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Search and Social: Birds Of A Feather Or Different Flock?

Aaron Goldman, Oct 20, 2010 12:01 PM

There's been a lot of chatter about search and social lately, with Microsoft announcing incorporation of Facebook "likes" into the Bing search algorithm and user interface.

In his last column, Chris Copeland gave a good recap of the news and implications for marketers. And, at the last winter Search Insider Summit, Chris shared some great research from Group M showing the impact of social on search.

But the more search and social converge, the more important it becomes to clarify the similarities and differences of the platforms. So, today, I'd like to separate the fact from the fiction and the feather from the flock.

Birds of a Feather

1. **Paid + Organic** - both search and social boast opportunities for marketers to capture real estate via paid advertising and organic content. With search, paid = sponsored listings and organic = well, organic listings. With social, the paid = ads and organic = pages, mentions, tweets, etc.
2. **PPC Auction** - both search and social ads can be procured via pay-per-click auction.
3. **Precise Audience Segmentation** - both search and social allow marketers to reach narrowly defined audience segments, aka the people most likely to be interested in their products or services.
4. **Highly Customized Creative Messaging** - both search and social ads can be customized to meet the unique attributes of the person (or IP address) being targeted.
5. **Continuous Optimization** - both search and social require ongoing management and optimization to maximize performance.
6. **Technology Automation** - to maximize performance in both search and social, it's critical for marketers to leverage technology to automate campaign set-up, group ads, manage bids, and generate actionable reports. This can now be accomplished via the Facebook Ads API.

Different Flock

1. **Consumer Mindset** - with search, people are actively seeking information, content or commerce. With social, people are actively consuming content or communicating.
2. **Time Spent** - people spend 5% of their time online searching and 82% of their time with content, communications, and community, per the Online Publishers Association. So, while search is a much better aperture to reach consumers in a commercial mindset, it's also a very narrow window.
3. **Ranking Criteria** - search is about pages. Social is about people. Search is ruled by links. Social is ruled by likes. Of course, the line is blurring here with the Bing/Facebook integration, and the future of web ranking is at stake.

4. Ad Targeting - search is about keywords. Social is about interests. As noted above, both provide precise audience segmentation, but these attributes are inherently different. Keywords are an overt statement of what people are looking for at a specific moment. Interests are an overt statement of what's important to people over a lifetime (or at least a phase or fad).

5. Conversions - search ads typically drive people to convert on a website or offline. Social ads (at least with Facebook) allow people to convert within the social network -- e.g., linking a brand.

6. Metrics - search is typically measured on some sort of direct-response metric: ROI, CPA, etc. Social should not be. It will never come close to performing like search on an apples-to-apples basis. Social ads (at least with Facebook) offer new metrics like social impressions: the number of ads that appear with an endorsement from an ad viewer's social graph. To get a truly accurate picture of performance, be sure to measure the impact of social ads on search activity, as GroupM did in the research mentioned above.

Before you flock to social advertising or social search optimization, stop and think if what's good for the goose is good for the gander, or if you're dealing with a chicken vs. egg scenario. Then, and only then, can you stick the feather of integration in your cap.