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Subject: Search Insider: SEO is Not Dead, It's Just Changing
Attachments:

Sent: Wed 11/3/2010 8:58 AM

SEO is Not Dead, It's Just Changing

by Aaron Goldman , Wednesday, November 3, 2010

Last week, Ben Elowitz, CEO of [Wetpaint](#) and former co-founder of [Blue Nile](#), penned a byline titled "[SEO is Dead, and the New King is 'SMO.'](#)" (In case you were wondering, that's social media optimization, not the [Seattle Mandolin Orchestra](#).)

As with any pundit who ever dared declare the death of SEO ([or its lack of rocket science](#)), Elowitz received quite a bit of backlash from the SEO community, including the requisite name-calling.

Elowitz points to the [recent announcement from Microsoft](#) that Bing is incorporating Facebook "likes" into its core search algorithm as evidence of the power of SMO. He says this new era of SMO "liberates publishers from the exercise of tricks, hacks and keywords."

For what it's worth, I think Elowitz is actually right -- but also totally wrong.

SMO is powerful. But SEO is not dead.

Like it or Not

Social media provides the strongest signals of personal relevance a search engine has ever been able to index.

But social media, and specifically Facebook "likes," are not nearly as ubiquitous as links and, therefore, no search engine can create a comprehensive index based solely on these signals.

Furthermore, I'd argue that SMO is not a replacement for SEO. Rather, it is a subset.

There will never come a day when any major search engine puts all the weight of its algorithm behind any one variable. That would just invite people to game the system.

Imagine a search algo that gave all the juice to "likes." Now imagine all the cyber cafes (read: sweatshops) around the world artificially inflating "like" counts. There'd be more liking going on than Tiger Woods at a Miss Universe pageant.

As long as there are [multiple factors contributing to search engine rankings](#), the role of search engine optimization will remain intact.

And, as long as Google controls 70%+ of the global search market and does not include "likes" in its algorithm, SMO won't really matter anyway.

That said, clearly Google is looking for ways to capture social signals to improve its search results -- likely (pun intended) the reason for the rumored Google Me social network. I wrote about this in my columns, "[Why Google Me](#)" and, "[Link vs. Like and the Future of Web Ranking](#)."

Search vs. Discovery

As Elowitz observes in his piece, more and more people are "discovering" relevant content through the social graph as opposed to searching explicitly for it.

And, in many cases, people turn to their social networks before search engines when it comes to answer-seeking.

What car should I buy? Where should I eat dinner tonight? What movie should I see? To date, the answer would have been, "Google it." But not anymore.

That said, by and large, the mindset of someone engaging with social media is not information-seeking. It's primarily communication and content consumption (read: farming).

Accordingly, social media is a less profitable aperture for marketers to reach people. Consumers will either tune out the message completely -- or see it, but not want to act immediately.

I touched on this and the other key differences between search and social in my last column, "[Search and Social: Birds of a Feather or Different Flock?](#)"

At the end of the day, both search and social have their role in the mix when it comes to information-seeking, content consumption, and marketing communications. To say one is dead is really just the stuff of link... er, like-bait.

A Matter of Like and Death

SMM is definitely something all marketers should consider. Whether or not it is part of SEO is really just semantics.

If your goal is to increase your search engine rankings, then SMM is a variable that must be taken into account. But, before you drop everything to start pinning for "likes," consider that, today, you will only be rewarded by Bing -- and it's unclear to what extent.

If your goal is good old-fashioned branding -- awareness, consideration, preference, etc. -- then SMM may indeed be a separate and worthy endeavor. But I don't know that I'd call it SMM. SMM (Social Media Marketing) seems to be a fine acronym to cover the creation and management of Facebook fan pages, Twitter accounts, etc.

Over the years, I've learned a few things about digital marketing nomenclature:

1. [People love their buzzwords.](#)
2. [Provocative titles generate readership.](#)
3. [It's futile to try and change the lexicon.](#)
4. [SEO never dies.](#)

With this in mind, I encourage you to (re)read [Elowitz' byline](#) and share your thoughts. But keep it civil, willya? All you ornery bloggers are the reason people want SEO to die so badly.

[This commentary is insightful. I recommend it to others.](#)

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