

CONSUMERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD SEARCH ENGINES, AND THEIR USES IN INTERNET MARKETING – THE CASE OF FINLAND

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ABSTRACT

It has been studied that approximately 71 per cent of all commercial web pages focus primarily on advertising. Therefore it is problematic that in numerous studies it has been proposed that the general attitude towards web advertising forms such as banner advertisements and pop-up advertisements is low. To counter this decreasing trend, companies have opted in using search engines as one marketing channel to their products and services.

This study presents a phenomenon called search engine marketing (SEM), and an empirical study on how Finnish consumers perceive it and what role do search engines play in consumers' online buying processes. SEM is most usually divided into search engine optimization, which focuses on achieving high rankings in search results, and paid placement, which is basically an advertisement space sold by search engines. Empirical data with 314 responses was gathered from several Finnish online communities in order to gain understanding about the following issues: 1) How do consumers use search engines to gain knowledge about the products they desire? 2) What are their attitudes towards search engine marketing? 3) What is the search engine's role in the purchase process?

The findings from this study propose that search engines are very commonly used tools in information retrieval, and that they play a major part in the online buying process as well. The study at hand acknowledges the fact that since consumers usually view only a fraction of all the available search results, it is imperative for companies to be able to position themselves so that they can gain the maximum exposure. The results show that consumers do not tend to trust in the paid placements as much as they do in normal, organic, results, which poses yet another problem for search engine marketers.

Additionally, it was discovered that navigational searchers (i.e. searchers who know the exact URL to the desired page, but still navigate there via search engine) may produce errors when measuring web traffic from search engines and making assumptions from those figures alone. Navigational searchers may boost up the incoming web traffic rate from search engines which needs to be accounted for when evaluating the success of company's web sites. Managerial implications and conclusions are provided by the basis of the results.