

Making Sense of Search

by Mark Toner | Illustration by Ryan Etter

Al Rotti is the first to admit he doesn't know a lot about the Internet. But the owner of a Holden, Mass., power equipment supplier does know how people find his store online—and it's *not* by Googling "Rotti's Power and Service" and hitting the "I'm feeling lucky" button.

Nutshell

- ▶ Search overwhelmingly drives user behavior, prompting newspapers to maximize online visibility by optimizing and marketing their online content.
- ▶ Changing online behaviors provide new opportunities to win advertisers for local search efforts, often building upon existing verticals.
- ▶ Newspapers are also employing strategies that blend local search with global reach to help advertisers boost their visibility on search engines like Yahoo! and Google.

After one of the tools he sells gets rated as a best buy, "people will go out and search for [that] product online," says Rotti, whose company's slogan is "Where Real Men Buy Their Toys." When they do, his store pops up on search results across the Web, from Google and Yahoo! to WickedLocal Shopping (<https://stores.wickedlocal.com>), the local retail search engine offered by GateHouse Media of Fairport, N.Y., in partnership with www.Yokel.com, a

search engine for local shopping.

Meanwhile, Ottaway Newspapers Inc. in Campbell Hall, N.Y., is perfectly happy that most people are getting to the rich business listings it's building on www.HudsonValley.com and six other regional sites through Google Maps. In fact, Ottaway entered a content-sharing partnership with Google Inc. (www.google.com), and is providing—for free—rich metadata offering specific information about more than 7,000

Newspapers are retooling search strategies—and bringing their advertisers along for the ride





Ottawa's Kurt Lozier

businesses in the markets Ottawa's newspapers serve.

"The more data you have in your system, the higher your rank in [search results]," explains Kurt Lozier, Ottawa's director of Internet product revenue. "The better results users get in Google, the better the likelihood people will click back and increase traffic on our sites."

Welcome to the calculus driving the search industry, which in turn is driven by Google. By turning its eponymous search engine into the verb that describes how people use the Web, it's changed the entire game for most content providers. Small wonder, then, that Microsoft Corp. (www.microsoft.com) tried to buy Google's closest competitor, Yahoo! (www.yahoo.com)—and was turned down, at least initially, for offering a measly \$44.6 billion. And that's before anyone has perfected mobile search, driven by location-aware handheld devices that can find the nearest gas station with the push of a button. "People's muscle memory has them start with their favorite search engine," says Lozier. "What's important is providing them with information that helps them in the place they already are."

Newspapers are finding wildly varied footholds in that space. Go to www.boston.com, and you'll notice that the ubiquitous search box sitting atop the site defaults to a unified search of newspaper content, events, multimedia, area businesses and

more than 2,000 local sites indexed, in part, by a team of editorial and Web staffers. "Human intervention is what we think is the secret sauce locally," says Robert Kempf, vice president of product for www.boston.com. Gannett Co. may not be Microsoft, but it has acquired Planet Discover (www.planetdiscover.com), a developer of local search technologies Gannett is rolling out as part of its hyperlocal initiatives, while www.local.com partnered with MediaSpan (www.mediaspangroup.com) to bring its local business directories to more than 1,500 media sites, offering newspapers and their advertisers the opportunity to snare more traffic.

"Consumers are looking for local businesses online," says Malcolm Lewis, vice president and general manager of Local.com's private label search offerings. "Local advertisers want to be found on Google, Yahoo!, Local.com. Newspapers must address that need and accept they no longer control the majority of eyeballs and distribution."

To that end, publishers are discovering potentially lucrative niches by helping their local advertisers play in both worlds—local search engines or directories of their own creation, as well as the infinite sandbox of the broader search universe, driving traffic and revenue alike.

"Many of the models I've seen equate to throwing darts at King Kong," says Gordon Borrell, chief executive officer of Borrell Associates Inc. (www.borrellassociates.com). "But they're a start."

SEO a Go-Go

The first challenge for many content providers is just getting their sites noticed. That's far less of an issue

Simple SEO

SIX WAYS TO optimize search engine results from the NAA report "Smart Strategies: A Fresh Look at Marketing for Online Newspapers" (www.naa.org/smartstrategies):

▶ Meta title tags, which provide information about a Web page's content to search engine spiders, are the most important piece of data for the robots crawling your content. Make every word count, and limit the number of terms to about six to eight.

▶ The same goes for visible user content, especially headlines and the first paragraph on the home page. The Sacramento Bee's www.SacBee.com, for instance, tries to get the word "Sacramento" and other important keywords into both places as often as possible.

▶ Ensure your content is indexed by search engine spiders. Major search engines offer ways to verify this is happening. If your site is not getting indexed, you're not getting found.

▶ Use Cascading Style Sheets, which let spiders get past all that HTML to the meat of your content faster.

▶ Keep news content up longer, and ensure visitors coming directly from search sites can access it.

▶ Use text. Content embedded in Flash and images is generally not crawled by search engines. Use meaningful file names and "alt tags" for images, not just "image1.jpg" and "picture goes here."

“Newspapers need to remember it is not just the headline that brings them up on a search page.”

— PETER KRASILOVSKY,
THE KELSEY GROUP



for The New York Times than it is for Al Rotti, but publishers still have to pay attention to how search-engine “spiders,” automated programs that prowl the Internet, index and rank their content.

In a nutshell, if a site is linked to by a bunch of other sites that are, in turn, linked to by a bunch of other sites, chances are it will rise to the top of search results. Picture the “they told a friend, and those friends told two friends” shampoo commercials of the 1970s, and you’ve got a fairly good sense of the secret sauce behind search engine rankings.

Of course, it’s not quite that simple, as shown by the burgeoning \$2.7 billion search engine optimization (SEO) industry—and the fact that Google and other search engines keep tweaking their search algorithms to keep SEO specialists from gaming the system. Newspapers’ oft-linked content and sheer presence in their local markets are usually enough to pull their sites to the top of search results. When newspaper sites don’t top the results, relatively simple concepts can win the day.

“It’s not brain surgery,” says Mike Blinder, president of the Blinder Group (www.blindergroup.com), a multimedia sales consulting company. “All you have to do is some very simple things. If you can maximize with metatags, you can solidly win in the local space, and take that to your advertisers.” Those tags—invisible to Web users but all-important to search engine spiders—should include keywords for the locations and topics of interest to readers.

“Think like users, not media people,” Blinder advises. “What do people want from you? Find those words, and use them.” For instance,

The Houston Chronicle’s www.chron.com rose to near the top of all U.S. newspapers on Google News after staffers made sure all pages were tagged with the word “Houston,” as well as terms describing key news topics—Enron and Hurricane Rita, for example (see story, p. 24).

“Newspapers need to remember it is not just the headline that brings them up on a search page,” adds Peter Krasilovsky, program director at The Kelsey Group (www.kelseygroup.com), a research firm specializing in Yellow Pages, electronic directories and local search, and author of www.localonliner.com, a blog about local media. “It’s also the community content, such as maps, letters, ratings.”

Another growing practice is paying for search-engine eyeballs, a practice known more delicately as search engine marketing (SEM) or “paid search.” It’s a \$5.6 billion market, and growing numbers of newspapers have become customers.

“There’s a big audience for people looking for news online, [but] a very targeted audience looking for [a

specific] newspaper brand,” says Kate Stanford, Google’s head of industry marketing for classifieds and local sales division. She should know—she previously worked at Philadelphia Newspapers Inc., and in her role at Google, Stanford sees users trying to find “newspaper-like content,” if not newspapers themselves.

Last November, The New York Times tied five of its key channels—movies, travel, business, opinion and technology—into a paid search and banner campaign across Google, boosting site traffic and the number of searches referring to the Times by name (“Google Press Day Highlights Advertising Partnerships,” April, p. 25). This kind of promotion “is not just brand building,” Stanford says. “It’s really looking to showcase content offerings.”

BY THE NUMBERS

\$20 BILLION : Estimate of annual local search revenue.

0.5 : Percent of newspapers’ total share of local search revenue.

30 : Percent of all Yahoo! searches with local intent.

9 of 10 : Number of people who stop looking after the third page of Google search results.

85 : Percent of online consumers who search online for offline purchases.

SOURCES: DERINGER RESEARCH GROUP, YAHOO!, BORRELL ASSOCIATES INC.

Local Search: Opportunity or Oxymoron?

DEPENDING ON whom you ask, local search is a marketplace worth as little as \$2.5 billion annually—or as much as \$20 billion. Either way, newspapers currently hold a tiny share of that revenue: \$57 million, or less than one-half of 1 percent, estimates Gordon Borrell, chief executive officer of Borrell Associates Inc. (www.borrellassociates.com).

While newspaper sites have long dominated their markets in terms of news and advertising content, they've divided content into a variety of walled gardens. "We have 19 search boxes—classifieds, news, display

ads," says Mike Blinder, president of the Blinder Group (www.blinder-group.com). But, he says, "People don't think that way. They're looking for a car."

Newspapers are now revisiting local search, offering new services and blended strategies that tie local content into global search engines. A new NAA Digital Edge report, "Local Search: Opportunity or Oxymoron?" offers case studies of several strategies currently in play. The report is available at www.naa.org/localsearch.

Other newspapers buy keywords related to major stories, adding new terms frequently as news happens. "Not a lot of newspapers have the bandwidth to do that on an everyday basis, but as newspapers become more familiar with [search marketing], you'll see more of that," Stanford predicts.

Neither strategy is a novel one for newspapers, though the use of these tactics is growing rapidly. Less commonplace, however, is the notion that newspapers can tap the same approaches to help their advertisers. "The disservice we've done our advertisers is that we haven't told them how to get found," says Melinda Gipson, GateHouse's former director of Internet business development.

Finding Advertisers

Creating local business directories has long served as low-margin, low-hanging fruit for newspaper sites. But something has changed, according to Blinder—namely, that the Yellow Page franchise is now vulnerable, leaving a much larger prize up for grabs. "Seventy-five-year-old women are going to Google to find a plumber,"

Blinder says. "It's killing their market. If we do it right, we can win local search."

But winning solutions are unlikely to stop at the Yellow Page-like directories long offered by both newspapers and their competitors (see story, above). In one way or another, newspapers' approaches are likely to have connections to Yahoo! and Google, both of which have robust, if uneven, local search tools of their own.

Ottaway worked with Planet Discover to revamp its own business directories, designing an in-house metadata collection engine to feed information about local businesses—hours of operation, services and the like—directly to Google, a tactic long employed by national aggregators like www.restaurant.com. Rolled out in March, Ottaway is using telemarketing and breakfast seminars to encourage local businesses to enter their metadata for free and then selling premium listings and search positions on its own site. "Our goal is to have people understand that they may go to Google in the beginning, but they keep ending up with data and information from [A hand is shown interacting with a futuristic, circular search interface. The interface has a glowing red center and several buttons around the perimeter. The words "OPTIMIZE SEARCH" are prominently displayed at the top in a stylized font. The overall aesthetic is sleek and high-tech.](http://www.</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox=)

HudsonValley.com," Lozier says. "Then it becomes a vertical search site."

Specialized sites targeting familiar advertiser verticals are growing, says Planet Discover President David Lenzen. "We have deployed vertical search for home improvement, cosmetic surgery, gift guides and dining," he says. "There will be more emphasis put on vertical or hyperlocal search functionality."

"Newspapers with local directories are finding ways to monetize that go beyond just site traffic," agrees Beth Lawton, NAA manager of digital media. Still, publishers "tend to be far removed from the 'local information hub' concept that would allow them to compete head-on with the \$17 billion directory business"—which has a whopping 5,500 categories, Krasilovsky cautions.

To capture those categories, other newspapers are shifting away from narrowly focused verticals. In Nashua, N.H., The Telegram combined once-siloed listings of retailers, hotels and restaurants offered on its statewide www.NH.com portal into a single business directory powered by www.local.com to draw more traffic and improve search engine results, says Ernesto Burden, vice president of new media.

The Boston Globe's Web site, www.boston.com, ceded the business portion of its new local search to Google, augmenting its data with specialized information, such as directions for Boston's "T" mass transit system. While losing the ability to sell enhanced search listings, www.boston.com's single-search approach places business listings front-and-center for relevant searches like "plumbers in Cambridge" and adds contextual display ads to Google's

“We’re not monetizing the listings themselves but the advertising inventory around them.”

— ROBERT KEMPF,
BOSTON.COM



listings—often from competing merchants. “We’re not monetizing the listings themselves, but the advertising inventory around them,” says Kempf. “I learned this from the search engines.”

To be successful, newspapers will have to draw more traffic and rethink how they develop such applications, Krasilovsky argues. “What they need to do is really take a ‘sales first’ approach. When you are looking for a wedding gown, you don’t necessarily want to wade through 30 articles about the bliss of marriage.”

More emphasis also will be placed on helping customers find advertisers like Rotti, no matter where they happen to be looking. “We don’t think users come to the Internet to find stuff any one way. We want to be able to use search and product discovery to drive people into a store,” Gipson says. “Consumers don’t go to the Internet looking for stores. They go looking for stuff.”

GateHouse encourages local merchants to add inventory feeds or product listings to the WickedLocal Shopping site, so the products appear in local and national search results—as well as in print ads in GateHouse newspapers showcasing the most popular items offered for sale by a variety of merchants. And www.Zvents.com, which provides local event listings to newspapers in The McClatchy Co. and New York Times Regional Media groups, among others, has begun incorporating retailer events, such as plumbing

workshops at a local Home Depot.

Other newspapers are experimenting with mixed models that blend business directories, banner advertising, premium search results and search optimization, all with the goal of driving more traffic to advertisers. The Savannah Morning News’ business directory on www.SavannahNow.com “works fine, [but] doesn’t get the local business in front of people using search engines,” says Online Sales Manager Dave Fogel. So last December, SavannahNow began selling packages, which include advertising inventory on Yahoo! Local (<http://local.yahoo.com>) as part of its participation in Yahoo!’s newspaper consortium, along with premium search results, advertising and a business listing on www.SavannahNow.com. That listing, in turn, links to the more detailed business profile in the business directory or the company’s own Web site, which helps boost the advertiser’s overall search rankings.

“Just mentioning to potential customers that we can offer them something to help get their rankings high has been a great way to get in the door and talk about other programs to bundle the SEO with,” Fogel says.

Growing numbers of newspapers also are working to help their advertisers benefit from paid search. “We need to be able to handle the placement of businesses’ digital dollars not only within our own media properties, but anywhere it makes sense for a local business,” says Lozier of Ottaway, which became a certified

Google AdWords reseller in February. Ad reps can educate businesses on how SEM works, and even companies with past experience in the labor-intensive process of buying keyword campaigns appreciate having “a trusted partner in the area who can take over the work for them,” he says. “We’re opening the door to a long-term strategy of becoming the local interactive agency.”

While high per-click costs can make it difficult for local advertisers to achieve a return on their investment—“soon buying anything with the word ‘Savannah’ in it became a \$5 click,” Fogel says of his experiments with a local auto dealer—tying SEM to local search can bolster overall results.

“Every dollar you spend for every merchant in your system benefits you as a whole,” Gipson says. “It’s a fairly low-margin business, and yet the conundrum for us is that it drives results, and it’s one of the things the merchant judges us on.”

Rotti’s certainly quick to pass judgment. He says his store’s revenues rose 30 percent last year through the combination of local search and national reach. “They find the product and they find my store,” he says. ■