

Search Engine Marketing For Healthcare & Medical Businesses

The
fundamentals
of 'Search'



SEARCH ENGINE MARKETING FOR HEALTHCARE & MEDICAL BUSINESSES

Introduction

The search engine is now probably the most widely used research tool used by consumers and business professionals alike when looking for new products and services. Around 80% of people will start their online session at a search engine. Therefore, search engine marketing offers many benefits for businesses looking for a highly targeted and measurable form of marketing to disseminate information and promote products and services.

This paper aims to help CEOs, Directors, Marketing & Product Managers within Healthcare, and Medical organisations understand all the different elements and business benefits of 'Search Marketing' and how they can be applied to their businesses to help reach and interact with their target audiences.

It's All Happening Online

All over the globe the Internet is increasingly being recognised as a tool for healthcare sectors to develop as part of an e-health infrastructure. The e-health initiative is all about using technologies like the Web to transmit, store and retrieve digital data. In 2010 the total e-health spend accounted for 5 percent of total health budgets of the EU Member States compared with just 1% in 2000 (Christodolou et al).

In the US the number one most trusted source of information is physicians (62%). The second most trusted source is the Internet (57%). In Europe these figures are 85% for physicians and 75% for Internet. So, clearly the Internet must be seen as an important channel for communicating with your target audiences. However, most pharma and healthcare companies still invest less than 10% of their marketing budgets on digital and search will probably get a small percentage of that, somewhere in the region of 2-3%.

The Internet & Healthcare Info

"The UK is clearly relying on Dr. Google and that trend is set to grow due to the increasing pressures on our NHS"

In the UK people are increasingly looking online to assess their health as they find it harder to get a doctor's appointment. According to the Push Doctor Digital Health Report 21.8 per cent of people in 2015 chose self-diagnosis with search engines. 11 per cent said that this was because they were unable to get a doctor's appointment, while the other 10.8 per cent said Google was the best option because their GP wasn't available quickly enough.

The BUPA Health Pulse report states approximately 15% of individuals will “often” use the Internet to search for advice about health, medicines, or medical conditions. Approximately 60% will “sometimes” use the Internet and 25% will “never” use the Internet as a source for information. The survey also indicated that graduates and those in highest income bracket are more likely to regularly use the Internet to search for health information. The UK is clearly relying on Dr. Google and that trend is set to grow due to the increasing pressures on our NHS.

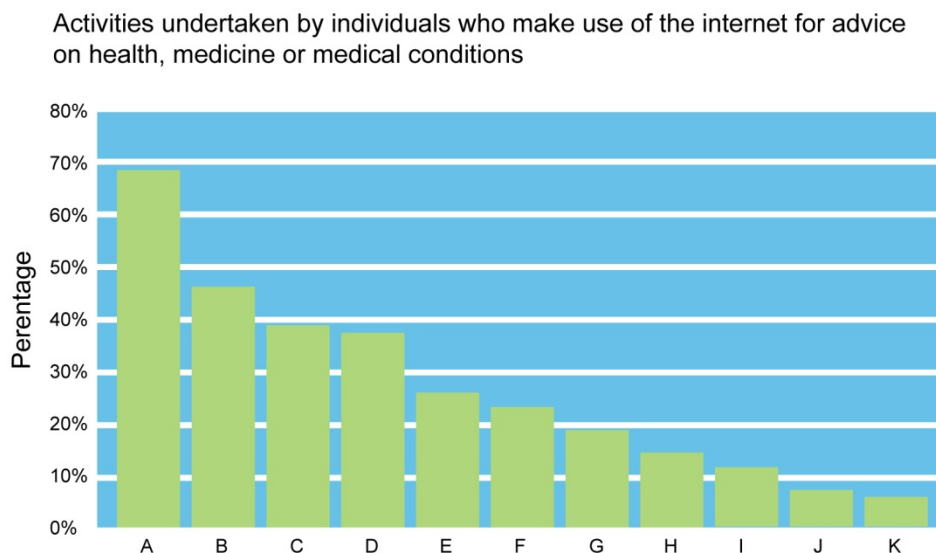
Search engines are the most visited sites on the Web.

Most searches for health related information will take place via the major search engines, Google, Bing or Yahoo. Searches for specific diseases or medical problems, medical procedures and exercise/fitness related information are the most popular areas being researched online.

Google is by far the most widely used search engine with **83%** of searchers in the UK using Google and only 4% using Bing and a mere 2.5% using Yahoo. Google clearly dominates the search market and should therefore be the search engine you focus on for your search campaigns. In fact out of all the websites in the UK, Google is the most visited site. Facebook is second and the top non search/social media oriented site is the BBC ranked at number 8.

What are individuals searching for?

Figure 1 – Activities undertaken by individuals who make use of the Internet for advice on



Key

- A Information on medicines
- B Self-diagnosis
- C Other patients' experiences
- D Information on hospital/clinic
- E Information on doctors
- F Post a comment/question about a health condition
- G Social networking sites (e.g. FaceBook etc) for healthcare info
- H Book an appointment with a doctor
- I Buy prescription medicine
- J Used Twitter to post/read about a healthcare matter
- K None of the above

health, medicine or medical conditions.

A great deal of detailed market research for online searches has been conducted in the US. The top three topics for American Internet users include searches for specific diseases or medical problems, certain medical procedures, medicines and exercise/fitness. The research also revealed that keyword search queries on search engines are becoming more specific. More 'search savvy' users are using specific search queries to produce more relevant results. For instance users will search for 'preventing heart attacks with aspirin' as opposed to a simple search for 'heart disease'.

Here are the top 10 health searches in Google for 2017 according to Harvard Health Publishing:

1. What causes hiccups?
2. What can I do to stop snoring?
3. What causes kidney stones?
4. Why am I so tired?
5. How long does the flu last?
6. What is normal blood pressure?
7. How to lower cholesterol?
8. What causes high blood pressure?
9. What is ADHD?
10. What is lupus?

"What is cancer?" was the UK's most googled health question in 2017, data reveals.

According to experts at Google Trends, other pressing health issues we visited Dr.Google to learn more about were diabetes, blood pressure, depression, back pain and sepsis.

The Use of Mobile Search

The increasing use of mobile search should also be considered as part of an online marketing strategy.

According to a recent report from Hitwise, nearly 60 percent of all Online Searches are now carried out on a mobile device, with some sectors (Food and Beverage) reaching 72 percent.

Hitwise found that 68 percent of all searches to a healthcare website was carried out using a mobile device, while just 39 percent of banking searches came from a mobile device.

Other takeaways from the report include:

- Mobile searches are more likely to be structured in the form of a question, including words such as "how", "are", "where", and "is".
- Breaking news, medical symptoms and product recalls are heavily tilted toward mobile users.
- While large purchases may start off with mobile searches, there is a clear transition to desktop searches as users carry out more intense research or conduct the actual transaction.
- In what seems to fly in the face of logic, mobile searches tend to be slightly longer (character length) than desktop. For example, the average desktop search that resulted in a visit to Food & Beverage website is 2.2 words or 13.8 characters in length, whereas a mobile search was 2.5 words or 15.5 characters in length.

In the US, CNN looked at the use of Yahoo and Google via computers and mobile phones to search for health information. Three of the top five web searches originating from mobile phones relate to sexual health, pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Interestingly, STI and sex related health search queries do not appear on Google and Yahoo's top searches via conventional computers. The study suggests that this is because mobile phone web searches are more likely to be carried out by people in their 20s and 30s and it could also be because of the sense of anonymity that comes with using a mobile phone as opposed to a computer.

According to the findings, mobile searches tend to serve a larger role in answering consumers' questions earlier on the purchase journey, with navigational or brand specific searches still more likely to be conducted from a desktop.

On the other hand, location-based searches (i.e. "near me"), are almost exclusively carried out on mobile.

The Age of the Digital Physician

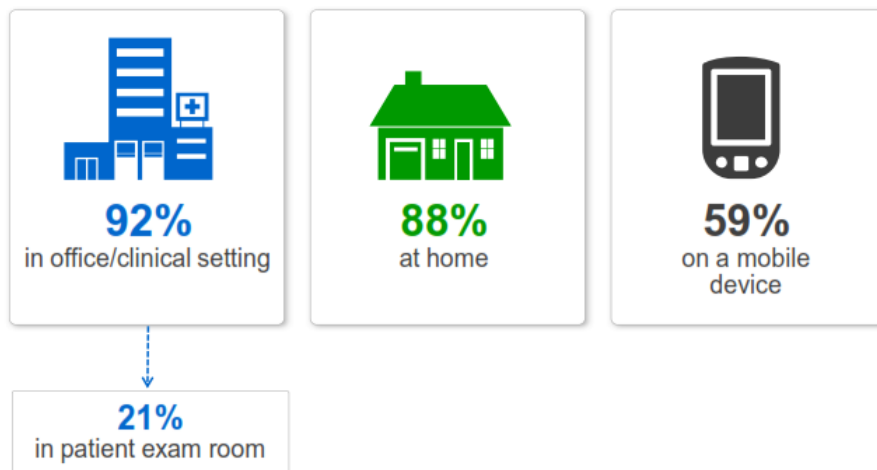
A study was conducted by Hall & Partners to understand how US physicians use the internet and 'Search' in their clinical practices. Each test physician was given a scenario and their online behaviour was tracked in a test environment.

Some of the key results from the study are as follows:

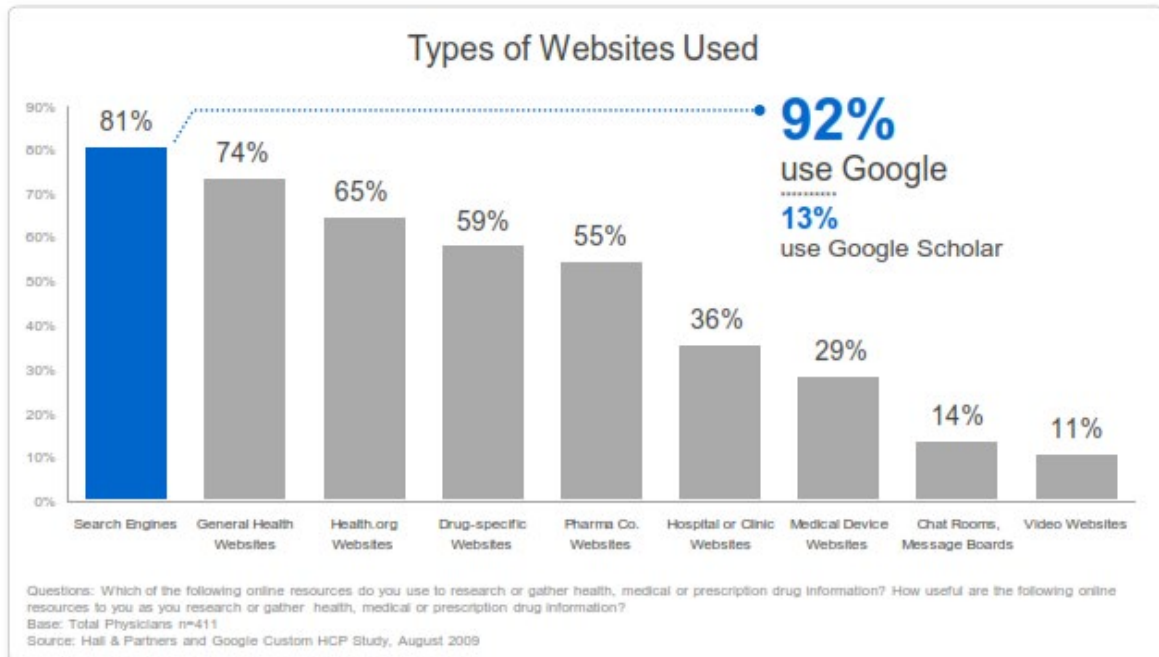
86% of physicians have used the Internet to gather health, medical, or prescription drug information. The Internet far exceeds other resources for gathering health, medical, or prescription drug information:

- Training – 78%
- Peer Reviews Journals – 77%
- Pharmaceutical sales representatives – 77%
- Colleagues – 67%
- Books – 56%
- Health-related organization/association – 54%
- Magazines – 35%
- Video/DVDs – 20%

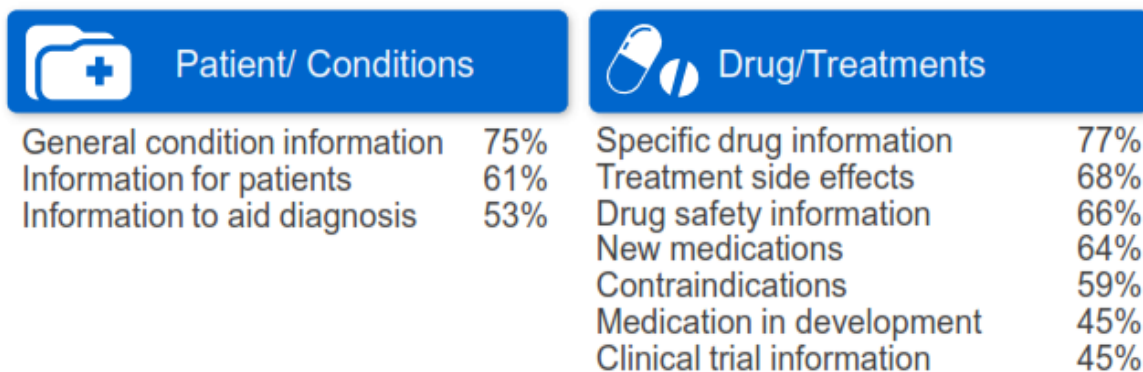
Physicians are also accessing the Internet at home and from their smartphones.



Search Engines are the top online resource for many physicians



Physicians are searching for information on a variety of topics



The study clearly shows that the Internet is now an integral part of the physician's clinical practice and Search has transformed the way they research not only specific medical conditions but drugs and medicines too.

- Physicians use the Internet round the clock in short bursts of time
- 'Search' is a gateway to online health information but also used throughout the research process
- Physicians find what they are looking for using 'Search': Typically they are using three words per search query; they do one search and tend to only view the

results on the first page. If they can't find anything relevant on that front page then they refine their search query.

From a search engine marketing campaign perspective it's important that marketers create separate physician-specific SEO or PPC campaigns to help reach each target audience. It's important to include a robust range of keywords, from more general brand and condition terms to more specific ones unlikely to be part of consumer searches.

Search Engine Marketing Tactics

Keywords – are you thinking like a customer?

The most important aspect of any search engine marketing campaign is making sure that you are targeting the right key phrases and using those key phrases intelligently within the content on your website and your other digital assets whether they are, video, images, white papers, or tweets.

Most companies make the mistake of focusing on keywords that they are familiar with internally. The pharma and healthcare sectors are awash with in-house jargon and acronyms. So, when it comes to search you need to put yourself in the shoes of a potential patient/physician/health professional and think about the keywords they might use to find your products and services. Here is an example. Marketing professionals working for a cancer treatment company might be happy to use the word 'oncology,' in their material, whereas individuals looking for information on the disease will use the word 'cancer.' Another example would be a company promoting the effective relief of 'Pyrosis.' Again, it's unlikely that a consumer will type in "pyrosis relief," chances are they are more likely to Google "heartburn relief." However, a physician might indeed use the correct medical term as part of their search query.

The message here is you need to match the content on your site to 'real' searches being carried out by your various target audiences. A simple search using the Google keyword tool: <https://adwords.google.co.uk/select/KeywordToolExternal> can give you an idea as to what key phrases people are searching on and their respective volumes.

It may also be the case that individuals won't be aware of your particular product names or brands and will tend to use longer, more descriptive search queries to research a particular drug or medical condition and its treatment. It is important for marketers to understand this shift in search behaviour and to ensure that their keyword strategies take into account the 'long-tail'. Long tail keywords are typically 3-6 words in length, but they could be even longer than that as opposed to short tail keywords that are more often 1-2 words in length, sometimes 3 words but used for more general searches.

So, your goal should be to try and think about the different phrases that your target audiences will use to try and seek out information on your products and services. For more information on the 'long-tail' theory visit: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Long Tail](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Long_Tail)

Search engine marketing strategies

There are two key ways in which you can make your business more visible on search engines a) Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) and b) Pay Per Click Advertising (PPC). Each area is a massive topic in itself so for this paper I'll take you through the basics of each discipline.

The Search Results Page Explained (see image below)

The image shows a Google search results page for the query "liquid medication". The search bar at the top indicates "About 1,840,000 results (0.06 seconds)". The page is divided into several sections:

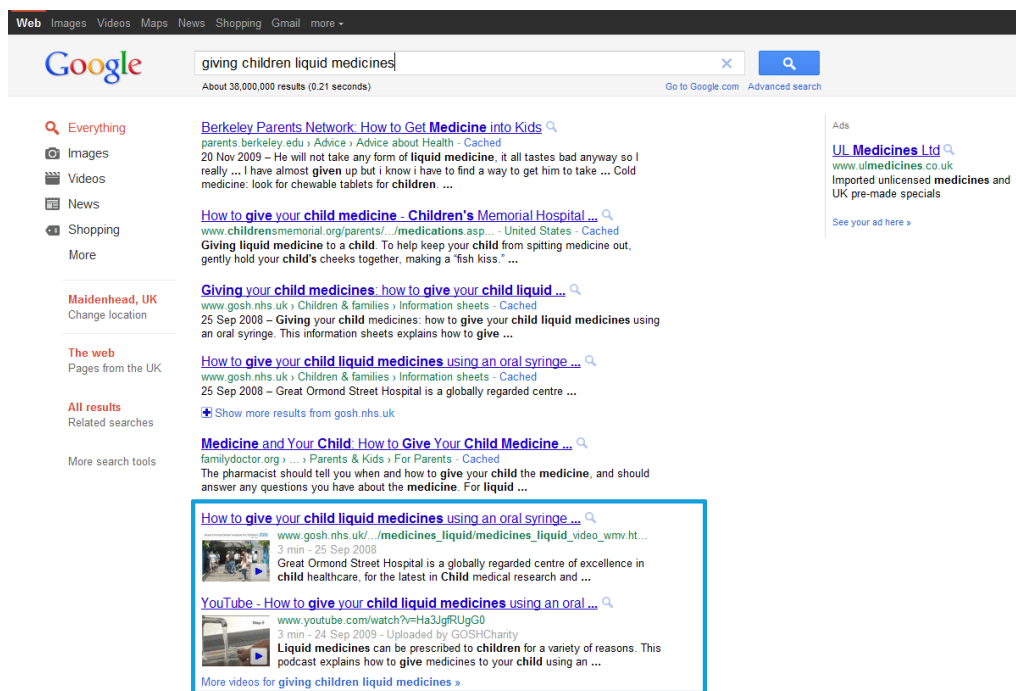
- Left Sidebar:** Contains navigation options like "Everything", "Images", "Videos", "News", "Shopping", and "More". It also shows location information for "Maidenhead, UK" and "The web" pages.
- Top Right:** Features a "PAID RESULTS" banner for "Chemist Direct Online" with a 5-star rating and promotional text.
- Main Results Area:**
 - PAID RESULTS:** A large green banner on the right side of the main results area.
 - ORGANIC RESULTS:** A large blue banner on the left side of the main results area.
 - Search Results:** A list of search results including:
 - "Liquid Medication Tools | Pill Dispenser" (www.pillthing.com)
 - "Liquid medication administration Medical Information" (www.drugs.com/enc/liquid-medication-administration.html)
 - "Liquid Medication - No prescription necessary..." (www.liquidmedication.com/)
 - "Liquid Medicine - Medication For Those With Swallowing Difficulties" (www.rosemontpharma.com/)
 - "prednisolone (Pediapred Oral Liquid, Medrol) - drug class, medical..." (www.medicinenet.com)
 - "Images for liquid medication" (Report images)
 - "How to Get Your Cat to Take Liquid Medication | eHow.com" (www.ehow.com/video_2259732_get-cat-liquid-medication.html)
 - "YouTube - How to Give Your Cat Liquid Medication" (www.youtube.com/watch?v=tmXzUshnA)
 - "Giving Your Cat Liquid Medications | Partners in Animal Health" (partnersah.vet.cornell.edu/pet/fhc/liquid_medications)
 - "Liquid Medication | Facebook" (www.facebook.com/LiquidMedication)
 - "TSA Permitted Items" (www.seatguru.com/articles/tsa_prohibited_items.php)
 - "Press Announcements > McNeil Recalls Infant and Children's Liquid..." (www.fda.gov)
 - Bottom:** Includes a "Searches related to liquid medication" section with suggestions like "give cats liquid medication", "give liquid dogs", and "nursing bottle with medication dispenser patent". It also features the "Go" button, a "Next" button, and a footer with "Search Help", "Give us feedback", and "Google Home" links.

Search engine optimisation (SEO)

Search engine optimisation (SEO) is the process of improving the visibility of a website or a web page in search engines via the "natural" or un-paid ("organic" or "algorithmic") search results. Other forms of search engine marketing (SEM) target paid listings. In general, the earlier (or higher on the page), and more frequently a site appears in the search results list, the more visitors it will receive from the search engine. SEO may target different kinds of search, including image search, local search, video search, academic search, news search and industry-specific vertical search engines. Google's image search is now receiving over 1bn page views each day (source: NetImperative, July 2010).

As an Internet marketing strategy, SEO considers how search engines work, what people search for, the actual search terms typed into search engines and which search engines are preferred by their targeted audience. Optimising a website may involve editing its content, HTML and associated coding to both increase its relevance to specific keywords and to remove barriers to the indexing activities of search engines. Promoting a site to increase the number of backlinks, or inbound links, is another SEO tactic.

SEO doesn't just involve optimising web pages. Some healthcare businesses are beginning to using digital assets like video and podcasts to interact with their target audience. A Google search for the phrase "giving children liquid medicines" show the following results on Google. As you see from the screen grab below, a video from the NHS has appeared in the search results. Optimising video assets that you have created can be a highly effective way of standing out in the search results and interacting with potential customers looking for advice about administering oral medicines for a child.



Another example shows how a search for the condition "Benign Prostatic Hyperplasia" also displays results for scholarly articles (we often refer to this as 'academic search' or 'Google Scholar'). Many pharma and healthcare companies produce medical-based white papers and reports on clinical trials. Again by optimising these papers for 'academic search/Google Scholar' you can use Google to promote your findings to a more technical audience such as a Physician, GP or Pharmacist.

The screenshot shows a Google search for "Benign Prostatic Hyperplasia". The search bar contains the text "Benign Prostatic Hyperplasia" and shows "About 3,000,000 results (0.25 seconds)". Below the search bar, there are several filters and search results. A blue box highlights the "Scholarly articles for benign prostatic hyperplasia" section, which lists three articles: "Benign prostatic hyperplasia - McConnell - Cited by 328", "Benign prostatic hyperplasia - Thorpe - Cited by 98", and "Benign prostatic hyperplasia - Simpson - Cited by 30". Other search results include "Benign prostatic hyperplasia - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia", "Prostate Enlargement: Benign Prostatic Hyperplasia", "Benign Prostatic Hyperplasia | Doctor | Patient UK", and "Benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH)".

Algorithm Updates

The Google search algorithm is being updated all the time, and it's these changes which help the search engine to constantly improve the quality of its search results. There have been a number of "game-changing" algorithm updates over the last twelve months, which keeps online marketers and SEOs on their toes. It's up to us to understand these updates and change our strategies to suit.

The most recent update to impact healthcare and medical websites has been the "**Medic Core Update (August 1, 2018)**". In summary, Google is calling this a broad, global, core update, but based on much of the analysis done thus far, there seems to be a focus on health and medical sites and YMYL Your Money Your Life sites. If you've been impacted by this update, Google is recommending you should just focus on making a great experience, offer better content and a more useful website. This update has taken on the name the *Medic Update* because of its focus on the medical and health space. This specific focus is something Google will not confirm.

Other past key updates include

Penguin

The latest significant Google update has been dubbed Penguin. It targeted websites which had a disproportionate amount of single anchor text links, and also targeted blog networks which aimed to manipulate the search index. The algorithm has been refined to give priority to websites with a varied and natural-looking link portfolio, with a mixture of citations, anchor text links and branded links.

For this reason, and especially for sites that were "penguin'd", it's more important than ever to build a diverse link portfolio using a range of SEO tactics. This can include branded links and URL links as well as the keyword-rich anchor text links which were prioritised in the

past. Sites with a huge number of almost identical links will be flagged by Google as suspicious.

Panda – Low Quality Content

The Panda update was rolled-out in 2011, and targeted low quality content and content farms which hosted low quality content. These content farms had been used by online marketers to manipulate the search index with high volumes of low quality content. These sites ranked well in the search index until the Panda update came along.

Post-Panda, great onsite content is increasingly important, and building genuine editorial links back to a website is the most effective way of improving its rankings in the search results. Engaging with real people and creating genuinely engaging and interesting content will produce the kind of links which make the difference and build an online reputation.

Personalised Search & Google Reviews

One of the biggest changes to search in recent years is personalised search. For logged-in Google users, it means that previously visited sites are far more likely to appear near the top of subsequent search results.

Personalised Search is helping to tailor individual's search results to their own specifications. It's great news for individuals but it makes search engine optimisation a lot more complicated. It means that having a content-rich website with helpful and informative content is even more important than ever, since attracting a customer at an earlier stage in the buying cycle will mean they are much more likely to return at a later date to buy or convert. Engaging users at an earlier stage in the buying cycle means providing genuinely useful information which can help inform their purchases.

Google Reviews

Google Reviews do help to improve search rankings and overall SEO efforts. While there are a lot of factors involved in search rankings, online customer reviews can be a strong signal to search engines that communicates trustworthiness and authority. In an era in which competition has gotten tougher for many businesses on the web, managing online reviews is a way to differentiate your business and raise your visibility in the search results.

Social Signals

It's increasingly acknowledged in the SEO community that social signals are playing an increasingly important role in search rankings. Social content has been integrated into the search index in various ways in the past, and it seems highly likely that there's some SEO benefit to maintaining a strong and optimised social media profile.

Investing in SEO

Search engine optimisation requires a great deal of patience and, like all marketing activity, it should be approached with the view that it is about making continuous improvements as opposed to achieving perfection. The process of improving your positions in Google is a complex one and depending on how much activity you have carried out relative to your competitors will determine how quickly you will see results from your SEO efforts. SEO should be viewed as a long term and ongoing investment. However, if executed properly the return on investment from this activity will be significant.

SEO activities generally involve content development and promotion of a brand, company or products, and as such can be seen as part of an over-arching digital marketing strategy which seeks to build a brand reputation and awareness.

Pay Per click (PPC) advertising

Pay for click advertising or paid search as it is often referred to is an alternative approach to getting your web pages found in the search results. Google however has a number of restrictions around the promotion of certain types of healthcare products, services and medicines. You can view those restrictions by country at:

<http://adwords.google.com/support/aw/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=176031>

How does PPC work?

When a searcher types specific keywords (or search phrases) into a search engine, the search engine will separate the paid listings from the unpaid listings when calling up the results. Pay-per-click advertising is an agreement between a search engine and a business or advertising firm that enables them to place a small ad on the right-hand side, or top left-hand side, of the results page, for certain keywords.

The number of other people targeting the category and search terms that you have selected will dictate how much you will have to pay each time someone clicks on one of your links/adverts. Generally, the more competitive your term(s), the more your click(s) will cost. That said, however, it's also important to bear in mind that the search engines will give your site a quality score based on the relevancy of your advert. The better the quality score that your site receives, the lower you will have to pay for relevant clicks.

In some ways, pay-per-click marketing is similar to search engine optimisation (SEO). Keyword research, competitive analysis and constant monitoring and tweaking are required to streamline the campaign to achieve maximum return on investment (ROI) for minimum cost. The primary difference between SEO and PPC is that a pay-per-click advertising campaign is more likely to generate faster results for your website - whereas SEO processes may take many months to improve your site's rankings on the search engines. With PPC it is possible to generate measurable results within just days.

However, over the past few years pay per click advertising has become more widely adopted as a marketing tactic and this in turn has increased the level of competition for certain key phrases. This has resulted in the bid prices for high volume keywords increasing quite significantly and as a result some businesses are struggling to generate a positive return on their paid search investment. Consequently, they are looking longer term and investing more of their marketing budget into search engine optimisation.

Tracking & Measuring ROI

Using tools like Google Analytics, which measures the volume of visitors to your site and their behaviours on your site, you can easily measure the impact that your search marketing activity is having on website traffic, article downloads and enquiries. With Google analytics you can even integrate the software with CRM systems like Sales Force and Hubspot.

The ability to track campaigns at a granular level gives the marketing function the ability to fine tune campaigns and focus their budget on the areas that are contributing the most to helping them achieve sales and marketing objectives.

For instance, you can track which websites or search engines are referring visitors to your site. You can even track which individual key phrases are driving visitors to your site and what the conversion rate is for each key phrase, i.e. what percentage of those visitors go on to carry out a positive action, such as make an enquiry, sign-up to an email newsletter or download a PDF product information pack. You can also measure the number of repeat visits made by an individual and analyse what pages are most and least viewed.

With newer technology such as 'call analytics' you can track exactly what each visitor is doing on your website and even when they pick up the phone to call you. With this level of tracking you are able to report on the exact visitor path, including what the visitor did on your website, before, during and after the phone call. You now have the ability to report on which keyword search, advert, referring website and click caused your website visitor to pick up the phone to call you.

The ability to accurately measure the effectiveness of various digital marketing assets and campaigns is one of the most useful tools for the modern day marketer. At a time when marketing budgets are being cut and marketers are being forced to achieve the same or even higher ROI on lower budgets, investing in web analytics enables you to get a 360 degree picture on what is performing well and more importantly what is not, so you can tweak it, or ditch it.

Closing Thoughts

Research from reports provide real evidence that the Web is being extensively used to research and buy healthcare related products and services online. The tight regulations that surround this sector especially those from the Medicines Act and the ABPI may make it harder for certain pharmaceutical, medical and healthcare businesses to take advantage of the customer attraction opportunities that search engine marketing presents. However, with a bit of creative thinking there are search marketing solutions that can be applied to help these businesses overcome such hurdles and take advantage of the traffic generating potential of 'Search'.

We've highlighted that 'Search' is much more than simply optimising individual web pages. Search engines are now able to index and display a variety of digital assets in their results - like video, medical papers, images and tweets. Faster download speeds have also encouraged web surfers to download more online videos and this area of digital communication offers a truly interactive and engaging experience.

With the volume of online videos growing significantly, there are specific search engines entering the market that purely focus on video search. Blinkx.com is one of the leaders in video search with over 35 million hours of video to search from. Furthermore, in a study conducted by Ipsos OTX consumers were asked the question: *"Thinking about online videos in general, which, if any, of the following types of videos do you typically watch on the Internet?"* The top video category was 'News' at 42%, 'Health' came in second at 32% above the categories 'Food' and 'Celebrity'. As a marketer it's important that you look to research all the various vertical search engines that exist and consider whether or not they should be part of your overall search marketing mix.

The growing use of mobile search is an area that must also not be understated. As the mobile phone makers continuously improve the browsing capabilities of their handsets, more and more mobile phone users are enjoying the convenience and anonymity that searching and browsing the web via their smartphone offers. And if the predictions of the Ipsos report are correct – this is a trend that will only continue to grow. Including mobile optimisation in your online & search marketing strategy now will put you ahead of the game once mobile becomes a channel that can't be ignored.

It's not only consumers that are using the Web and search engines like Google to look for health and medical related information. As we have seen from the Hall & Partners study, physicians are also using search engines to look for more information about a particular condition or disease and for specific medical information to aid their diagnosis.

Furthermore, they are also using search engines to seek out clinical trial information and for researching specific drugs and new medicines. The more that you can engage with them, intelligently, in this space, the better chance you have of influencing decision-makers at the point of prescription.

Credits and References

- BUPA Health Pulse – Online Health Untangling the Web
- Google/Ipsos OTX – The Mobile Movement
- Google/Hall & Partners, Connecting with Physicians Online
- Google/OTX – Health Consumer Study
- Google/OTX and BabyCenter - What Makes Dr. Mom Click

About The Author



Damon Lightley is a co-founder of Genetic Digital. He has been involved in the digital marketing sector since 1997. In 2003 he founded a top 20 search engine marketing & optimisation agency which he sold in 2008. His areas of expertise include developing digital strategy, search engine optimisation and measuring ROI. He has developed digital marketing solutions for the likes of Smiths Medical, Martindale Pharma, Rosemont Pharmaceuticals, Britannia Pharmaceuticals, InHealth, The On-Call Room and Bloodwise.

[Connect with me on LinkedIn](#)

About Genetic Digital

Genetic Digital specialises in **identifying, creating** and **promoting** the most valuable **digital assets** that will enable healthcare, medical and pharmaceutical brands to **optimise** their **online presence**.

What sets us apart is our working knowledge of the various compliance procedures that many of our clients have to adhere to and our ability to help them identify which digital assets they should focus on creating and how to best get them noticed by their target audiences, be they healthcare professionals, patients or carers.

By thinking strategically and asking the right questions along the way we will ensure that every digital solution we implement delivers maximum impact for your organisation.

Visit: www.GeneticDigital.co.uk and [follow Genetic Digital on LinkedIn](#)