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Six must-know international SEO tips to expand business

30-second summary:

- Achieving online visibility on an international scale can be tricky, particularly when you factor in differences in language, culture, and search habits. It’s not a cookie-cutter approach where one size fits all across all regions.
- Chief Executive at Go Up Ltd, Edward Coram James shares a strategy to tackle the challenges of international SEO.
- Right from picking an effective domain strategy to implementing localized link building, there’s more to discover.

The start of international expansion is an incredible milestone for any business, and gearing up to take your venture around the world will be one of the most exciting moments of your career. But just because your business is thriving at home doesn’t mean that it will be a success abroad. To achieve that, you’ll need to give attention to your international SEO strategy.

Achieving online visibility on an international scale can be tricky, particularly when you factor in differences in language, culture, and search habits. It’s not a cookie-cutter approach where one size fits all across all regions. However, you’ll be more than ready to tackle the challenges of

international SEO once you've followed these six must-know tips, and should soon see your business soaring in search rankings across the globe.

1. Pick an effective domain strategy

A .com TLD is usually considered the cream of the crop when it comes to domains and the authority afforded to them by search engines. But this can be far too generic to attract international customers. Instead, your domain should clearly target your country of choice and show users around the world that your website is catered specifically to them.

A ccTLD (for example, *cocacola.fr*) is often popular because the country code immediately shows users and search engines what the target country is. However, if you have multiple localized versions of the website across a number of ccTLDs, search engines will treat these as separate entities, meaning each domain will need to build up backlinks and authority from scratch.

A subdirectory (like *nike.com/fr*) maintains all your pre-existing SEO efforts as you're simply adding a localized folder to your current domain. However, this risks causing internal cannibalization if different international landing pages are optimized for the same keywords, such as a US subfolder and an Australian subfolder where the language is largely the same.

A subdomain (such as *fr.airbnb.com*) is often the default for CMS tools, but users are less likely to associate your site with their country as the country code comes first rather than last, meaning click-through-rates could take a hit.

All domain strategies have pros and cons, so it's important to ascertain how each option would work for your business

specifically. Matthew Finn, one of the SEO specialists at Go Up, highlights several points that could determine your international domain strategy decision. Budget obviously comes into play—ccTLDs can be particularly expensive—and your branding could be a factor too.

As they explain: “If your company has a logo which features your domain, or brand guidelines which stipulate talking about your business as YourBrand.com, then a ccTLD wouldn’t work.” You also need to consider possible limitations of your CMS and current domain. For instance, subdirectories and subdomains only work with an existing generic top-level domain like .com. Look at the domain structures of competitors in your new target countries to see what Google favors. You might decide to use a combination of all three strategies to target different markets.

2. Conduct localized keyword research

You may feel like you have a good understanding of your current audience’s search habits, but these keywords may not be popular across the board. Conducting localized keyword research will help you judge the online queries likely to serve you best in each country.

This isn’t so difficult when you’re targeting other English speakers, though you still have to take slang and regional variations into account. For example, if you’re a shoe business going after an Australian audience, you would probably be better off targeting “thong” rather than “flip flop” keywords. This is especially relevant to voice search.

Of course, things become more complicated when dealing with entirely different languages. You may not understand the words themselves and also need to consider how cultural context can impact intent. Findings from Webcertain showed significant

differences between the search habits of US and Chinese users. Roughly 60% of US searches about chairs related to style and shape, yet only 20% of Chinese searches had the same intent. In fact, 5% more Chinese searches were action-based—what to do with the chair. Culture can hugely influence how people formulate their online queries and you can't ignore this factor when choosing location-specific keywords.

3. Don't assume one language means one culture

One size does not fit all when it comes to international expansion, especially considering the diversity of languages. There are many differences in Standard Portuguese and Brazilian Portuguese, while there are plenty of Spanish variations spoken across North America, South America and the Caribbean, let alone the many regional dialects in Spain itself. You may think that translating your website into a "standard" language will enable you to connect with all relevant markets, but you risk alienating millions of potential customers if you don't tailor your content to each target location.

First of all, remember that idioms or colloquialisms may make sense in one place but not in another, even if the same language is spoken. If an Ireland-based furniture business used the word "press", it's highly unlikely any English-speakers outside the country would realize this referred to a kitchen cupboard.

Similarly, some words, images, and practices are accepted in one place but offensive in another. Though Arabic is the official language of both Morocco and Saudi Arabia, references to alcohol would only be permissible when targeting the former as drinking is forbidden in Saudi Arabia. You also need to use the correct measurements, currencies, and other details, which may vary from country to country regardless of language.

French-speaking Canadians would be puzzled to see prices in euros rather than Canadian dollars.

Errors like this could deter users and damage a business's trust, authority, and click-through-rate. Therefore, it would be a huge mistake to focus on accurate translations without considering the unique historical and cultural factors making every place unique. Consulting people familiar with the nuances of each target location will ensure your content is suitable for all the potential customers living there.

4. Think beyond Google

Google is normally the holy grail when it comes to all SEO efforts, but there may be other search engines to prioritize during international expansion. The majority of users in China and Russia, two of the largest markets in the world, direct the majority of their online queries to entirely different platforms, so focusing on Google alone could be detrimental to your visibility and profits.

In Russia, the leading search engine is Yandex which holds 56% of the market share. This success has been put down to the search engine's deeper understanding of Slavic languages. Meanwhile, Google has been blocked in China under the country's Internet censorship policy. Most Chinese users conduct their online searches through Baidu, which held between 60-77% of the search engine market share in China during 2019.

You can't afford to ignore alternative search engines when targeting markets like these, and it's also important to recognize each has its own unique algorithms. There will be some similarities—for example, Google, Yandex and Baidu all reward quality content—but you'll need to be aware of the differences. Indexing can be very slow for both Yandex and Baidu which means it will take longer to see the benefits of your efforts, so long-term results should be the priority.

Paid search is crucial to Baidu, as paid results are given much greater precedence than organic results. Meanwhile, Yandex still values meta keywords—a metric that Google removed from its ranking algorithm some time ago.

5. Implement hreflang tags

Hreflang tags signpost which languages and locations your pages are aimed at, helping Google to understand which version of a page is most appropriate for its users. For example, if someone in Paris typed in a search term relevant to your product page, an hreflang tag signals to Google that the French version of the page should appear in search results.

To target users as accurately as possible, you should include hreflang tags for both language and region. For instance, an ‘en’ tag shows Google that your page is for all English speakers, but you could also add tags to emphasize the specific geographic locations you’re targeting, en-ca for English speakers in Canada and en-us for English speakers in the US. It’s crucial you use the correct codes—for instance, the UK is ‘gb’ rather than ‘uk’—and a hreflang tag generator like this one recommended by Moz could help minimize mistakes.

6. Start localized link building

Just as with any domestic SEO strategy, links are essential in building the authority of your website within a target locale. To elevate your brand in local search, it’s vital to source links from local platforms within your industry. The more hyperlocal, the better. For example, if you’re opening a new hotel in Berlin, links from travel platforms in the German capital will be more valuable than those in Munich or Hamburg.

Seek out journalistic opportunities and serve as a source of

expertise, guest post on influential sites within a region, and use social channels to build connections with local influencers and businesses. It’s also recommended that you use a translator or someone accustomed to the language and customs of a target region to handle the outreach. The more you extend your brand in a target market, the more you will be rewarded with high authority backlinks.

Edward Coram James is an SEO professional and the Chief Executive at Go Up Ltd, an international agency dedicated to helping its clients navigate the complexities of global SEO and the technical aspects of delivering location-specific pages to targeted audiences.

More about:

https://www.searchenginewatch.com/2020/06/03/six-must-know-international-seo-tips-for-expanding-businesses/

Google is Currently Experience Indexing Problems via @MattGSouthern

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Bing Updates Backlink Research Tool via @martinibuster

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Seven tips for full funnel SEO in 2020

30-second summary:

- Improving their organic search presence is the top

inbound marketing priority for 61% of marketers.

- It’s imperative that today’s marketers leverage paid search at every stage to create more sophisticated strategies because greater sophistication means less wasted budget and higher quality conversions.
- Erica Magnotto gives a crisp breakdown and categorization of how to make your sales and marketing funnel work through SEO.

Improving their organic search presence is the top inbound marketing priority for 61% of marketers. But many are unaware their tried-and-true search engine optimization tactics have lost their potency thanks to today’s more fluid marketing funnel.

Every marketer knows the marketing funnel: The famous upside-down triangle used to visualize the customer journey from “awareness” at the top to “action” at the bottom. Paid search is typically considered a lower-funnel tactic used to nudge customers toward a conversion. But in today’s digitally-dominated landscape, paid search plays a more integrated role.

It’s imperative that today’s marketers leverage paid search at every stage to create more sophisticated strategies because greater sophistication means less wasted budget and higher quality conversions. Here are seven tips to plug in paid search throughout your customer relationships in 2020.

Phase one: Awareness

If you’re currently investing in awareness channels, you’re likely using a combination of programmatic display, video, social and influencers to connect with your audiences. But don’t overlook paid search, which is also effective at driving new users to the website through competitor and educational campaigns.

1. Competitor campaigns

If a customer is looking for your direct competitor, it’s likely they’re in need of your services as well, so bidding on competitor terms is a great way to capture your competitor’s customers. Keep in mind though these keywords are usually expensive and receive lower quality scores, they can help inform customers of their options within your industry.

2. Brand education

Customers looking to educate themselves on a particular product or service are likely to go to Google first. Use this knee-jerk reaction to send web traffic in your direction by adding specific content on your website that answer their questions. Blogs, white papers, FAQ pages, and industry updates are valuable forms of customer education that can develop brand awareness and promote trust with your audience. Even better, you can combine branding and lead generation by gating some of this content to collect user information that can later be repurposed for email marketing, retargeting, lookalike audiences and more.

Phase two: Interest

After a user visits the website and gains familiarity with your brand keep your brand top of mind through retargeting list search ads and audience bidding.

3. Retargeting List Search Ads (RLSAs)

RLSAs can help drive repeat visits to your website by directly targeting and bidding on those previous website visitors. These campaigns typically use tailored messaging, such as a discount, countdown or reminder to complete an action on your website, to create urgency. RLSAs can also be used with the brand and non-branded terms to entice user action in the

decision phase of the funnel.

4. Audience bidding

Marketers should consider applying in-market audiences to campaigns on observation mode to develop a clearer image of how each audience segment performs. Segments that perform or convert at a high level indicate interest from that grouping of potential customers and, therefore, are worth a higher investment through the use of bid modifiers. Bid up on these audiences to garner a stronger return.

Phase Three: Decision

Invest in your brand terms to protect yourself from competitor interference once potential customers have made the conscious decision to engage with your brand. You can also implement extensions to impart more influence during the decision stage and garner increased user engagement.

5. Bid on brand terms

Brand terms serve two purposes in SEO: visibility and defence. First, it’s important to remain relevant to the SERPs by being represented in organic and paid results. Second, while you have the flexibility to bid on competitor terms, the competition can bid on your terms as well. By creating a dedicated brand strategy for search, you can help cut down on competitors showing up in place of you.

6. Use extensions

Extensions such as site links, callouts and structured snippets place more ads on SERPs, giving your ads more opportunity to influence in the decision of customers. Marketers should use as many relevant extensions as possible to improve click-through-rates (CTRs) and higher quality scores.

Phase four: Action

Search engines can optimize toward conversion action through automated bidding after users take action on your website through a paid ad.

7. Automated bidding

Conversion or action data that are stored in Google or Microsoft Ads is repurposed to support automated bidding like Target Cost Per Action (CPA), Maximize Conversions or Target Return on Ad Spend (ROAS). These features support a variety of conversion goals through Google's AI automation. Creating accurate conversions in your account is essential during the final step of the funnel.

Paid search is a foundational channel for driving lead generation initiatives, as it has vast capabilities. Search plays an integral role in every stage of the marketing funnel – not just at the top. Consider connecting with your in-house team or agency partners to revamp your paid search strategy for 2020 to ensure you are leveraging search across the funnel, and, ultimately, boosting the channels' benefit to your bottom line.

Erica Magnotto is Senior Search Engine Marketing Manager at R2i.

More about:

https://www.searchenginewatch.com/2020/06/01/seven-tips-for-full-funnel-seo-in-2020/

The Basics of Link Profile Analysis via @BrianHarnish

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COVID-19 has altered paid search: How marketers can adjust strategies

30-second summary:

- Since shelter-in-place rules were enacted, the way people use the internet has changed. They’re consuming more media and increasing web research and browsing.
- Paid search strategy is not one-size-fits-all. Each vertical must be treated differently, as some industries like ecommerce have seen improved performance while others have seen a declined performance.
- A pandemic is not the time to cut ad budget. Instead, investing in advertising now should pay dividends when the market normalizes.
- Ensure your ad copy is appropriate for the landscape. That means even going back to a campaign that started before the pandemic to update any language that isn’t applicable to the current landscape.

- Marketers must stay flexible and agile during this time and monitor what’s working or not working and creating a quick plan to adjust.

When COVID-19 began spreading across the U.S., marketers scrambled to figure out how to respond. Sudden work-from-home mandates, cancelled business trips, postponed conferences and frozen budgets threw a wrench into usual expectations and plans. Users’ needs and online behaviours have changed in tandem, forcing marketers to meet them on their new terms.

Search is more important than ever now because people are spending almost all of their time at home and online, consuming media, researching, browsing and shopping. According to Forbes, total internet hits have surged by 50% to 70% with people under lockdown, while 32% of people say they are spending longer on social media. Hours spent in non-gaming apps are up as people turn to TikTok, WhatsApp, Instagram and Twitter to keep entertained, connected and informed. To stay relevant in these turbulent times, it’s imperative that marketers maintain their paid search presence while adjusting to the needs of the moment.

Vary strategy by vertical

While no industry is immune from the impact of coronavirus, businesses are affected differently and should adapt their paid search strategies accordingly. Industries like B2B and ecommerce have seen improved performance, while industries like travel and healthcare have struggled with poor results.

The fact that healthcare is struggling may seem paradoxical, given the overwhelming need for healthcare services right now. While hospitals are busy with COVID-19 patients, people who don’t have the virus are avoiding medical centres, hospitals, and non-essential medical services like bariatric surgery and physical therapy.

Users are shifting their searches for their healthcare needs. Notably, people under shelter-in-place orders are seeking to receive care while staying in their homes. eMarketer published data from CivicScience which found that between February and March 2020, the number of U.S. adults who reported intent to use telemedicine rose from 18% to 30%. As a result, healthcare providers have to switch their offerings – along with their messaging – to emphasize virtual and telehealth services. The same is true for many restaurants as they pivot to pick up or delivery only.

The situation is different for B2B companies

The situation is different for B2B companies, which have longer sales cycles. While businesses like restaurants are worried about running out of money now, B2B companies are concerned about how they'll fare months and, in some cases, years from now. The instinct may be to cut down on marketing budgets to save money, but extreme changes in paid search strategies can have long-lasting effects on performance. During this time, it's important B2B companies continue filling the funnel and building brand awareness to alleviate large sales gaps that can occur later in the year.

Financial service-related searches are surging

Financial service-related searches are surging right now as people explore their options for economic relief like loans. Many companies in this space are smartly increasing their ad spending and shifting the bulk of it toward campaigns that push their best performing service lines. The same is true for ecommerce companies, especially those that sell household products and cleaning supplies, loungewear, cooking equipment, workout gear and entertainment items like board games and puzzles. Shares of Hasbro, for instance, have soared. For

these companies, the adjustment is less about the offerings and more about the messaging.

Don’t stop advertising when times are tough

There are universal principles for how to optimize paid search strategies that apply to marketers in every industry. The first is not to neglect paid search, even during difficult times. The World Federation of Advertisers (WFA) recently ran a survey which found 81% of large advertisers deferred planned ad campaigns and cutting budgets due to the coronavirus pandemic. Of those surveyed, 57% said they had decreased budgets greatly or somewhat due to the virus outbreak; however, cutting out advertising or marketing completely can make the road to recovery more challenging.

Experts advise not to stop advertising during a downturn. Evidence from recent economic downturns like the 2008 housing crash show that companies come out stronger in the end if they continue investing in brand awareness. According to Google, “Even in categories where consumers have pulled back spending right now, creating a branding impact now will have a halo and pay dividends when the market normalizes. Research and historical examples of economic downturn have shown this to work.” It’s important to keep investing in your brand and branded keywords, regardless of industry. The last thing an organization wants is competitors monetizing on branded search results.

Every cent counts these days. Not only is paid search cost-effective with a low barrier to entry, but it also enables companies to be extremely agile. A company can get a campaign up and running pretty quickly, run tests, collect data and easily alter the messaging as things change day-to-day. Marketers can also see the results of engagement, click-through rates and conversions in real time, so they know

whether their investment is paying off. COVID-19 is an unprecedented situation, so testing and learning are critical during this volatile time in the market.

Best practices for paid search

For any marketer thinking about how to adjust during COVID-19, here are a few best practices for how to optimize paid search.

1. Pivot messaging

Messaging needs to be both accurate and appropriate for the current landscape. Confirm that messaging is updated with current business hours and offerings, and revise CTAs away from messages like “Visit in-store.”

2. Keep an eye on the tone of messaging

Is your copy appropriate or empathetic? An ad for booking a vacation package could feel out-of-touch. Customers will be turned off by companies that seem like they are trying to profit or gain from the pandemic, so craft communication to focus more on brand identity and values. Businesses can also use marketing to let customers know how they are responding to the pandemic. A construction firm or ecommerce company could talk about safety practices for workers, for example.

3. Adapt offerings to what your customers need

As mentioned above, healthcare companies are moving to telehealth, restaurants are moving to pick up, delivery and B2B companies are repurposing content planned for conferences into virtual webinars. Marketers should be connecting with customers virtually to let them know how you are supporting them.

4. Adapt your strategy to your customers' changing digital behaviour

During the quarantine, desktop usage has increased. Conversely, the rise of remote work conditions and people being less on-the-go has caused mobile search traffic to decline by nearly 25%. We've all become accustomed to a mobile-first world, but given the predominance of desktop, it's especially important to ensure all search ads and landing pages are optimized for both mobile and desktop.

Move fast

This pandemic has caused so much of what used to be normal out of the window. Whereas before, marketers might have used a multiphase process for developing campaigns that involved planning and back-and-forth and feedback, now they have to act fast to keep up with the rapidly changing world. Marketers need to craft campaigns that are affordable, cost-effective and agile – and that means paid search.

As marketing and advertising professionals, we're all trying to figure this out together as we go. There is no roadmap or rules, but there's no doubt that staying flexible and using this time to connect with customers is a smart strategy.

Brianna Desmet is Media specialist at digital and demand gen agency, R2i.

More about:

https://www.searchenginewatch.com/2020/05/29/covid-19-has-altered-paid-search-how-marketers-can-adjust-strategies/