

Search Engine Optimisation in China

What companies should bear in mind when marketing to the world's largest online population

By Alain Kaiser

NEVER before has there been a bigger demand from foreign companies and brand advertisers to establish and develop a digital presence in China. With over half a billion netizens, the country features the world's largest online population, with one out of five internet users across the globe being Chinese. At the same time, the Chinese internet landscape is undoubtedly one of the most challenging in the world to navigate. Digital marketers must build and execute strategies that encompass the ever-changing and accelerating range of available channels and services, which include social media marketing, display and banner advertisements, retargeting to email and text messages, and search engine optimisation. They must also take into account the local characteristics of the Chinese online world.

What is SEO?

Search engine optimisation, or SEO, is the active practice of increasing the traffic and ranking of a web property on the results page of a search engine through non-paid listings. The most common goal of SEO is to have a website rank of "1" for selected search terms. However, apart from this active, "positive" pursuit, many neglect the potential of using SEO to combat negative or unwanted results for certain search terms. Think, for example, of how potential consumers are affected by negative customer reviews that appear on the first page of search results for a company's name or brand. If possible, companies would like to remove this negative "publicity" and populate the first few pages with neutral or favorable results. This is referred to as "online reputation management."

How does SEO work?

For a search engine to recognise a web prop-

erty to be the most relevant to what was typed in by the user, it analyses a wide range of different factors. These are all interrelated, but can be classified into four broad categories: content, website infrastructure, back links and social signals. Relevant and unique content is still by far the most important ranking factor. However, even if a website has the most suitable content for a certain search term, no search engine will list it as the first search result if the website's server is very slow. Most sites of international firms are hosted abroad instead of in China, and users may have to wait 30 seconds for the page to be loaded. Page rank, or back links, simply means that other relevant websites on the internet have hyperlinks that point back to the website in question, thereby validating the page as a trusted source of information. The more links a page has, the higher it will rank in search results. Social signals are references from social media channels and are important because it is a good indicator that people are "talking" about a site -- and this popularity helps rankings.

SEO in China

As with most industries in China, the search engine market landscape is quite different than in other parts of the world. The Chinese search engine giant, Baidu, holds more than 80 per cent market share, while Google has less than 6 per cent, followed by lesser known engines such as Sogou and Soso. Meanwhile, there is the emergence of many new and so-called "vertical search engines" that cater towards a certain topic, e.g. eTao by Taobao/Alibaba Group for shopping and Qunar for travel.

There are two significantly different aspects of Baidu that make its SEO different than Google's: a) Paid advertisements. Although

it depends on the search query, Baidu can display up to eight paid ads before the first natural search result appears. In contrast to Google's style, these paid results are not as obviously marked as advertisements to users. Hence, even if perfect SEO optimisation is done for a search term, a website will only come up at the ninth position and can only expect approximately 4 per cent of all users to click on it.

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b) Baidu universal search results. In addition to paid advertisements, Baidu tends to display many of its own related services in the first few natural search results. These include relevant discussions on Baidu Zhidao (similar to Yahoo Answers), Baidu Tieba (Baidu's discussion board) or Baidu Baike (similar to Wikipedia). This means that SEO work also has to be done on these services.

Just as in the realm of search, local providers of social media platforms tend to beat out globally used social media networks. Thus, whereas other countries frequently use Facebook and Twitter, in China it is Sina Weibo or Tencent Weibo, and RenRen or Kaixin, which are dominant. In some cases, foreign service providers are not even accessible from within China. This also requires an entirely different strategy to off-page SEO through social signals than in other countries.

Going SoLoMo

Globally, the largest trend in online user behavior is the so-called “SoLoMo” experience – an abbreviation for “social, local, mobile.” All three factors are having huge impacts on SEO in China.

All search engines will continue increasing the influence of social signals on natural search rankings. Consequently, all major search providers, with Google taking the lead with Google Plus, are currently adding their own social services. In China, Alibaba’s Laiwang is already in place while Baidu will soon acquire or develop their own social networking sites, while they have already started displaying Sina Weibo entries for popular queries.

With the rise of smartphones, followed by applications that use built-in GPS technology to offer location-based services, being localised is central to success. Google and

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Baidu tend to show different search results on one’s mobile phone for the same requests (e.g. “closest Italian restaurant”), as the latter shows results relative to the user’s current location.

By the end of 2011, 356 million users – or almost 70 per cent of all Internet users in China – were going online through their mobile phones. It is predicted that by 2013 mobile devices will trump personal computers as the chief means of accessing the Internet. SEO results for mobile searches can be very different than on a PC browser – both due to added location-based information and because search engines take into account whether the results content is displayed correctly on mobile devices.

More localisation

Additionally, many search applications, such as the mobile versions of Baidu and Google, have begun to support Chinese language voice searches. When people speak to express a search request, they often formulate their requests in a different way than when they type them in. When typing, users tend to use short phrases, such as “best hotel in Shanghai,” but when speaking, they are inclined to use more natural language, as in “which is the best hotel in Shanghai.” Therefore, marketers will need to take into consideration such additional search expressions when formulating keyword strategies.

Well-planned and executed SEO in China can produce excellent results. The key is to develop an integrated SEO strategy first, and to then build it up with localised on-page optimisation – such as via translation, hosting the site in China, and integrating Weibo-like sharing tools, as well as by attracting local links from related Chinese websites and maximising references on Chinese social media. **SBP**

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