

Is Google No. 1 Forever?

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Google is without a doubt the world's number one search engine. According to the research firm Nielsen/NetRatings, Google's share of the global search market in February 2006 was 48.5%, more than double the 22.5% share its nearest rival Yahoo saw. Having been the engine of choice for nearly five years, Google is synonymous with search. Because Google is the first thing most folks think of when they think about search, it is the most important search marketing venue, at least for the vast majority of SEOs.

That might be changing in the coming years. There's a sense in the SEO sector that the horizons have expanded significantly and the search marketing map has gotten far larger. What the new landscape will look like exactly, and how large Google's footprint will be, is still unknown. The emerging online environment is still being explored, so to speak. As it is explored, it is evolving very quickly. In many ways, it feels like the early days of the commercial web where everyone knew that everything was about to change, but no one really knew exactly how.

While Google's influence is incredible and its dominance appears unassailable, a number of newer products and changes in public perceptions have prompted subtle shifts in the habits of Internet users. Search marketers and online advertisers have started taking notice, putting more energy into helping clients understand and use tools such as blogs, images, press releases and video content as marketing devices.

The evolution of the Internet, in regards to search depends a lot on four unique groups; users, online marketers, search engine developers, and creative web developers. How each group reacts to these new user/marketing channels in the coming months and years will determine if Google's dominance is threatened. As it stands today, Google remains synonymous with search however, users are starting to venture away from the Google brand, even if it is the most recognizable one in their minds.

A recent survey conducted by UK-based online marketing firm, [Harvest Digital](#) (reg. req.), shows that Google is almost universally recognized as the UK's leading search engine. (When thinking about North American search engine usage, similar results are assumed to be a somewhat safe assumption.)

When asked, "What search engine do you use?" 94% of respondents said Google. 40% said they used Yahoo, 39% said Ask Jeeves and 37% said MSN.

The answer clearly shows that Google is the first thing consumers think of when asked about search but it also shows that most search engine users are looking at more sources when looking for information. It also confirms that Ask continues to enjoy high popularity in the UK, even after dropping ex-pat butler Jeeves. Of the 205-person test group, only 24% said they only used one search engine with 56% using two or three search engines.

A large group of search engine users express less than stellar expectations from their experience with search engines. There appears to be a growing dissatisfaction among UK search engine users with only 22% of the survey group stating they felt "... confident that search engines would always give them the

information that they needed." More often than not, users blamed themselves when searches produced less than useful results. 36% assumed they were using the wrong keywords. 32% figured the information they were looking for was too specialized. These statements should be noted by SEOs when thinking of creative keyword targets along with alternative search venues such as vertical and local search.

Interestingly, nearly a quarter of respondents said that advertisers paying for higher position are responsible. 24% agreed with the statement, "Advertisers are paying to come top of the results", is the reason "... some searches are less successful". While the survey draws the conclusion that this is a paid-search issue, it is unclear if respondents are noting PPC ads or well-optimized sites dominating organic results.

When choosing results to click on, 60% said it is because that result appeared on the first page with 17% tending towards the top results. 32% stated the description as an important factor when choosing which search results might best match their needs. Again, 78% of them will express some sense of dissatisfaction with the results.

Ultimately, the survey tells search marketers and their advertisers to spread their focuses to see the much wider horizon. Almost one third of respondents stated their search queries are too specialized to produce successful results. This suggests there is a lot of room for adoption of more targeted search tools such as the vertical search sector and local search engines.

Google is working to cover the vertical bases with its all-in-one solution, Google Base. Several search marketing forums have noted the appearance of Google Base results in searches conducted around the travel, home sales, and automotive industries. It is assumed by many SEOs that Google is trying to see if it can take a share of the market from popular advertising boards like Craigslist and e-commerce facilitators such as eBay.

Yahoo and Google continue to compete against each other and smaller firms such as A9, Ask, and even AOL, in the race to perfect a local search model. As Internet access is integrated in smaller portable devices, local search is seen as one of the greatest growth areas for search marketing.

Other search firms are moving to explore the expansive web as well. Last month, Lycos announced it was introducing a number of self-publishing and distribution options for content creators. It recently entered the VOIP market with Lycos Phone and today announced the release of a desktop Blog editing tool, Lycos-Qumana.

Google has another problem on its plate in regards to user loyalty. Its footprint has grown large enough that at times, it sort of steps on people's expectations in the course of its operations, as is the case with Google's relationship with the Chinese Government. While the other major search engines are active players in the Chinese market, and actively make values-based compromises their Western users might find unacceptable, Google tends to attract the majority of user outrage. That's likely because users have come to expect Google to hold itself to a higher standard, one that goes beyond compromising fair search results. A minor migration from Google happens every time the tech-press cracks a shot across Google's bow.

As Internet usage increases, and the online environment evolves through growth, search engine users are being offered more options while becoming more educated about the medium. Social networks (which enjoy enormous traffic) such as MySpace have search features that users turn to when logged in to the network.

The goal of online marketers is to drive traffic to client websites or documents. For search marketers, the expanding horizons can bring a bounty of business. Today, the reality is that Google is the most difficult engine to achieve a high ranking on but it is also the most effective search marketing venue. Google is the most popular search engine and continues to drive the most traffic.

We expect that fact to remain the same but, at the same time, we are strongly advising our clients to think about other search marketing channels. The habits of Internet users are changing as the incredible growth of MySpace demonstrates. There is a lot of new search marketing turf out there and it is time to work towards establishing a presence there.