gone up? Those are pretty much the main questions you need to ask.

Stephan Spencer: Okay. Cam. Anything to add?

Cam Balzer: Yeah. Christine mentioned earlier that NSO or SEO vendors need to take long-term business strategies and I would say that another way to kind of re-cast the issue around ethical behavior is whether an SEO is using sustainable business practices; practices that are going to deliver long-term results for a client.

And so one question that a marketer might ask is what is the average length of time that you worked with your clients. If they've got a lot of client turnover, they may not be taking a long-term – the SEO may not be taking a long-term approach.

Another thing that we also feel is important is – companies that work in more than just natural search optimization or strict SEO – if a company also has capabilities in paid search as well as even paid placement, chances are that it allows them to use a variety of

opportunities to maximize the client's exposure through natural search – or through search in general so that you don't have to resort to, you know, only being able to elevate a client's visibility in search engines through natural search.

So that kind of good coverage of the entire search medium, I think, is important.

Stephan Spencer: Ian, anything to add?

Ian McAnerin: Yeah. Just a couple of things. Obviously, the most common thread throughout all of the advice so far is to do due diligence and to make sure that whatever the SEO vendor is saying that they are going to do that they actually do. So if they say "We don't do anything deceptive," and then you go to one of their client sites and you see a bunch of hidden text and links and so forth, then obviously, they are already lying to you. So that is something to look for.

I would also do a quick search on the internet for that company and see if there are any people out there who have posted complaints and so forth. If there are a lot of them, then, you know, that is part of doing due diligence. You can also check on forums and there's – you know, there's sites like SEO Pros and SEO Consultants that also take a closer look at websites as well.

Just because a company isn't on either of those directories doesn't mean that they are a bad company, but it is a reasonably good indication that at least some other SEO has taken a look at that company, which is better information than you had before.

So basically, the bottom line is do due diligence and check what they have actually done, not what they say they are doing.

Stephan Spencer: Barry, did you have anything to add?

Barry Lloyd: I think we have pretty much covered it all. Due diligence is the real key. Longevity of the actual SEO company can give an indication as to whether they have got an ascertainable business model and in all probability have clients going back a number of years.

So due diligence is the key.

Stephan Spencer: Great. **What are your top most effective optimization tactics?** In other words, please share some of your absolute best "how-to"

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tactical information with our listeners. Mike, would you like to start off?

Mike Grehan: I certainly would. I think number one – I would say links. Links build links.

Number two: I would say more links and even more links. Number three: I would say links, links, links.

You have got a few guys to go through here. I mean, I stick strictly to looking at putting together a really comprehensive linking strategy because it really is fundamentally one of the most important things that you are ever going to do to rank. Getting a site indexed is not that difficult. It's ranking which is the hard thing.

So I think if you stop and think about how you can build links, put them together, you know, in an appropriate manner and remember that you are talking about quality; it's not essentially quantity, then that's the single most important thing I can add to it. Like I say, you have got to go across a few people here.

Stephan Spencer: Yes. Okay. Barry, how about yourself?

Barry Lloyd: Links. **[laughter]** I will try and follow that point. I will follow that by saying that remember that every page on your website is a potential entry point. Make sure that it is usable both by surfers who actually visit that site and can navigate out of it but it is also readable by search engines. So probably the best tip that I can give anybody is make sure that every page is viewed as a separate potential entry point and hire a copy writer to make sure the copy is effective.

Stephan Spencer: Absolutely. It's like your entire site acts like a virtual sales force in the search engines for you if you have 10,000 skews, that's 10,000 potential product pages you could surf...

Barry Lloyd: Absolutely.

Stephan Spencer: ... through the search engines. Absolutely. Cam. Anything you would like to add as the sort of top optimization tactics from your standpoint?

Cam Balzer: Yeah. I would build on what Barry was just saying – that it's those deep pages, those content pages or product pages on your site that can really drive a lot of traffic.

In my experience, casting a very broad net by tuning those templates of those pages especially if your site is database driven so that every single page of content is performing at its maximal in the search engines. That broad net can catch a lot more fish than just a couple of rods and reels if you are only focusing on optimizing, you know, a couple of pages for some very high-volume keywords.

Stephan Spencer: Okay. Ian, anything that you would like to share with our listeners on top optimization tactics?

Ian McAnerin: Yeah. Basically, SEO boils down to simply making the best possible site you can, which is content, and then telling as many people as possible about it, which is links.

So, you know, just get the content in there so your website deserves to be in the position that you want it to be in and then get the links there to basically let the search engines know that you are there and that there is some content there worth visiting and, you know, you put the two together and you end up with a very powerful package.

Like the others, links are extremely important but, you know, don't forget your content.

Stephan Spencer: Okay. Now, interesting. I would actually like to chime in here on this question myself because I think one thing is really crucial for our listeners to understand in regards to links.

Yes, they are absolutely important in that search engine juice that comes into your site in terms of page rank score or whatever you want to call it – that is all well and good but it all aggregates on your home page for the most part because that is where everybody is linking to.

You have let's say a 20,000 page website. You really need to put some serious thought into your site architecture, your internal hierarchical linking structure and how you pass that important score, that page rank, that search engine juice on to your most high-margin product pages, your most important category pages and so forth.

Stephan Spencer: Let's move on to your next question here, which will be **how does optimizing a site for SEO relate to optimizing a site for human usability?**

Usability is an often talked about term in website best practice. We have people like Jacob Neilson and Jared Spool charging \$50,000 for a half-day workshop explaining how to make a more usable website.

Are there objectives – are these objectives of usability and optimization – are they at odds or are they harmonious? Are they two processes or are they one? Two vendors or one?

Ian, let's start off with you.

Ian McAnerin:

Actually, I have always considered search engine spiders to be just another visitor to your website. Just they happen to be a visitor that refers a lot of other visitors to your website and unfortunately, that particular visitor happens to be disabled.

So usability really does go hand-in-hand with search engine optimization. You are making your website usable to the search engine spider.

So the same tactics that you would use to deal with someone who is blind or someone who has difficulty understanding, you know, high-tech ways of navigating through a site should also apply to a search engine spider.

So I don't really see a huge difference between optimizing your website as far as usability is concerned and optimizing it for SEO. Yes, there are some additional things you work on in either of those that don't overlap, but the vast majority of it really does overlap. You make it usable for everybody whether it is a disabled visitor or a search engine spider.

Stephan Spencer: And Barry? How would you like to chime in on this one?

Barry Lloyd:

I view them as absolutely harmonious and every time that I go and take a potential client, my first view of the site is looking at usability issues. Two reasons behind this:

One – if I think I am going to spend an awful lot on SEO and I go and get them ranked wonderfully high and that site can't sell anything, it's just wasting their money. So therefore, we automatically bundle the two areas together and so they are not mutually exclusive by any means. You can and should construct a site for both human usability and spider readability.

Stephan Spencer: And Jill. What would you like to add?

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Jill Whalen:

Yes, I agree with the others. They are definitely harmonious in – the spiders are like the biggest newbies of all time. They can't really think about what they are doing. They can't go – they just basically go from link to link and the more usable a site is, the easier it is to get around; really both for humans and spiders.

Other usability goodies like descriptive links so that a person knows where they are going will also tell a spider where they are going and what a page is all about, so definitely harmonious although I do think there are usability experts who know an SEO isn't necessarily an expert in usability. Some SEOs do have usability people on board, which we do. We outsource to usability people.

So, I mean, you may or may not need two separate vendors.

Stephan Spencer:

Right. Okay. How about off-page factors where we are talking about, you know, link popularity, page rank score, that sort of stuff?

They not only help curb search engine spam, but they are having an increasing impact on SEO. **What are the pros and cons of links and other off-page ranking factors?** Eric?

Eric Ward:

I am pleased that the search engines – in some ways, I feel like it is a vindication of everything I have been doing for 11 years because back when I started, there was no Google. Heck, there wasn't even a Yahoo when I started. Well, there was but it was residing on stanford.edu back then so I have been trying to build links for client sites, never really giving any thought to whether they would ever have anything to do with the search engine ranking so in some ways, the search engines are viewing off the site – off-page factors is kind of a validation that there's a lot more ways to judge the content of a website than just trusting whoever wrote the content on it or an optimization company that may be using some techniques that aren't appropriate.

But I think that also it's a double-edged sword because if I was to kind of look through the inquiries I get about the services, up until a couple of years ago, nobody ever really asked me about search engines. They wanted links for – because they knew that links could help them if they got links in a relevant – on a relevant site or venue – that it would help bring them traffic.

Now, though, the majority of the inquiries I get are things like "What will you charge us to get 100 links," or "Our site has a page

rank three. What will you charge us to boost that to a page rank seven?"

So people – while being much more interested in links and search engines while being interested in off-page criteria – have maybe created a climate where people have become a little bit obsessed with the types of links they get to the detriment, long term, of their site.

I mean, if you are interested in page rank, that's great, but I have always kind of felt that those things were useful regardless of whether or not – links were useful regardless of what Google thinks of them.

Stephan Spencer: That's great. Now this is actually kind of a follow-on to this existing question here: RSS. RSS is a syndication channel that you can use to get links. Eric, maybe you could **address RSS as an exploding content delivery technique**. What is its place in SEO and how do you see it being used now and in the future?

Eric Ward: Well, I can speak a little bit about – I am very familiar with RSS, having started a feed for one of my businesses a little over a year ago and having gone through the process of then trying to build links and awareness and publicity of that feed.

So the unique thing or the interesting thing about feed content is I don't know if there are any search engines that are currently indexing, you know, the underlying SML or RSS – whatever format you want to call it.

The other thing is the whole nature of RSS content is that it changes so quickly, by the time an engine indexed any of it and then somebody searched on that, the underlying content there would probably have changed.

So I think that it might matter a little bit less from the standpoint of search engine optimization; but what would matter would be if a client or a content provider makes the decision to start offering some of their content as an RSS feed to recognize that there are many, many venues out there that will want to know about those feeds. I mean, you see Yahoo now with the My Yahoo page. Millions of people have their own personal Yahoo page that they – where they get their news and weather and stock quotes, etcetera, and with – by offering content available as an RSS feed with a little "Add to my Yahoo page" button on your site, people can in one click make your content part of their daily visit to their My Yahoo page.

Not that has nothing to do with search engines, but that is all about having that clickable link that automatically subscribes somebody to a feed and helping to get those clickable links wherever they can be or should be around the web.

Stephan Spencer: That's interesting. I am actually talking on RSS at the Search Engine Strategies conference at the end of the month – and I find that most people that are implementing RSS on their website – they have an RSS feed and XML file available on their website – tracking of the success of those, the readership or any of that just hasn't even crossed their mind.

Eric Ward: No. It's very difficult now because the log data for an RSS feed, you know, all of these RSS search engines and pingers are out there pinging the content every five minutes, every ten minutes, every hour, every two hours – and that shows up in your server log as an access – as a request for that RSS file.

So I think it will have to get more sophisticated in order to be able to say “Well how many of the accesses of an RSS feed were actually because people wanted to read it or from the various engines out there that are pinging it looking to see if it has been updated?”

Stephan Spencer: Right. So I am familiar with a couple of different services out there that allow you to track readership and just kind of separate out who is the user and who is one of those pingers or bots. A couple come to mind: Simple Feed and Feed Burner.

Basically, what you can do is you can track click-throughs on your RSS feeds and even opens. You can embed web bugs – these little hidden images that are just one pixel wide and tall and...

Eric Ward: What's interesting about this particular type of content delivery is ultimately an RSS feed is – it still has an address like any web page does, whether it is, you know, if it is a page served by Microsoft Active Server, it's not ASP or if it's just a, you know, a .html file or a – even a .pdf file or any document, any file that is addressable on the web including an RSS file – is typically indexable by a search engine.

So my hunch is what an engine is going to have to decide is gosh, do we want to index feed content given how often it is going to potentially update? I would think it would be possible. I am just not quite sure yet how valuable it would be unless it was one of those things where there – maybe it was an opportunity for people

who are searching for the most current news on any given topic because most RSS feeds do update fairly quickly, fairly regularly.

I don't see there being a whole lot of impact for SEO yet, but I bet it will.

Stephan Spencer: Well, even if – let's say you have some sites that syndicate an RSS feed onto their own homepage. Like I know, for example, nanodot.org syndicates Slashdot's latest headlines from their RSS feed on their homepage, so that gives Slashdot ten links.

Eric Ward: Sure. Now that would be – see one way to look at it from an off-page criteria standpoint would be – if you don't have an RSS feed today and you work on one for a week and you launch it next Monday, you now have probably 50 to 75 venues out there that you can go get new links for so sites will link to your feed – directly to your – not your home page, but to your feed URLs and you can submit your site to the feed search engines. There are a bunch of tremendous feed search engines that are out there that happily accept submissions of RSS feeds and really, that is the same thing as accepting a submission of a link. That's what they are doing. They are indexing the link that takes people directly to your feed.

So you could increase link popularity by getting links to your feed in addition to your homepage or to any other content on your site. A feed is just another element of a site that's linkable.

Stephan Spencer: Fine points. Let's move on to the next question. **What is it that sets a top performing SEO apart from a run-of-the-mill one?** Brian, let's start off with you.

Brian Klais: Well, I think there are a couple of qualities that are important. One is, you know, having a partnership-type model. There's – I think there is kind of a general fear for – in the SEO industry – that, you know, once you let the cat out of the bag and share kinds of tactics that need to be implemented – that the client won't need you anymore or that there's no more work to be done and so I think that tends to cause a little bit of, you know, reluctance maybe to share information openly with clients and so I think that working with somebody who is very transparent, willing to kind of put it all on the table and work with the client at their pace to implement the things that can be implemented and communicating with the stakeholder groups that are involved in the initiative and motivating them.

I think those are all very important – very important qualities so that it's not – it's not so much about, you know, selling – selling

fish, but it's about teaching them how to fish and sort of then trusting that – just the amount of change and the fact that competitors are catching up and doing similar initiatives, I think, is – I think that's kind of the value proposition that a good NSO or SEO company brings to the table is being able to partner with their clients and work with them over the long term, recognizing that there will be a need as search engines evolve.

Stephan Spencer: Very good. So okay, Ian. How about you?

Ian McAnerin: Honestly, a top performing SEO is no different than a top-performing any other professional in their field. There are two major aspects to them. There's their own business practices. Do they keep the client in the loop? Do they properly educate the client on what's to be expected and so forth and do they – do they find out what the client wants as well as what they intend to deliver to the client?

And then, of course, there is the tactics and practices related to that particular field – what they are doing as far as SEO is concerned and so forth.

One thing that has been mentioned by others is top SEOs really do understand not just the technical aspects of a website and SEO but they also understand general marketing tactics. I know I have actually learned a lot from my own clients on how to market their own products because they are the experts, but also because I have had numerous clients, I am able to bring some of that experience to other clients and help them market their site as well.

Stephan Spencer: Okay. How about you, Barry?

Barry Lloyd: What's the thing that sets a top-performing NSO apart? I would say usually confidence and knowledge.

Pretty much the fact that top-performing SEOs have been in this long enough to really understand what is going on in the marketplace, have usually some form of interface and understanding with the search engines, and as the others have said, also have knowledge of marketing products via search engines.

But I would still say that the sort of major thing is confidence in their ability to do the job.

Stephan Spencer: Thanks. Jill?

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Jill Whalen: I've actually seen – I had a lot of clients come to me lately that have used SEOs in the past and aren't happy with it so I have seen a lot of sort of what sets them apart, I think, and it tends to be a lot of times, the extent of the knowledge, as some of the others have said, and I think it really comes down to sort of the extent of the keyword research, whether they are using professional copy writing as opposed to just basically sticking keywords anywhere, and then just understanding the basics of marketing and conversions and, of course, the technical issues.

I think it's really just the whole knowledge base – the run-of-the-mill SEOs don't quite understand the issues as well as the much better, top performing ones.

Stephan Spencer: Okay. Cam. How about yourself? Top performing SEO?

Cam Balzer: Yeah, just to build on what Jill was saying, I think that the ability to – for clients – or for an SEO to really have an understanding of the client's business beyond just the search arena or beyond the natural search arena, so I think we see it as important to offer, you know, a full range of search services so the client can, you know, gain maximum visibility through various channels and then work across all those channels to, you know, get the best of all the opportunities that are available to them at the most efficient rates.

Stephan Spencer: Okay. And Mike, how about you? What sets apart a top-performing SEO from a run-of-the-mill one?

Mike Grehan: In my opinion, the first thing is client renewals. The second thing is client renewals. The third thing is – it's kind of like the links thing for me. I think Jill just mentioned talking to a number of clients who have had their fingers burned with search engine marketing firms that weren't up to scratch. I think if you talk to a firm - I have worked with, you know, independently and with larger firms.

If you look at firms that are getting client renewals, they have had clients for, you know, five, six, seven years. There's the sign of a company that's doing its job.

Stephan Spencer: Okay. Let's go on to our next question: **What are your favorite search engines?** Ian, how about you?

Ian McAnerin: Well, my favorite search engines are the ones that my clients are most often paying me to work on, quite frankly – the ones that my clients are typically most interested in, of course, are Google followed by Yahoo, MSN and then Tioma.

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From an SEO standpoint, honestly, I am kind of partial to Yahoo, though Google is quite nice and I have a tendency to root for the underdog so I – I really like what Tioma is trying to do there and I would like to see them do better than they are right now.

Stephan Spencer: Eric, I would love to hear your opinion on this because you spend so much time just becoming familiar with all the different places on the web where you can get a potential link. So Eric, why don't you share your favorite?

Eric Ward: Well, I will answer it with a very specific engine and then more of a general kind of answer. I am in – I am based in Tennessee. I have lived here for about 20 years and my favorite search engine is a vertical search engine called elvisfind.com. Elvisfind, as the name implies, is a search engine devoted purely to content about Elvis Presley so that if – because if you go to Google and do a search on “blue suede shoes,” you are probably just going to find a bunch of stores, but you do a search on “blue suede shoes” at Elvisfind and you are going to find the stuff you are after.

But I like – more than the Elvisfind content, I like what the site itself represents. The whole concept of – that anybody out there that has a little bit of technical know-how and is – and a lot of expertise or passion for a subject – can compile and put together a search engine devoted to a specific topic. All they have to do is hand-select the sites that they choose to index and if they are running a crawler then direct the crawler to those sites, so I think this is still a very early phase in the search engine industry and I think you are seeing in some ways how it is just finally starting to break out now.

I mean, remember when Google search – when Google didn't used to have all those tabs and now you have the Google News that you can click to get your news results? You've got the results from Groups, which is deja, as well as Google's own privately-branded groups. You've got the web, which is Google's crawler, and you've got a number of other tabs.

In some ways, that's kind of – I mean, it's just destined that there will have to be some group somewhere that will be an expert in running a search engine on about any topic you can imagine because I really don't myself feel that Google could ever master having every venue or every site out there about any topic.

So my answer to your question – my favorite engine is any engine about a completely arcane or unusual topic that there are only a

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few thousand people around the world that care about and the person who decides to create the search engine for them.

Stephan Spencer: Right. Ammon, how about yourself? What are your favorite search engines?

Ammon Johns: Ammon stopped out for a martini.

Stephan Spencer: Ammon, how about yourself?

Ammon Johns: There's got to be two there. The first one is incredibly obvious. It's Google, because it re-invented the search interface. When everyone else was heading into the ferreting of search within a whole portal of other things, Google kept it clean, kept it logical, and really re-invented search. I think a lot of resurgence of the search market has really come from that. Search was getting very complex in terms of usability and Google turned that around and I think that's been a good thing.

In terms of technology, though, Tioma. Tioma.com has got to be the best search engine for most purposes. I find the index is about the only thing that is holding them back. It's still quite a small index compared with the real leaders. Those are my two favorites.

Stephan Spencer: Now just to – to just add a little bit of something – or to clarify – there is a big technology difference between Tioma and Google and Yahoo and MSN in that those other – the major engines, the top three, are using just a – sort of a page rank variant. Yahoo calls it web rank and it is just basically weighted link popularity.

But Tioma does it a bit differently. They have a kind of a localized sort of approach and they group kinds of sites together. Could you kind of differentiate those engines for us, Ammon?

Ammon Johns: Yeah. Most of them, it's about popularity. I think Tioma themselves were the ones who explained it best. They said that page rank and other link popularity things like it are a bit like going out into the street and asking everyone who the best scientist is – and you are going to get the obvious names. You are going to get Einstein, you are going to get Stephen Hawking. That's just popular answers.

Tioma looks within the topic. First it finds the authority sites within the topic so that is kind of like just going after “scientist” and saying “Who is the best scientist,” and chances are, it is going to come up with names you have never heard of before but are actually much better answers.

It gives you the authority – the specialist answer instead of the general popular answer.

I can probably pitch something else in here, Stephan. The difference between the two algorithms – page rank, web rank – is based on page rank, but the two main algorithms that are used out there – page rank we understand because it has been so visible with Google, although between you, me and everybody else who is listening, they don't actually use it.

Page rank is a keyword-independent method of ranking; i.e. you already have your page rank before somebody types the word into the search box. So before “blue widgets” goes in there, you've already got a rank, you've already got a score.

The difference with Tioma is it is keyword-dependent. So when you type the words “blue widgets” into that search box, it then pulls the community together as Ammon was just saying. It pulls the whole community together and then it does that local search which refines the whole thing and finds the experts – the authoritative sites on that particular subject.

Just to cover something else that Ammon was talking about before – but I have to tell you I was talking to an executive at Google about the clean interface and how they changed the search horizon as it was by coming up with this thing and they explained to me the reason that they had that keen interface was because neither one of the guys – Sergei Bren or Larry Page – actually knew anything about HTML.

On a usability side – this is true – on a usability side, they did some testing on their own interface and discovered that people kind of hang around there for about 90 seconds or more – even longer – and couldn't figure out what it was and then they realized it's because the interface is so clean; that people sit there waiting for the rest to load in.

The way that they got around that – if you look now, they have actually put the copyright statement just below the search box, which doesn't need to be there, but at least because people are used to seeing that at the end of a page, they understand “Oh, that is all I am going to get.”

Stephan Spencer: That's funny. Alright, well we just have a few questions left and I am cognizant of everyone's time here. We really appreciate you taking the time out to do this – the Thought Leader Summit with us.

So one of the last few questions I would like to ask is **what is wrong with the SEO industry today?** Barry.

Barry Lloyd:

Ah, me? **[laughter]** The SEO industry is unclear to the general purchaser of SEO services and I think that's its major fault. It hasn't really defined rules of operation, it hasn't really defined what each individual segment of the market actually does. It hasn't really defined what you are meant to get for your money.

So what's wrong with the SEO industry today? The fact that still you are getting people starting up as SEOs by downloading little products that are out there that promise to turn you into an expert overnight and they go up to bat with people who have been around for 5,6,7 years and the message they are actually putting towards the general public is identical: We can get your site ranked on search engines.

It needs tidying up. It needs some standards being brought in and hopefully as the business matures, that will actually happen.

Stephan Spencer:

Ian. What's wrong with the SEO industry today?

Ian McAnerin:

Um, I think there's – I will bring it down to two here. First off is a lot of SEOs – especially ones with – that are just starting out – tend to focus on their websites, not the client. Because that is their starting point, they end up doing things in a different manner than if they start off with focusing on what is best for the client and then using the site to help that client out and I think by switching your approach from the client rather than the site – you end up approaching things in a very different manner and that is just an issue of maturity.

The other thing is a lack of standards. There's no list of cross-SEO standards that everybody can agree on. Now Google – there are the generic ones like “don't trick the search engines” and so forth, but as you have heard earlier, there are a fair amount of grey areas in there and there are some things that we – we hear a lot about grey area here in SEO and we should hear honestly a lot less of that and a lot more of “this is an acceptable way of doing things and this isn't” simply because how can you judge an SEO if anything that they do could be okay and could be okay? Like it's all in a grey area. That's a really difficult way to do stuff. So I think some basic standards are in order.

Stephan Spencer:

Very good. Brian. What is wrong with the SEO industry today?

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Brian Klais: Well, I certainly agree with what Barry and Ian have shared. I think the fact that the results that clients are seeing are sporadic, you know, that it's – I think that just the unpredictability of the marketplace in general in terms of SEO coupled with what they – what has already been shared – the lack of standards, you know, that it's kind of uncertain what you are going to get, what the value that you are going to get knowing that there are no guarantees that can be made.

I think that one of the issues that I would look at from a general SEO vendor kind of perspective is that it seems that the focus is somewhat on sort of a self-preservation mode. It's on, you know, providing services that, you know, I think as Ian shared, you know, they may not be actually valuable to the client. I mean, if you are just providing keyword research every month or making doorway pages, you know, that's not – or metatags – that's not high-value.

It may be a way of sort of justifying your fees and that kind of thing on a month-to-month basis but that's – I think in a nutshell, that is where the problem starts. If we were focusing on doing what's right for the customer, you know, making – helping them make the changes that need to happen. That's when the results start to come.

So I think it kind of goes – in my mind, it kind of goes back to having a customer centric partnership type of a model versus kind of this sort of self-preservation mode.

Stephan Spencer: Alan. Anything that you would like to share with us?

Alan Rimm-Kaufman: I think that question was pretty well – pretty well covered.

Stephan Spencer: Alright. Final question for the day. Let's just do a bit of crystal ball-gazing into the future. You could go as far as the next year or the next five years if you would like. **Just paint a picture for us for our listeners of what the search engine industry will look like in some amount of time.** What will search engines look like? What will the industry of SEO look like?

Let's start with Brian.

Brian Klais: Well, I think that if you look at the next year or two – immediate – the immediate future – I think the challenges that we are going to face are what it means to optimize a website for three major engines and separate algorithms at once without being spammy and then if that's not difficult enough, coping with the innovation

that is occurring so, you know, Google or any of the other engines developing and launching local search and personalized search and desktop search and how those opportunities can be leveraged across many online channels at once. You know, blogs, RSS, PDF publishing, e-mail marketing campaigns. All those channels are – they have influence now. They are all in play.

And so the extreme fragmentation that is occurring as a result of the innovation that is happening at the engine level – it is adding such complexity to the – to the mix that it is no longer as easy as “Well, just optimize your website for Google and you will be okay generally speaking.” There are many factors that are – that are going into it and search is pervasive. It’s becoming more and more ubiquitous so it’s touching all aspects of the online world.

So how we manage that and, you know, how we take advantage of those opportunities, I think, is what’s exciting in the years to come.

Stephan Spencer: Ammon. How about yourself?

Ammon Johns: Oh, there is so much happening. It’s really an exciting time. We’ve got localization and personalization finally becoming real ideas that they are really working on – on bringing to the full, which is going to be a big shakeup to the industry in general.

The core elements of search engine marketing haven’t changed much in the last couple of years. The personalization and localization really do shape those up a lot. I think some of the companies making easy promises based on what they have picked up in the last couple of years are going to find themselves struggling to try and catch up with what’s coming.

There is also the big factor that consolidation within the industry is coming and we have seen some big high-profile purchases, not least I-Prospect, being taken up by IGS, which is now forming a very big group of really full-service staff. There is going to be a lot more of that. I have seen an awful lot of companies with price tags on them.

The search engines are going to keep on evolving, really. This is the key point, you know. We are not at any level of a finished process with the way people are still learning to use it better – and the way they use it changes the way that we have to adapt to that and the way that search engines have to adapt to that.

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I think in a nutshell, it is going to be an interesting time, but predictable? No.

Stephan Spencer: **[laughter]** Okay. Barry. What would you say the future looks like?

Barry Lloyd: I think as far as the SEO industry is concerned, what you are going to see is consolidation and you are going to see, I think, SEO practitioners becoming more rounded in terms of the services they offer their clients.

You are already seeing companies coming out and – who started off in optimization but now are taking on board things like bid management, web analytics, RLI tracking and providing a whole range of services that are related to internet marketing, not just search marketing.

So I think you will see the SEO industry certainly mature. As for search engines, five years is a lifetime in this industry. Who knows what is going to happen then, but as has been previously mentioned, local search, personalized search are going to become more and more prevalent. It is going to be an exciting future.

Stephan Spencer: Okay. And how about Cam?

Cam Balzer: Well, I know there were some comments earlier in the conversation about paid inclusion and how that, you know, is perhaps a negative thing in the industry. I actually see the industry moving more and more in the direction of data feeds driving particular areas of search even within natural search and so I would anticipate to see that – and actually, as a by-product of that, I think that I will go way out on a limb here and predict the death of the keyword.

This industry is really driven around keywords right now but I think as the engines get better at understanding what the user is looking for in the context for their query and as they also get better at understanding what a page is actually about as opposed to which keywords are on the page that keywords are no longer going to be the magic here, which is obviously going to result in, you know, a pretty fundamental shift in the way this industry works.

I think, in line with previous comments, that in that kind of a scenario, the industry becomes more about holistic online marketing; about how a client merchandises their products, how they design their website for usability and for content, so that is kind of the way – maybe not five years, but way out there.

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Stephan Spencer: Fascinating. Okay. Alan, how about yourself?

Alan Rimm-Kaufman: I think we are going to see the blending of paid and unpaid search – the engines are public companies and the money at stake is so large it is going to look much more like product placement in the movies. I think much more money is going to change hands both on what seems to be organic and what seems not to be organic. I think search is going to leave the desktop. I could envision an ipod-esque device with GPS that not only would do the MP3s but would be the all-information-with-you device on your hip probably two or three years out using those search as universal encyclopedia knowledge bases.

I could see trust being purchased, authority and subjects being purchased and bartered between sites and I could also see strong XML categorization tags being pushed across where people would agree on some sort of a hierarchy – a super Dewey Decimal system as to how content could be characterized for the good of the whole web.

I think the local search will also be a tremendous business, dwarfing what is currently going on by a factor of five or ten. I think local search will eat the Yellow Page industry whole and make what we see now just the tip of the iceberg.

Stephan Spencer: Interesting. Ian. Anything you would like to predict for the future?

Ian McAnerin: Yeah. I think the search engines are going to stop looking for websites and are going to start looking for information and whether that information is on your desktop or in a .pdf file or in a vertical or in a blog or news or whatever, right now it is still – they are adding those things slowly, but it is very much a website-centric process and I think you are going to see a lot more of an information-centric process in the future where people – where they will pull answers from answers.com or Encarta and add maps and stock quotes and you name it – and try to almost create a portal, an information portal, every time you type in a search and it will be an information portal aimed at what you are looking for.

We are seeing the beginnings of that right now and I think that's going to continue into the future.

Stephan Spencer: Alright, how about Mike? I would love to hear from Mike on this one. What's the future got to hold here?

Mike Grehan:

Well, I think the word “consolidation” has been used a couple of times here. I actually think rationalization is something closer to it. This industry is still just a baby trying to find its feet. It doesn’t know how to walk yet, you know. It’s kind of like the tip of the iceberg – any analogy you like.

So it is very difficult to predict the future, but certainly as we go through this mini-dot-com-to-dot-bomb situation that we have seen before, I think that there will be some fallout, so for 2006, next year, in the near future, yeah, the industry will begin to rationalize and that is a good thing and then people will start to adopt search marketing and it will become a line item and a lot of the bogus guys may not be in the industry anymore.

On the technical side – I mean, we have seen three phases of search right up to the point where at the moment, documents are being ranked purely on links – linkage data or whatever it is. But I think Cam hit the nail right on the head when he mentioned before about the keyword disappearing and it really is an important thing.

I talked to one of the most important scientists in this field recently and what he explained to me was very interesting. He said the way that they look at it themselves on the research side is there are two galaxies out there. He said the first galaxy is the search engine optimization galaxy; the content creators. And we are the guys who control that. But to them, the other galaxy is the end user and they control the end user.

So now they have data about the end user. They are using, in fact, a support machine – all kinds of different information that we don’t have access to about the end user and certainly with personalization coming along, it could well be the death of the keyword. Again, as somebody else said to me, you know, typing in “blue widgets” will mean absolutely nothing. It will depend on who is typing it in at what time of the day and at what part of the world they are in.

So I think there will be those kind of changes there but certainly the search engines have a lot more in terms of the technology that they can use themselves to find out what it is that the end user is actually looking for because it is about that kind of relevance. If somebody has a problem and they are looking for that kind of solution, even that guy that I was talking to can’t say what’s happening in five years but he is very excited about the fact that he has spotted these two galaxies now, so there is going to be a difference, yeah.

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Stephan Spencer: Fascinating. Absolutely fascinating. So it is interesting how this whole evolution of search kind of is moving and at the same time, we see the whole evolution of the web and a way that is much more conversational with – with blogging and, you know, forums and it's just – the passive websites in the brochure ware that we have grown used to over the past ten years of the history of the web is really falling to be passé and it's interesting how just everything is shifting and one of my favorite websites out on the web today is a site called Slicker that you might have – you might be aware of S – L – I – C – K – E – R dot com and I think it's just a great example of where the web is heading to and should be heading to – much more conversational, much more interactive sort of model. It's actually based on role-playing games.

So anyway, that was our last question and I greatly appreciate everyone sticking around for this whole event – this was a fantastic summit. I can't imagine it being any better for our inaugural summit. Fantastic. Some great knowledge has been conveyed to our listeners and what we will be doing next is we will create a transcript and we will create a synopsis report of, you know, what the findings and recommendations and trends and so forth are in the search industry.

So thank you all for joining us today. I greatly appreciate it. Roy, did you have any final comments?

Roy Young: This is fantastic. I can't wait to get off and look up the Elvis search engine. I really appreciate all your insights, everyone. I feel like I have attended a Danny Sullivan conference just this morning in the comfort of my own office.

So thank you, everyone, so much and we will be getting you a link to the recording, and as Stephen said, a copy of the transcript.

So thank you all so much and have a great day or evening in the case of folks in London. I know you want to get to the pub right away, so...

Man: Absolutely.

Roy Young: Cheers. **[crosstalk]**

Man: We want to get to the pub too and we are in California.

Man: We've got to get there before Mike does and drains it dry.
[laughter] [END OF FILE]

About the Thought Leaders

Cam Balzer is an online marketing expert with a proven track record for driving results and delivering innovation in the search engine marketing arena. Cam's expertise is based on nearly ten years experience across all online marketing channels. Cam is currently the director of search strategy for Performics, the performance-based marketing division of DoubleClick and the leading search engine marketing firm.

Christine Churchill is President of KeyRelevance.com, a full service search engine marketing firm offering organic search engine optimization, strategic link building, usability testing, and pay per click management. She was on the founding Board of Directors of the Search Engine Marketing Professional Organization (SEMPO) and is the Vice President of the Dallas-Ft Worth Search Engine Marketing Association (DFWSEM).

Mike Grehan is CEO Smart Interactive and author of *Search Engine Marketing: The essential best practice guide*. He is a sought after speaker on the subject of search engine marketing and has worked with major brands both in the US and Europe. Mike is also editor of the email periodical, e-marketing-news.

Ammon Johns is the Marketing Director of Propellernet, a leading, UK-based, Search Marketing company. Ammon has been a 'thought leader' and innovator in creative and cutting edge SEO techniques for many years, and is held in high regard within the SEM industry. Ammon is a member of the working party set up to found the Search Marketing Association - UK, and is an Administrator at the Cre8asite Forums.

Brian Klais is Vice President of eBusiness Services for Netconcepts, helping retailers and catalogers hone their natural search optimization and email marketing strategies. He is a frequently published author and contributor to publications like Catalog Age Magazine, MarketingProfs.com, American Marketing Association, and Opt-In News Online. Brian also presents at conferences such as ACC and the DMA Annual.

Barry Lloyd runs the MakeMeTops search engine marketing services, which have been assisting companies world-wide with search engine marketing since 1999. He moderates, posts information and writes articles for several major search engine related information sites on a regular basis. He is also acting President for SMA-UK, a UK trade association for search engine marketing professionals.

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Ian McAnerin, founder of McAnerin Networks Inc, is a moderator for the High Rankings and the Search Engine Watch forums, and has been vetted by the standards watchdog SEOConsultants.com and SEOPros directories. He is a founding member of the Search Marketing Association of North America, with published articles in many international newsletters and web site news reports. He has a special interest in SEO legal issues due to his legal background.

Alan Rimm-Kaufman leads the Rimm-Kaufman Group, a marketing services firm specializing in online and multi-channel marketing. Prior, Rimm-Kaufman was VP of Marketing at Crutchfield, a \$220 million consumer electronics e-retailer. A frequent conference speaker and columnist, Rimm-Kaufman holds a PhD in applied statistics from MIT's Sloan School of Business.

Eric Ward founded the Web's first service for generating links and publicity for web sites in 1994. Clients past or present include Amazon.com, DiscoveryChannel.com, and PBS.org. Eric trains ad agencies, PR firms, and site developers in the art of link building and online publicity. In 1998 Websight magazine named him one of the world's 100 most influential people on the web.

Jill Whalen of High Rankings is an internationally recognized search engine optimization consultant and host of the free weekly High Rankings Advisor search engine marketing newsletter. She specializes in search engine optimization, SEO consultations and seminars. Jill's handbook, "The Nitty-gritty of Writing for the Search Engines" teaches business owners how and where to place relevant keyword phrases on their Web sites so that they make sense to users and gain high rankings in the major search engines.