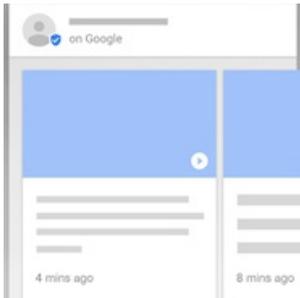


MOBILE

Is mobile search shifting towards greater brand control?

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Google is testing letting marketers publish directly to mobile search results

By CHANTAL TODE

Google's test of directly publishing content into mobile search results is a potentially significant change that puts greater narrative control in marketers' hands while boosting the impact of voice search.

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The direct posting strategy is just the latest attempt by Google to reinforce its position in search as mobile behavior continues to expose weaknesses. By enabling brands to publish content directly into search results rather than having to wait for it to be index, this addresses the growing need for real-time content and bolsters voice search as meaningful resource.

"It could reflect a fundamental change to Google's core business," said Scott Allan, chief marketing officer at **Pure Oxygen Labs**. "It's letting the advertiser/publisher control the narrative in a nimble way within search results for their own branded terms.

"What we're seeing is a reaction to mobile consumer behavior," he said. "The average time spent searching on mobile devices is less than desktop and falling across search engines.

"Will this content generate more clicks and increase engagement duration? Possibly. It's about striking the right balance between trending content and evergreen content."

New podium

Google is calling the strategy an experimental new podium enabling mobile users to hear directly from the people and organizations they care about. Verified individuals and organizations - read celebrities, brands and publishers - will be able to communicate with text, images and videos with content appearing instantly in search results related to the entity publishing that content. Posts can also be shared on social networks.

The announcement comes at a time when Google is under growing pressure to shore up its position in mobile search as competition grows and marketers explore other ways to provide mobile users with the information they want, such as via social media sites, messaging apps and location-based services.

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At the same time, the company is also searching for ways to drive revenue from mobile search, where cost-per-click rates are lower compared to desktop ([see story](#)).

While content that is directly published to search results will be pushed further down the page than traditional results, there is still a significant opportunity for advertisers and publishers to control a brand's narrative.

"It comes down to affecting consumer behavior and continuously having a pulse on consumer intent," Mr. Allan said. "Can consumers be conditioned look to that area when searching for types of certain information about the advertiser/publisher?"

"It allows advertisers and publishers to interact with consumers in a new way and it has the potential to turn into a very important brand optimization point," he said. "Public relations firms will love it but therein lies the danger.

"If the content disappoints, seems overly contrived or not aligned with intent then consumers may put up their blinders to that area."

Voice search

On the surface, direct publishing seems like another attempt by Google, following the lackluster performance of Google+, to build a role for itself in the growing space for real-time content.

Google previously integrated results from Twitter to address this need. Direct publishing will insure such content is not just coming from secondhand sources.

Direct publishing could also help Google bolster its voice search prospects.

"Voice searchers are looking for individual answers, not page of links," said Jeremy Hull, vice president of products and services solutions at [iProspect](#). "Google has addressed this well with the Answer Box, and iProspect has seen great success building content for our clients that positions them as the trusted authority in this context but that takes time to ideate and deploy, and while it's a strong long-term strategy it's not as agile as we would like.

"This functionality bridges the gap, allowing brands to publish real-time updates and information in a way that positions them as the trusted source to answer their audience's questions, especially in the context of mobile and voice search," he said.

Providing value

One challenge will be insuring that the content has value for users.

"The posts need to be in line with consumer intent or delight consumers in some way to keep them clicking and coming back to that area," Mr. Allan said. "Over time, if the content stale or not valuable it will reflect badly on the company who published it and could reflect badly on Google as a search engine.

"The seven-day expiration on the carousel content is just one way Google can exert control but other guidelines are likely to follow," he said.

Direct publishing is a very limited test right now. One challenge Google will face is figuring out how to scale it. For example how will Google choose which posts to highlight when multiple brands and celebrities publish content about a specific event? When there are a multitude of posts, how will they be ranked? Also, which response will be surfaced in voice search?

Mobile revenue

It is not a stretch to imagine that Google will look for a way to monetize the direct posting strategy.

The answer could be that direct posts eventually turn into something similar to Facebook's promoted posts using Google's AdWords Quality Score.

"Any brand or celebrity will be able to publish a post for free, but they will have the option to pay to promote it in order to reach a broader audience when there is competition," Mr. Hull said.

"This is just speculation on my part, but I think it's the most likely way Google will deal with the challenge of competition when they option this feature up to more participants," he said.

"The biggest opportunity is for publishers and marketers to promote their content directly on the Google SERP in real-time, and position themselves as trusted authorities answers searchers' questions. These types of posts will integrate very effectively not just into Voice Search, but into the cards seen in Google Now providing Google with even more relevant content to present to users."

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