



# SEO Spotlight on the Cruise Industry

# Overview

There continues to be a healthy rise in the number of people choosing cruises for their vacation. The F-CCA forecasted that a record 15 million people went on a cruise break in 2011, with demand so high that 26 new ship builds (19 ocean-going, 7 riverboats) are planned by 2014. With such interest around cruises, Ayima has chosen to analyze and report on this niche travel vertical within Organic Search, both in the US and the UK.

This report follows a similar track as our investigation into the Hotels and Flights market within search earlier this year. A copy of this 2012 SEO report is available free of charge from: <http://www.ayima.com/travel/>

## Online influence within the cruise industry

With such investments being made in the industry, competition is fierce to get the attention of potential cruise customers. An F-CCA report in 2011 cites the following as major influences for both vacations and cruises:

- Destination websites (39% Persuasive)
- Word of mouth referrals (33% Persuasive)
- Spouses (32% Persuasive)
- Cruise websites (28% Persuasive)
- **Internet Related Aggregate Total (67% Persuasive)**

With internet related sources accounting for 67% of all positive buying influences, they greatly outstrip word of mouth and family referrals. Attaining paramount rankings in Organic Search for the most important keywords in the target sectors must therefore sit centrally as a long-term business goal.

So, does the search landscape look as harsh for the major cruise operators, as it does in the hotel and flight sectors (previously reported)? Here we investigate how the established brands perform against the aggregators and price comparison websites in the Cruise industry (US and UK markets).

# Market Sector Analysis



In order to give an accurate picture of the relative strengths and weaknesses of the websites in the sector in question, we first looked to create Market Intelligence reports. This analyzes the most competitive and highly trafficked keywords within the cruise sector in the US and UK. Each website is then assigned a score based upon the ranking position for each particular keyword. The combined total is a metric we call 'Traffic Score'. This metric allows you to accurately measure the SEO performance of one website against another in the vertical.

Below you see a selection of the highest traffic keywords in the US and UK. It is interesting to notice the difference in search behaviors in the two countries. Many of the highest volume terms in the US are location-related queries. These location-based queries are much less prevalent in the UK. However, one of the most popular terms in the UK is [cruise reviews]. Individuals can be seen to be actively seeking peer-generated reviews on destinations and carriers to assist in their purchase decisions.

Keyword	Monthly Searches
cruises	246,000
cruise deals	90,500
cruise	74,00
cruise lines	60,500
caribbean cruise	40,500
alaska cruise	33,100
norwegian cruise	27,100
alaskan cruise	22,200
cruise ship	22,200
mediterranean cruise	18,100
caribbean cruise line	14,800
celebrity cruise	14,800
cruise america	14,800
princess cruise	14,800
cruise ship jobs	12,100
cruise ships	12,100
singles cruise	12,100

Keyword	Monthly Searches
cruise	74,000
cruise deals	74,000
cruises	49,500
cruise ship jobs	12,100
nile cruise	9,900
cruise holidays	8,100
cruise reviews	6,600
norwegian cruise line	6,600
cruise ship	5,400
cruise and maritime	4,400
carnival cruise	3,600
cruise ships	3,600
caribbean cruise	2,900
cruise and stay	2,900
cruise from southampton	2,900
late cruise deals	2,900
mini cruise	2,900

It is clear that the consumer is keen to understand how others rated and reviewed their experiences. Well aware of the increasing value of the travel market online, Google, not wishing to be left in the cold, has announced a further acquisition in the travel space. They now own the 55-year-old, Frommers' database of hotels and destination guides having acquired it from John Wiley & Sons Inc.

When you consider this huge body of rich, unique content from Frommers, alongside the UGC reviews of Zagat that are already populated within Google Places, you can see exactly which direction Google is headed. Their bayonets are fixed and they are preparing themselves for the battle of online supremacy in the travel space.

## Market Intelligence Reports

When comparing the Top 15 websites in order of Relative Traffic Score, one finding is very clear. In the US, the 5 major cruise companies fall into the top 10 ranking websites as seen below:

Rank	Domain	Relative Traffic Score
1	carnival.com	43.7
2	royalcaribbean.com	37.6
3	cruisecritic.com	36.2
4	travelocity.com	17.3
5	princess.com	15.8
6	wikipedia.org	15.5
7	ncl.com	12.8
8	twitter.com	11.8
9	cruisedeals.com	9.1
10	celebritycruises.com	8.4
11	expedia.com	7.6
12	facebook.com	6.6
13	orbitz.com	6.6
14	go.com	6.4
15	hollandamerica.com	6.2



The situation in the UK is markedly different, with only 2 positions in the top 10 being taken by cruise operators. The remainder of the sites are price aggregators, booking engines or affiliates.

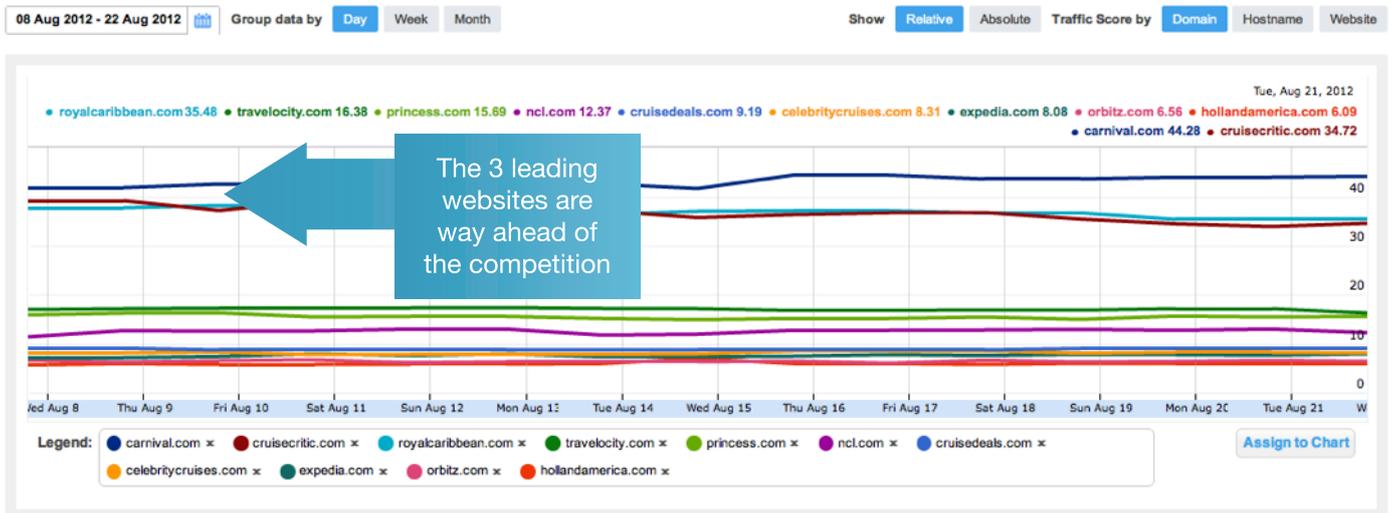
Rank	Domain	Relative Traffic Score
1	cruise.co.uk	33.9
2	iglucruise.com	27.9
3	cruise-fashion.co.uk	26.4
4	cruisedeals.co.uk	20.4
5	cruisecritic.com	18.0
6	thomson.co.uk	13.7
7	cruisecritic.co.uk	13.5
8	thomascook.com	11.8
9	pocruises.com	11.6
10	virginholidaycruises.co.uk	10.8
11	royalcaribbean.com	9.7
12	cruise1st.co.uk	9.5
13	wikipedia.org	7.4
14	cruisedirect.co.uk	6.6
15	fredolsencruises.com	5.6



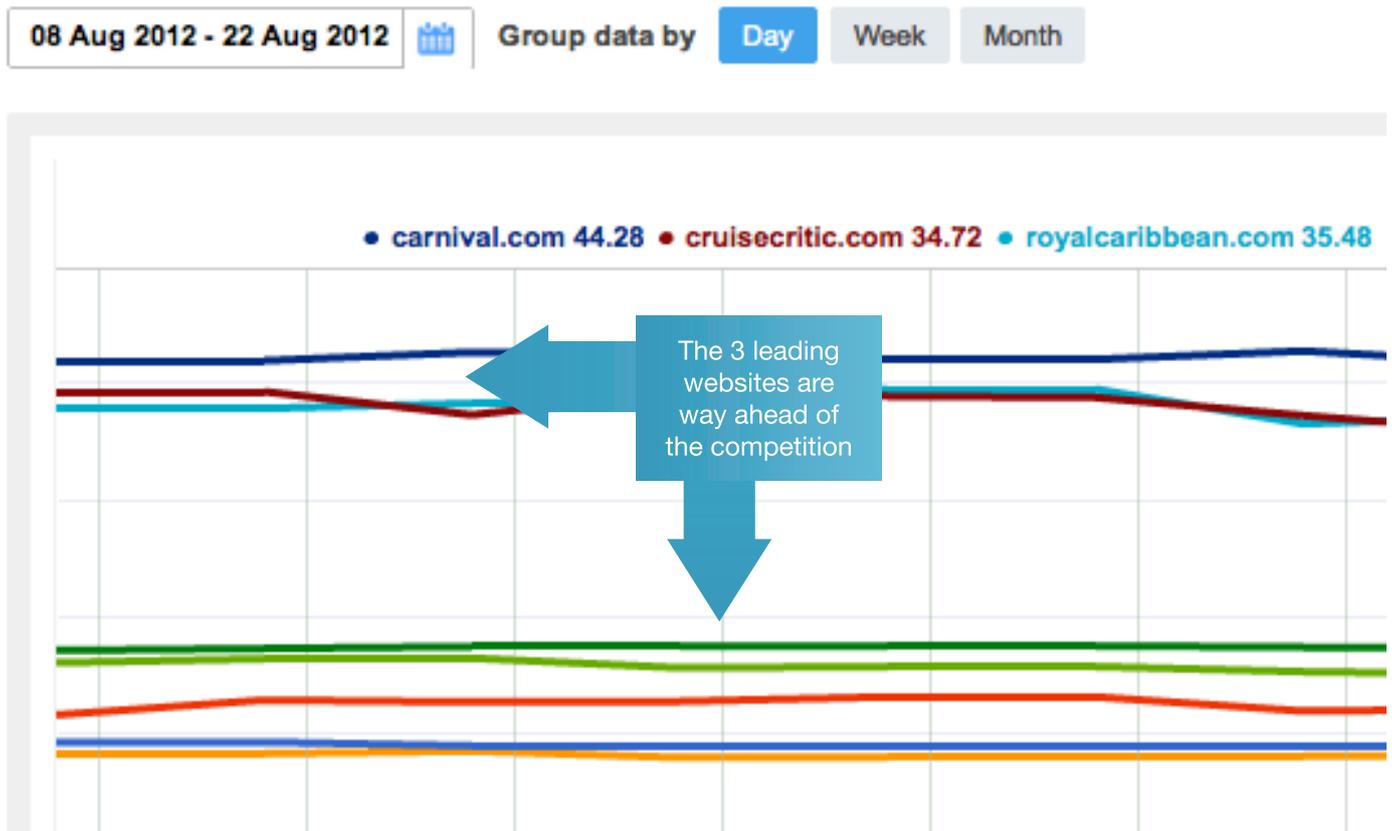
In the UK, only 2 brands appear in the top 10 websites and none in the top 5 options

What the tabular data above perhaps doesn't provide greater insight to, is just how far ahead the top 3 websites are within the US cruise sector. When you view the same data in a graphical form, the true nature of the dominance becomes more obvious.

Carnival.com, RoyalCaribbean.com & CruiseCritic.com can clearly be seen to be dominant in the sector:



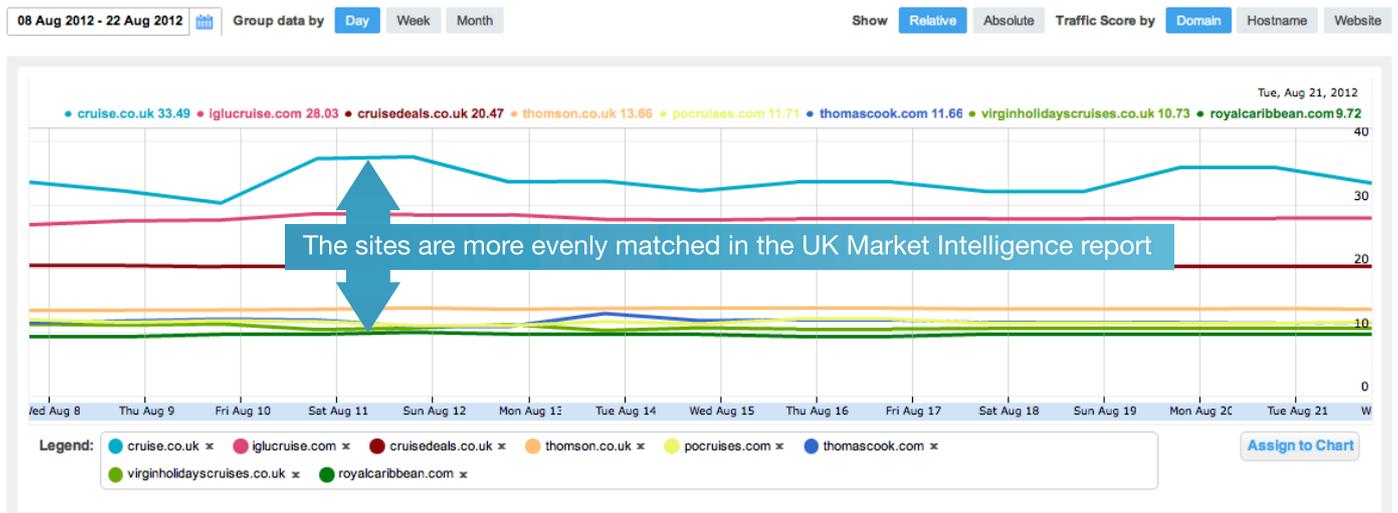
Here you see the graph in more detail:



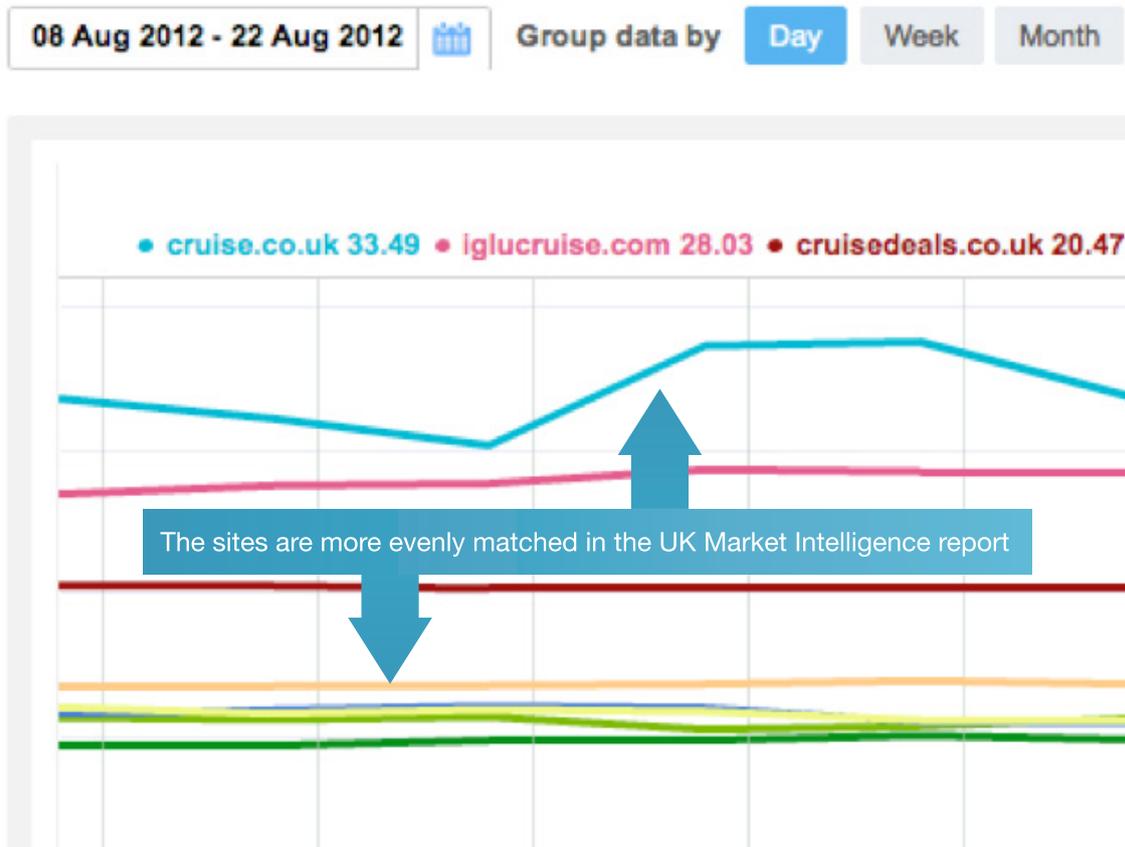
What tends to cause this huge disparity in Traffic Score is when powerful sites rank very highly for the most competitive keywords. A ranking of #2 for the highly competitive keyword [cruise] generates a much higher Traffic Score than ranking at #12 for [Greek island singles cruise] for example. A high Traffic Score also tends to highlight where a website is better optimized in general. This will cause it to rank higher for more terms, thus generating the greater score. A poorly optimized website will only rank in lowly positions for a few terms so can only attain a fraction of the Traffic Score.

In the UK, the graph of the top 10 sites shows that there is more of an even spread between the various sites.

Cruise.co.uk, Iglucruise.com & CruiseDeals.co.uk are still a little way clear though:



Here you can see the graph in more detail:

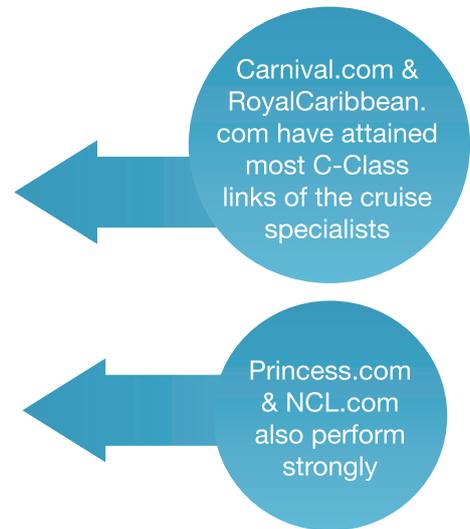


The fact that there are two exact match domains achieving such high scores in the UK is perhaps not so much of a surprise. The website [www.cruise.co.uk](http://www.cruise.co.uk) ranks at #2 for the term [cruise] and likewise, [www.cruisedeals.co.uk](http://www.cruisedeals.co.uk) ranks at #1 for [cruise deals]. Both of these keywords have large search volumes so the Traffic Score realized from these paramount rankings alone is considerable. Exact Match Domains or EMDs as they are known have lost some of their power over the years but with some best practice SEO employed, positive results can still be achieved. The savvy Internet marketer would want to investigate the rankings for a wider range of terms and plan to dominate more SERPs to ensure that the strategy was future proofed.

The Market Intelligence data throws up some interesting questions as to why the top 15 lists of websites from the US and UK is so different. Specifically, why do the websites of the established Cruise operators not rank well in the UK SERPs. As we know, although Social Media is increasingly becoming a small factor in the algorithms of the major Search Engines, links are still the major commodity. So firstly, let's inspect the backlink profiles of the top performing websites in each country.

Below are the backlinks of the top six cruise related sites in our Market Intelligence report:

Rank	Domain	Individual C-Class IP Links
1	carnival.com	2973
2	royalcaribbean.com	2851
3	cruisecritic.com	1538
4	travelocity.com	5784
5	princess.com	2090
6	ncl.com	1531



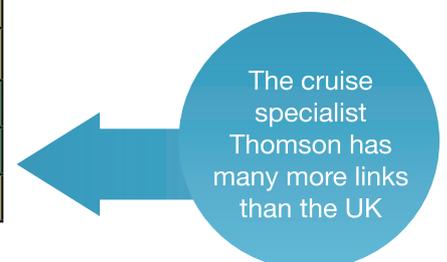
Carnival.com & RoyalCaribbean.com have attained most C-Class links of the cruise specialists

Princess.com & NCL.com also perform strongly

Apart from Travelocity.com, which is a site not a Cruise specialist, the volume of individual C-Class IP address links back to each site is not too dissimilar. Google very much looks at the volume of individual C-Class IP links, rather than total link volume as a factor in ranking websites in their algorithm.

Looking then at the backlink volumes for the sites appearing highly in the UK Market Intelligence report, you see a very much different picture and magnitude of links acquired by each of the websites. Only Thomson.co.uk has a volume of C-Class IP links equivalent to any of the US cruise specialists.

Rank	Domain	Individual C-Class IP Links
1	cruise.co.uk	922
2	igluccruise.com	307
3	cruisedeals.co.uk	29
4	cruisecritic.com	1538
5	thomson.co.uk	1515
6	cruisecritic.co.uk	164



The cruise specialist Thomson has many more links than the UK

This chart also provides further evidence as to the reasons why ccTLD domains cause problems in terms of SEO. This is covered later in this report but you can see here that CruiseCritic.com has 1,538 links and yet the .co.uk website has only 164.

A quick cautionary tale as we end the discussion about links. Even as late as August 21st this year, Google announced that they had pushed live the latest version of their 'Penguin Update'. Many of these updates have been designed to promote sites of genuine authority, with good quality content and that have been adhering to best practice guidelines. Sites that have taken a different path have tended to suffer in the past six months and many of those sites who have seen ranking or traffic drops have been as a result of developing too many of the wrong type and quality of links, as well as other factors.

We are highlighting link numbers here but don't think that it is simply a numbers or a volume game. Driving relevance and developing the right type of links for your website(s) takes time, patience, skill and experience. Google continues to sharpen their sword over time as their infrastructure improves and their ability to spot dubious patterns and footprints gains accuracy.

## So if it's not links, what's the problem?

OK, so we've looked at the backlinks of the sites in the US and they are vastly greater than those of the domains that currently perform in the UK SERPs. What factors exist that are holding these websites back and hindering their rankings in the UK?

Well, the factors vary widely from site to site. You would obviously need to carry out in-depth analysis of each individual web property prior to making recommendations. That said however, it can be seen that the International SEO and domain strategies could in some instances be enhanced to develop rankings.

The Travel Industry 2012 SEO Report (<http://www.ayima.com/travel/>) highlighted how the more nimble Online Travel Agents and price comparison websites were in a far better position when it comes to on-page SEO. Their more up-to-date CMS platforms and technology allows them to deploy best practice SEO far more quickly. The more established airline and hotel brands struggle due to the historical codebase many reside on and changes are very hard to implement. This tends to result in new websites being built on sub-domains or new domains entirely, something that can cause huge problems in terms of SEO.

During the planning or development stages of any particular project (and ideally at the

inception or scoping kickoff session) the question as to where the new website or website content should be hosted will be raised. In essence, it boils down to three main options.

1. On your existing website in a sub-folder
2. On a sub-domain of your existing domain
3. On a separate domain to the main brand

When you analyze the websites within the Cruise industry, you see that all three of these solutions are being employed.

Option 1: Sub-folder
<a href="http://www.thomascook.com/cruise/">http://www.thomascook.com/cruise/</a>

Option 2: Domain separate to main site
<a href="http://www.iglcruise.com">http://www.iglcruise.com</a>
<a href="http://www.virginholidaycruises.co.uk/">http://www.virginholidaycruises.co.uk/</a>

Option 3: Sub-domain
<a href="http://cruise.expedia.com">http://cruise.expedia.com</a>
<a href="http://cruises.jetblue.com">http://cruises.jetblue.com</a>
<a href="http://cruises.orbitz.com">http://cruises.orbitz.com</a>

## So which option is best for you & more importantly, your SEO?

Well, there can always be tiny edge cases, but Option 1 (Sub-folder of the main domain) is by-far the most valuable from an SEO perspective.

In the eyes of Google, sub-domains and new domains are entirely separate entities to your main website. When they are first created, they hold no value, trust or history in terms of SEO. They require all the work, effort, and investment that your main site has had, just to try and get to the same level, let alone to standalone and compete for high value terms. They have no equity or authority in the eyes of the Search Engines and whilst you try to improve these vital statistics, your competitors will be riding into the sunset.

## The multi-agency approach

What you'll often find when brands have deployed content on sub-domains or new domains, is that multiple agencies have been involved in their creation. In many cases, these are even different agencies to those working on the main website itself. This not only rings true for design or development agencies, but SEO agencies too.

There is a tendency amongst senior management to mitigate risk, hedge bets and allow multiple agencies to operate on multiple websites. Managing the work, strategies and practices of each agency becomes a considerable headache. As highlighted in the link development section of this report, over-optimization, the development of poor quality links, or just simply the development of a poor quality website can result in these sub-domains or microsites being destined for Search Engine anonymity.

## Flying the flag for International SEO

After choosing the location to host your content, you then have to consider the headaches of internationalization. You may have content in multiple languages, serving single or even multiple countries in the case of Switzerland for example. International SEO can quickly spiral out of all control as multiple versions of the same content begin being published across huge websites. When this goes wrong, results can be disastrous and can result ultimately, in poor organic visibility and brand presentation across the globe.

One such example is when your content is identified as being targeted to the wrong country in a local version of Google. US websites on .com domain names can appear labeled clearly

as targeting the United States when listed on Google.co.uk or other Search Engines as you can see below. This can seriously affect CTR and brand recognition.

Welcome to My Cruise Website  
[www.mycruisewebsite.com/](http://www.mycruisewebsite.com/) - United States  
We have amazing **cruise** holidays to the best destinations  
and we offer the best prices and family packages...

On Google.co.uk when your listing appears in the SERPs, it is tagged as United States, putting off UK visitors. Rankings can be affected too in Google.co.uk

The complications rise even further if the choice has been made to use local ccTLD domain names for each individual country such as [www.mydomain.co.uk](http://www.mydomain.co.uk) for the UK and [www.mydomain.es](http://www.mydomain.es) for Spain. Search Engines see each ccTLD as a separate, standalone entity. Each domain will require it's own SEO strategy in order to build authority, trust, to attract links and to gain rankings.

## Help! My content is not getting indexed

There are many tools in the arsenal of the SEO to try to highlight the correct local language versions of your content to Google. The arsenal has increased over the last 12 months and new tools and tags are being developed regularly to assist in this process.

A few of the most important tools are:

- Geo-targeting in Webmaster Tools
- Specifying the language of each piece of content within the code
- Implementing the latest `rel=alternate href=""` tags within the code to specify the language and target country of your content
- Alternatively, specifying this language and territory information for each URL in an XML sitemap, as is now possible
- Correctly implementing language selection on your website such that it is friendly to Search Engines

## Conclusion

The number of travellers choosing a cruise for their vacation is increasing year on year, so it is only reasonable to expect that the competition for SEO domination in this sector will also continue to rise. That said however, by failing to implement best practice SEO across the board and especially in relation to International SEO, major players are leaving huge amounts of revenue on the table to be taken by competitors. This ignores the consideration of how the brand is presented online across the globe on Search Engines.

There are increasingly tools being provided by Search Engines to assist site owners navigate complex issues, but there is simply no substitute for data and experience in such large engagements. Understanding exactly how and why a certain site is performing (or indeed not performing) is crucial. Armed with that knowledge, it is then far simpler to create a long-term plan that integrates SEO into every aspect of the business to drive traffic, conversions and revenue.

## Data Source

The data relating to the Cruise Industry was sourced from the 2011 Annual Report of the Florida-Caribbean Cruise Association (F-CCA). You can view the information yourself by visiting: [http://www.f-cca.com/downloads/2011-overview-book\\_Cruise\\_Industry\\_Overview\\_and\\_Statistics.pdf](http://www.f-cca.com/downloads/2011-overview-book_Cruise_Industry_Overview_and_Statistics.pdf).

## The Author

David Burgess has been working in SEO for over a decade, currently heading up Ayima's New York office in downtown Manhattan. When he's not sifting through terabytes of client and competitor data, David spends his days engaging with clients and implementing SEO best practices on even the most complex and legacy of CMSs, release schedules and organizational structures.

## The Company

Ayima was founded in 2007, by the former in-house SEO team of a FTSE 100 online gaming company. With extensive experience working in the toughest verticals and with the most corporate of companies, Ayima now strives to make its clients the SEO market leaders either locally or worldwide. Headquartered in London, Ayima employs over 100 people and has regional offices in New York, Raleigh, Vancouver and Asia.

## Working With Ayima

If you're interested in working with Ayima or finding out more about our services, we'd love to hear from you. We have the knowledge and resources necessary to drive your SEO rankings, traffic, market share and sales.

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## Why SEO?

The process of Search Engine Optimization should be an integral part of any business that is aiming to establish a prominent online presence. The ability to enhance a website's visibility within organic search results (SERPs) is a crucial tool to propel a business's virtual presence above that of its rivals. The widespread prevalence of Pay Per Click "PPC" ads (\$28 billion was spent in the US alone in 2010), highlights how important Search Marketing continues to be.

With click through rates (CTRs) for PPC at around 14.5%, there is still much more audience share to aim for in the Organic Search realm. The top three positions in organic search listings averaged over 35% of all click throughs in 2011, showing the potential traffic wins available from performing truly effectively in SEO.

## What it takes for you to rank ahead of your competitors

An incredible amount of research, analysis and on-going promotional activity is required for a successful SEO campaign. Even then, over 200 ranking factors are considered by Google – many of which undergo tweaks and amendments on a daily basis. This means that knowledge must be continually updated and expertise regularly honed to adjust to a search landscape constantly altered by minor algorithm tweaks.

Search Engine Optimization requires a fully integrated approach, including buy-in from technical departments, marketing staff, PR and other marketing agencies. Ayima has honed their communication and SEO planning processes over many years, ensuring company-wide visibility and understanding of SEO requirements.

We consider all aspects of the client's business, from the product itself to website design, functionality and visitor conversion. Ayima aims to help clients create a technically sound and user intuitive website which, when coupled with creative promotional campaigns, will in turn boost traffic, search rankings and sales for the company.

## Our clients

Ayima is fortunate enough to work with global market leaders in the fields of Retail, Mobile Communication, Online Gaming, Insurance Services, Media and Entertainment, as well as Charities and NGOs. Ayima does not publicize its client list, to protect the interests of its clients.