Zero-Result SERPs: Welcome to the Future We Should've Known Was Coming

On Wednesday, Google launched a large-scale experiment, removing organic results from a small set of searches with definitive answers such as this one for "What time is it in Seattle?":

These SERPs display a Knowledge Card with a "Show all results" button and no additional organic results or SERP features. Danny Sullivan wrote on Twitter that this is currently limited to a small set of answers, including calculators, unit conversions, and some time/date queries. Here's another one, converting yesterday's MozCast temperature ("108 degrees in celsius"):

At first glance, this is a startling development, but it shouldn't be entirely surprising. So, let's get to the hard questions – is this a sign of things to come, and how quickly do we need to adapt?

For today, don't panic

First off, preliminary data suggests that these really are isolated cases. Across the 10,000 searches that MozCast tracks daily, one search (0.01%) currently displays zero results: "1 gigabit to gigabyte." This change is not impacting most high-

volume, competitive queries or even the vast majority of results with Knowledge Cards.

Second, we have to face the reality that Knowledge Cards, even paired with organic results, already dramatically impact search user behavior. Thanks to Russ Jones, we've pulled some data from an internal CTR study we're currently working on at Moz. In that study, SERPs with 10 blue links have a roughly 79% organic click-through rate (overall). Add just a Knowledge Card, with no other features, and that drops to 25%. That's a 68% drop-off, a loss of over two-thirds of organic clicks. Google has tested this change and likely found that showing organic links on these particular searches provided very little additional value.

This isn't new (part 1)

I'm going to argue that this change is one that we in the industry should've seen coming, and I'm going to do it in two parts. First, we know that Knowledge Cards and other answers (including Featured Snippets) power SERPs on devices where screen size is at a minimum or non-existent.

Take for example, a search for "Where was Stephen Hawking born?" Even though the answer is definitive (there is one factual answer to this question), Google displays a rich Knowledge Card plus a full set of organic SERPs. On mobile, though, that Knowledge Card dominates results. Here's a full-screen image:

The Knowledge Card extends below the fold and dominates the mobile screen. This assumes I see the SERP at all. Even as I was typing the question, Google tried to give me the answer…

If the basic information is all I need, and if I trust Google as a source for that information, why would I need to even click at this point?

On mobile, I at least have the option to peruse organic results. On Google Home, if I ask the same question ("Where was Stephen Hawking born?"), I get no SERP at all, just the answer:

> *"Stephen Hawking was born in Oxford, United Kingdom."*

Obviously, this is born of necessity on a voice-only device like Google Home, but we get a similarly truncated result with voice searches through Google Assistant. This is the same answer on my phone (the same phone as the previous screenshots), but using voice search instead of text search…

Google's push toward voice UI and mobile-first design means that these considerations sometimes move back up the chain of devices. If the answer is enough for voice and mobile, maybe it's enough for desktop.

This isn't new (part 2)

Over the past couple of years, I've talked a lot about how SERPs have expanded well beyond 10 blue links. What we talk about less is the flip-side, that SERPs are also shrinking. Adding SERP features is, in some cases, a zero-sum game, at the cost of organic results.

Each of the following features take up one organic position:

- Full site-links (each row)
- Image results
- Top Stories
- In-depth articles (3 articles = 1 organic)
- Tweets (carousel)
- Tweets (single)

Across the 10,000 SERPs in our data set, over half (51%) had less than 10 traditional organic results. While very-low counts are rare, over one-fourth of page-one SERPs fell into the range of 5–8 organic results.

While the zero-result SERP is certainly a new and extreme case, the removal of organic results in favor of other features has been happening (and expanding) for quite some time now. SERPs with as few as 3–4 page-one organic results have been appearing in the wild for well over a year.

In some cases, you might not even realize that a result isn't organic. Consider, for example, the following set of results on desktop. Can you spot the In-depth Articles?

On desktop results, there are no visual markers separating In-depth Articles from organic results, even though these results are powered by two different aspects of the algorithm. From the source code markers, we can see that the answer is #2–#5, three results which displace one organic result:

Another example is Twitter results. You've probably seen the

Twitter carousel, which is a visually distinct format with three tweets, but have you seen a result like this one (on a search for “cranberry”)?

At first glance, it looks organic (except for the Twitter icon), but this result is a vertical result pulled directly from the Twitter data feed. It is not subject to traditional organic optimization and ranking factors.

All of this is to say that organic real estate has been shrinking for quite a while, giving way to vertical results, Knowledge Graph results, and other rich features. Google will continue to experiment, and we can expect that some SERPs will continue to shrink. Where the data suggests that one answer is enough, we may only see one answer, at the cost of organic results.

Search intent vs. opportunity

It’s easy to let our imaginations run wild, but we have to consider intent. The vast majority of searches are never going to have one definitive answer, and some queries aren’t even questions, in the traditional sense.

From an SEO and content standpoint, I think we have to expand our idea of informational search intent (vs. transactional or navigational, using the classic model). Some questions are factual, and can be answered by the ever-expanding Knowledge Graph. As of today, a search like “When is Pi Day?” still shows organic results, but the Knowledge Card gives us a definitive answer…

Here, organic opportunity is very limited. Think of this as a “closed informational” search.

On the other hand, open-ended questions still rely very much on a variety of answers, even when Google tries to choose one of those answers. Consider the search “What is the best pie?”, which returns the following Featured Snippet (a hybrid of organic result and answer box)…

No one answer will ever suffice for this question. Even the author of this post had the decency to say “Go ahead and let me have it in the comments,” knowing the disagreement would soon flow like cherry filling.

Think of these searches as “open informational” searches. Even if we have to compete for the Featured Snippet (especially on voice results), there will be organic/SEO opportunity here for the foreseeable future.

Ultimately, we have to adapt, and we have to get smarter about the searchers we target. Where Google can answer a question, they will try to answer that question, and if organic results add no measurable value (regardless of whether you agree with how Google measures value), they will continue to shrink.

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