Yelp adds new personalization features in bid to regain local momentum from Google

Yelp is betting big on personalization. Soon, new screens will allow users to select preferences and favorites that will be used by the company to offer better recommendations and personalized search results.

Pet owners, vegans and parents. In the latest version of the Yelp app users will be prompted to indicate dietary (e.g., gluten free, vegetarian) and lifestyle preferences (e.g., pet owner, parent, homeowner). Then the app will ask for favorites across a number of categories: food & drink, things to do and lifestyle.

The process is simple: users simply tap images from a visual menu. It took me about three minutes in total. And it does make the app potentially different from Google local search, which has increasingly encroached on Yelp's territory as the go-to local review site in the U.S.

Depending on one's choices, which can be changed at any time, a home-owning parent who likes beaches and bookstores should get different recommendations and search results than a happy hour loving single person interested in middle-eastern food.

The beginning of 'major product changes'. Yelp says that it's using reviews content, photos, business attributes and other

data to match consumer interests and businesses or activities. “Rather than serving recommendations solely based on a user’s search history, Yelp is starting an open conversation with consumers to better understand their preferences and interests in order to customize the app to show them what they want to see more of,” Yelp says in its blog post. The company adds that Yelp won’t expose user preferences publicly.

Yelp says the new features will be rolling out soon to iOS users and in stages for Android users, with the “full experience” available early next year. The company also teases that these new capabilities are “the beginning of major product changes the company is undertaking to significantly evolve and improve the consumer experience.”

Why we should care. Yelp faces intensifying pressure from Google and GMB’s increasing transactional functionality. In terms of overall volume, Google now has more reviews than Yelp, although Yelp points to its controversial “not recommended” feature (previously: “review filter”) as providing more safeguards against review spam and fakes.

The company needs to make changes that differentiate its experience from what Google is doing. It needs to regain growth and momentum or face an eventual sale, to private equity or someone else.

Yelp is silent on whether personalization data will be used in any way in advertising on the site. I didn’t notice any obvious personalized ad targeting in my testing and I suspect Yelp will tread very lightly there for some time. But first it needs to get users engaged with the new functionality.

[embedded content]

About The Author

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