2019 in search: Find your seamlessness

Well, Google turned twenty this year and if the political and media drama was any indication of what 2019 holds, we have a lot to look forward to in search. (And if the Pichai's hearing was any indication of the general searcher's knowledge, then we'll also have job security.)

Wait, remind me of what happened this year: a 2018 recap

Skipping over a bunch of (probably important) details, Google received some real flak from the media and government relating to a variety of consequential, societal issues. These topics all relate to how the American consumer digests information and Google's role and responsibilities. (Think: "With great power, comes great responsibilities." Sidebar: Pouring some out for Stan Lee).

Top issues include:

- **Confirmation Bias.** We are what we search (and the specific way we ask it). Unfortunately, being a pull channel, we have an innate issue of confirmation bias. This is exacerbated by the general public's limited critical evaluation of the information they digest (leading to a garbage-in, garbage-out problem). Ultimately, the public has shifted from individuals being responsible for validating source, to search engines being *expected* to validate information (no pressure…). The question (of course) remains – could search engines ever be responsible for their algorithm's results?

Source: chainsawsuit.com

- **Accuracy:** The false assumption that search engines are infallible, means that the accuracy of results, particularly relating to fact-based information, is more important than ever. Since many users are comfortable living in their own bias bubbles, blissfully ignorant, and too lazy to discern fact and fiction, we push that responsibility to search engines. Shouldn't it be their job to tell us what is and is not "fake news" or helping us to more accurately self-diagnose medical conditions? This shift has major implications for the big G (and we'll probably see more in 2019).
- **Accusations of political bias:** During the Pichai

congressional committee hearing, there were numerous allegations of political bias. Regardless of the validity of these claims, Google reacted in some form.

- **Privacy:** From Europe's GDPR to accusations of Google placing users in a filter bubble from DuckDuckGo mascot Dax, to being questioned whether or not Google holds too much data (particularly location). The problem is that most users don't understand what they're giving away when they agree to privacy terms and conditions and enable location-based settings (and most of the time, they don't care). Opening our doors to an oligopoly of tech brands has long-term societal implications (I'll leave these predictions to most-any sci-fi novel).
    - **Plus+:** Privacy concerns tend to flare up when something affecting trust occurs (e.g., like potential data breeches – maybe a -1).
    - **Sidebar**: Here is a great article to see what data is being stored and (if you choose) methods for deleting it.

Whelp, here's a map of everywhere I've been in the last two months. (Find yours too, there's even a zoom feature!)

- **International affairs**, including:
  - The truth relating to whether or not foreign interference during certain elections occurred – is something only tech giants (and probably Vladimir Putin) know. It's a "who do you believe" situation. Did or did not Google disclose the appropriate information (a real-life Hamilton situation here)?
  - Google's willingness to work with the Chinese government's censorship (about the now supposedly ended Dragonfly project).

This past year was a rough politically, leading to Pichai even stating, “You know, we deliberate about things a lot more, and we are more thoughtful about what we do.” I’m sure the ongoing focus on deliberateness will carry downstream. Exactly how this will affect the “move fast, break things” Silicon Valley philosophy of our technological overlords is TBD.

A slight modification suggested to Facebook’s tagline.

Where is Google going?

Well, if we follow the dollar bills, Alphabet makes money via ads. They even say so themselves in their financial statements. “We generate revenues primarily by delivering

relevant, cost-effective online advertising," (and ads generated roughly ~86 percent of all (yes, that's *all*) of Alphabet's Q3 revenue). This is simply to say, search is important to Google, as there is a substantial economic incentive to keep search users delighted. Understanding the mechanics of search, knowing how to add value and where to prioritize SEO efforts remains vital.

What does this mean for Google?

1. They're probably going to focus on the known, nestling themselves into a branded comfort zone. This includes:

- Doubling down on the known:
  - More focus on top brands, news outlets, and well-known sites.
  - Potentially, more aesthetics in SERPs to identify how credible Google feels results are.
- Tripling down on the facts:
  - Semantic fact checking, flagging of pages exceeding a certain threshold.
  - There will probably be a side focus on medical answers. This means working with hospitals and seeking out more expert advice. Also, high chances of trying to crack the PII nut that is health by putting data in the hands of consumers.
    1. Maybe this includes (probably not within the next year) integrating with telehealth services.
    2. Ultimately, if consumers have control of their health data, Google can then provide that medical data to technology that will use machine learning to analyze data points, return the most relevant results and develop suggestions on solving. We won't get there in 2019, but the seeds will probably be planted.

- Finally, it will release some form of multi-perspective answers to address a sliver of confirmation bias for queries like: [Is [x] good?] or [Is [x] bad?].
    - Maybe (though probably not) we'll even get some dual political education on top issues? What are Democrat liberals saying? What are Republicans saying?
- More support of structured data.

2. Google will aim to be the transaction hub of the web (more than just an information portal).

- Try to find ways to pull conversions from Amazon.
- Likely this will continue to affect the travel industry. Any industry that's previously paid booking fees will probably be the first.
- Push towards making Google Home transactions as simple as possible (particularly for recurring orders).
- Then there is the goal to work up to Amazon's Prime experience (vast inventory, two-day shipping, one-click, customer guarantees, re-ordering convenience).

3. It will double down on security.

- Stricter prioritization of HTTPS sites.
- More education and attempt at transparency, particularly targeted towards Washington, D.C.
- More auditing and notifications for potentially hacked sites.
- In SERP, visual identification to users of sites with higher risk or that Google believes is compromised.

4. Privacy: We'll probably be told what Google's doing for privacy, security and ensuring credible sources are identified. Likely this means increased notifications for identification when cookies are being stored and more updates for when apps are storing location-based information. I don't really anticipate anything changing with actual best practices.

5. Integration of search within more hardware.

- We already have Google Home and Android implemented. Eventually, search will be omnipresent (following you versus having you transport it).
- With image search identifying products.

6. (Curveball) I'm anticipating a big purchase in the market within the next year. In the current elevated pressures, higher uncertainties and depression will lead to more favorable prices. Google's reasonable growth rates allow for longer-term investments. Maybe they'll follow Amazon and get some interesting medical-tech related.

Where are/should companies be going?

1. Find your seamlessness. We don't all have to be Amazon; however, you should all aim to delight users with a radical focus on creating seamlessness across every touchpoint (including website, search, voice search, apps (potentially PWAs), offline, email, display, etc.). This includes:

- Work towards a frictionless conversion.
- Understand new and existing customer behavior, intent and common journeys.
- Create the infrastructure needed (e.g., Alexa skills, Google Actions, analytics implementation that allows for personalization).
- Ensure internal site search is providing relevant results.
- Ensure repeat customers can restock commonly purchased items simply.
- Consider use of chatbots to lighten the load for basic, common questions and procedural tasks.
- Make sure users are easily able to navigate to physical locations.

- Provide users with their stage in the fulfillment funnel (think: clear, visual process forms).
- Be transparent with users, providing access to where they are at every stage in the funnel (an online snapshot of where they are in the process can go a long way).

2. Consolidate recurring tasks, work marketing into BAU flow.

- Schedule a monthly meeting with marketing and development to discuss synergies and make a strategy to automate. Commit development hours to automation.
- Review 2018 work:
    - Identify tasks that take a human-less that one second to decide, the mundane work that rots a human mind, and work with development teams to see which of these issues can be automated.
    - Are there any issues from 2018 that often happened (that really shouldn't have)? See if you can add milestones and automatic compliance checks to the current development workstream.

3. Leverage data to power better user experiences and to empower users.

- Ensure that your company has the analytics and content management infrastructure needed to support personalization.
- Test and develop more personalized experiences (make sure to provide search engine bots with a base-case user experience).

4. Instill credibility in every aspect of the online experience. If Google is looking for credibility and buckling down on its trust level, you need to make sure you're showing users and search engines why you're the best at what you do.

What should SEOs do?

Well, depending on where you are in your SEO journey, there are probably a lot of things that you could do in 2019.

Here's a starting list (a smattering of ideas, if you will):

1. Know your brand, site, users, industry and your unique value proposition. You must understand the competitive ecosystem and why customers choose your brand.

2. Ensure technical SEO is en pointe because if search engines can't crawl, render or index a page, it's not going to perform well in search.

- Ensure site = crawlable, indexable, and renderable.
- Ensure all signals = clear, aligned.
- Automate, where possible.
- Detailed checklist here

3. Inventory content. See what's working (driving KPIs, traffic, clicks or even impressions) and what's not.

- If it is not working – build a strategy to optimize or cut.
- If it is working – determine why is it working (use this to build case studies). Could it be better? (e.g., Is it on page one and not ranking for an available quick answer? Could it be optimized to rank for a quick answer?)
- Research keywords, the search landscape, site performance, develop audience segments and common user journeys.
- Look into the potential value for your site of creating non-text-based content experiences. Rand Fishkin brought up Google's trojan horsing of the web last year and it will remain an issue. Any experience that makes it harder for Google to roll into the SERP may serve as a long-term play.

4. E-A-T audits. Essentially answer: How well do the website and content reflect your brand expertise, authoritativeness and trustworthiness? This may include things like:

- Review about us page.
- Ensure all content is up-to-date and factually accurate.
- Review the site and identify opportunities to add ClaimReview Schema.org structured data (a.k.a. fact check).
- Identify and address any common user questions.

5. Where applicable (and able to be prioritized), implement.

6. Develop first-party case studies that will help build your team's credibility within the organization and serve as navigation tools as your online strategy develops. It can be challenging when your head is buried in the work, but having these resources around always ends up being worth having in your back pocket (or, of course, in front of executives).

Summary

- 2019 promises to be a hairy, political hodgepodge of issues that will likely be a defining year in terms of our legislative approach to technology.
- An understanding of the mechanics of how search engines return which results will continue to be an invaluable skill set.
- Companies should focus on seamlessness across all channels, consolidate recurring tasks, leveraging data to build personalized experiences and instilling credibility in all aspects.
- SEO should focus on whatever needs to be done to promote business goals, which may include: technical SEO, content, E-A-T audits, structured data, page speed optimizations and developing first-party case studies.
- I'm excited for the messy, beautiful, exciting year that 2019 promises to be! Welcome to your twenties Google!

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Opinions expressed in this article are those of the guest author and not necessarily Search Engine Land. Staff authors are listed here.

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