

Online marketer Jellyfish helps advertisers turn Google searches to sales

May 21 2015, by Scott Dance, The Baltimore Sun

Every time you search Google for a business or product and click on a result, the marketers are watching.

Companies bid for spots at the top of the page when consumers search for general terms or even competitors' names. And they closely track where those shoppers end up, analyzing the ways differences in a few words of ad copy or slight adjustments to website layout drive sales.

For Jellyfish, a United Kingdom-based company that has quietly built up a \$100 million U.S. headquarters in Baltimore, it is a booming business opportunity. While [search engine optimization](#) and marketing isn't an altogether new business, it is an evolving one that is expected to dominate digital advertising spending for the foreseeable future, as more mid-sized businesses tackle it as a way to proactively connect with customers.

"Companies are getting smarter," said Jay Robertson, vice president of marketing for home alarm system company Protection 1, a Jellyfish client. "There is so much more technological capability today than what we had five years ago as it relates to paid search. It is ever shifting."

Jellyfish's U.S. operations started 5 { years ago with Kevin Buerger, who is now executive vice president of U.S. sales and client services. He came from an advertising background and was working at a startup that sold services to Jellyfish when, he said, he "approached them and said, 'You now have a U.S. salesperson.'"

The company chose Baltimore as a launching pad because work with a large education client here made up a fifth of its business. And within a month of joining Jellyfish, Buerger started to expand that roster, landing work with U.S. video game retailer GameStop, he said.

The company has since added 60 employees in about 16,000 square feet of spare, modern office space here. And its list of clients has grown to include Fitbit, Carfax, Nestle, Pfizer, Yankee Candle, Walden University and Skype.

A hiring program called Jellyfish Academy brings in bright recent college graduates and young professionals without experience in Internet marketing and trains them in the field. The company expects to hire another 40 people in Baltimore by the end of the year.

While most of Jellyfish's 250 employees are in the United Kingdom, executives see the United States as their best opportunity for growth because of its massive consumer market and advertising budgets, said Daniel Wilkinson, the firm's executive vice president of global PPC, or pay-per-click, advertising.

Spending on digital marketing is expected to reach \$67 billion this year and top \$100 billion by 2019, growing from about a quarter of all ad spending to more than a third of it, according to Forrester Research. And search marketing is expected to consistently take the largest share of Internet advertising budgets, at nearly \$32 billion this year, according to Forrester.

Increasingly, that money is up for grabs as more companies take control of their marketing and put it online, said Matt Goddard, CEO of r2integrated, a Baltimore Web marketing firm that competes with Jellyfish. While companies used to pass their advertising into the hands of TV and radio stations or printed publications carrying their messages,

they now have to buy or license systems to manage online content and email, search engine or social media marketing and manage them on their own, he said.

Fortune 100 or 500 brands were quicker to take those reins, but now a growing number of middle-of-the-market companies are following along, Goddard said.

"That is where we see the growth," he said.

As more businesses sharpen their focus on Internet advertising, it is making the strategy more complex for marketers like Jellyfish.

For example, a company like Protection 1 will naturally pay for its website to appear high up in results for those searching for home security systems. It also will pay to show up in searches for names of competitors, like ADT. But those competitors do the same thing - meaning Protection 1 may have to compete to remain high on searches for its own name.

That forces Jellyfish's engineers to pore over every character of paid search advertisements, looking for the right combination of keywords that are most successful at leading shoppers to provide their personal information for a salesperson to follow up.

"We want to be respectful of our competitors but also push the envelope," Buerger said.

In other work, the company helps clients strike a balance between creepy and effective when serving people ads based on their past browsing history, or tests variations in website design to see which ones might confuse customers and which are most likely to encouraged a desired response.

But the right strategy isn't necessarily the one that spends the most, something that Robertson said is appreciated. If spending extra to get to the top of search results, as opposed to the middle, doesn't drive a commensurate surge in clicks or sales, then Jellyfish will advise against it, Buerger said.

"We think of their money as our money," he said.

That may be part of what is making Jellyfish's brand of Web marketing successful. While advertising strategy in the past was rigidly tied to television schedules and print production, the accelerating proliferation of online marketing technology is creating the chance for advertisers to get more bang for their buck.

"The thing about digital is digital is always on," Goddard said. "It used to be when you ran an ad, you'd run it for a specific moment in time. Digital is totally different because the customer actually drives the process."

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