For the online travel industry
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Innovate in DIGITAL MARKETING

The sheer dominance of Google means many major travel firms spend more marketing funds on the search engine than they make each year in profits.

So, there's long been a desire to find an alternative that can provide competition and drive down costs. The rise of social and mobile promises exactly this as web users move away from accessing web content by using words into a search box.

However, with its Google+ social network and Android mobile platform, Google is not about to let its rivals have everything their own way. But the rise of app-based mobile browsing, bypassing search, has prompted speculation about a post-Google internet age.

Leading global flight comparison site Kayak claims it now spends very little advertising on Google as more and more people come via its mobile channel.

Back in traditional search, changes to the way Google displays and prioritises its search results is causing experts in the field plenty of headaches.

One key fear among the SEO operatives is that Google is prioritising the bigger brands that have the budgets to create the rich content it favours and bid for terms.

A Panda algorithm update on January 17 is suspected to have been more fundamental than Google has admitted.

ason Woodford, chief executive of Brighton-based Sitevisibility, which has a number of large travel clients, said smaller brands are being disproportionately affected.

For the first time following all of Google's updates some of our customers were impacted," he said.

"The online industry is all about innovation. If Google is starting to favour large brands it's going to make it so much more difficult for smaller companies to break through online."

Google's algorithm changes are happening hand in hand with the rise of encrypted search, which GuestCentric said now means up to 40% of traffic comes without any analytics.

It claims this is forcing companies to use paid search for advertising on the search engine to gain access to data that Google once provided for free.

GuestCentric said this trend is being heightened by the implementation of encryption to the Google Chrome browser address bar, following Firefox and Safari.

In a blog post on its site GuestCentric said: "As encrypted search increases, one will increasingly be required to resort to pay for keywords to test the market and somehow establish keyword conversion rates for their website. This will translate into more costs, and more time dedicated to website tuning, as it makes SEO a lot more dependent on trial and error."

Increasingly one alternative option for travel firms could be Google's big rival Facebook, which has set up travel as one of its eight key verticals. Lee McCabe is the social network's first global head of travel. He said travel was a priority because Facebook's tools are proving it can drive return on investment.

He said the ability to target users means innovative firms are putting social media at the heart of marketing, customer service, loyalty, promotions and internal communications.

"Social media will become a part of every website. TripAdvisor is part of that trend, ranking friends' reviews first and OTAs next. It enables you to get to the stage where recommendations are that good, that people do not have to shop around 20 websites.

"Loyalty is more important than ever and social media is a

"LOYALTY IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER AND SOCIAL MEDIA IS A GREAT PLATFORM"

great platform. Social media now touches every one of the five stages of travel: dreaming, planning, booking, sharing and experiencing."

McCabe said the early signs are that Facebook's new Graph Search, currently in beta, will be huge for travel.

This move towards a greater emphasis on content marketing, rather than playing 'beat the Google algorithm' is starting to see travel firms build more in-house expertise in digital marketing.

Woodford said while agencies are having to expand their expertise in creating new forms of rich, shareable content, travel companies are increasingly using them as a sort of outsourced project management.

PLAYING WITH GOOGLE

Meta-search website Skyscanner and digital marketing specialist Kenshoo have achieved some impressive early results since they started working together last year.

Central to the Kenshoo strategy was a 'sandbox' concept that is used for testing keywords – basically a virtual play area in which keywords can be tested.

Skyscanner had a number of key objectives, the main one being increasing traffic while reaching marketing spend limits and return on investment targets.

Secondly, the firm was targeting rapid overseas expansion meaning PPC campaigns had to be easily replicable in new markets.

A process of throwing thousands of terms into the sandbox is repeated every month, except January when turn-of-year campaigns determine what customers search for.

The Kenshoo Portfolio Optimizer (KPO) bid manager automates a process that was traditionally carried out manually by Skyscanner.

The results allowed Skyscanner to determine which terms it should be including in its more structured, more cost-effective exact-match keyword campaigns.

As a result the firm can now direct more marketing funds to expansion into new markets where, initially at least it has to grow brand recognition rather than drive return on investment.

Skyscanner has implemented Kenshoo's technology on 20 of the 50 markets it currently works in. Below are some of the results from two of the 50 markets.

UK RESULTS

(September to November 2012)
28% increase in exact match clicks
20% increase in traffic from non-brand terms
Average CPC rate reduced by 9p

FRANCE RESULTS

(September to November 2012)
25% increase in exact match clicks
20% increase in traffic from non-brand terms
Average CPC rate reduced by 7p

WHAT UPDATES MEANS FOR SEO AGENCIES

JASON WOODFORD, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, SITEVISIBILITY

Any SEO consultant will tell you a year in our industry is never the same. They could argue the same about six months.

Whenever you read the latest about the digital marketing world you'll find the word 'updates' strewn across many of the headlines.

Updates, updates, updates – it's what the search engines are all about.

Google is the game changer as most, if not all, SEO activities are tailored to its requirements.

Algorithm updates have considerable effects on an SEO agency from strategy formulation to the types of technical, analytical and content marketing skills required. All of which means increased delivery costs.

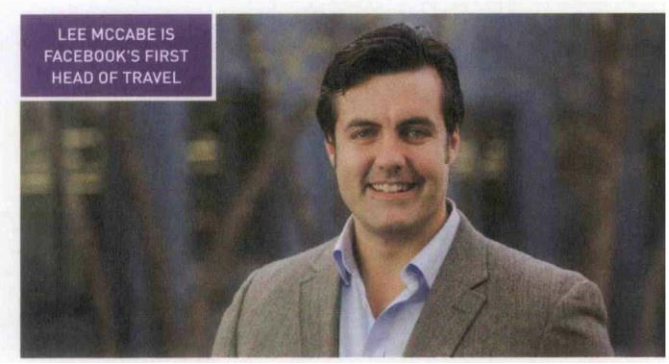
According to SEOmoz the Google Panda refresh this year was the 24th update since its launch in 2011 – an indication as to the number of changes.

Google updates its algorithm to improve the quality of search result. It would be madness not to prioritise those updates that have an impact on rankings.

One could argue the fear of being left behind forces change within an SEO agency, which leads to having to constantly evolve how we work.

The pace and frequency of change now requires significant investment on the part of the SEO agency.

In SiteVisibility's case we estimate we need to commit more than 18% of our time into the analysis, research, development, testing and approval of SEO tactics. Simply put, to capture the ever evolving industry, it's out with the old, in with the new.



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