Google Instant: A Reason to Buy AdWords

In September 2010, Google changed the way search results appeared. The new version, dubbed Google Instant, displays search results as the user types a query. In the old version of Google, the system displayed query suggestions in a drop down box. Now the screen fills with search results.

If you have not tried the new "search as you type" system, navigate to Google and enter a query. I tested the query for American Airlines, which I typically abbreviate to "aa". Google displays AAA Official Site. The Triple A is the American Automobile Association. How do I get "American Airlines"? The solution is to enter the full query "American Airlines," not the abbreviation "aa". If you want to change your default Google settings, you can click on different links until you find the page that allows you to turn off Google Instant.

Most users just use the default settings. The result is that finding Web sites or information now requires some extra work. Granted, if you are looking for the American Automobile Association, Google Instant is a great benefit. But if you are looking for any other entry that includes a double "a", you are going to be affected by Google Instant.

What's behind this type of radical change to Google's main search system? According to Google,

> *"We are pushing the limits of our technology and infrastructure to help you get better search results, faster. Our key technical insight was that people type slowly, but read quickly, typically taking 300 milliseconds between keystrokes, but only 30 milliseconds (a tenth of the time!) to glance at another part of the page. This means that you can scan a results page while you type. " (Source:* http://www.google.com/instant/*).*

Google continues:

> *The most obvious change is that you get to the right content much faster than before because you don't have to finish typing your full search term, or even press "search." Another shift is that seeing results as you type helps you formulate a better search term by providing instant feedback. You can now adapt your search on the fly until the results match exactly what you want. In time, we may wonder how search ever worked in any other way.*

If American Airlines is affected by Google Instant, what about a smaller business? My testing reveals that Google appears to be focusing search results, particularly the first two or three letters, on larger firms. I did some spot checking and could not discern a specific pattern. My

conclusion was that a Google numerical recipe was looking at what the user typed and then consulting a list of results that were stored in various caches. The method seemed to deliver results for sites that receive high traffic. I tried to cross match the results with online advertising, but the results were inconclusive. My research indicates that Google Instant seems to favor high traffic sites and popular topics such as the letter "g" displays hits to Google and Gmail, surely not an accident of chance? The query "ga" returns entries for games, which is a popular topic. (Popularity can be estimated using a number of different tools, but I rely on Google Trends at http://www.google.com/trends.) You can test the popularity of the queries in this column by typing the key word in the search box and looking at the traffic reports. The public version of Google Trends does not show actual clicks per time interval, but you can approximate the relative popularity of terms by entering a multi-word query like gaga, games. Google plots both lines. Lady Gaga recently passed a billion downloads of her videos, so you can see relative popularity easily. Games are more popular than Lady Gaga it seems. But when you enter "gag", Google displays Lady Gaga.

What more about obscure words and phrases? Consider the search for ip, an abbreviation of intellectual property. Google leaps forward with hits to Apple's iPad. In order to locate documents about "ip", the abbreviation of intellectual property, I had to run the full query "intellectual property." The other fix I stumbled upon was to turn off Google Instant. Depending on your context within Google, you can turn off Google Instant via the "search settings" link at the top of a results page or click on the toggle "Instant is on" next to the search button. A click turns instant off.

Now what does this have to do with a small or mid-sized business getting found via a Google search? My opinion, which has been informed by my test queries, is that big companies and popular words and phrases have an apparent advantage. American Airlines, for example, will have to work harder to generate traffic to its Web site. But a more practical approach may be to invest in Google's AdWords to make certain that when certain queries are run, American Airlines turns up.

There are other approaches as well, but some of these will require some time and effort to implement. Let me run down six suggestions for you to consider if the Google AdWords approach is not suitable for your business.

First, you can sign up for Google's Local listings. The easiest way to get to the sign up page is to navigate to Google.com and run a query for "Google Places." You will need a Google account to create a free listing. Keep in mind, however, that the free listing does not guarantee that your entry will appear quickly or that if you are listed, your listing will be permanent. The listing for my company ArnoldIT has been under review for months even though I was an early participant in the program. Google will also offer for-fee options to increase your firm's visibility. These are called Google Tags and provide a preferred listing in

certain results lists. Tags are free for some registrants, but I have heard about fees for tags as a forthcoming feature.

Second, you can increase the flow of original content to your Web log. That content can then be distributed via really simple syndication. Google offers a blogging service at www.blogger.com, but Google does not appear to favor users by blogging platform. Google is paying considerable attention to Web sites and blogs that produce original content on a consistent and timely schedule. My blog at www.arnoldtit.com/wordpress is indexed frequently even though my business is not listed in Google Local. Google's different units and services are not tightly coordinated in my experience.

Third, you can look at advertising options on Facebook. For some businesses, Facebook offers advertisements that can be targeted to specific demographic groups. Some of the Facebook advertisers with whom I have talked report considerable success with Facebook's display advertisements. However, some advertisers of more general products and services have found that ads are less effective than mounting a Facebook content campaign. You may want to test Facebook advertising and experiment with increasing the content flow to a Facebook page about your business.

Fourth, you may want to take a close look at your present Web site. Content, not graphics and high style, are more important than search engine optimization tricks. If your Web site is more like a motion picture trailer, you may want to think about adding more product information or more detail about your firm's success stories. If your Web site has not been updated in months, you should invest in getting more substantive information into the Web site. My recommendation is that content is more important today than at any other time. But Google is keeping track of the frequency of updates to a Web site. One time content updates are less useful than regular content additions.

The problem of getting a business found via an Internet search is growing more complex, not easier. The emergence of mobile device usage across different age groups and business functions is changing search. Small form factor devices like mobile phones or tablet computers make it difficult to type 1990s style queries in a search box. On my BlackBerry, entering a query in the provided mobile browser is essentially an exercise in frustration for me. To address this problem, some businesses are creating "apps" that allow one click access to content. Before you dive into an Android or Apple iPhone app, you want to do some hard thinking. App development is not a silver bullet and any type of programming can chew through a marketing budget like a hungry raccoon raiding a picnic basket.

In my own business, I am focusing on the basics. I am updating my Web site and publishing new blog content on a daily basis. As I look toward 2011, I may have to open my billfold and invest in Google's for-fee advertising programs. The Web is changing as user habits shift from the desktop to mobile computing. The good news is that change brings opportunities.

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