



Search. Does it Pay to Pay?

As a community management company or even a community association, one of your goals is probably to make more people aware of you and what you offer. Most people realize that a great way to accomplish that these days is to have a web site on the Internet. Unfortunately the famous line "If you build it, they will come" does not apply so well in the web site arena so the next thing you have to consider is how to get people to your web site so they can find out more about you. There are a number of ways of going about getting this "traffic" to your web site but one of the best is being listed on the leading search web sites. This past January Neilson NetRatings reported that in the single month of November 2005, 5.1 BILLION internet searches were made by US web surfers using the top 60 search sites. That should tell you that people are relying heavily on search sites to find what they need on the Internet. Of those 5.1 billion searches fully 88% were done using just 4 search sites (Google, Yahoo, MSN and AOL, in that order) and Google alone represented 46.3% of that total. So, let's focus on the "low hanging fruit" and see about getting listed on those "big 4" search sites.

In the "good old days" (the late 1990's) you would simply let the search sites know your web site existed by submitting your web address to them and you stood a pretty good chance of getting listed in their search engine. Alas, with the amazing growth in the number of web sites and the significant commercialization that has taken place on the Internet over the last 6 years this is now wishful thinking. The way to make sure you get traffic from search engines these days is, quite simply, to pay for it. This approach is commonly called "Pay Per Click" advertising or just "PPC" and it works like this: you determine which search results pages you would like your listing to show up on (for example, "Florida Community Management") and then you decide how much money you are willing to pay for each "click" you get from the search site on that particular search term (maybe 10 cents). This results in a "bid" to advertise and the search site will then weigh your bid against others who have bid for the same search term and rank your listing based upon how you compare. Those who pay more per click get listed higher than those willing to pay less. Your listing won't show up with the regular (free) search results on the page but instead shows up in a special "sponsored links" section above and/or to the side of the regular search results. This can be a highly cost effective way to drive traffic to your site depending upon your goals and a well-worded listing targeted at the right search terms can result in a 5%, 10% or even better "click thru rate", or CTR, which is the percentage

of people seeing your listing who actually click on it to visit your site. These response rates are quite a bit higher than those of more traditional forms of advertising like direct mail primarily because you are getting to people exactly when they are thinking about the subject your site relates to.

Now a warning, because the Internet is global and you will have to pay for each "click" to your site you have to be very careful about what search terms you decide to bid on for your listing. If you set your search terms too broadly, like "association manager" or "condominium" you will probably pay for clicks from people living not only all over the country but possibly all over the world, which is probably not what you want to spend your money on. You are better off targeting your search terms geographically as much as possible to reduce this. So try combining your subject matter with the names of cities, counties or areas of town near you, like "Orlando community manager", or "Clearwater condominium". You won't get as much traffic this way but the traffic you get will be very targeted. The other advantage of this targeting is that it reduces the competition for listings and will usually result in a lower cost per click rate and better (higher) listings.

You can bid on as many search terms as you feel like and you can easily limit the amount of money you want to spend on "clicks" by setting the per-click amount and by setting an overall daily spending limit. Start off small to get a feel for it and then build it to your comfort level while measuring the results against your goals.

How to get started? Well, each of the "big 4" search sites has some variation on the PPC advertising concept. On Google they call it "AdWords", Yahoo calls it "Sponsored Search" and MSN and AOL either borrow ads from one of the other two or use their own similar service. A good idea is to go to your favorite search site and find a link called "Advertising Programs" or "Advertise with us" to learn more about it.

If all of this sounds a bit intimidating you can find companies that will manage this process for you for an extra fee. Be careful because there are many companies that do this and not all of them have your best interest at heart. You can find more about them by searching on "Search engine optimization" at your favorite search site.

The bottom line is that if you put some up front effort into figuring out the best search terms to be listed under and invest a nominal monthly amount into PPC ads you can start generating some nice external traffic to your web site. Try it, you just might like the results.