



CONQUERING THE ONLINE VISIBILITY BATTLE

With competition for customer engagement intensifying online, **Alex Bell** explores winning strategies businesses can deploy to succeed in the digital age of today – and tomorrow

"It's our belief that to maximise your online potential, it shouldn't be a choice between SEO [search engine optimisation] or PPC [pay-per-click]."

That's the view of Ben Foster, chief executive of The SEO Works. And he adds: "In fact they are much better together."

The SEO Works has worked on campaigns with the NHS, Decathlon, Just Eat, Tata Steel, the University of Sheffield, Sheffield Hallam University and many more across a plethora of industries.

I ask Foster the best way to approach SEO and PPC and how budget and objectives feed into the implementation and execution of strategy.

"With up to four paid ads coming before organic results for the most competitive keywords, paid ads dominate the top of the page – even more so on mobile," says Foster.

"However, SEO can drive a sustainable return on investment. It's a longer-term strategy, but once you start to see movement

"It shouldn't be a choice between SEO or PPC. In fact they are much better together."

Ben Foster
The SEO Works

in your rankings and map listings it can result in really strong returns, generally at a lower cost."

Foster says to think of it as real estate: "There are a limited number of pitches at the top of the search results, and the more you are present, the more opportunities you have that someone will click on you."

"At the core of any strategy is uncovering the searches that are relevant for your business, and the intent behind them. Then choosing the most relevant ones to try and be found through search, be it through SEO

or PPC, or ideally both. Budget and objectives will affect the nuances of a strategy, and how much of that opportunity you can reasonably 'go for'."

The good thing is, according to Foster, that if you are using both channels, you can share learnings from each. "For example, you may uncover a keyword that converts extremely well in paid, which you have missed in your SEO strategy," he adds.

"Or a certain keyword might become so well-performing in SEO that you can dial back the budget a little in PPC."

The fight for conversions

Leeds-based technology firm Tribus recently launched a new digital marketing division, headed up by Oliver Blackburn.

Tribus works with clients across various industry sectors delivering digital solutions for businesses, including Willmott Dixon, CFC Underwriting, SIG (Sheffield Insulation Group), AXA Climate and John Adams.

Discussing the current intensity level in today's battle for online visibility, Blackburn tells *Insider*: "It's easier than ever to gain visibility because of how many platforms are out there and the freedom to post."

"What we are finding with all clients is it's great to get vanity figures, impressions and reach, but conversion is what really needs to be driven through any digital channel. Even if we're launching brand awareness campaigns and there's no real conversion objective, if users are clicking through to the site and converting at some level, whether that's a

click through or file download, then the point of your brand awareness becomes irrelevant because anyone can do that. So, the fight for conversions is the hardest thing, rather than necessarily a fight for visibility."

Foster, of Sheffield-headquartered The SEO Works, adds: "Online visibility is increasingly competitive. Covid accelerated digital adoption within business, which drove a rise in online advertising. These mirror a shift in consumer behaviour – more people are turning to online shopping. It's not just in consumer sales either – even for B2B services, the search starts online."

"In the UK, search and online display formats are on course to account for almost four in five pounds spent on advertising, up from a share of 51 per cent just five years ago," he says. "More businesses are now investing in digital than ever before, meaning the fight for attention is intense."

SEO versus PPC

Blackburn picks up on budgets and drills deeper into how businesses operating in specific sectors might want to spend.

"There's an overlap with SEO and PPC, but there's definitely a major difference in the way budgets are allocated to it," he says.

"With SEO, you're paying mainly for time. You're paying for your tech experts to make sure your website is healthy. You're paying for your content writers if you don't have anyone in-house to write the content based on your SEO specialist suggestion keywords."

"But it goes a lot deeper than that. You need someone who is an expert at

"There's lots of chat about SEO being dead but I think it's going to be the future still."

Oliver Blackburn

Tribus

keeping up with what's going on. It changes every single hour and sometimes it can get a bit confusing for brands and clients to keep up with. Whereas PPC is obviously media spend-based so there's a line in your budget that just goes to media spend, and it does cost a lot more because you've also got that specialist that manages the controls and pulls the levers.

"PPC is a much slower approach for a new client – we call it test and learn. We throw the keyword research into it, see what's costing the least, what's converting the most. And we slowly raise the media spend."

"We work with a lot of B2B clients – fintech, insurance, construction – and SEO is a huge part of their strategy. They're after brand recognition, longevity and are not after that quick retail win. They're after good content, want to advise customers and a conversion for them is a much higher value at the end."

"We work with retail as well. That ecommerce element is all PPC and they're not really bothered about SEO because they want someone in the moment to search for a specific product they offer, pay for

them to come to their site and pay for them to purchase an item. They're not really bothered about their domain authority or if they're ranking for blog posts on the product because it's more of a fast churn rate."

Predicting the future

A critical area to tackle is what the future holds for SEO and PPC and in turn what will influence how they are then utilised by businesses and brands.

"AI [artificial intelligence] is coming soon to the search results pages through Google's 'search generative experience'," says Foster.

"This will change the front page of Google to offer an AI overview at the top for some search results. This has already launched in the US and estimates are that it shows for around 35 per cent of search queries. It represents another opportunity for SEO, as AI uses websites to create the answer, and provides a link to the source website. So by investing in good content and SEO you are more likely to be featured."

As a result though, according to Foster, clicks to websites may be more transactional in nature as informational answers are provided by the AI response.

"Within PPC, Google has been including new automation and AI features steadily over the past few years," he says. "It can be tempting to ignore these features, such as 'performance max', but adopting them into your workflow can enhance results. The latest feature Google will be adding into PPC is image generation. This will help advertisers generate new images, replace image backgrounds, auto-enhance images and create all the sizes needed to reach audiences across Google's advertising channels."

"In terms of the future, attention online is even more splintered. Social media now plays more of a role in discovery and research, so brands need to be aware of where their audience spend their time online. But people still turn to Google to 'get things done' and it is still the main platform for high-buying intent. This means that SEO and PPC are here to stay."

Blackburn weighs in: "If I had a crystal ball, I'd say SEO is not going anywhere. There's a shift in people coming back to SEO because PPC media spend is getting more expensive."

"There's also lots of chat about SEO being dead but I think it's going to be the future still. It's always going to be based on a user searching for content, being fed the right content and being sent to the right website."



The SEO Works