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SEO Agencies Buyer's Guide

2009

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1. Introduction

Econsultancy's buyer's guides are the ideal starting place for anybody researching new suppliers in digital market sectors. They contain **in-depth vendor profiles**; to help you quickly evaluate suppliers and service providers, as well as **market analysis** to help you put things into perspective. Vendors are selected for the report based on a combination of factors, *not limited to but including*:

- **Analysis of capabilities** (services / products)
- **Clients**
- **Experience** (qualifications / trade bodies / case studies / client lists)
- **Expertise** (by sector / topic),
- **UK status** (a UK office is preferred, occasional exceptions are made)
- **Ability to take on and fulfil new projects**
- **Recommendations from trusted sources** (or anecdotal evidence to the contrary)
- **Google visibility**
- **Business model** (a high % of turnover should be related to these services)
- **Company website**

Econsultancy does not explicitly recommend any of the suppliers featured in these guides, principally because it is impossible for us to work with all of them to form a first-hand opinion. But we do believe - based on an intensive and careful selection process - that the chosen vendors represent quality.

Buyer's Guides are updated on an annual basis, so the information contained within is recent and thus valid. Send any questions or comments to linus@econsultancy.com.

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1.1. About Econsultancy

Econsultancy is the leading source of independent advice and insight on digital marketing and ecommerce.

Our reports, events, online resources and training programmes help a community of over 75,000 registered marketers make better decisions, build business cases, find the best suppliers, look smart in meetings and accelerate their careers.

Econsultancy is an [award-winning online publisher of reports](#) covering best practice, user experience benchmarking, market data and supplier selection aimed at internet professionals that want practical advice on all aspects of e-business.

Econsultancy also operates a highly popular [training](#) division, used by some of the world's most prominent brands for staff education, both in-house and via public courses. We provide training across all areas of digital marketing and at all levels from one day courses to diplomas to Masters in Digital Marketing.

In addition, we host more than 100 events a year, such as The Online Marketing Masterclass, regular Supplier Showcases and Roundtables, an annual Future of Digital Marketing event, Digital Cream and a range of social events.

The [Econsultancy](#) site now attracts over 175,000 unique users per month where they access research, read the blog and take part in discussions in the forums. And as a portal to the digital marketing community, Econsultancy members can also link up with other members and digital suppliers through our directories, as well as find a new job or new digital talent using the job listings.

Some of Econsultancy's client-side members include: Google, Yahoo, MSN, MySpace, BBC, BT, Shell, Vodafone, Yell.com, Dell, Oxfam, Virgin Atlantic, TUI, Barclays, Carphone Warehouse, IPC Media, Deloitte, T-Mobile and Estée Lauder.

[Join Econsultancy](#) today to learn what's happening in digital marketing – and what works.

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2. Executive Summary

The focus of this report is natural **search engine optimisation** (SEO or ‘natural search’), and contains an analysis of market trends and detailed profiles of the leading UK agencies offering services in this area.

This report supersedes Econsultancy’s Search Engine Marketing Buyer's Guide¹, which previously covered both search engine optimisation and paid search.

The advice for buyers, and many of the market trends, within this document are relevant for organisations internationally as well as in the UK. Ideally, the report should be read in conjunction with our [SEO Best Practice Guide](#)², which contains comprehensive practical, “how-to” guidance about SEO.

Trends discussed in this guide include:

- Search marketers harness social media to boost visibility
- Focus on new platforms and tools as search behaviour changes
- Companies strive for best practice as SEO evolves
- Improved technology and processes help understanding of return on investment
- Google maintains its grip on the search marketplace
- Microsoft and Yahoo seek to dent Google’s market share

The Supplier Marketplace and Profiles section (*Section 9*) contains profiles of 31 leading agencies which provide natural search services.

Further Econsultancy Reading:

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) - Best Practice Guide

<http://econsultancy.com/reports/search-engine-optimisation-seo-best-practice-guide>

Search Engine Marketing: SEO – Digital Marketing Template Files

<http://econsultancy.com/reports/search-engine-marketing-seo-digital-marketing-template-files>

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO): A Beginner's Guide

<http://econsultancy.com/reports/search-engine-optimisation-seo-a-beginner-s-guide>

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) Business Case

<http://econsultancy.com/reports/sem-search-engine-optimisation-seo-business-case>

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¹ <http://econsultancy.com/reports/search-engine-marketing-buyer-s-guide-2008>

² <http://econsultancy.com/reports/search-engine-optimisation-seo-best-practice-guide>



3. The Market

3.1. Market Value and Growth

Market Value

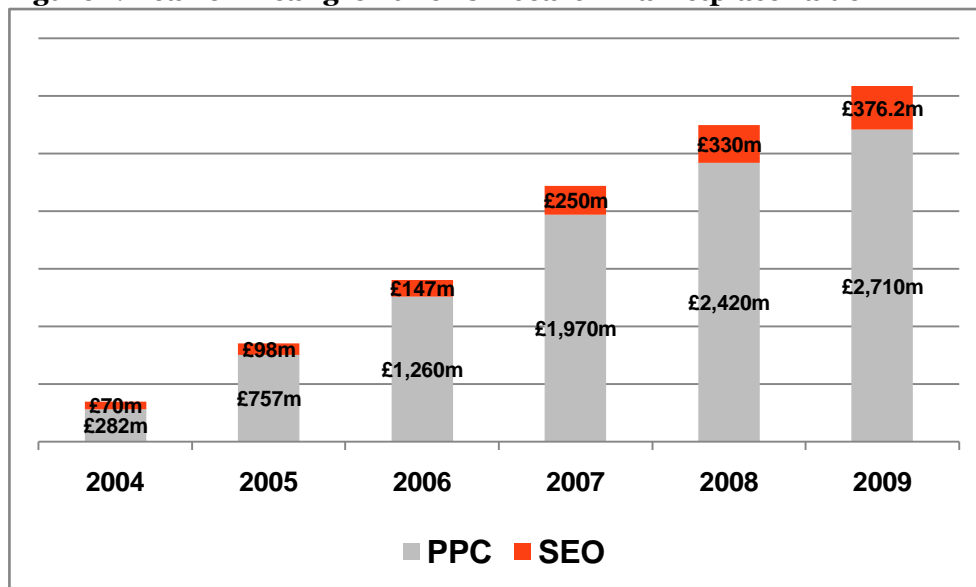
Econsultancy estimates that the SEO market will grow by 14% during 2009 to a value of £376 million.

Econsultancy

Econsultancy expects the total market for search engine marketing (SEM) to be worth in excess of £3 billion in 2009, of which the vast majority (£2.71 billion) will have been spending on paid search marketing.

The remainder, £376 million, is accounted for by spending on search engine optimisation and this figure is based on 14% year-on-year market growth in 2009. Our estimate for SEO includes payments to agencies, as well as investment in client-side staff to manage SEO and implement changes.

Figure 1. Year-on-Year growth of UK search marketplace value



Source: Econsultancy

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3.2. Market trends

3.2.1. Search marketers harness social media to boost visibility

Social media marketing is an area of continuing interest to search marketers, especially give its meteoric rise to prominence in recent months.

The growth of sites and communities such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, MySpace, Digg, Delicious and Yahoo Answers have not escaped the notice of search marketers who are looking for more traffic and more links.

Econsultancy Training

Did you know that Econsultancy offers an enormous range of SEO training, including:

- Organic/Natural (SEO) Search Marketing
- International/Multilingual (SEO Search) Marketing
- SEO Public Relations

More information can be found on the [training section](#) of the Econsultancy website.

What the clients say

“A big change which has happened over the last two years is the role social media plays in the how we communicate with our customers and engage with them. Done well, we know this can have many SEO benefits too, so we spend time ensuring we are engaging in the right way for our target audience.”

SAMPLE QUOTE

What the agencies say

“The explosion of social media is also something that impacts SEO, as clients engage with increasingly diverse social media channels. It is vital that this activity is integrated with SEO to ensure that they deliver the maximum benefit not just from a brand exposure perspective, but also for the natural search status of the main website.”

SAMPLE QUOTE

“The roles of search engine optimisation and online PR will continue to twist around one another; acting as one strategy at times but with different goals at other times. However as SEO and online PR evolve they’ll both have to tackle the issue of speed. Increasingly, in order to be effective, you need to be quick. This will produce much discussion from brands and agencies.”

SAMPLE QUOTE

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3.2.2. Focus on new search platforms and tools as search behaviour changes

Digital marketers need to be aware of the way that user search behaviour is changing and the impact that new ways of searching and evolving platforms have on their online marketing strategies.

Some of the main changes are outlined below.

Mobile Search³: As handsets have become more sophisticated and internet speed has improved, the mobile phone has become a more relevant proposition for the search engine marketer.

Integrated search: This is the ability to search multiple data sources simultaneously, including the internet, corporate intranets and hard drives. More often than not, this is done directly from the user's desktop. This generally means that the user experience is much smoother, as there is little need to minimise a live document or open a browser or similar application. The likes of Google, Microsoft, Yahoo, and Apple are either offering or developing their own versions.

3.2.3. Google maintains its grip on the search marketplace

Google is undeniably the dominant force within the UK search industry, accounting for somewhere between 80% and 90% of UK search engine traffic (depending on the source). Globally, comScore recently noted that Google is still significantly ahead of its competitors, generating 76.7 billion searches or 67.5 % of the market share in July 2009 which represents year-on-year growth in user numbers of 58%.⁴

In its bid to remain the champion of search, Google has instigated a number of changes which affect both natural and paid search. Changes affecting paid listings are explored in greater detail in Econsultancy's [Paid Search Agencies Buyer's Guide](#), where factors such as trademark bidding and the end of Best Practice Funding for agencies are discussed.

What the agencies say

"The recent changes in Google have incentivised big brands to pay more attention to the ability of their websites to perform in natural search engines."

SAMPLE QUOTE

"The fact that the SEO sector is largely controlled by Google because of their market share is always a concern. The threat comes from how much prominence they continue to give natural rankings versus their paid listings. Google were talking about the rollout of Ajax which depending on how this was rolled out could stop all analytics tools tracking conversions by keywords from both PPC and natural rankings – except Google Analytics..."

SAMPLE QUOTE

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<http://econsultancy.com/reports/seo-agencies-buyers-guide>

³ Econsultancy has published a Mobile Marketing Buyer's Guide, which includes more discussion and statistics relating to mobile search. <http://econsultancy.com/reports/mobile-marketing-buyers-guide>

⁴ <http://www.iabuk.net/en/1/searchmarketgrows41percentto10909.mxs>



4. Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT)

This section contains a 'SWOT' analysis of the SEO market and also serves as a summary of some of the points made above.

What the agencies say

“SEO’s strengths are also its weaknesses. It is a discipline still in its infancy, continuously evolving, adapting and changing and that is what gives it dynamism and power. However, because it’s a fledgling sector, it’s swamped with too many young companies selling a product they can’t adequately support or understand to customers who have no knowledge of what to expect.”

SAMPLE QUOTE

4.3 Strengths

- Growth in SEO remains strong as this form of marketing continues to attract increasing levels of investment from businesses, as the benefits become more widely understood.
 - The prevalence of broadband means internet usage continues to grow.
 - More people are searching for goods and services on the internet.

4.4 Weaknesses

- Google remains highly dominant in the search engine space, increasing the risk that marketers could be significantly affected by changes to its algorithm and policies.

4.5 Opportunities

- From the agency perspective, as search engine marketing becomes more complicated, businesses will have more to gain from hiring outside help to assist them in their formulation and implementation of SEO strategies.
 - There is also increased demand for training, especially from companies who want to keep their search activity in-house.

4.6 Threats

- The major search engines are getting better at spotting unethical SEO practices and penalising offending organisations, but there are still a large number of websites getting away with dubious practices.
 - This could reduce user-confidence in search engines.

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5. Tips and Pitfalls

5.1 Introduction

In order to identify the right natural search provider for your organisation, it is important to understand that different companies have different types of expertise and experience.

Econsultancy's [SEO Beginner's Guide](#) and [SEO Best Practice Guide](#) are also useful reading to help you in a number of relevant areas including understanding the channel, finding the right supplier and managing your resources internally.

Other separate documents you may find helpful are Econsultancy's [SEO marketing template files](#), our [SEO business case](#) and [Request for Proposal](#) template.

5.1.3 Costs

- Do you have a fixed or scalable budget for SEO activity?
- Have you got the kind of budget that will enable you to adopt an effective natural search activity in your particular market?
- Are you and the agency both clear as to what success looks like for the search marketing you are paying for – and how will you judge how effective the activity is?

What the agencies say

“Make sure you see a full breakdown of service costs or hourly rate. Compare proposals from at least three different companies... Just because something may look more complex does not necessarily justify price.”

SAMPLE QUOTE

Sample only, please download the full report from:

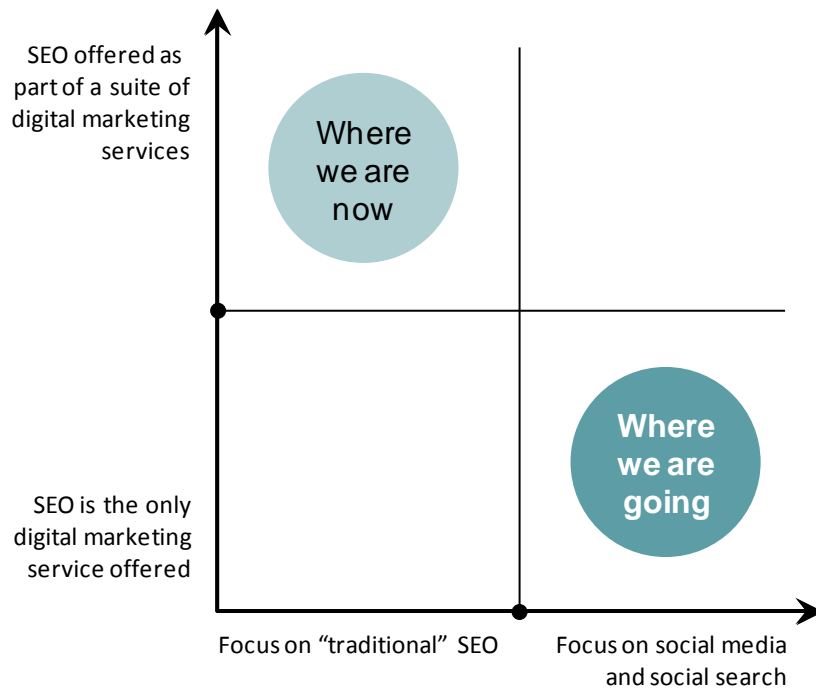


<http://econsultancy.com/reports/seo-agencies-buyers-guide>



6 Market Positioning Charts

Explanation for Chart 1 – Services



The vertical axis of this chart indicates to what level the agency provides a pure SEO service, against SEO being offered as a service along with other digital marketing activities.

The horizontal axis indicates whether an agency sees itself as specialising in the more “traditional” SEO methods or whether it has a greater focus upon social media and social search techniques.

For example, a position in the top left of this chart indicates a supplier who can provide you with natural search services alongside other offerings (eg. paid search, email, etc.), but focuses on the more established methods of SEO.

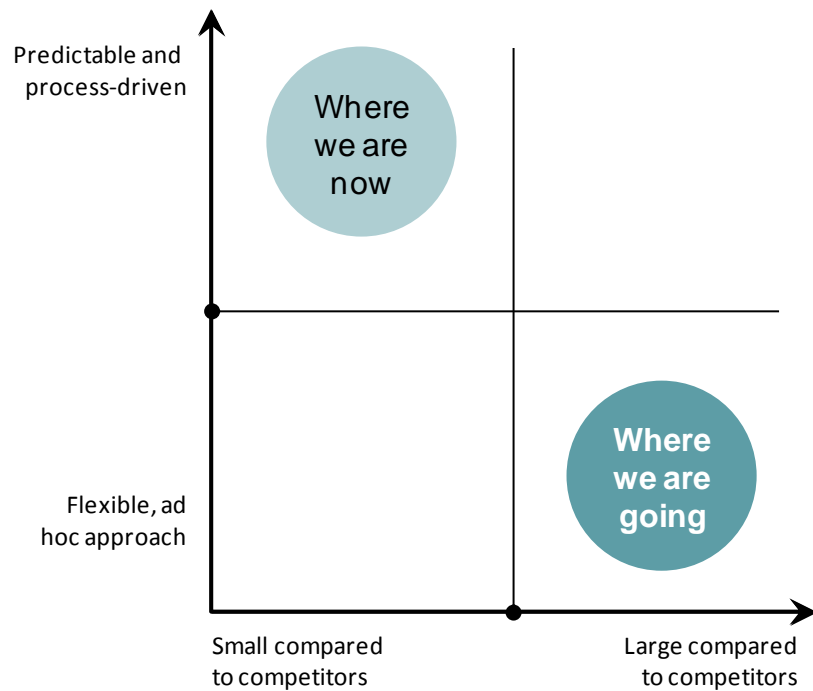
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Explanation for Chart 2 – Company Culture



The vertical axis of this chart indicates the extent to which an agency offers a flexible approach to SEO services, as distinct from a predictable and process-driven culture.

The horizontal axis shows what size an agency views themselves, against their competitors.

For example, the position in the bottom right of this chart therefore indicates a relatively large agency which can offer clients a flexible approach to work.

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7 Supplier Matrix and Company Focus

7.1 Sample Matrix

An at-a-glance overview of who's doing what ...

Supplier Matrix: A fast guide to services																												
	SAMPLE	SAMPLE	SAMPLE	SAMPLE	SAMPLE	SAMPLE	SAMPLE	SAMPLE	SAMPLE	SAMPLE	SAMPLE	SAMPLE	SAMPLE	SAMPLE	SAMPLE	SAMPLE	SAMPLE	SAMPLE	SAMPLE	SAMPLE	SAMPLE	SAMPLE	SAMPLE	SAMPLE	SAMPLE	SAMPLE	SAMPLE	SAMPLE
Types of services offered (SEO)																												
Keyword research	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Search Strategy definition	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Site technical audit	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Competitor research	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Landing page development	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Position monitoring	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
ROI tracking/analysis	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Submission process	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Link generation campaigns	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Copywriting	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Online PR optimisation	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Social media marketing consultation	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Social search optimisation	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Training	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Multi-territory campaigns	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Multi-lingual campaigns	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Other	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●



Supplier Matrix: A fast guide to services

	Ambergreen	Barracuda Digital	bigmouthmedia	Browser Media	ClickThrough Marketing	DBD Media	Epiphany Solutions	Equi=Media	Factotum Creative	Fresh Egg	Greenlight	Guava	Harvest Digital	High Position	iCrossing	i-level Search	Latitude	LBI	Leapfrog	Make It Rain	Optimize	Propellernet	Receptional	Search Laboratory	SEOptimize	SiteVisibility	Steak	Summit Media	Tamar	The Search Works	VCCP Search							
Other services / expertise																																						
Vertical search	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●			
Local search	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		
Mobile search	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		
Pay-per-call	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		
Optimisation of feeds for shopping comparison sites	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		
other relevant services or expertise	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●		
Charging Models: Type of charging																																						
Project by project	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	
Retainer	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Success-based fees	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Other	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●

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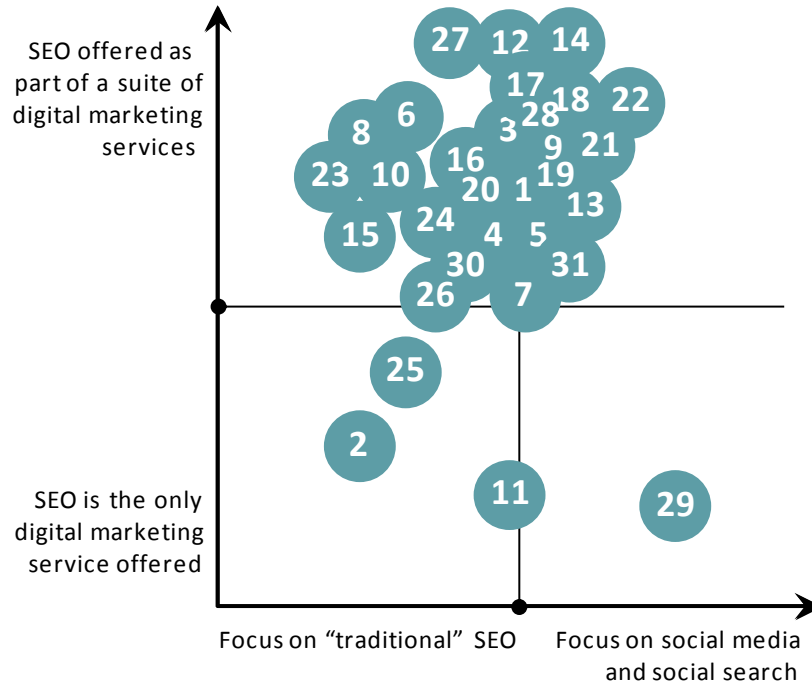


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7.2 Market positioning overview

Chart 1: Services



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8 Supplier Marketplace and Profiles

8.1 Sample

Company Details
Company Name
Company Logo
URL
UK Head Office Address
Other office locations
Contact Name
Contact Telephone
Contact email
Company Proposition
Brief Company History
For how many years have you been offering SEM services?
Number of UK Full Time Employees
Key personnel including brief description of role
Turnover for 2008 or last accounting period
Projected Turnover 2009
What percentage of your income comes from Search Engine Marketing Services?
Do you offer PPC as a service?
If yes (above), what is your revenue split between SEO and PPC?

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Sector focus

Do you have a specific sector focus?

How do you avoid potential conflicts of interest?

Unique Selling Point

What sets you apart from competitors?

Clients

Selection of current UK clients

Case Study

Single UK Case Study or 3 key projects including project outlines and techniques

Types of services offered (SEO)

Keyword research

Search Strategy definition

Site technical audit

Competitor research

Landing page development

Position monitoring

ROI tracking/analysis

Submission process

Link generation campaigns

Copywriting

Online PR optimisation

Social media marketing consultation

Social search optimisation

Training

Multi-territory campaigns

Multi-lingual campaigns

Other (Please specify)

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Other services / expertise

Vertical search

Local search

Mobile search

Pay-per-call

Optimisation of feeds for shopping comparison sites

Please outline any other relevant services or expertise, e.g. training

Charging Models: Type of charging

Project by project

Retainer

Success-based fees

Other

Fees and commission rates

Day rates (range) and/or commission levels.

Best Practice and Awards

Details of best practice policy

Memberships

Accreditations

White Papers/publications

Additional Supporting Information

Any other relevant information not previously included

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