

online

language

pathways

How Search Influences Brand Communications Planning

By Amanda Davie

Every year in search, a few buzzwords emerge, but few brands or marketers know how to put the nuances into practice. Among the aspirational topics of 2009 were semantic search and the role of search in brand communications — though skeptics would argue that the latter has been an attempt to get our mitts on the big brand budgets.

Beyond ensuring that brands have the correct representation (coverage and message) in search, strategic brand communications planning tactics have, to date, been limited. And when it comes to fully understanding the psychology and the semantics of the online searcher, as an industry, we've barely scratched the surface with our keyword analysis methodologies.

So where do we go from here? How do we stop talking and start doing? How do we combine communications planning with search? And how do we move beyond keywords and into the psychology of search, to understand the intent behind search behaviour and search language?

In 2009, my company, Reform, collaborated with the U.K.'s leading digital content strategy consultancy, CDA, to conduct a research study on the linguistic journeys of online search. For example, what motivations lie behind search queries, and how does this language adapt during the "search and find" process, from the initial search to the destination website? We wanted to understand how people articulate their intentions and motivations when they start their online searches, and how search behaviour

relates to the language of the web pages with which they choose to engage.

In a departure from traditional search research, we took a qualitative approach by inviting a sample of Internet users of varying levels of online proficiency and with different demographics (age, gender, and profession) to take part in a two-stage study.

First, we asked the participants to consider an online information need (for the purposes of the study, we selected a common personal finance product scenario), and to articulate how they might go about searching for it, and what criteria would be important to them in their selection process. We asked them to

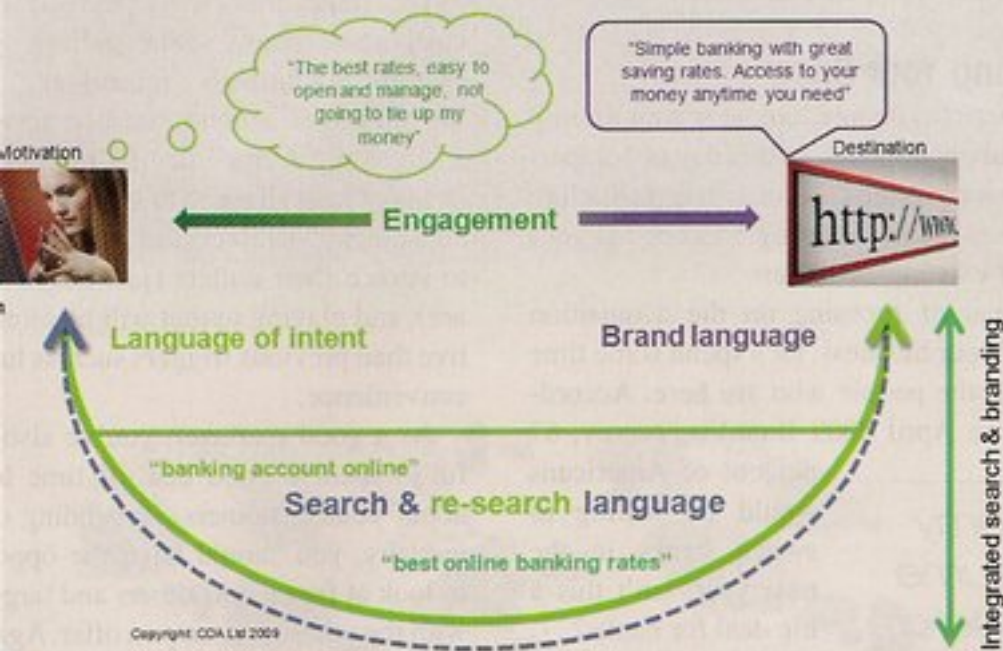
consider what keywords — or language — they would use when conducting this imaginary search journey.

In the second stage, we asked the same participants to carry out the task online, and we recorded what language they used, how they responded to messaging within the search results, and also how they responded to the content upon arrival at the branded destination website. We then compared the language across both the imaginary and the actual stages, and we analysed the influence of the journey itself to identify distinct language phases or pathways.

One of the key findings of the "online language pathways" research study was that the language people used to describe what they wanted to find online before they started their search — the language of intent — was not the same as the terms and phrases they used when they actually started to search — search

*The language of intent
does not equal
search language.*

Integrated Planning Approach



marketers can model the integration of search language into a communications strategy.

Language Pathways



brands can harness language filtering.

language. The study found that a language process takes place as searchers refine their language to eliminate irrelevant search results. That, broadly speaking, the language of intent can be described as natural and human, while search language becomes more mechanical and technical.

The research revealed that the language used to deepen and refine their searches was influenced by the brand language that appeared within the search results listing.

The study also found that the language people appeared to respond most favorably to when they actually engaged with a website was that which most closely resembled their language of intent. Hence, brand communications planners and branded content strategists should incorporate search linguistics analysis into their audience planning efforts.

Finally, the study highlighted the need for content publishers to work hand-in-hand with search marketers, so that brands can create content more intelligently to attract customers. As we search marketers know, SEO cannot be an afterthought.

This is but one example of how the search strategy can move past the "aspirational" and into practical planning steps to ensure that brands are delivering the information and the brand experience that online searchers are looking for.

My search wish for 2010 is that search strategists use this kind of rich brand insight to refine their linguistic analysis and to encourage more customers and higher conversion rates. To this end, I hereby call for a new phrase "keyword analysis" in 2010. *



Amanda is founder and director of Reform Digital, an independent search marketing firm that helps businesses to improve their search marketing strategy, optimize their search engines, and explore new commercial models. Amanda has 15 years' experience in the digital marketing industry and is one of Europe's leading search marketing specialists.

After launching Reform Digital in 2009, she spent eight years running search operations within market leading digital agencies like i-level and Outrider (WPP). Amanda is passionate about the standardisation and quality of search business and works closely with brands and publishers to ensure that search is an integral part of their communications and commercial planning piece.