



February 22, 2011

Automation Helps Marketers Scale Organic Search

by **Shar VanBoskirk**

with Kate van Geldern and Angie Polanco

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Marketers can now use standalone technologies to automate the SEO audits, prioritize SEO tactics, and measure results — efforts that have been available primarily through services engagements to date. But SEO automation isn't right for everyone. Interactive marketers with some organic search visibility who have dedicated internal SEO resources should choose an SEO vendor whose search engine partnerships and measurement approach aligns with their needs.

TECHNOLOGY HELPS SEO SCALE

Recession-weary search marketers are returning to search engine optimization (SEO), a less expensive — albeit less immediately gratifying — alternative to costly and competitive paid search ads. Eighty-five percent of enterprise marketers use or plan to use SEO within the next year.¹ Traditionally, SEO efforts exist as services projects only, conducted by agencies or consultants with narrow sway over site development and limited ability to measure the effects of site changes done in the name of SEO.

However, standalone SEO technologies like Conductor Searchlight and SEOMoz PRO are rewriting the SEO playbook — as well as SEO budgets.² These tools automate the management and measurement of SEO, creating efficiencies by offloading formerly manual work and making it possible to track SEO results, a la paid search.

Tools Automate Site Audits And Measurement

Generally speaking, SEO automation technologies analyze websites and identify where improvements can be made to boost natural search rankings. Most vendors offer similar core capabilities like:

- **SEO performance assessment.** The core of SEO automation tools is a persistent series of site audits that crawl a website to determine how a search engine would assess each page for organic rankings.
- **Recommendation engines.** Results of site audits are often pushed into some form of a recommendation engine, which scores proposed improvements. Most SEO tools prioritize recommendations based on their expected impact on page rank, their ease of implementation, and competitor SEO tactics.

- **Measurement and tracking.** Almost all SEO automation vendors offer a performance dashboard that reports on natural rankings and competitors for salient keywords. Some also track online conversions resulting from organic results.

Who Should Use SEO Automation Technology?

SEO automation can cut the costs and time associated with traditional human resource-intensive SEO projects. But not everyone is an automatic fit for today's SEO technologies. We find they work best for:

- **Organizations with dedicated in-house SEO resources.** Technology can support SEO reporting, workflow, and execution. But it can't determine target audiences or keyword strategy or implement changes to site structure or content. This means, successful users of SEO tools also need an SEO strategist to apply automation in the right places. Could an agency resource play the strategist role for a marketer? Possibly. But in our interviews, marketers who relied on agencies, used agency tools rather than buying third-party ones.
- **Sites with some SEO visibility already.** Investing in automated audits won't be worth it if your site has barriers — like excessive flash or firewalls — that prevent it from being crawled. Seth Besmertnik, the CEO and co-founder of SEO automation tool Conductor advises: "If you don't show up anywhere, you're probably not ready for an automation technology yet."
- **Agencies and consultancies that don't want to build their own technology.** Automating the nonstrategic parts of SEO will become increasingly crucial to preserving the margin for services firms. Agencies or consultancies without technology competency should partner with an SEO automation vendor in order to offload tactical work and allow more time for strategy.

Choosing The Right SEO Automation Partner

Today the SEO automation landscape consists of a handful of vendors that sell to agencies, consultants, and end marketers (see Figure 1). All tools offload SEO grunt-work, but each tool is not a fit for everyone. Ask the following questions to determine which option best suits your needs:

- **Which engines do they support?** Selection factor No. 1: Make sure the tool can catalog the results of search engines you care about. Some, like Conductor, work primarily with Google over Yahoo or Bing. SEOMoz supports several non-US regional variations of Google, Yahoo, and Bing. And just Yield Software and Covario integrate with native international engines like Baidu.
- **How does the vendor integrate with paid search?** All marketers should want an SEO tool that can help them better tether SEO to paid search. Some may even want a vendor that can automate both SEO and paid search optimization. Conductor's tool identifies keywords that based on organic rankings would be good to support with paid search ads as well. And vendors like Yield Software and Covario also provide paid search management technologies.

- **How will the vendor measure the results of SEO performance?** Marketers should determine what metrics they need to track — like SEO’s impact on conversions, qualified leads, or traffic —and see which vendors can oblige. BrightEdge Technologies, for example, is one of the tools that can link SEO performance to conversions and revenue.
- **What other technology partners do they have?** You’ll want an SEO tool that can integrate with your existing ad serving, web analytics, or CRM tools. Conductor is Omniture accredited to tie SEO data to website behaviors. And Yield Software ties SEO to lead management efforts through an integration with salesforce.com.

Figure 1 SEO Automation Technology Vendors

Vendor	Key differentiators	Technology integrations	Engines supported	Tracks site traffic	Tracks online conversions	Example clients	2009 revenues from search	Tenure in market
Altruik	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Targets eCommerce companies 	Google Analytics, Omniture, Websphere, GSI, OneStop	Google, Yahoo, and Bing	×	×	Home Depot	\$*	1 year
BrightEdge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Includes recommendations and competitive insight in reports Provides project management tools 	Omniture, Google Analytics, Webtrends, Coremetrics, SEOMoz Linkscape data	Google, Yahoo, and Bing	×	×	MySpace.com, VMware, Symantec	\$*	3 years
Conductor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gives prioritized recommendations Alerts users of critical changes in consumer or competitor behavior 	Omniture accredited, Google Analytics, Coremetrics, SEOMoz Linkscape data	Google and Bing; international engines will be available in 2011	×	×	FedEx, GE, Siemens, Victoria's Secret	\$\$	4 years
Covario	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gives site audit scores on a performance scale Offers agency services Has tools to monitor rankings in mobile search results 	Omniture, Webtrends, Google Analytics, Coremetrics, Unica	Google, Yahoo, Bing, Baidu, Naver, Daum, Yahoo.jp, AOL, Bebo, Alibaba.com, Ask (support 45 languages)	×	×	Procter & Gamble, Cabela's	\$\$\$	4 years
SEOMoz	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offers beginner- and enterprise-level solutions Shows external link impact on SEO rankings Reports how competitive it is to rank for different keywords 	Google Analytics	250 regional variations of the Google, Yahoo, and Bing search engines	×		eBay, Best Buy, Zillow.com	\$	4 years
Yield Software	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has a simple user interface Can customize landing page content to searcher Automation of paid search and SEO 	Salesforce.com, Omniture, Google Analytics, Webtrends	Google, Yahoo, Bing, Baidu, Yandex, Ask, AOL	×	×	Not reported	\$\$*	2 years

\$ = \$0 to \$5 million
 \$\$ = \$5.1 million to \$15 million
 \$\$\$ = \$15.1 million+
 *Forrester estimates

RECOMMENDATIONS

USE AUTOMATION TO IMPROVE SEO COLLABORATION

Here's how you can make sure that adopting SEO automation tools will make it easier for critical stakeholders at your company to cooperate around SEO initiatives.

- **Involve IT in vendor selection.** The SEO process requires cooperation between marketing, IT, and website resources — something that is almost always easier said than done. But SEO automation tools run SEO-like tech initiatives, making it feel familiar to IT project managers. In fact, most SEO vendors include project management capabilities to manage responsibilities across marketing and IT roles. So what is responsibility No. 1 for marketing as you select an SEO vendor? Invite IT into the process.
- **Elevate SEO's visibility in the organization.** New SEO automation tools can measure return on SEO tactics, finally enabling marketers to measure SEO against metrics parallel to those from paid search. We think embedding these more comprehensive organic search metrics into your marketing dashboard will illuminate the value of SEO across your organization — particularly to nonmarketing staff — like web developers, product managers, or copywriters — who need to see why SEO matters to their role. Cabela's used Covario's Organic Search Optimizer technology to identify that making improvements to poorly ranked pages generated a 50% lift in new sales.³

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Methodology

Forrester fielded its May 2010 US Interactive Marketing Online Survey to 309 interactive marketing professionals. For quality assurance, panelists are required to provide contact information and answer basic questions about their firms' revenue and budgets.

Forrester fielded the survey in May 2010. Exact sample sizes are provided in this report on a question-by-question basis. Panels are not guaranteed to be representative of the population. Unless otherwise noted, statistical data is intended to be used for descriptive and not inferential purposes.

If you're interested in joining one of Forrester's research panels, you may visit us at <http://Forrester.com/Panel>.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Eighty-five percent of US interactive marketers at companies with more than \$500 million 2009 revenue reported using or planning to use search engine optimization. Source: May 2010 US Interactive Marketing Online Survey.

- ² Forty-seven percent of marketers' total search budget is now spent on agencies and technology. Stand alone technologies play a big role in that — on average 19% of marketers budgets go to managing their search programs with purchased technologies. See the February 22, 2011, "[The Search Marketing Vendor Landscape, 2010](#)" report.
- ³ Source: "Covario Outfits Cabela's SEO," Covario Case Study (<http://www.covario.com/our-perspective/documents-and-resources/case-studies-section>).