

Organic Vs. Paid Search

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Most searches on a major Search Engine such as Google will call up two types of search results: Organic search and Paid search (also known as Pay-Per-Click). Organic search results on Google appear on the left of the page, whilst Paid search results appear on the right. The basic difference between these types of results is simple. Paid search results are those for which an advertiser has paid Google – the prominent position is secured by a financial transaction. Organic search results have not been paid for – a prominent position is assigned by Google based on a complex set of algorithms that determines how relevant the website is to the search term used.

Both Organic and Paid search have their advantages, and which is the most appropriate to use will depend on the nature of the campaign in question. To explain, let's look at each in more depth.

Search Engines such as Google assess a website according to a wide range of factors and assign it rankings for relevant keyphrases. In the case of Google, this assessment takes in more than 200 different metrics, among them such things as keywords, number of quality in-bound links from third-party websites and portals, coding, information architecture and usability. Securing high rankings is essential for Organic search to be successful, and websites engage in ongoing Search Engine Optimization campaigns to do so. Each results page on Google shows 10 Organic search results, and more than 75% of Internet users move on after the second page of results. So to be truly effective, Search Engine Optimization needs to secure listings in the top 20 results for targeted keyphrases. This can take some time, typically 6 months, but with proper maintenance it is possible to keep high Organic rankings in the long term.

Paid search listings, such as Google AdWords, are accomplished by "bidding" (paying) for specific keyphrases related to your product or service. High rankings are achieved immediately, but are only retained for as long as you keep paying for them. The exact position of Paid search listings depends on a range of factors, including the price paid and the quality score assigned by the Search Engine to the landing page or website. Advertisers pay only when an Internet user clicks their paid link.

According to Jupiter Research, four out five clicks from a search results page come from Organic search results. This is a clear indication of how much more seriously Internet users regard Organic search. So does this mean that Organic search is always the best method to use? Actually, no, it doesn't. In the long-term, Organic search yields the most cost-effective results, but there are specific circumstances in which Paid search is more appropriate.

Paid search can provide you with an immediate boost in pre-qualified website traffic, leads and online sales. As Paid search advertisements appear straight away, results can be seen within days, even within hours, of the start of a campaign. This makes Paid search extremely useful for tactical campaigns, or for promotional campaigns involving time-sensitive or seasonal offers which need immediate exposure.

The other major time when Paid search is the best option is during the early stages of Search Engine Optimization. As a typical SEO campaign takes 6 months to "ramp up", Paid search is an effective way of getting fast results and a good return on investment whilst waiting for higher Organic search listings to be gained. In the short-term, Paid search is often the best option.

The major disadvantage of Paid search is cost. In the long-term, Paid search is significantly more costly than Organic search, with cost running into hundreds or even thousands of dollars each day, particularly for the most valuable keyphrases. And the cost is increasing. Google's reinforcement of "Quality Score" has raised costs for non-targeted keyphrase buys that get a "Poor" quality score. This has had a serious effect on the cost of Google AdWords, in particular for affiliate sites.

With various optimization strategies you can lower your costs for Paid search, but over the long term organic Search Engine Optimization will give you a higher return on your marketing dollar. In a September 2006 poll by MarketingSherpa, 68.7% of US marketers identified Search Engine Optimization as yielding the best Return on Investment for product marketing.

To summarize, both Organic and Paid search have their uses. Organic search is the best long-term option to yield the maximum Return on Investment – the costs are lower, the click-through rates are higher, and positions are retained for longer. But Paid search is the best option in the short term – you only pay for the clicks you receive and results are immediate. As with most things in marketing, it is getting the right mix of elements that is important, which means Organic search as the basis of a marketing strategy, backed up by Paid search for key and time-sensitive initiatives.

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