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“I like the idea of a smoking licence, because I am spineless” Cailin Moran

From The Times
February 27, 2008

Internet is a cheap and effective campaign tool

Drew Broomhall: Analysis

Campaigning groups used to rely on rallies and publicity stunts to get their message across. Now all they need is a well-drilled online membership.

Search Google for Marks & Spencer and you will find a Boycott Israel website in the top few results — just below the company's own.

Protest groups self-organise on a global scale and the way that search engines work helps them to campaign cheaply and effectively on the web.

Internet search engines have become a key battleground between interest groups, charities, unions and their governmental or corporate targets. Securing a position on the first page of Google results can be done in two ways: paid advertising, or search engine optimisation.

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Union hijacks Google in fight for workers' rights

Campaigners have to be careful when using trademarks. Brands can complain to Google to prevent anyone unsuitable from paying for adverts to appear against searches that use their trademarks.

Where protest groups score is in Google's "organic" results, the main search listings. These are determined by Google's patented PageRank algorithm, the much-studied secret formula which helps to choose the order in which websites appear.

You can't buy positions here for cash, but results can be manipulated using search engine optimisation (SEO). These are techniques that help websites appear at the top of Google's rankings for desired search terms.

One of Google's key indicators of the importance of a website is the number of websites linking to it. Links between websites can be thought of like votes — more votes will generate better results. Therefore communities with an established presence online can gang together can help promote their cause.

Take the case of "Exxpose Exxon" (sic). Many thousands of environmental websites, blogs and online forums link to this website, with the end result that it sits alongside Exxon Mobil's corporate sites, and is very difficult to dislodge.

Online groups are nothing new. Early innovators such as Yahoo! still have active communities in their Yahoo! Groups, but the boom in social media websites such as Facebook is making it even easier for individuals to collaborate in groups and to spread their message outside their community.

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Alice Miles

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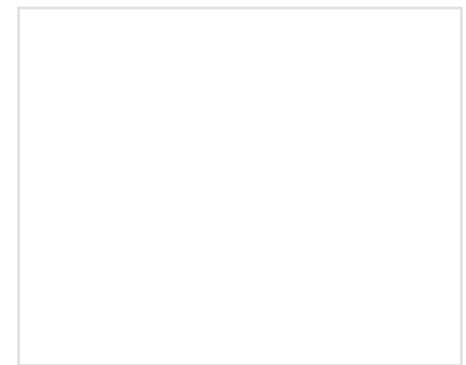
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