Search Engine Marketing (SEM) is a form of Internet marketing that improves a website's placement on a search engine result pages. But getting a high ranking through SEM is not necessarily easy – there’s a lot of competition for the top spots. To be successful, you must have a good understanding of how search engines work and what “keywords” consumers use to find your website.

There are two popular ways that dealers can use SEM to get top rankings in search engines like Google, Yahoo and others: Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Pay-Per-Click (PPC) advertising. SEO typically has a higher long-term ROI while short-term results are seen quicker with “paid search.”

Whether you choose Search Engine Optimization, Pay-Per-Click or both, Search Engine Marketing works well if done right and can deliver measurable results.
What Exactly Is Search Engine Optimization?

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is essentially making your website “search-engine friendly” by using keywords, headers, hyperlinks, styled text and other techniques in the words and design of your website. Also important is the volume of inbound links to your website from other sites. These key ingredients allow search engines to easily find your website and will improve your site’s ranking in the “natural” (not “sponsored links”) search results. SEO is the best way to improve your site’s ranking in natural search results, but it can take up to three months to start seeing the benefits of optimizing your website.

SEO typically involves:

- Analysis of your site’s ranking and your competition’s ranking on the search results page.
- Keyword analysis. (“Keywords” are simply the words or phrases that Internet users enter into the search engine.)
- Well-written, organized content on your site that will trigger a match between the keywords and your website so it shows up on the search results page.
- HTML code optimization.
- Continuous maintenance, updating and experimenting to sustain and improve ranking and results.

SEO is a very technical process and may require a significant financial investment to afford the professional expertise needed to optimize your website, but it can deliver excellent long-term results if done properly and maintained over time. Be sure to research any SEO vendor you are considering – ask for references and investigate the analysis tools they offer. Also, have a good understanding of what keywords are important for your dealership. Keep in mind that SEO is not a one-time shot. It’s a long-term, continuous process.

If you’re using a vendor to design and maintain your website, be sure to ask them if your site is search-engine friendly. Search engines don’t recognize website content that is designed in Flash or content that mainly consists of images. Instead, search engines read text, so it’s important that your website largely uses HTML code in order for search engines to find your site.
Pay-Per-Click (PPC) simply means that you pay a search engine to rank your website at the top or side of the search results page. With PPC, your listing appears in the “Sponsored Links” section, and you don’t have to rely on the search engine to find your site on its own. PPC is an auction-based system where, in most cases, whoever bids the most money for keywords gets the highest position on the page. But just like the name says, you only have to pay when a consumer actually clicks through to your website.

Pay-Per-Click is a good way to increase your website traffic right away if you don’t mind spending a lot of money. But getting traffic to your site is just the first step – your website must be ready for visitors. Is it well written and organized with clear directions on how to find what shoppers are looking for? You only have a few seconds to convince visitors that your site can give them what they want. Keep in mind that they’re just a click away from a long list of other websites that make a similar offer.

Pay-Per-Click (PPC) can be maintenance-intense and generally involves:

- Frequent monitoring of your competitors’ PPC rankings (which may call for you to modify your strategy, including paying more money for keywords for better placement).
- Analysis and selection of the right keywords to bring up your listing. (Avoid using your dealership name as a keyword – you don’t want to pay for clicks for shoppers that already know who you are!)
- Updating keyword bids weekly, daily, or in some cases, even hourly.
- Effective copywriting for your listings to encourage a consumer to click on your site.
- Measuring results, including ROI. (Use a web analytics tool to do this – there are free ones out there, like the popular Google Analytics.)
Challenges with Pay-Per-Click Advertising

One of the biggest challenges with PPC is making sure you are driving quality traffic to your site. It doesn’t matter how many visitors click through to your site (except to your wallet!). What’s really important is what they’re doing once they get there. It’s a good idea to keep an eye on your “bounce rate”—that is, the percentage of visitors who click through to your site but leave within five seconds. A good rule of thumb is that 30% is an acceptable bounce rate while 60% is way too high (even the best sites don’t see bounce rates less than 20%).

It's important, too, to pay attention to the length of time a visitor spends on your site and what pages they are viewing. Remember, you’ve just paid to bring them to your site, so you want to make sure they’re sticking around and shopping. In fact, if you’re not converting PPC visitors into actual leads at around 15% to 25% but are stuck in the 2% to 5% range, then your Pay-Per-Click advertising is not effective. It could be an important sign that your website needs some work.

How AutoTrader.com Puts Search Engine Marketing to Work for You

If you don’t have the budget for Search Engine Optimization or costly Pay-Per-Click advertising, AutoTrader.com is a great way to reap the benefits of successful Search Engine Marketing. We use the power of SEM to drive qualified traffic to your dealership and the inventory listed on our site. In fact, every month dealers receive an average of 176 click-throughs from AutoTrader.com to their websites. Plus, more than 80% of AutoTrader.com visitors are actively shopping for a vehicle,* while 67% will buy a car within 60 days.**
SEO on AutoTrader.com
Brings Shoppers to Your Cars

When shoppers enter the most searched auto-related keywords like “used cars” and “cars for sale” into a search engine, AutoTrader.com consistently appears in the Top Five Rankings on the search results page. AutoTrader.com listings also appear when Internet users enter popular phrases like Make/Model/City combinations. In fact, one out of every 10 Vehicle Details Page viewed on our site comes from search engines, and 19% of Dealer Details Page sessions are driven by SEO. Your inventory on our site is optimized for search engine rankings, and the more descriptive text you use in your listings, the better it will rank in the long-run! We even have a dedicated team of SEO experts constantly monitoring the web and search engine trends just to bring more and more shoppers to your vehicle listings.

We “Pay to Appear” So You Don’t Have To!

AutoTrader.com uses over 500,000 keywords to guarantee that when we pay, car shoppers appear on our site to search your inventory. And because AutoTrader.com is so well-known across the nation, shoppers don’t just see the AutoTrader.com name – they click on it. With AutoTrader.com, you’re getting exposure from Pay-Per-Click advertising but without the added cost.

*AutoTrader.com Internal Data audited by ABC;
**Harris Interactive, 2007

When we say that we work for you – that’s exactly what we mean. We use our brand, our reach, our people, our knowledge and our resources to bring more and more shoppers from search engines to your cars every day. And we are constantly working to improve our methods to improve your results from search. Talk to your Advertising Consultant today about how AutoTrader.com can help you succeed.