

Number One in Google? Not for Long...

[Web Smart Newsletter](#) originally published December 2005 - Updated July 2006. By Eric Holter.

Number One in Google? Not for Long...

Everyone wants to be number one in Google. I'm happy to have a few phrases that hit that golden spot myself. But in the not-too-distant future (and for some that future is today), the notion of being number one in Google will come to an end.

Today, web pages have a definite position in search engines for any given phrase. Of course, this position is slippery - number one today could be number 21 tomorrow. But for today, if you're number one for a particular phrase, you'll be number one for anyone searching that phrase. Not for long. Want to know why? Read on...

It's good to be number one. There's a certain thrill at typing a phrase into Google and seeing your content come up in the top spot. If you've worked hard creating original and compelling content with strategically considered and appropriate titles, it's great to be rewarded with a respectable position. If you've been reading our newsletters you understand that search engine results are based primarily on the [relevance of your content](#). Search engines work hard creating mathematical models that weigh words, context, and popularity/authority to establish a page's relevance to a given phrase. Once all the factors are calculated, a page's position is established. You might tweak content a bit to improve standing, but position is ultimately tied to how relevant content is to the search term used. Relevance is everything. But how search engines determine relevance is always changing.

A new relevance factor is emerging that may radically change the way search engines determine relevance - and it's already here. The factor is *intent*, and it will forever change the way we think about a web page's position in the search engines.

Determining the Intent of Search Phrases

How Intent Changes Everything

It's amazing what we expect from search engines. We enter a word or two and expect to find exactly what we're looking for. Imagine talking to a librarian this way. I can just picture the perplexed expression on a librarian's face if I were to walk up and just say "records." Would he point me to the music collection? Would he assume I was looking for the card catalog? He would probably have to ask some clarifying questions. "I'm sorry sir, what kind of records are you looking for - Jazz, Rock, Bluegrass?"

I'd restate my request, "making records."

Still puzzled he'd say, "Hum, well we have some accounting books that have good ideas about keeping your files in order..."

"How to set records," I interrupt.

Are you looking for the Guinness Book of World Records, or sports related records?" he might ask.

"How to set records in a database," I'd clarify.

"Oh, those kinds of records," he'd say with relief, "the computer books are over there but there are a lot of them. What kind of databases are you interested in?"

We would never presume that a librarian would understand vague ambiguous requests. Yet we often throw such words and phrases into

search engines with little clarification. All a search engine has to go on is the words we give it. And it doesn't even have the opportunity to ask clarifying questions. No matter how abstract or unclear our request, the search engine has to respond with something.

But if the engine had a little more information to go on, beyond just the words we give it, it might be able to provide better results. For example, if, while I approached our bewildered librarian to ask for "records," I was wearing a U2 T-shirt, and was listening to music on an MP3 player he might glean that I'm looking for record albums. Likewise, if I were whacking a paddle ball game while balancing a chair on my nose he might conclude that I was interested in setting a word record. Or, if I had thick black glasses, a pocket protector, and a laptop under my arm he might guess I was looking for information about database records.

Unfortunately, search engines don't have any of this auxiliary information available to them. That is, unless we give it to them.

Google Personalized Search

The Newest Thing in Search

The next big thing in the evolution of search is the establishment of an individual's intent as they go about their search. If a search engine were to know something about me, what I do for a living, my hobbies, interests, and so forth, it could filter its results, putting information that is more **relevant to me** at the top. The words I use in a search, though they're the exact same words as someone else's search, could have different results because of the difference in our intentions. If Google gets to know something about me as an individual, it can give me tailored results.

Right now in Google the number one result for the word "records" is The Guinness Book of World Records. Tower Records is listed as number two, followed by a series of record labels. The British National Archives holds number eight. But if Google knew that I was a database programmer (which I'm not) and that I had been researching databases lately, it might skip right over Guinness and Tower and instead list Oracle, Microsoft, and IBM. What's more, if Google knew that I frequented php.net and opensource.org (which I don't) it might put MySQL.com (an open source database) at the top of the database sites. My personal profile would factor into its relevance system and deliver customized results.

Once this starts happening there will be no such thing as "number one in Google," but rather, number one in Google **for me**. Guinness can boast all he wants at his number one spot in Google for "records," but they won't be number one in **my Google**.

The Future is Today

Guess what? The ability to have your Google results personalized to our own search engine fingerprint is here today. Just go to Google and sign up for personalized search, and the future begins today.

Technology and the Evolution of Marketing

Is this a good thing?

Fears of Big Brother aside, I wonder if this new dimension to search will make marketers happy or sad. In one respect, I can understand how some might see this as bad news. Those who work hard at SEO will have a hard time quantifying search engine positions on their targeted key phrases. I wonder how the folks at Guinness World Records will feel when their powerful number one position for "records" becomes less valuable because it's no longer number one for everyone.

I empathize with the struggle that marketers face as they adapt to new technologies. I understand how advertisers are not too fond of innovations like TiVo because it allows me to skip through their ads. But in the end, when it comes to these complaints I say - as I do to my kids when they don't want to eat their peas - "too bad, how sad."

I feel it's very short sighted for marketers to complain about technological changes. After all, in the end technology only improves marketing for everyone. True, TV ads now have less reach and therefore less value because of TiVo. But consider the vision of marketing convergence that John Battelle describes in his book *The Search - How Google and Its Rivals Rewrote the Rules of Business and Transformed our Culture*. In his book he describes a possible future in which a service like TiVo and a search engine like Google could interact to deliver highly targeted marketing information and compelling offers. His example is of a soon-to-be mother and father searching

for information on baby strollers on Google. They also set their TiVo prefs for shows about birth and child care. As they sit down to watch a show one evening, a few ads - not unlike Google AdWords - appear on their TiVo start page. Rather than these ads being for high end sports cars or banal new comedies the ads are for baby food and - **what do you know** - strollers. Not only are the ads relevant, but, because the manufacture did not have to dump millions into a broadcast ad campaign, they include significant discounts to highly qualified prospects. Win - win. The product manufacturer gets a low-cost, highly targeted marketing channel, and the consumer gets a great deal on a product they were looking to buy.

I don't know about you, but I would trade 100 or so irrelevant spam emails for a couple of discount offers on gadgets I am looking to buy. From a business perspective this is great news too. Would you trade a million unqualified TV viewers with no intent to purchase for a few thousand highly qualified, interested, and actively seeking consumers at a fraction of the cost of a national television campaign? You bet. With such refined marketing channels, companies will not have to waste the time of millions uninterested consumers or waste the dollars it takes to get the time-wasting message to them in the first place. As a consumer I will get helpful marketing information and offers for products I may really want from companies I may have never heard of, and they will find me when I'm ready to buy. That's improvement.

Two things have to happen to make all this work. One, as a consumer, I have to be willing to let the technology and marketing world track my personal preferences so they can develop an accurate profile of me. And two, marketers need to stop complaining about change and recognize the potential power available to them through the internet, search, and other innovations like TiVo.

Because these two conditions are still in process, the future is still future. But for some, the future really is today. Google has targeted AdWords and personalized search today. TiVo keeps track of my viewing habits and delivers programming it thinks I'll like today. Credit Card companies keep track of consumer buying data today. Connect a few of these data sources together and presto! You get less junk mail, less spam, and more appropriate information and mutually beneficial offers.

I'm sure that, as you've read this newsletter, you've had underlying thoughts concerning the protection of privacy, and that is a big objection and potential barrier. Certainly policy, politics, technology and law have a lot of work to do to make such systems function safely. But as for personal search, I look forward to the discoveries I'll make that I miss today because Google doesn't know me very well. When it does get to know me, irrelevant links will drop out to make room for the information I do care about. And that's a good thing.