

COLUMNS

How app search optimization is about to change

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The app developer world is about to change – again.

The Apple iOS 9 will release many new features, but one that I believe will have a large long-term impact on consumer behavior is happening behind the scenes rather than during a flashy, onstage demo of a pretty-looking user interface.

Updates to search functionality for applications will change how users find content on their phones. Excitingly, it is possible to optimize for these changes to get app content found in new ways, ultimately extending discoverability.

The industry largely defines app search (ASO) optimization as methods and tactics to improve the ranking of an app within app stores and regular search engines such as Google.

Up until now, this has been a very limited tactic, as developers and marketers have only ever been able to promote the app listing page – ASO 1.0. This is because previously there was no method for search engines to gain access to the content of the app.

However, Apple, Google and some independents such as Branch.io, Deeplink.me and other deep-linking startups are now actively indexing app content rather than just the app store listing page, hence the advent of ASO 2.0.

Now, once indexes are created, new ways to promote the content of apps will follow, thus driving more engagement, more conversions and making apps function more like the Web does. This is a win for the whole ecosystem.

Developers experience an increase in app usage. Operating system providers get more app revenue as well as potentially creating new revenue lines. End users get easier access to the rich content of the apps that they have downloaded.

Indeed, we are almost at a point where users essentially create a curated Web on their device by downloading the apps and services they want and then being able to find the content they need from this curated list of services. This is a change from relying on Google to always curate which publisher has the best content.

So, what specifically is changing?

Let us start with Apple

Apple is now indexing app screens that will be suggested as results when users are searching in Spotlight, Siri, or the address bar of Safari.

We already have a sneak preview of the associated usefulness from the existing Apple apps such as mail and calendar that currently are served when using these services.

Expanding this to all apps – assuming they are optimized – will make finding information super easy.

The search functionality in Safari will further dent Google's search market share as Apple will serve results before a user hits Google or Bing for their search result.

Apple's changes have very cleverly considered the personalized nature of mobile by creating a store of results that sits only locally on a user's device. This keeps personal data on the device and not transmitted up to a big bad cloud while ensuring massive relevancy as it is hyper-personalized.

Apple has combined this local index with a public cloud index that stores publicly available results and takes into account signals being made across the ecosystem.

Crucially, the cloud index provides methods to submit app content so the user can be served an app result without having the content app on their device.

The net result is when users search they will see results for the apps that they have downloaded and apps that they have not. This creates a huge opportunity for anyone looking to promote their app.

Suddenly, ASO is not a nice have – it is essential to not get left behind.

Google won in Web search because it gave more relevant results than any other search

engine.

Apple will need to do the same to be successful and truly change user behavior. It has not given away all the levers in how it will rank results but it looks like a combination of on-app factors such as keywords and descriptions combined with user behavior patterns to help increase relevance.

Apple has multiple indexes for different content types as well as the local and cloud stores. This presents a lot of complexity.

We will not know what has the biggest influence in earnest until iOS 9 is out in the wild and ASOers have had time to test and learn. For early pioneers there will be significant gains to be made.

Now let us look at Google

This is obviously a huge threat for Google.

While Apple Search will only ever work for iOS apps, this is where the highest-value users are and most focus on app distribution is made.

To be listed on Apple Search is free. The potential lost search market share if Spotlight becomes the most used search engine could be compounded with a reduction in Google ad dollars if marketers can get results with Apple Search for free.

Indeed, it will be interesting to see how Facebook responds, since it would also lose marketing dollars if Apple Search is successful.

Google is not slow to ensure it is building out its own indexes to improve app search. It has the edge on Apple, given it has been presenting app results for a while on its own search products.

Google Now, for example, has been working with select publishers to start serving relevant content within the Google Now app. This, plus Google's install results, gives the company huge data on search behavior and how to optimize relevancy.

Now that Google is going deeper by building out its own app content indexes and starting to present this content on the results pages, it will be interesting to see if Google can win out on pure relevance.

On Android, Google is doing as per Apple and baking the result into the OS.

For Apple devices, Google is facing probably the biggest threat in its search dominance.

A key difference between Apple and Google is that to rank on Google you need to have a corresponding webpage with which your app deeplink can be associated.

For most multichannel operators, this should not be too much of a problem.

But for mobile-first companies, especially games, developers will need to think very carefully about creating Web version of key screens if they want to get ranked by Google.

Apple does not require the same link to a Web site to rank, but does offer a method to

submit Web versions of app content to better rank when a user does not have your app implemented.

Given the biggest upside with deeplinks is going to be promotion of deeplinks that help to drive new or lapsed users, ensuring you appear whenever a search is made against a core keyword is essential. If you do not, your competitors will steal the traffic.

What about Facebook?

It is important to note that Facebook has its own index, too.

Facebook launched its index in April last year and to date has been focused more on giving developers tools to build deeplinks in its app, which then allow promotion to Facebook audiences.

I strongly suspect this is just the start and Facebook will be pushing new content discovery tools for apps to try and compete with the user land grab that is about to take place between Apple and Google.

Finally, independent deeplinking solutions are also building up indexes.

These companies typically offer deeplinking coding tools for developers that allow them to start to crawl app content.

While they are disadvantaged compared to the OS owners, there is still an opportunity to serve up more relevant results.

App content search is a new frontier and given the amount of venture capital cash companies such as Branch.IO have raised, I would not bet against them releasing consumer products that take significant market share.

After all, Google beat early Web search engines such as Yahoo that had complete dominance by out-innovating.

History could repeat itself with a search startup taking out the dominant player. It is a big ask, but apps is a whole new frontier for relevancy.

How can marketers and developers take advantage?

Get indexed

Submit your app content to the relevant indexes as a starting point.

The easiest wins will be in the early days of this new world order, so getting indexed early is key.

Optimize

Look at the different needs of the different indexes.

Google and Apple are different so you cannot just optimize for one and assume you will be OK.

Measure

Watch organic installs in your analytics closely. Start to deploy monitoring tools.

In the early days, we expect data from Spotlight search will be limited but do not let that stop you. Use organic trend analysis to help estimate early gains.

THIS IS A very exciting time for the mobile development community.

We now have significant new ways to get apps installed and crucially used.

Remember, there are three search engines for which you need to be optimizing: app stores, OS search engines such as spotlight search and your traditional search engines Google and Bing.

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