

JOHN DVORAK'S SECOND OPINION

Aug. 6, 2010, 6:47 p.m. EDT



Search-engine subterfuge hits Google traffic

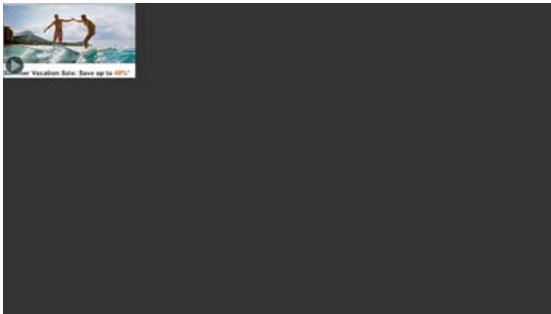
Commentary: Industry giant needs to beat back those gaming the system

By John C. Dvorak

BERKELEY, Calif. (MarketWatch) -- From its inception, I thought Google was a winner of a company and a great stock. But I did not anticipate its leadership in search would wane due to Web sites gaming the system and driving Google traffic away.

Their chicanery is called SEO for "search-engine optimization." Right now, the tricks and techniques are targeting Google -- and they're working.

While SEO is nothing new, it seemed to get a head of steam a decade ago when some prankster discovered "Googlewashing." By setting up some Web pages with carefully chosen words and iterative links, Google (NASDAQ:GOOG) could be tricked into giving a high ranking to bogus sites set up as a joke.



Smart money took note of this and saw dollar signs. From that point on, SEO would become an industry.

How can you tell it works? When you do a search and are led to pages and pages of odd sites with lots of advertising or things to sell, that's when you know. Many companies are so good at it, they specialize in loading up the net with sites designed to rise to the top, using every trick in the book.

For example, when you suddenly get a hit for a site describing in detail some process that you might be interested in and the site is named eHow.com you are witnessing one of the [Demand Media](#) sites, an operation led by visionary-entrepreneur Richard Rosenblatt.

Rex on Techs: Trends in Online Travel

They may not truly be "tech" companies, but several online travel sites show how the Internet is a boon for bookings. MarketWatch's Rex Crum reports.

Demand Media develops content cheaply via a network of penny-a-word writers and uses the most modern of SEO tricks to get the pages of its sites well placed. Window dressing does the rest. (The company filed for an initial public offering Friday.)

Getting a bigger audience

Almost everyone is thinking SEO nowadays and you commonly hear references to it when writing a headline or discussing the content itself. Everybody wants a bigger audience.

How can you trick the search engine to get that audience? Dropping high-interest zingers in this column, such as the Gulf of Mexico oil spill, Britney Spears visiting Lindsay Lohan in jail or the Chelsea Clinton wedding might get pull in extra readers out of the blue. Then an SEO maven could track the results of that sentence and improve upon it next week.

Since this column is not designed to be a seminar on SEO, I won't go into the details of all the trickery used. Entire books have been written on the subject.

Google search-engine developers read these books to and try to adjust the search results with countermeasures to defeat SEO. But the real champs at gaming the system quickly adapt and are on to a new trick.

This is killing the search experience for many people. A half billion have left the grid and retreated into the cloistered world of Facebook. Both Facebook and Twitter have looked at the SEO attacks on Google and both think they might be able to do search better using social networking tools.

And by the way, since Microsoft Bing is modeled after Google, it's subject to the same tricks.

Segment the search

What can Google do? The company, whose stock has mostly flatlined, needs to take some drastic action. I would suggest a few things.

The first thing it can do is segment search a little better. It has a sub-search engine called Froogle for people shopping for something. That's where all this junk should be shoved.

If Google took a page from the U.S. Postal Service handbook, it might help. To send a magazine through the mail at the second-class rate, you cannot have more than a certain percent of the magazine consisting of advertising. Otherwise, you have to ship it at an exorbitant first-class rate.

The Google search bots can look over the page and the site as a whole and quickly determine what is advertising and what is not. Advertising of any sort on any page within the site could be limited on the main search engine to 10% of content or so.

Then again, this may worsen the situation if the SEO people are forced to post even more pages to make up for the lower advertising load. So I'm not sure what the answer is.

Google needs to figure this out quickly. ■

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