

User Behaviour and Google Site Profiles

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StepForth's methods of providing search engine optimization services for Google rankings have evolved significantly over the past year. Since the release of Google's March 30, 2005 patent application, "[Information retrieval based on historical data](#)", our SEO and research departments have made site usability and understanding user behaviours a priority.

After reading, analysing and [writing about](#) information found in the patent application, we correctly predicted user behaviours were becoming critical factors in Google's estimation of the relevancy or importance of documents in its index. To meet what we see as the major challenges for our search engine advertising clients in the coming years, we have spun off a [SEO friendly web site](#) division, moved to provide several levels of SEO consultancy, and accessed the services of website usability experts.

A growing number of others in the SEO community are sensing, testing and talking about issues central to how Google perceives user behaviours and how that perception affects search engine placements.

A discussion thread at WebMasterWorld, "[Google algo moves away from links, towards traffic patterns](#)", has been mentioned in several SEO/SEM related news sources and blogs this week. Started on April 4, the thread has been picking up steam with discussion generally ranging towards Google's tracking of user behaviours and how that data might affect search results.

The term "user behaviours" describes any number of actions taken by people while using a Google branded search tool, while visiting a particular site in Google's index, and while moving from site to site or document to document.

Basically, Google wants to know what its users like and dislike. Those user-judgements have become important factors in how Google ranks sites in its index and in personalized search results shown to registered users.

Hundreds of millions of Internet users subscribe to or otherwise use Google products every day. Google tracks each of their actions to one degree or another. For some, a simple cookie feeds basic data back to Google's servers. For others, products such as the Google Toolbar, Bookmarks, News Alerts and even Google Analytics feed large amounts of online behavioural information to Google.

Google pays attention to what its users do when they visit a particular website, page or file listed in its index, keeping an active record in order to compile historic profiles of those documents. If a visitor accesses a document while performing a Google search or from a bookmark file, Google notices and takes note. If visitors find a document by following a link from another, that action (or behaviour) is noted. How long visitors tend to stay on a document is counted, as are the actions taken by those visitors after they are finished viewing the document.

It does so for a number of reasons. Search is increasingly becoming personalized. Google is experimenting with personalized search results for registered users, showing ads that match location; results from Google Base that match user locations registered with searches performed using Google

Local. The goal of search is to deliver the most relevant set of results possible, and Google is trying to account for the fact that relevance is relative to the searcher's personal needs. Google also views user-behaviours as a way to filter out sites that a mass of users might deem less useful.

Google's core ranking algorithm, PageRank has long used links as an indication of the relevance of unique documents. One facet of user-behaviour tracking looks at how site-visitors use those links as a factor determining the relevance, or importance of those links. It is also interested in knowing which documents its users take seriously by gauging the number of visitors and the time each visitors spends examining the document, and other documents associated by domain or link.

User Behaviour has become an important pillar supporting the PageRank algorithm. A short note in the discussion thread from WMW admin [Brett Tabke](#) suggests Google has been tracking a wide range of information supplied by its users, along with a wider array of information supplied by the web documents in its index since November 2003's Florida Update.

Data supplied by user-behaviour is included in a larger and more important profile Google keeps of each document in its index. As it visits and revisits documents in its index, following and evaluating every link it can from document to document, Google forms an evolving impression of each document. It records that impression in document-specific historic profiles. These profiles are thought to generate a reputation score for each document that acts as a major factor in its algorithm.

Google also pays attention to any changes made to documents in its index. It finds site or document changes during its normal spidering cycle. It notices when new text is added to a document and when text is deleted. When a new link, or set of links, is added to a document, Google notices and follows the links, recording the date of insertion and its impression of the pages or files the new links lead to.

It adds this all data to a profile that already includes specific details about the history of a URL, historic details on document and site content, and an evaluation of all links leading to and from the document. User behaviour forms a fourth pillar of PageRank's overall relevancy formulas.

It should be noted that Google takes interest in user behaviour for a number of reasons but with the exception of specific personalized search data, it's nothing personal, it's only data. There is no reason to think that Google is playing Big Brother by tracking user-behaviour. It might use specific personal data to serve advertising, as is the case with Gmail and with personalized search results but it appears to have acted ethically to protect user data from various governments over the years. Google recently earned a notation from the [Thomas Jefferson Center](#) for "strenuously" resisting the US Department of Justice's request for user data.

The writing has been on the wall, (or on the server at any rate) for over two years. After several algorithm changes and a four-month infrastructure upgrade, Google results are starting to show the direct influence of its users as they vote with their mouse-buttons. User-data is an important factor in search engine placement, making website usability an important factor in SEO services.