Where is SEO going? An essential guide to the future of natural search

Search has always been a fast-paced industry, but SEO is now evolving more rapidly than ever; where it used to encompass a fairly narrow, reactive set of activities, natural search is now a crucial consideration in the planning of wider digital marketing strategies.

Whilst many of the fundamental principles of search remain unchanged – namely, relevancy and authority – there has been a huge shift in how we apply them to brand campaigns. In this whitepaper, we'll be looking at what's changed, why, and how we can adapt to the new search landscape.

What's the story so far?

To better understand where search is going, it's important to look at some of the key milestones over the last 18 months.

Google have spent the last year and a half aggressively tackling the issue of web spam through its Penguin algorithm which was launched back in 2012. Since then we have seen an almost continual evolution of this part of its algorithm, with many link networks targeted across the world and several large brands such as Interflora, Overstock and Expedia penalised.

So, if there's one thing we can guarantee, it's that anti-spam measures will be top of Google's list.

What's clear is that brands will now need to earn links not build them. Having a content strategy in place that either genuinely offers value to your customers or is truly remarkable will be the cornerstone of this strategy.

In many ways the foundation for 2014 has already been laid with September's Hummingbird, which saw Google completely re-engineer its search algorithm in order to create a solid base for the next 10 years of growth. This is another key area where we are likely to see continual innovation from Google as it starts to better understand the relationships between people, places and things.

We have also seen a paradigm shift in the way we report natural search performance due to the obfuscation of keyword data by Google. Although Google launched secure search back in May 2010 it wasn't until September 2013 that we lost visibility of the majority of keyword data. This was driven by Google encrypted searches using HTTPS for users, regardless of whether they are signed into a Google account or not.

This meant a large proportion of keyword data was blocked from analytics platforms such as Google Analytics, Adobe Analytics and Coremetrics. Google's move towards 100% secure search is likely to be completed in 2014 with other search engines such as Bing and Yahoo following close behind.

We predict the changes won't stop here: the next few years are likely to be equally volatile and several important trends are likely to emerge in 2014 and beyond. Let's look at each of these points in a bit more detail.

The language of search is evolving

Firstly, the language we all use will fundamentally change as the industry starts to integrate SEO into the wider holistic marketing mix. In reality I expect the term SEO will be used far less and instead be labelled as natural search, inbound marketing, earned media, organic search marketing, technical optimisation and other such terms.

This is best illustrated by the rebrand of SEOmoz that occurred back in May 2013. By removing the term SEO, CEO and founder Rand Fishkin hoped to distance himself from the spammers and create a company that transcended traditional SEO activities. It was also an important acknowledgement that traffic is growing from other channels, with social networks such as Facebook starting to rival search engines as an important driver of referrals.

Like Rand, I'll always argue for the legitimacy, value, and importance of SEO but I think the evolution of its lexicon demonstrates that the search industry is both maturing and part of a greater synergy with other marketing channels. Ultimately the willingness of the industry to distance itself from some of its more exploitative heritage is a positive move and should help drive better engagement from clients and the press.

Natural search is becoming more visual

This is something that I get very excited about as it allows us to experiment with some very cool ideas and also get great quality search results for our clients. We have seen a real step change over the last two years with a diverse range of visual search results now appearing in the SERPS. This is particular evident with Google's organic results and is a trend that is set to continue.

Visual results have also helped put a face to online content. Google's authorship algorithm, a process whereby authors can link content they publish to their Google+ profiles has helped Google solve challenges around identity and is now being used as a quality signal. This

programme has been enormously popular with publishers as it allowed their Google+ profile photo to be shown next to their content in Google search results which has a positive impact on click through rates.

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by Gary Moyle - in 147 Google+ circles
**Gary Moyle** rounds up some of the most interesting Google updates and …
This action met a mixed response within the **SEO** community with many SEOs worried …

Example of an authorship result on the NetBooster UK website

Linking expert authors to content will be an important tactic over the next few years as quality content becomes more valuable in natural search.

Video thumbnails are also appearing more frequently as Google is getting better at indexing and linking video and textual content in its results. In many instances it is easier to rank videos than pages and many publishers are taking advantage of this in natural search.

We have also seen Google beta testing some radical new formats with the most notable being the large banners seen in the US last year for South West Airlines, Nike, Ralph Lauren & Toys R Us. Although Google have since confirmed that this particular test will be discontinued it highlights just how far Google is willing to push the envelope when it comes to the visualisation of its search results.

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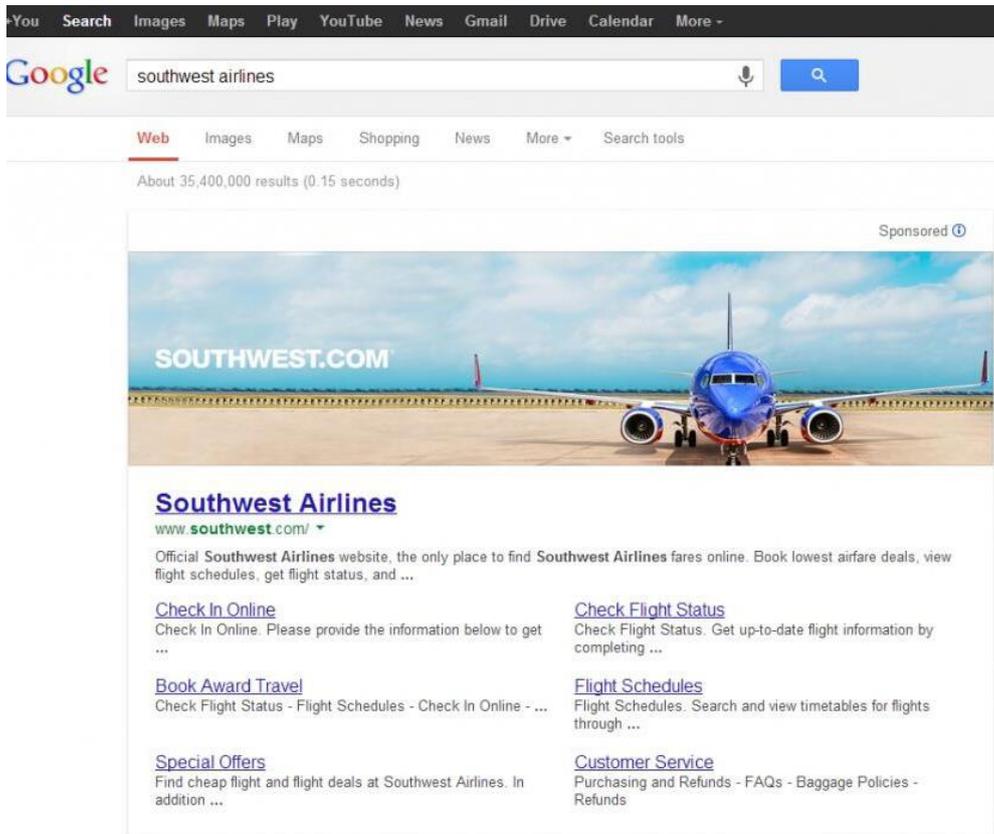
Screenshot of the large banner format trialled by Google last year

Overall we expect this trend will to continue throughout 2014 and also give way to some innovative new types of search results. We could also see search engines like Bing, Yandex and Baidu follow this trend as they look to mirror the quality of Google results. What is now very clear however, is that words are not your only assets in the SERPs.

Have you developed your content mix in order to maximise your presence in the SERPs?

A paradigm shift how we measure natural search activity

The secure search revolution in 2013 was probably one of the most painful changes for the search community but despite the challenges of 'Not Provided' there has been a silver lining: it's forced us to focus on content and its business impact.

Measurement is now about content rather than keywords. By putting the performance of content firmly on the radar it's given us an opportunity to move more quickly away from the traditional keyword reporting model and educate our clients about the importance of creating engaging, customer led content.

Understanding the business impact of individual or groups of pages and correlating this with ranking visibility in natural search is a more meaningful way of tracking campaign performance and will become commonplace as the industry moves forward to meet this challenge.

NetBooster has partnered with some of the world's leading enterprise level SEO platforms such as BrightEdge and SEOClarity in order to streamline this process and help us deliver the right business insights to our clients.

This change is not limited to Google however, we have already seen both Yahoo and Bing adopt the SSL protocol to varying degrees and the secure search model looks set to become the norm in 2014. As we move forward, it will be a mix of natural search visibility and page level reporting that will provide the key insights into campaign performance.

In addition to your analytics platform, what SEO reporting are you using to gain insights about your content and competitor performance?

Google's knowledge graph is expanding rapidly

The knowledge graph marked a huge leap forward in search engine understanding when it was launched in 2012 and brought Google away from the somewhat flawed contextual search model to an entity-based framework which allowed Google to better understand the meaning of searches.

The knowledge graph is essentially a semantic network contained millions of objects and billions of related facts and relationships between different objects that are used to understand the meaning of the keywords entered into Google. The knowledge graph uses sources such as Wikipedia, Freebase and the CIA World Factbook and is highly visual in the way it displays information (see carousel and panel below for the Mona Lisa).
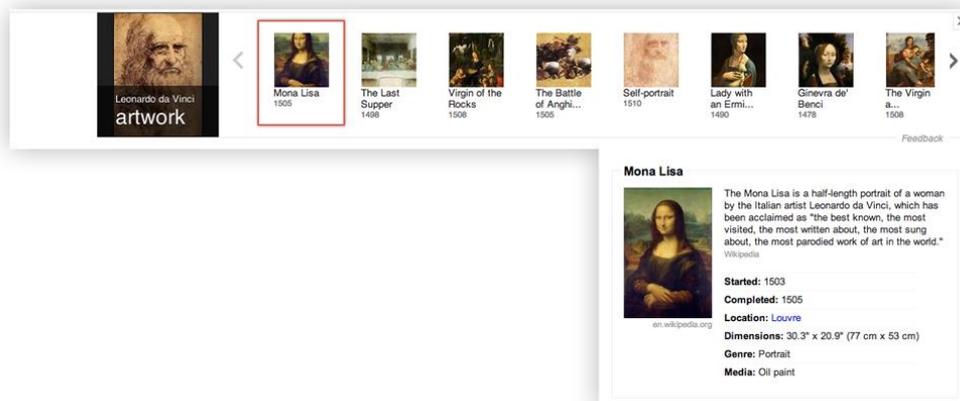
Screenshot of the carousel results for Leonardo Da Vinci & Mona Lisa knowledge graph result

Given that Hummingbird focused on better integration of the knowledge graph, and the expansion we have already seen, 2014 will likely see further proliferation of entity-based search results as Google moves one step closer to achieving the Star Trek computer long envisioned by Amit Singhal.

How is information about your business being shown in the knowledge Graph and have you connected your digital ecosystem to its authors and other relevant objects?

Content strategy is evolving

When Google announced its new 'Hummingbird' search algorithm they reportedly told Danny Sullivan that the name came from being "precise and fast", with improvements to "conversational search" being one of the key features. As a result, when speaking search commands, users would find it easier and more natural to have a conversation with Google.

Amit Singhal at Google's 15th birthday event back in September

What many commentators missed however, was how this greater understanding of intent would impact on content strategy. A more modern model is now emerging where it's important to define groups of terms and phrases that can be well-served by content and about the measurement of that content's organic traffic.

Whilst producing relevant content is always going to be important, content marketing is now much more about serving a topic well rather than individual keywords.   Consequently we should now find that publishers that serve well-constructed and valuable content should enjoy greater visibility for a wider range of search queries as a result.

We also need to start producing information that matches intent. If for example a visitor comes to your website looking for information on a generic search (i.e. laptops), Google may now realise that this visitor is at an early stage of their search journey and therefore unlikely to know what to buy yet.

By producing information that provides comprehensive buying information and a comparison of leading laptop brands you will be providing a valuable resource for that user. You are essentially proving that your website is an authority in that area and therefore much more likely to break into the top 10 results. This alignment between content and intent will be much more successful in 2014 and beyond.

Does your content strategy provide real value to your audience?

Personalisation & big data is crucial to success

Google has big plans for the future and data will be the connecting hub to all of Google services, devices, features and search results. The natural search journey across all major providers will be increasingly personalized and tailored to consumer behaviour and interests in order to provide a better customer experience. We will also see these results essentially follow the consumer across devices whilst continually factoring in localisation.

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Google's and Facebook's agenda is becoming more and more transparent and their aim is to make people's life easier by understanding their data. Understanding how mobile ties into the data discussion and the implications for natural search will be essential in determining success. Whoever controls the content and owns the user data will be able to influence results in natural search.

Are you using data to understand your audience?

The multichannel opportunity is increasing

The synergy between social, local and mobile channels and how search engines like Google uses them to enrich its search experience is going to grow even further. Technology has emerged as one of the key battlegrounds in retail as shoppers now expect their shopping experience to be integrated between offline and online worlds.

Retail is has become a multi device experience and content needs to be shareable across a variety of platforms. Customers value being able to shop by phone, in store and online so marketing need to be fully integrated so that shoppers receive a consistent message and experience. Pure plays are now more likely to lose ground against traditional high street retailers and those retailers with a strong bricks and mortar presence will be able to leverage this opportunity and strengthen their market share whilst providing customers with a better overall experience.

Are your offline and online marketing strategies aligned?

Social Metrics Becoming Increasingly Important

Social metrics are now emerging as an important signal of quality and we will undoubtedly see more clarity from search engine providers around the types of social metrics and sources that are affecting their search algorithms. We already know that both Google and Bing are using Twitter based signals such as the number of retweets and the level of influence (i.e. followers) however as algorithms evolve we'll also see a diverse array of social signals feeding into natural search signals.

Social channels will continue to diversify with Google+, Pinterest, Instagram & Snapchat all offering valuable ways for brands to engage with their audiences. Facebook and Twitter are also investing in protocols that aid the sharing of content. Both now have methods that enable web pages to become rich objects in the social graph.

Facebook's OpenGraph and Twitter cards help publisher's take greater control over how their content is being displayed across each network and also generate more traffic. Ensuring that content is easily shareable and fully integrated with these technologies will be increasingly important.

Given the trends we have already seen, it will be vital to ensure that social media optimisation is part of your digital roadmap as social signals will overlap with many traditional SEO signals.

After optimising your content for natural search, are you planning to optimise how your content looks when shared on social channels?

Conclusion

Google, Facebook and to a lesser extent Bing all want to become the interface between you and your life and we'll see them all fight it out with innovative tools such as Google Now and Facebook Home.

Fundamentally SEO now has much more in common with other channels and the overall synergy between natural search, social, paid search and display is crucial in developing a mature digital strategy that is much smarter than the sum of its parts. This is something that we take very seriously at NetBooster and is why we developed our Smart Search approach. Natural search forms an important part of this strategy.

The next couple of years will see an amplification of the core changes we have already seen in 2013. There will be highs and lows with some pretty big changes that will undoubtedly cause a complete controversy within the SEO (or should I say natural search) community.

We'll hear more cries of 'SEO is dead!' but eventually sanity will prevail and the community will realise that natural search is, in fact, pretty grown up these days. The spotty SEO teenager has been replaced with a more suave 20-something that actually has a pretty bright future.

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