

SEO Is Dead, And The New King Is 'SMO'

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Over the past five years, Web publishing has been so heavily dominated by search engine optimization (SEO) that, to many publishing executives, the right keywords have become far more important than their sites' actual content or audience. But this movement toward SEO has been dangerous, as it's moved publishers' eye off their most important job of creating great content, and onto the false goals of keywords, hacks, paid links, and technical engineering that their audience doesn't know or care about.

Even venerable publishers like Forbes have traded in their leadership legacy to chase the Huffington Post pufferfish strategy of filling up Google's database with more posts, more frequency, and more low-cost content; while stalwarts like Time Inc. (NYSE: TWX) are still chasing SEO basics like getting keywords into their URLs.

But the recent announcement of the Facebook/Bing partnership to integrate social and search results clearly marks the beginning of the end of SEO, and the smartest digital publishers will drop everything to rethink their distribution strategy entirely.

With the rise of Facebook, we've entered a new era of digital media: personalized discovery. The balance of power is shifting: Already sites at Wetpaint and other publishers are seeing more audience coming from Facebook than from search.

Search was critical when answers to questions were scarce. Google (NSDQ: GOOG) can find an answer to almost any keyword query from among the zillions of pages on the web. But at a time when such answers are abundant, it's far more valuable to find the best content for me – and increasingly, find it before I've even asked for it. The sort algorithm that works best for that is more correlated to who's doing the asking than how they would phrase the ask.

For that level of personalized results, no abject algorithm can keep up without deep knowledge of its users. Advantage: Facebook.

The encouraging implication is that the audience values content, not keywords. And Facebook sides with the audience. And so it's time to christen a new era of social-media optimization, or "SMO." The era of SMO liberates publishers from the exercise of tricks, hacks and keywords. Instead, the big opportunity is now once again creating and refining the most appealing content possible.

Imagine that.

SMO recognizes that Facebook already has the best position to introduce content to users. Already, audiences are using Facebook as the news interface to their favorite sources (both media titles and their friends) in a way that Google News hasn't cracked the code on; products like Flipboard that take this to the next level are captivating.

As Facebook takes its immense database of "Likes" and pivots it to inform search results, there's no question that it will have a huge advantage in delivering a better result set for almost every user. It simply knows more.

SMO strategy means appealing to the audience, not an intermediary; knowing what drives interest; and activating people's desire to consume and share. Sure, there is buzz among many publishers around Facebook logins and likes,

and the traffic bumps that come with them. But SMO offers more far than that. It's about creating a positive feedback loop, where users are rewarded for both consuming and distributing content. The key is to develop virality in media like that of Zynga games and Groupon offers. Beyond, of course, creating great content and experiences that are worth sharing, publishers need to then reward their audiences with the full range of possibilities, including prestige, access, exclusive content and enhanced experiences.

For those who are still working on implementing search strategies: if you haven't turned your focus to SMO, you will be left behind as the allure of gaming search engines fades into the past.