

Online and Offline Competitors: Identifying Them & Countering Their Tactics

The Internet, the great equalizer, has made it possible for you to reach a greater, yet targeted, audience in a unique and exciting way. And it has extended the same opportunity to your competitors. But with this unique playing field, understanding who your competitors truly are has become more difficult. While it is critical to monitor and know your “identified” offline competitors, it is equally important to know who your online competitors are as well.

Offline competitors are the companies who you view as brick and mortar competition in your marketplace. For example, if you are Pharmaceutical Company A with branded drug Y you probably view Pharmaceutical Company B which produces branded drug Z as your competitor. Both drugs, made from different chemicals, treat the same ailment. Therefore both companies are vying for the same audience to market to offline and online. However, when you target that audience online, you encounter a different type of competitor. This is a competitor that isn't anything like your company or your offline competitor's company, but seems to be targeting the same keyword phrases you have carefully selected and are tracking for your search engine marketing campaign.

Online and Offline Are Different

It is crucial to research which websites are showing up on your most important non-branded keyword phrases and check to see if those sites are repeatedly showing up in the top positions.

Working with the earlier example, even though Pharmaceutical Company A and Pharmaceutical Company B are similar offline; Pharmaceutical Company B may not be showing up in the top positions on the targeted keyword phrases. Instead, you see a number of sites that offer educational information on the ailment your drug treats. It makes sense that these sites would target the same non-branded keyword phrases as your company.

However, there could also be websites showing up on this same set of keyword phrases that offer generic or discounted versions of the drug. You may even find lawyers looking for consumers who have used the drugs in an attempt to put together a class action lawsuit against the pharmaceutical company. This makes consistently monitoring who else is vying for online visibility on your targeted keywords extremely important, and identifying the search engine marketing tactics they are using to achieve rankings on the critical keyword phrases essential.

Competitor SEM Tactics to Monitor

Page Content — How much content is on the competitor's ranking pages? What about keyword stuffing? Are there too many occurrences of a particular keyword phrase throughout the page? Keyword stuffing, which is frowned upon by search engines, could be an attempt to inflate the relevance of the page.

URL Structure — What do the competitor's URLs look like? Are they static? Are they written cleanly, with words representing the theme of the page in them?

Meta Data — What are the priority meta keywords for the page? Do they appear in the title and description for the page as well? Are the priority words in the meta data similar keyword phrases to those you are targeting for your campaign?

Source Code — How is the code formatted? Is it easy for a search engine spider to navigate?

Internal Navigation — Providing text-based links to other significant parts of your site invites search engine spiders to keep searching the site. Does the competitor's site have a sufficient amount of internal links? Are these links keyword-centric?

Link Popularity — How many quality links (from either directories or appropriate 3rd party sites) point to the competitor's site? A higher quantity of legitimate links pointing to your competitor's site may help them rank higher on certain keyword phrases, as search engines give preferences to sites with high link popularity.

Collectively, these elements add to the theme of a page. Researching how your top online competitors utilize these elements, and where they may be doing a better job than you, will help you formulate steps to gain visibility on your most important non-branded keyword phrases.

