

SEO 2.0: THE GAME HAS CHANGED, HAS YOUR STRATEGY?

BY RICH DEVINE

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Not everyone realizes it, but the world just changed for search marketing. Much has been made of Google’s recent algorithm changes, affectionately nicknamed the “Panda Update.” This little tweak was aimed at reducing the ranking footprint for content that wasn’t of genuine “quality” in the eyes of Google. Beyond the Panda update—which was sudden—there’s been a more gradual and significant shift in how search engines display results. This shift is based on four key elements: universal results, location, social, and mobile.

Why is this important? Google’s rate of change for how they display search results is much faster than the rate of strategic innovation for how businesses, especially bigger brands, optimize for search. So effective search marketing must now consider a wider scope of activity. We must also accept the convergence of emerging media and platforms such as social and mobile, which affect how search behavior changes for customers depending on time, location, and device.

Universal Search Results

Back in the good ol’ days, when you searched for something, you got good ol’ fashioned search results. These results comprised of a title, a description, and a URL.

Each result represented a web page that Google had inspected and deemed worthy of ranking for your respective search query. Then Google figured out there are other types of content on the web uniquely different or more specifically relevant than just web pages: video, news, images, blogs, tweets, books, etc. Search marketers refer to this wider set of searchable content as “Universal Search.” Back in 2007, Google notably made this information accessible on the left side of search results, and allowed users to filter their search queries by searching more specifically within any of these “Universal” categories.

But over time, and with increasing experimentation, Google has started to weave universal results into any search query—whether you filter for it or not.

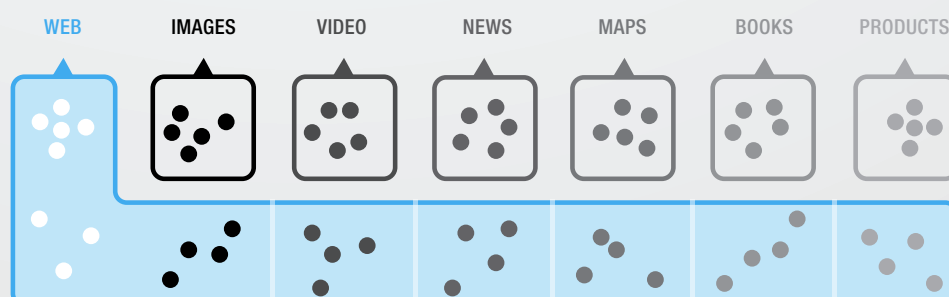
Old Google Model

Previously, a web search on Google would return web pages and document contents. Items such as images and video were not included.



New Google Model: Universal Search

A web search on Google will now include multiple types of information such as images, news, maps, books, and products.



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Why is this important? Consider that most SEO strategy tends to be about optimizing website assets. That's great! But search engines aren't just looking at websites; in many cases, no matter how well you are ranked for a web site, Google may determine that a different type of asset (video, local listing, review, social content, news result, etc.) is more relevant to a given query. So even if you are 100% optimized for your web content, you still may find yourself below the fold—or you may not find yourself at all!

Search & Local

Local search has always been important for small business. But bigger brands, with wider geographic focus and distribution, have been slow (at best) to consider the opportunity that local search provides. That's understandable—search optimization at the brand level is relatively easy. You just have to focus on your brand, then focus on your products and services, and voilà! Optimized.

Optimizing for local takes more work, but it's necessary. Location, or where you are, is now a ranking factor for every search. In fact, the oft-asked question “where am I ranked” is now irrelevant in many cases (at least depending on what you mean by “where”). The question we should be asking is “where am I ranked in terms of geographical location?” If you sell shoes in Seattle, but not in Oklahoma City, you want to be ranked on targeted keywords in Seattle—who cares about Oklahoma City. Or, to look at another way: Just because you sell shoes in Seattle AND Oklahoma City doesn't mean you have rank presence

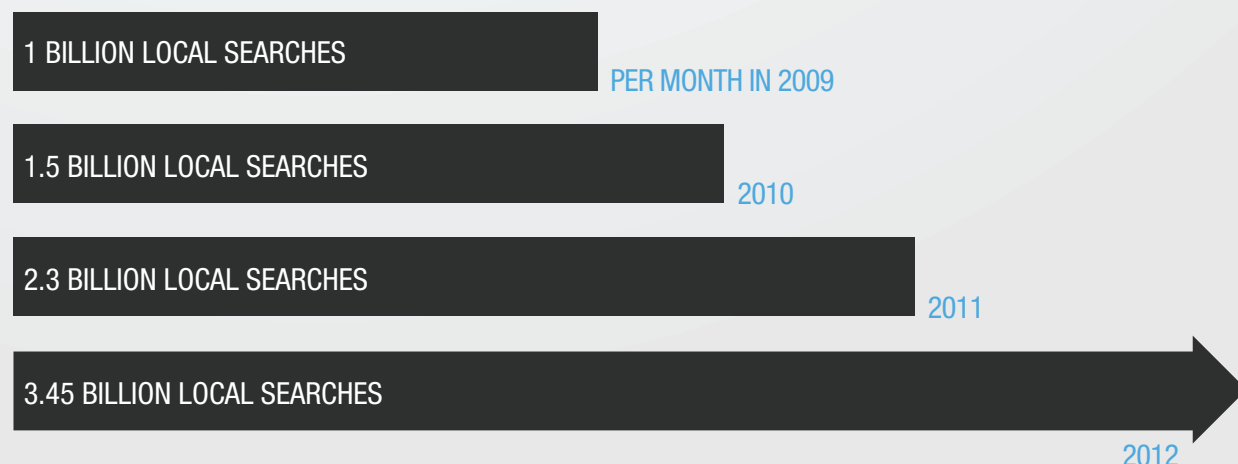
in both markets—especially if you haven't applied specific local optimization strategy. Not only do search engines factor location into every search, but location is factored uniquely depending on what device you are searching from. If you're on a stationary device, your IP address will be detected, and you'll be served results based on radial proximity—or what's near you. If you're on a smart-enabled mobile device, Google can understand your actual location and the results set may be even more targeted based on where you are as opposed to what you're near. We're talking about targeting search results based on street or neighborhood (mobile) as opposed to city-level (stationary device).

This is where we see Universal Search becoming important. Depending on your location or proximity, the types of universal results you see, and the order in which you see them, will change. Instead of just web results, you may also see map results and business listings from Google Places. Or you may see real-time results in the form of tweets. Or maybe you'll see shopping product results from local businesses.

Consider also the role of mobile in purchase decisions. 80% of searchers do research online before purchasing within a 10-20 mile radius.

Why is this so important? This is a big deal when considering your optimization strategy for mobile. For search marketing, if you're not thinking local, you're not thinking mobile. In one sense, mobile search and local search are synonymous.

Local search volume in North America has been growing year over year since 2009.



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Bottom line: You may have optimized your site for search, but that doesn't mean you're optimized for local or mobile search.

Search & Social

Search engines have always weighted links as a measure of “site authority” or popularity. The more links a site has and the greater site authority those links represent, the greater potential that site has to be ranked. Over time, links became the computational voice of the people. But with the proliferation of social media, the people now have a literal voice in the digital space. Search engines recognize this, and so social participation— whether from blogs, tweets, or likes—has become the new currency that pays for search ranking success.

Yes, links are still important. Yes, keywords are important. But social participation is REALLY important. Social is not just important as a new link-weight criterion; it has become a vital mechanism for Google to personalize and rank results.

Personalized search has also been around since 2007 when Universal Search was introduced. In essence, Google will serve different results based on who you are, what you've searched, sites you've visited, and other behavioral tendencies and history. Google uses its wealth of personal data from your Google account (anonymized, of course!) to provide a “personalized” search result.

Now search engines like Google can personalize not just based on your behavior, but based on your social uniqueness. Your search results will become the product of not just what you've expressed interest in, but based also on what your friends have expressed interest in.

For example, Google and Bing now show search results appended by your friends' Facebook likes and shares (assuming you're logged into Facebook). But that doesn't satisfy Google; they don't want to be limited to Facebook intelligence as the only indicator of social relevance, which is why they're introducing Google +1 (Google's version of a Facebook Like).

More importantly, social participation impacts rankings. Google considers everything from shares, tweets, and likes as an indicator of relevancy and popularity.

Why does this matter? Search Engine Optimization and Social are not separate activities. For some brands, and for some targeted keywords, the greatest business impact from social media efforts may actually be realized in the form of impact to search results and rankings. Moreover, we speak about social participation—and even that isn't enough. This isn't 2nd grade t-ball where everybody gets a trophy. Participation may get you in the game, but for your brand to realize impactful search success from social efforts, you have to do more than participate—you have to get a win.

Just having a Twitter account isn't enough. Just having a Facebook page isn't enough. How do you engage in those communities in a genuine way? How does your social participation add value to your customer's brand experience?

Mobile

For search, mobile is the battlefield where local and social converge. Consider that more than half of all internet connections are now coming from mobile devices. The search behavior on mobile devices, however, is very different. On a mobile device, we are engaged; we are actively participating in a function (usually driving). And our search behavior is also active, rather than passive. We are not gathering information for a future decision; we are trying to make or confirm a decision.

Search engines know this, and so they present different results based on device, as noted above. On top of that, location is a primary determinant of which results are delivered. Social is the third element in the trifecta, and it is the relevance engine that drives decision-making when engaged in mobile search.

The most common social assets in a mobile setting are ratings and reviews. The objective voice of fellow consumers is powerful, and is heard and listened to with

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rich is Director of Media Services for ZAAZ, an interactive agency headquartered in Seattle, and part of the WPP network of agencies. Rich leads a global team of 30+ media experts who use search marketing, display advertising, and social media to help brands achieve digital performance. Rich has more than 12 years of digital experience, holding roles at Microsoft, Omniture, and Northwest Airlines. He's consulted for dozens of global brands; including Ford, Walmart, Google, eBay, The Gap, Audi, Alaska Airlines, Nokia, Nike, and Converse. Rich holds MBA's from Cornell University and Queens University, and a B.A. from Brigham Young University. He is a frequent speaker on search marketing, digital media, and mobile strategy

more volume in a mobile setting. But the voice of friends is just as affecting, if not moreso. So paying attention to social sharing and participation is just as important as your focus on securing positive ratings and reviews.

So how do you take advantage of this? First, having a mobile site isn't enough. Just because you have a mobile site, that doesn't mean it's optimized for search. Similarly, just because you have a traditional site that is optimized for search, that doesn't mean your mobile site is optimized for search.

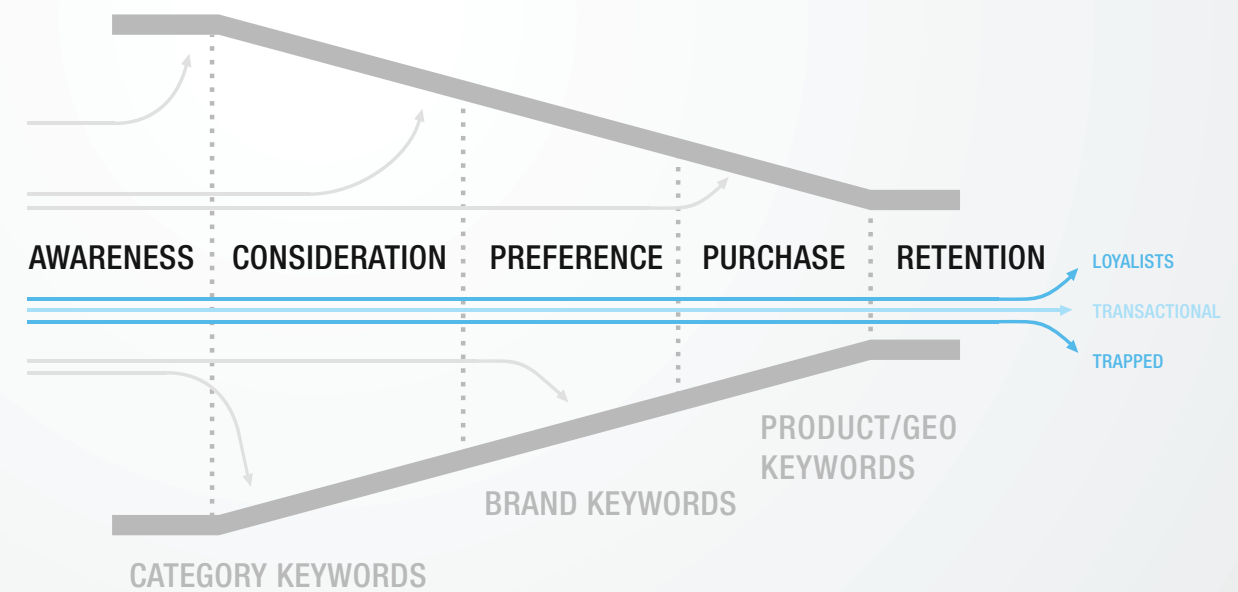
Second, don't limit your thinking to search engines. For mobile, we must think Search Marketing—not necessarily Search Engine Marketing. Mobile has become the realm of apps. In any given decision process where mobile is important, the function of search

and discovery is not limited to search engines. In fact, it's probably less driven by search engines and more by apps. What apps tend to be or should be drivers of your business in a mobile environment? Yelp? Maps? FourSquare?

Think End-to-End.

Social, Local, and Mobile is sexy. It is the new kid at school. But So-Lo-Mo didn't replace the fundamental discipline of search engine optimization; it just made the discipline a little more complex and multi-dimensional. The traditional foundations of SEO are as important as they ever were. What's important is to think end-to-end. From the moment someone performs a search related to your business to the moment of decision that leads to a purchase or desired behavior, search should be considered.

THE OLD SEARCH FUNNEL



THE NEW SEARCH FUNNEL

