SEO, TURN TO SEO TO HELP BEAT A BAD ECONOMY ... Interactive marketers and ecommerce companies alike are increasingly worried about the economy. If we dial back seven years ago, to the rather dismal fall of 2001, we might all feel a little better. As reported by ClickZ at that time, Odyssey's "Breadbox" study found 51 percent of consumers reported they were more likely to pursue bargains given the negative economic environment. Meanwhile, 65 percent of online shoppers said they felt shopping online saved them money and 55 percent of all U.S. consumers believed that people using online services for shopping were likely to be enjoying retail savings. The same survey would garner similar results today, and that is good news for those of us working in search. In times of economic downturn, consumers tend to shop online more, not less. While search enables online shoppers to comparison shop, there is also the perception that the best bargains are found online as well. As with 2001, I predict that online shopping numbers will either increase or change very little from where they were last holiday season.

A recent piece in the Washington Post should provide some comfort as well for interactive marketers. In her piece on comScore, "Counting Clicks: Now a Mainstay," Kim Hart makes the point that, "Eyeballs matter even more [in an economic downturn] now that legitimate companies' fortunes rise and fall with internet traffic and the advertising it attracts." Even as the market retracts and advertising budgets follow suit, one thing is for sure: search marketing will still reign. If one only looks at the article's predictions for comScore's financial future during the recession, it becomes clear: Companies that want to survive will have to maintain their online presence, and to do so they will need search.

Few question the fact that paid search pushed the interactive advertising community through tough economic times at the beginning of this decade. Paid search metrics tell marketers how many consumers are paying attention to paid advertorial, which is why eyeballs and ROI have dominated search since its inception. However, after a few years of focusing on pay-per-click campaigns, growth at most Fortune 500 companies over the past four years necessitated progress in organic search engine rankings as well.

I am willing to bet one thing will be different this year from 2001. With a whole lot more actionable intelligence and consumer eyeballs in the natural search space during this economic downturn, (1) CMOs will not wait to implement natural search strategies and (2) natural search will give paid a run for its money as the champion of interactive.

For example, look at a large enterprise software company, a channel that is very competitive in any economy, good or bad. The company was seeking solutions to build online brand awareness and increase conversion events. We listened to their search strategy, which predictably was heavily dependent on paid search. Then we made fewer than 20 basic, natural search recommendations and implemented them.

Just by changing its SEO tactics, the company quadrupled its Google ranking for one of its important keywords, moving from the third page of results to the fourth position on page one. Website traffic increased, bringing an additional 400 visitors per month, which also increased the number of leads and product and demonstration inquires. All of these fantastic results came from natural search optimization, not paid search. It was the natural search optimization that actually showed the company where its search strategy weaknesses were, and obviously provided effective course correction.

Great search marketing needs measurement and data points beyond the audience exposure that SEM represents. Despite its historic status as the engine that pushes our industry along even in difficult financial times, paid search data alone won't tell marketers about the impact individual keywords have on a particular search campaign. Paid search data alone doesn't tell search marketers which pages consumers visit most often and which pages are the last visited before conversion. Most CMOs would agree that it is more important than ever to know how the consumer came to their decision.

For years, marketers have complained that paid search results and natural search results are simply too different. With budgets retracting, it is imperative that CMOs justify expenditures. The good news is that technology is a great equalizer, and advancements have leveled the search playing field. There are ways to produce similar data that enables an "apples-to-apples" way of making evaluations and budget decisions.

For years marketers have been improving their page ranking using paid search. Now, marketers can improve their page ranking with SEO as well. As the example above shows, by looking at more than page ranking and meta descriptions and by incorporating links, visits, crawlability, and relevance, SEO can develop performance criteria comparable with SEM performance data. By evaluating multiple facets of SEO, marketers can receive an aggregate accounting of what is working.

We have known for a long time that traffic in search is entirely disproportionate to spend. Eighty-six percent of consumer clicks happen in the natural space, yet the lion's share of spend goes to paid search. Marketers have been told for years that this is acceptable because paid search is easier to justify. With new economic woes fueling stress in every market sector, and so much more to be gained in natural search, I am thinking that by next year, interactive will have a new favorite.