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# Get a grip!

The struggle of brand control in search engines. By Kelly Kochert

Kelly Kochert is Director of Search Operations for Outrider. Kelly's role is to develop and guide all internal staff and clients on the evolution of search and the role it should play in their overall marketing initiatives.

Search engines have given consumers power to seek out information on products and services on their own terms. A positive result is that marketers are empowered to increase their own relevance to savvy searchers with targeted content and advertising. Yet in a marketplace where brand owners could control a greater stream of communication, many fall short of true brand ownership in the search space.

This is most evident when a brand receives negative mainstream press. Examples of brands being overrun in the search space abound in the pharmaceutical industry, where drug recalls prompt frequent searches for information that are often met with ads for lawyers and anti-company sites. The brand is essentially hijacked to other sites seeking to make a profit. Case in point: a search for 'Vioxx' on Yahoo! yields 11 search ads for lawsuits and lawyers. The brand site is first in natural listings, but Merck, the drug's manufacturer, can be sure that the opposing ads draw traffic away from the brand. A search for 'Merck pharmaceuticals' results in ads about a recall and lawsuits with no messaging from Merck. Merck could be using the search space to further the brand message and the steps of the recall, essentially giving the company's side. But what should be a natural PR exercise has yet to be translated to an online search initiative. Merck could choose to bid for exposure with a site/page devoted to explaining the FDA decision on Vioxx, or could push people through natural listings to a PR release about the removal of the product from the market. Instead, the space is owned by lawyers and news sites leaving the consumers to draw their own conclusions.

Wal-Mart is another example of a brand losing control of its search results. A search in Yahoo! yields 13 ads, none of which are owned by the brand. The results are a mix of shopping aggregators and news sites. Opposition, news and discount sites infiltrate the organic listings along side brand results. The company has in the past used search to control brand message. The retailer employed paid search in January of 2005 to combat rumors and anti-Wal-Mart sites. The company launched WalmartFacts.com and purchased keywords in Overture to drive consumers to the site and to present its side of several high-profile issues. WalmartFacts.com was able to direct consumers to the site, which provided a channel to inform and communicate the company message. This is certainly a step toward the solution, yet without a strong organic search solution for consistent presence and full-time paid exposure, the problems previously experienced will return quickly and require more expense and energy to combat.

**As online news distribution and the general search behavior of consumers becomes more ubiquitous, it is obvious that search positioning and strategy will be key. For those companies that choose to allow opportunistic third parties to tread heavily on their space, they will find greater disconnect between consumers and their brands.**

Companies can bring relevance to their brand using search in times of crisis. By proactively using the search space to protect the brand message and provide a direct channel to communicate messaging to the public, a company can counter anti-company and lawyer sites in times of crisis such as a recall, controversial employment issues, unexpected tragedies and more.

**Outrider**  
A WPP Company  
111 Westport Plaza  
Suite 350  
St. Louis, MO 63146

T 314.209.1005  
F 314.209.1126  
search.outrider.com