

Search and Social: A marriage made in heaven?



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In the past three years, we've seen an incredible shift in the way people are living their digital lives. Twitter, Pinterest, Vine, Instagram and, of course, Facebook have all transformed the way that consumers discover and engage with brands and content. Facebook used to be about sharing photos of nights out and holidays, but it's evolved into a "magazine of your life," while Twitter has gone from a status network to an always-on, running discussion about more or less everything.

We've seen three Google algorithm changes: Penguin, Panda and Hummingbird, highlighting the importance

of content and social distribution, and let's not forget technology. The iPad was only launched in 2010, but you can now buy tablets for just £100, connected to superfast data networks. Anyone, anywhere, can now be online.

Amplification, where consumers go directly to a trusted information source, is also growing. Five years ago if you were looking for a hotel in Rome, you'd have searched on Google. Now you'd go directly to TripAdvisor or Hotels.com.

There are three things Google looks for when it scans a website. The first is: can Google navigate your site? The second: how relevant is your content? The third is 'social' and links. To be successful, brands need great content across all major digital and social channels that people want to share and distribute.

Search and social without the friction

The digital content explosion means consumers are bombarded by too many messages. The solution is frictionless discovery. We want people to instantly find what they want, when they want

it, in the format they need. So brands must have content at all stages of the consumer journey, but the only way that will happen is through a combined search and social strategy.

Google have made a big bet with Google+. It hasn't taken off as a social network, but it's a layer of social currency that's attaching itself to search, content, and everything else. Social sites are taking up more real estate on search results pages, but more than that, the focus on great content in social is really paying off in terms of the connection between search and social.

MAP brings social and search together

Our social, SEO, paid search and content teams work incredibly closely together. This close alignment of our search and social approach comes through in our Discovery framework. It helps our teams look beyond their own disciplines and think about how what they're doing in search, social, or mobile translates into opportunities for our clients across the board.

In fact, we created MAP to provide exactly this type of integrated digital strategy for brands. To be successful, a 'Discovery' strategy has to be integrated from planning through to deployment.

Search and social together means "it just works"

You can still improve the search performance of your website without being engaged in social media, but social recognition - the invaluable validation which comes from consumers sharing a brand's content - is a key element of success.

Any brand will see greater efficiencies and effectiveness if they approach digital more holistically. Consumers want to have meaningful experiences with brands that add value and remove friction. Nobody wants to have to click through a lot of links or navigate an FAQ if they have a question about their new coffee maker. They just want to go online, type something in and go straight to what they need - like a YouTube video showing them how to change their filter.

The brands getting it right

Brands like Canon and Vonage are making big strides. Their content-led strategies combine insights from social and search, which in turn helps to refine their SEO performance, bringing things full circle.

For Vonage, we've partnered with online influencers to build a Vonage blog full of content designed to engage, support and inspire the SOHO market, with posts amplified on social media to increase the brand's reach.

We're helping Canon to engage a wider audience by combining insights from search behaviour, social listening and outreach to build the content their target market wants, which we can then amplify on social channels.

Tesco are also creating very exciting cross-channel, data-driven, consumer-centric strategies that encompass search and social, both online and in store.

Coming soon to the search and social landscape

New mobile-based network Jelly lets people take photos of things and then ask questions of their extended network. This shows how people are increasingly crowd-sourcing information and insight, a trend that is likely to grow and grow.

Technology will keep on driving change. As well as low-cost tech and faster data allowing anyone, anywhere to get online, the long-awaited mass-market appearance of wearable technology is almost here, with or without the suspended Google Glass. It's not hard to see how search will only become more and more central to digital strategies.

At the heart of all this sits the vital principle of consumer discovery, which brands will have to crack if they want to stay ahead.