Press Release

Google: Vampire Effect Draws Millions of Eyes

Scientific Study reveals Google's Methods and Effects
European Union Google Antitrust Case

July 2012 – Everyone knows Google's search engine, and many rely on it every day to find anything they might be looking for. For webmasters too, Google has become vitally important: the vast majority of website visitors surfs to them via the search giant, whose market share in some countries exceeds 95%*.

The online map service hot-map.com wanted to know if everything was above board, when in spite of many top rankings on Google for hot map's city and country maps worldwide, and more people using the web every year, visitor numbers to hot-map.com were on a mysterious decline.

Since Google left the path of only being a search engine to become a provider of its own services and content (YouTube, Google Maps, Google News, Google Weather, Google Finance etc.) webmasters of websites small and large are complaining about being ousted by the big corporation. It is conspicuous that on top of the search result pages Google devotes a lot of prime space to its own services and information in special display formats (such as Google Maps, product price comparison, flights), as well as to ads, before listing the actual search results. This leaves not enough space for other good websites, which are pushed below the page fold, but could have interested the users as well.

Google calls these added features "Universal Search", recently augmented by "Knowledge Graph", and claims its intent is to show consumers the information they are looking for quickly and conveniently. If consumers don't like Google's search engine, company representatives have repetitively stated, "Competition is just one click away". Only that most users have gotten used to searching on Google and don't like to change habits, or Google is simply set as standard search on their devices by default. Also when consumers type only keywords or a brand name into the browser address bar instead of a proper URL, for example just "wikipedia" instead of "www.wikipedia.org", and get redirected to Google without having consciously wanted to go there at that moment. Add to this, that Google powers the search buttons on the largest web portals of other major companies. So webmasters are dependent on the visitor masses, which use the web mostly with Google as their starting point, one way or another.

Enter the Eye-Tracker

Do the enhanced graphical placements of Google's own services have a strong effect in their preferred spaces, or are they just harmless decoration? To bring this to light, the Institute of Communication and Media Research at the German Sport University Cologne sat test persons in front of a futuristic apparatus – the „Eye-Tracker" – which measures precisely how eyes move across a page, what they look at longest and where users click. After some questions and images of a variety of topics were shown to distract and relax them, the scientists asked their human "test subjects" to search for a map, to find out something about a travel destination. Coloured "heat maps" revealed and recorded the views and clicks of the test group for the scientists.

* Source: comScore, March 2012

Within seconds the test persons' eyes rapidly scanned the Google search result page, immediately followed by a click. 80 % were caught by the Google Maps image (installed by Google at the very top of the page) and clicked it. Only twenty percent clicked the top search result, a link to hot-map.com – actually number one – underneath Google's own map image. All other websites got no clicks at all. For comparison, a conventional search result page – a list of ten blue links, no special Google product placements – was tested in the same setting. The top blue link got 80% of views and clicks – so this majority of users would have found hot-map.com or whichever website ranks highest in the search results, rather than the only 20% Google allocates to all its competitors together, when it pre-installs its own product on top.

The Vampire Effect of Google

Media scientists and marketing experts coined the term "vampire effect" for this phenomenon, when an eye catcher draws most of the attention.

The scientists also observed that the illustrated "Universal Search" pages, contrary to Google's claims, do not help people find what they are looking for quicker. The test participants with the simple query "map Houston" needed only 7.69 seconds on average to find and click what they were looking for on the "ten blue links" page, but 16.03 seconds on the "Universal Search" page with Google's graphic product placement.

The Google ads, located laterally to the right were barely given a glance. They probably get more attention and clicks when Google frequently positions them in the middle on top of the search results pages.

hot-map.com CEO Michael Weber said:
„We were surprised how powerful Google's promotion of their own products in form of the inserted Google Maps image on top is in drawing the eyes and nearly all clicks. Our study example is transferable to any kind website, all hoping to be found by visitors: whatever Google places all the way on top will be clicked – the rest is almost ignored. Whenever Google inserts its own products in the best spots, all other websites have to split the small rest of visitors. This concerns many sectors and the whole Internet.

Google claims its own special service products, such as Google Maps, in addition to basic search are simply the best answers to users' questions. Actually they demote all other web services such as hot-map.com. Google's products, although labelled "free" come with a high price for consumers: variety, privacy, and, with endangered media companies, jobs are in danger.“

Europe's Competition Commissioner sets Google an ultimatum

Weber has filed anti-trust charges against Google with authorities in Germany and the European Union, as have other companies and industry associations, such as the German magazine and newspaper publishers.

With success: On May 21st 2012, Joaquín Almunia, Vice-President of the European Commission and Commissioner responsible for competition said that as part of a large-scale investigation he has asked Google, Inc. in a letter to come up in a matter of weeks with first proposals of remedies to each of the areas his agency's investigation has identified as concerns where Google business practices may be considered as abuses of dominance.

 One of those concerns is:
„In its general search results, Google displays links to its own vertical search services differently than it does for links to competitors. We are concerned that this may result in preferential treatment compared to those of competing services, which may be hurt as a consequence"*

On July 2nd 2012 the European Commission, without disclosing details, stated having received a letter from Google Executive Chairman Eric Schmidt responding to the probe. On the same day a Google spokesperson described the letter as a proposal addressing the "areas the European Commission described as potential concerns".

Michael Weber, hot-map.com CEO commented:
„Those in power at Google have hopefully realized, that only together we can fully benefit from the Internet: all consumers along with small, medium and large Internet companies. Even King Google has no benefit in the long run, controlling everything from a lonely throne, with a market share of 95 % plus , when the many, many other quality websites, small and large, perish and the Internet becomes a monotonous desert of Google products and Google ads.

Joaquín Almunia has invited hot-map.com and the other complainants to be associated in the process of remedying Google's abuses of dominance – we are looking forward to contribute constructively."

About hot-map.com

www.hot-map.com is a web service with country and city maps, with free to view interactive maps worldwide, based on real, printed cartographic maps from various publishers small and large. Other websites can obtain licenses to use them within their pages.

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More information at hot-map.com/press :
- This text as an editable file
- Study report in full
- Images of the heat maps and the eye-tracker in high resolution for print or web-optimized
- Background information on the Google anti-trust complaints and investigations
- Interview subjects in English and other languages in various countries

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