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The marketing directors guide to Google+

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So, we approach one-year since the introduction of Google+. Inevitably, we have witnessed discussions about the success, or lack of it, of this new social platform.

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Many suggest it has triumphed, while others argue that the service equates more to a failure like Buzz than a success, like Gmail for instance. For SEOs though, it doesn't matter.

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It's hard to argue that the site is the runaway success the team at Mountain View might have hoped for. However there is no question that it is a viable service, and one which I fully expect to continue to rise in popularity with marketers – especially if you're interested in performing better in the natural search results. I know personally that as a marketer, it's a missed opportunity if I'm ignoring Google+.

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It's no secret that Google wants to better integrate social signals into its algorithms to help reflect who is 'socially significant'. Google either doesn't have much access to the data of other big social networks or, if they do, they're paying through the nose for it.

So it's no big surprise one of the reasons many companies are investing time and effort into Google+ is the expectation that it is already having an influence or will, in the future, on natural search results. As more people share content on social networks, it becomes a better indicator of the 'best' content the search engines want to return. Building an audience on Google+ may be the smartest thing you do as a content marketer when it comes to improved search rankings. However, you still need to understand the language of your audience and reflect it back in your content, but Google will now have direct indications that you're putting out quality stuff.

There have already been a number of studies suggesting that social signals such as 'tweets of links or likes of a page' are correlated with high rankings. Two well-known studies from SEOmoz and SearchMetrics point out that this correlation does not mean there is a causal relationship – i.e. just because a page has good social signals doesn't mean it will rank highly. A way to illustrate this is the fact that Facebook 'Likes' have been found to correlate well with rankings despite Google having no authorised way of accessing this data. Therefore it is unlikely to be using it to determine rank. However, the relationship between the two data points is still very significant and if it's a metric which indicates 'high quality', it's one the search engines will look to integrate into their algorithm. Whether this is now or the immediate future matters little if you are trying to carry out long-term sustainable campaigns.

The understanding that social signals already have a healthy relationship with rankings makes the argument to invest in Google+ much stronger. We know the relationship is there, and we know Google has the best access to their own social network, so it makes sense that they'll look there first when considering social signals. Even if these signals are perhaps not directly influencing results at the moment, there's already a strong precedent of social signals indirectly influencing your natural search through personalisation based upon your social connections.

An obvious example of this is where Google has rolled out Search Plus Your World which explicitly pulls in search results based upon who you are connected to within the social networks that Google has access to.

This dramatic change in how search results are ranked hasn't rolled out yet in the UK or Europe, but social signals are already influencing what appears when you make a search and therefore strengthens the case that your SEO and social campaigns need to be working in harmony.

We can see the potential influence of Plus, but what do we do about it? First, avoid the temptation to go out and buy social signals or votes. It's unlikely to have any impact in the short-term and in the future you'll regret it. Large brands have already tried to actively reduce the number of people who have liked them on Facebook, as those they purchased in the past are now making their social engagement look weak. If they'd stuck to 'real likes' they'd have much better numbers. In the same way, not all links are created equal and nor will social signals. A link from the BBC is more valuable than a link from a hobbyist's blog. It's sensible to assume some social signals will be more powerful than others. Thousands of social votes from weak accounts that will shill their social capital to the highest bidder are not going to transfer a huge amount of ranking value.

Marketers should understand the pages and content they've produced which are being shared on social networks and do more of the same. Use a tool like Social Crawlytics to get a sense of what assets being built by your competitors are getting picked up socially and learn from your successes and then work those findings into a content strategy.

Also, in the same way you'll assess the results of a piece of content by looking at how many views it has on YouTube or views on Google Analytics, you should be reporting on the number and quality of social shares. This might not be a report you present to the board but this will be data which you can act upon.

The challenge is not how can I get my content social signals by rather how can I get content that gets social signals.

Kelvin Newman is director of strategy at SiteVisibility.