



Media Contacts  
**Insight**

# NOW IT'S PERSONAL

*From Discovery to Trust*

December 2011

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## Executive Summary

This white paper discusses the evolution of Google into a socially focused search engine, aiming to achieve their goal of providing personalized results which are influenced by a user's social network. The impact of this personalization has the potential to mix up the search space by changing the way consumers interact in today's plugged-in world.

**The search landscape has evolved over the last ten years and has provided us with greater insights into the consumer and the ways that they interact with Search Engines.** Over the last five years Google has been pushing personalized results and, with the explosion of social, Google has been forced to adapt their core algorithms to incorporate this never before seen level of social interaction. This move initially saw Google looking at the social signals from the key social networks, but earlier this year, Google had to take the fight to likes of Facebook and Twitter by launching its own social network (Google+) and a sharing button (Google +1).

*The impact of this personalization has the potential to mix up the search space by changing the way consumers interact in today's plugged-in world*

Google+ aims to make sharing on the web more like sharing in real life. Essentially, this is Google's invention to tap into the social space by evolving the way we socialise online with the +1 button and other features like Circles, Hangout, Huddle and many others that its competitors lack. Google is serious about making a move in this space and, as such, is pushing Google+ hard. Since the public launch of its social network, the user base has grown rapidly, now with over 40 million users and continuing to grow. This rate of growth makes Google+ the fastest growing social network to date.

**Google+ is without doubt a game changer and has the potential to revolutionize the search space;** however, to do this, it first has to build upon its 40 million+ users and move towards mass market adoption. On the path to mass adoption, trust and influence will be the two major factors at play in the new search engine results, and it is these factors, along with the success of the platform, which could force the relationship between search and social to become closer than ever.

# 1. History of Personalized Search

**Personalized Search first launched as part of Google Labs in June 2005** and at launch was an opt-in service. Since 2005 Personalized Search has been through much iteration designed to both enhance the level of personalization and to increase the user base. Key phases included:

- 2005 | My Search History is launched in Google Labs
- 2005 | Personalized Search is launched in Google Labs
- 2007 | Anyone signing up for a Google account will automatically have search history and Personalized Search enabled
- 2007 | Google Search History expands and re-brands as Web History
- 2009 | Personalized Search changed to be an opt-out feature
- 2011 | Google launches 'News for you' (a layer of personalization added to the News results)
- 2011 | Google+ launches and adds a social layer to personalized results

The idea behind Personalized Search was always **to provide users with a more relevant set of results based upon their individual search history**. Social data was seen as a way to further refine search results by altering them based upon the data shared by your 'friends' within their social networks.

However, there was still a huge hurdle to overcome as you needed to be signed in to Google, and only a tiny fraction of users were. To overcome this, Google made Personalized Search opt-out with the social interaction layer still requiring sign-in. Needless to say, this was less than ideal due to the small percentage of users actually signing in.

Today, when signed in to Google, social plays a key part in personalized results. With **Google+ and the +1 button**, you are now able to see the total number of +1s for each search result and which of your friends +1ed the website. This is illustrated in the image below:



This enhanced level of personalization which incorporates social activity adds **another interesting and vitally important layer into the mix: trust**. Seeing that your friends have endorsed a website via the use Google +1 button will most likely have a big impact on which result a user clicks on and, in all likelihood, this addition will mix up the click-through rates for each result and reduce the dominance of a position one ranking.

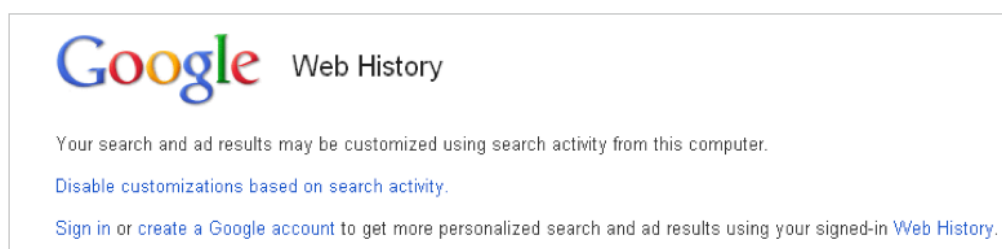
### *The signed-in dilemma*

Google has long been vying to tailor the search results to a user based on their search behaviour – i.e. the sites they visit and the influence from their social circles. However, to implement this, Google needs to track your search history and integrate with your social networks.

For a long time, a prerequisite of Personalized Search was that you needed to be signed in to Google and this was a problem as, pre-Google+, roughly only 25% of users actually signed in.

#### **This promoted a move to two levels of personalization:**

- **Level 1:** all users now see personalized results based purely on their search history –regardless of whether they are signed in or not. Personalized results are only based on your search history for the last 90 days. Social factors are not taken into account for non signed in users. It is possible to opt-out of this via an option in the web history preferences:



- **Level 2:** full personalization based on a users search history and influence from a user's social networks. This is the ultimate goal for Google, but requires users to be signed in.

So why not kill two birds with one stone? Google's determination to succeed with their own social network was also the solution to increasing the number of signed in users as, to use Google+, you have to be signed in.

With the recent public launch of Google+, usage figures have begun to soar; a trend that is likely to continue. This trend will result in a vast increase in the number of users signed in to Google and, indeed, users who receive fully personalized results.

Whilst the launch of Google+ was primarily focused on building a social network to rival the likes of Facebook and Twitter, the resulting impact of increasing the number of signed in users certainly goes a long way to helping achieve the 6 year project of providing truly Personalized Search results.

Looking to the future, **building a large user base of signed in users could lead to further developments in the search and analytics space.** One such development could potentially be to provide a partial solution to cross device tracking and attribution.

*This enhanced level of personalization which incorporates social activity adds another interesting and vitally important layer into the mix: trust*

## 2. Social influence with Google+

Google+ was created to make it easier for people to share content online with friends, colleagues and family. Within the social network there are different ways to share content and information with various people – by creating circles, joining hangouts, uploading pictures and choosing who to share it with and receiving recommendations from Sparks based on your personal interest.

Google+ also has a feature that turns multiple conversations into one communication hub, so everyone can participate in the conversation, in one centralised environment.

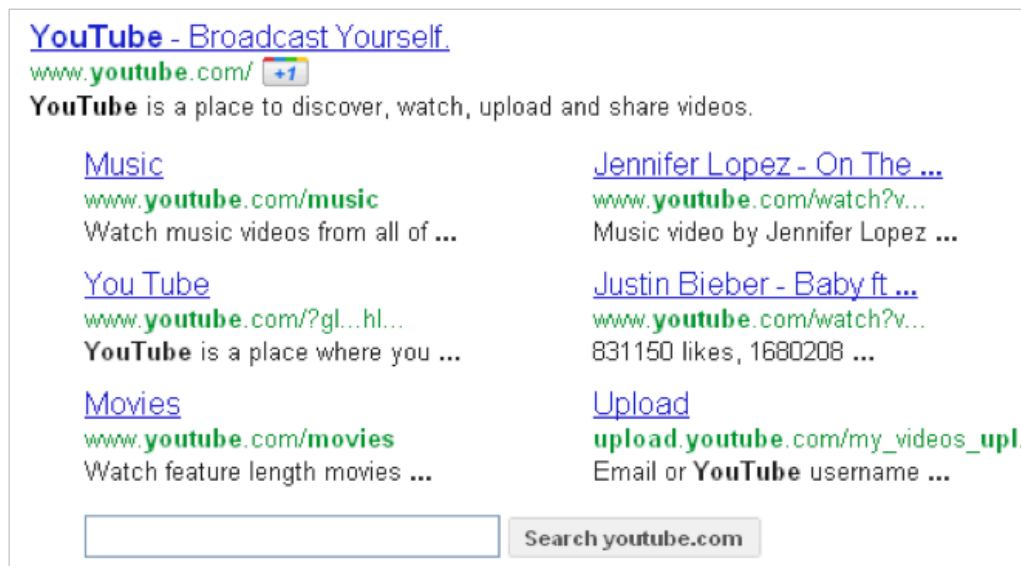
However, from a search perspective, with Google+, **Google has the ability to build up social graph for every user.** They will know which other social networks a user is on and their profile name for each network, the people in their circles that influences them the most, and the content that they share. When this data is linked to your search results, Google has the ability to tailor the results in a data driven fashion and be certain that they are improving the search experience by providing each user with a unique set of results that will be more relevant than the standard non personalized results.

## +1 button

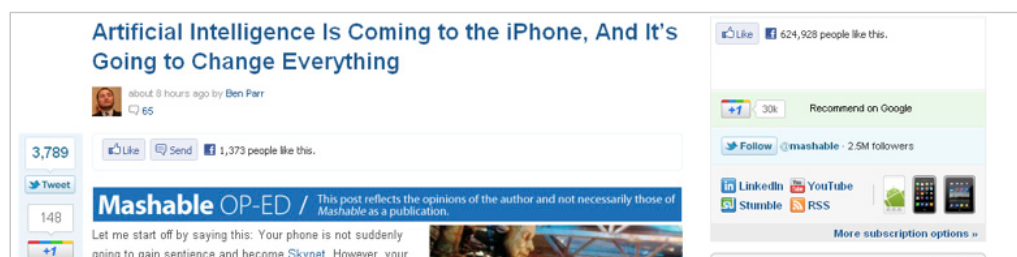
The Google +1 Button is an endorsement or stamp of approval that allows you to share recommended content, websites and information with friends, family and contacts. When your friends search on Google, they can see your recommendations which will help them find the most relevant and interesting information on the web.

### There are two elements to the +1 button:

- The first is the button you see in the Google results as shown below. In this format the +1 button allows users to directly +1 a webpage from the Google results, which is slightly odd as it implies that users would +1 a site they are yet to visit.



- The second side to the +1 button is '+1 for websites'. In this format you are able to add a +1 button to a website as you would a Facebook Like button or Tweet button. The image below illustrates the implementation of the +1 button on Mashable.com.



Conversations can also be shared in the Google+ network, to get conversations going about products, services or any other recommended information through your trusted circle of friends.

Recently, **SEOMoz undertook some testing on the impact of the Google +1 button and other social signals on rankings**. The results of the tests concluded that the +1 button and other social factors, in addition to a strong technical architecture, strong on-site optimisation and quality inbound links, are playing an influential role in Google's algorithm as one of the factors for ranking a site in the Search Engine Result Pages (SERPs) for various keywords.

### 3. Getting personal

Whether you realize it or not, search results have been personalized for quite some time now and only if you opt-out will you stop seeing these results. However, as mentioned in an earlier section, the ultimate goal here is to provide personalized results that incorporate social signals from your social circles. **The goal of providing personalized and socially influenced results requires two things:**

1. **The success of Google+**
2. **Users to sign in to Google**

Google is focused on ensuring that Google+ is a success; at every level of the company there is a concerted effort to push the product and integrate aspects of it with other products in the Google family. Until mid-September, access to Google+ was on an invite only basis, but now it is open to everyone and this – in conjunction with the subtle marketing activity (illustrated below) – will ensure the user base of the platform grows rapidly.



With the rise in Google+ users (currently estimated at 40 million and growing) comes with it a rise in signed in users, which has been the overarching goal since Google first launched Personalized Search as a labs product back in 2005.

**The big question is: why is all this important?** The answer is simple. When a user is signed in, Google can apply its full range of personalization to the results. This helps to deliver their overarching goal of providing a better user experience by serving users results that are tailored specifically to them and that integrate social 'trust' signals from social circles.

Whilst it's still early days for Google+ and their new signed-in user base, we're starting to see the effects across our clients with an increase in referrals from results pages that have been personalized. This indicates that results are becoming ever more varied from user to user – based on a combination of the sites they have previously visited, the activity of your social circles (now cleverly tied into Google+), and the real-time data gathered from the +1 button.

Another aspect to the Google+ and signed-in user combination is that click-through rates for each ranking position now begin to widely vary as Google plays the trust card by showing who, from your social circles, has recommended a site or web page via the +1 button. You'll start to notice results similar to the screenshot below, where you can easily be influenced as to which results to click based on who in your social circles +1'd or shared that article.

► [The Google+ project: real life sharing, rethought for the web.](#)

<https://plus.google.com/> - Cached

The **Google+** project aims to make sharing on the web more like sharing in real life. Check out Circles, Sparks, and Hangouts, just a few of the things we've ...

Bas van den Beld, Andrew Harris, Lisa Myers and one other person +1'd this

[The Google+ Project](#)

[www.google.com/+/learnmore/](http://www.google.com/+/learnmore/) - Cached

The **Google+** project makes sharing online more like sharing in real life.

[The Google+ Project](#)

[www.google.com/intl/en/+demo/](http://www.google.com/intl/en/+demo/) - Cached

The **Google+** project makes sharing online more like sharing in real life. Take the interactive tour for a quick look at five of the first key features.

Dan Siroker +1'd this

[Official Google Blog: Introducing the Google+ project: Real-life ...](#)

[googleblog.blogspot.com/.../introducing-google-project-real-life.ht...](http://googleblog.blogspot.com/.../introducing-google-project-real-life.ht...) - Cached

28 Jun 2011 – Introduction and explanation of **Google+** functionality on the official **Google** Blog.

Matt Cutts (googleblog on blogspot.com) shared this

## Circles at the heart

One of the key features of Google+ is 'Circles', its system for managing your network of friends. It has been made clear right from the top of Google that the Circles functionality is going to play a key part across Google products. As eluded to in a recent interview on Wired, Google+ will integrate with all the Google products:

"But Google+ is Google itself. We're extending it across all that we do—search, ads, Chrome, Android, Maps, YouTube—so that each of those services contributes to our understanding of who you are."

At the heart of this integration are the people you share with; your friends or Circles. This wider plan to integrate Google+ across all aspects of Google suggests that social will play an even greater role in Google's algorithm.

This complete integration may be some way off, but it sends a clear message about how important Google+ and social is to Google.

The social landscape is currently a battle ground, with the likes of Facebook, Twitter and Google competing against each other for market share. Whilst Facebook remains a long way ahead of Google+ in terms of users, Google+ is growing fast and, arguably, Google has more at stake in this battle as it needs to make its social offering work in order to evolve its core search product.

*This complete integration may be some way off, but it sends a clear message about how important Google+ and social is to Google*

## 4. Trust me

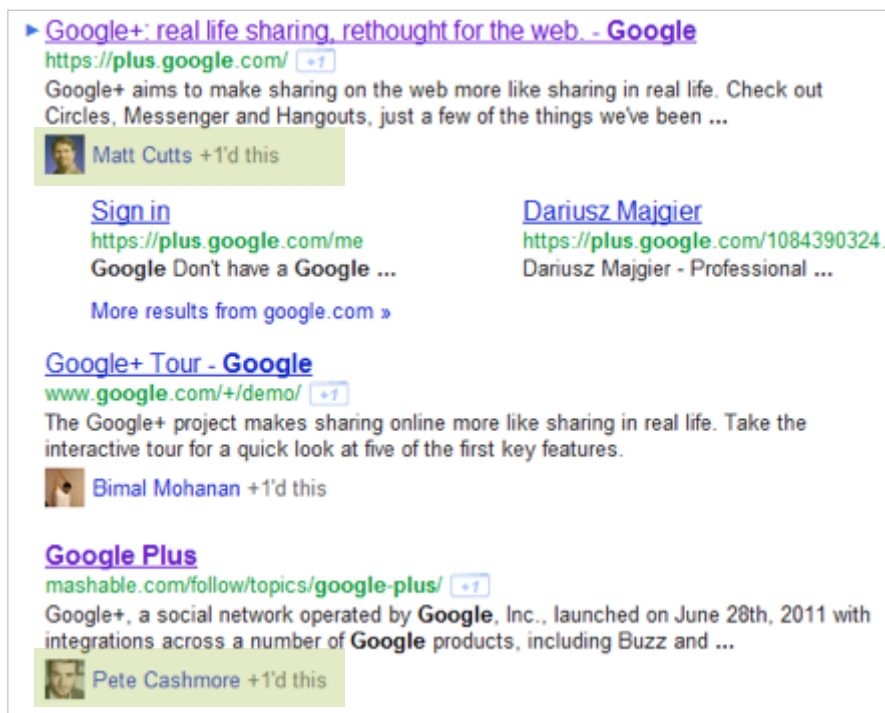
Google's organic and paid search results have historically been ranked quantitatively through algorithms, keyword bids, and quality ratings. There has been little intervention from people to decide on rankings and positions on both paid and organic search. With the rise of people, and socially dominated sites like Facebook and Twitter, Google realized that search needs to get more social and incorporate trust factors.

**At present, you may optimise paid search ads and organic listings based click through rate (CTR) through tailoring the message you provide.** CTR is

the relationship between how many times your ad has been shown and the times it has been clicked. It is one of the many factors that determine paid search ad position and to a lesser extent organic ranking in the SERPs. With the launch of Google+ CTR is about to be redefined with a social touch.

In the past, when searching for any keyword, the trigger would be the relevancy to the query searched for. However, with +1, the potential new social trigger for clicking a sponsored ad or organic result would be your friends. When I search for "Google Plus One", there are users from my circles on Google+ who have +1'd the results. This endorsement or vote of confidence adds a trust factor, which increases my intentions to click the result. There can be no better recommendation than one from somebody you know and trust.

The benefits site owners may gain from this new button are therefore likely to be huge and reduce the dominance of the position one ranking. In addition to this there is the very real possibility that in non price sensitive sectors the purchase funnel will shorten as users are selecting the sites they visit with the aid of endorsements.



**This is essentially word of mouth digitalised on Google with +1.** Google claims that Google+ aims to make sharing on the web more like sharing in real life. With the increased user base, Google+ is likely to have an impact on CTR for your Google advertising campaigns and SERPs. This impact will be positive

as searches will be +1ing content, Google results and paid ads all over the web under Google's umbrella.

Google is the top most visited website globally and this social adoption will have a tremendous impact - not only on the look and feel of the SERPS, but also on how users interact with Google and social media. The user experience that Google offers is strongly tied to the quality of results that it returns and there is no better way to improve user experience than adding the recommendations from your friends - the people you place a huge amount of trust in.

*The benefits site owners may gain from this new button are therefore likely to be huge and reduce the dominance of the position one ranking*

## 5. Impact on Paid Search

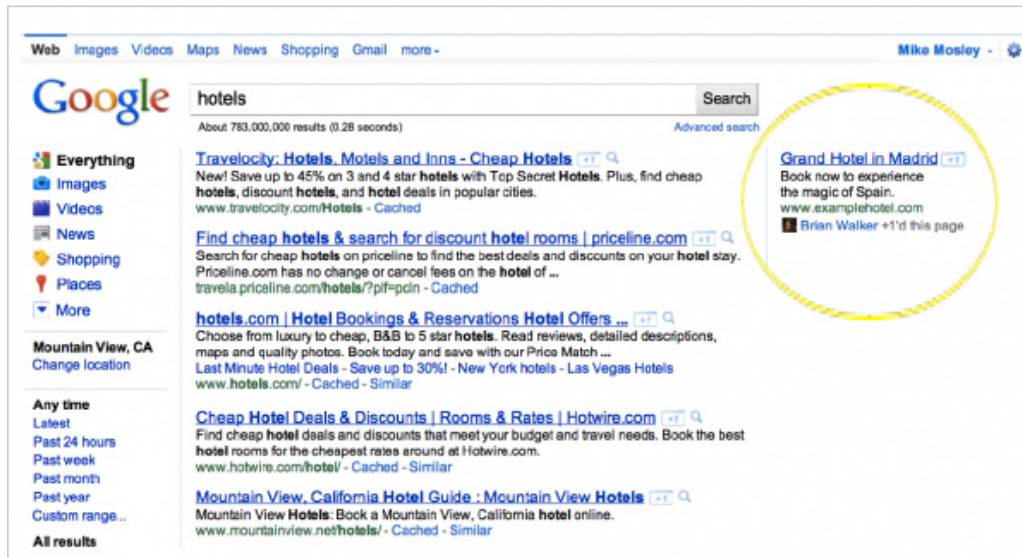
Personalized results and Google+ aren't just about the organic results; they will have just as much impact on the paid advertising side of Google.

Paid search works because it delivers relevant ads based on the user search query and captures the current demand and, as a result, generates increased revenue for advertisers. Paid search advertising campaigns are usually optimized based on performance, typically metrics like ROI, CPA, and sales volume; whereas the ad copy is optimized towards CTR and the conversion rate.

Google+ brings a plethora of opportunities within paid search. It creates a connection between search and social by centralising what users do and where they spend their time online.

### **+1 impact on CTR**

Social connections influence what we do in our lives, from buying to sharing to searching. Searching is one of the most popular activities that we undertake on daily basis. Google+ allows users to influence paid search ads through +1 and, as a result, this will have a direct impact on which ads users will click. This impact is expected to be positive as you are more likely to click something if someone you know recommends it; however, at the same time, this will reduce the dominance of the position one paid listing.



## Ad delivery based on behavioural targeting

As mentioned previously, with Google+, **the targeting options are expected to evolve based on audience**. This allows targeting opportunities within paid search advertising campaigns to serve the right message to the right audience at the right time. This will result in increased relevancy and will potentially feed in to quality score indirectly.

Once Google releases +1 analytics data in Adwords, advertisers will be able to optimise based on influence metrics. Furthermore, there is potential for Google to offer enhanced targeting options in Adwords based on 'Friends' and 'Look-a-Likes' options. This will certainly progress the search industry and add advanced functionality on how advertisers optimise ad campaigns.

## New formats on Adwords for Google+

Google+ presents opportunities for Google **to invent new social formats like Facebook's ASU ad units, sponsored stories etc**. These formats can integrate both text and visual elements of an ad to enhance the user experience. If Google chooses to go down the route of monetising Google+ (which is no-doubt a long term aim), it has the potential to display interactive ad units within the Google+ environment that can be managed from Adwords on auction basis.

This is, again, an enormous opportunity for paid search marketers as it poses further prospects within Adwords on how we deliver the message through the platform to gain relevant audience.

## 6. Measurement

There are a vast range of tools and solutions that measure tweets, Facebook likes, recommendations and other social interactions. **One of the best ways to measure the impact of social interactions is by reviewing your site analytics platform.** Free analytics platforms and tools like Google Analytics and Google Webmaster Tools have a "+1 Metrics" section, which provides reports on the impact of the +1 button on search, click-through rate with +1, click-through rate without +1, +1s per page, and geographic and demographic data about users that have +1'd your website's content.

There is also a **social plug-in for Google Analytics** that allows you to see the impact of different social media signals such as Tweets, Facebook Likes and shares and other social interactions. By drilling down in the reports, you can track metrics like time on site, page views, bounce rate and actions. It is also possible to compare web pages based upon the number of social actions they are receiving. This insight is invaluable as it allows you to identify your most socially active pages.

**Social campaigns can also be measured with SEO insight platforms like BrightEdge, Covario, or SearchMetrics.** All three platforms have intuitive tools that monitor and compare social activity, in addition to providing insight, which can help to improve your social media campaign. There are a number of web based tools like Socialscan.com that monitor link popularity from the most important social networks. However, they do not provide as much detail information as web analytics or SEO insight platform.

Another way to measure the impact of social media is **by keeping a timeline of when you promoted your webpages before social interactions and after social interactions.** This will allow you to gauge the impact of social media's effect on traffic and rankings and find out if your social media campaigns had a positive effect on your PPC or SEO efforts.

*One of the best ways to measure the impact of social interactions is by reviewing your site analytics platform*

## 7. An integrated future

Social is becoming an **ever more integral aspect of Google's algorithms** and, when you combine this with the social elements of Personalized Search, you absolutely have to stop thinking about search in a silo.

The key to this integrated approach is socially focussed content. However, as the lines between search and social blur it is becoming ever more difficult to define social content and its role. Is it to engage the user, it is to gain a social share or is it to drive links? Ultimately it should be all three.

A socially focussed content strategy should be at the heart of the integration, and the target audience should be at the heart of the content strategy to ensure that the right audience are being targeted and are interacting with the content. **There are a wealth of content formats and tactics available that will tie search and social together through social sharing and link building, including:**

- Blogger outreach
- Guest posting
- Online PR
- Infographics
- YouTube videos
- Competitions
- Engaging advertising creative

Successfully crafting engaging content across a variety of formats forms a big part of a successful strategy, however the key lies in finding the right mix of sites to publish the content. It is vital that selected sites have a user base that embrace social and social sharing. Having great content that sits on socially inactive sites just won't cut it.

If you continue to approach search in a silo, campaign performance will suffer in the short term through missing out on the opportunities that other channels present, a lack of social endorsement with the SERPS and, ultimately, through a disjointed approach. In the longer term the impact will be significantly greater as older optimisation tactics will become less effective which will negatively impact campaign performance and you will end up playing catch-up to competition.

**At Media Contacts, we recognised this trend early** and, for the last few years, we have been focused on providing fully integrated search campaigns that tightly integrate social, online PR, display, communication strategy and offline media. This innovative approach was recognised in early 2011 when our UK SEO team became the first SEO team to win the Revolution award for the Best use of Search for their work in the Social SEO space.

So, what does this actually mean for your business? In essence, it is quite simple: ensure all channels (especially social and SEO and PPC) are working together. This approach will not only ensure that your search and social campaigns are as future proof as they can be, but you will see improvements in the performance of the site.

*The key to this integrated approach is socially focussed content. However, as the lines between search and social blur it is becoming ever more difficult to define social content and its role*

## Summary

The search landscape has changed dramatically over the past 10 years as Personalized Search and Social Media have played an increasingly influential role in Google's algorithm. This combination has the potential to revolutionize the way we interact with search and social as consumers. **We believe trust and influence will, in the future, play a major role in how users interact online.** Google+, in effect, allows you to +1 any content, site and search results online – indicating your recommendation to your social 'Circles' on Google+. This is digitalisation of word of mouth; one of the most influenced forms of marketing.

This move towards trust and influence will in some cases lead to a compressed purchase funnel as users arrive at a website with fewer concerns about the customer experience and reliability of the company and as such there should be a reduction in the number of people leaving the site to look at reviews. There will still be a number of instances where the purchase funnel won't be shorted as users are purely focussed on finding the best price.

Personalization and Social Search will continue to have an impact on paid and organic search as the Search Engines continue to incorporate social interactions into the SERPs and look for ways to further integrate online social 'conversations' into their results. Currently, Google are leading the way in incorporating trust metrics into their results, but you can be fairly certain that others will up their game as, ultimately, users are interested in endorsements from trusted friends who recommend content in today's connected world.

**The future is integrated and integration is the future.** Incorporating social media into your search strategy can ensure that your search and social campaigns continue to perform well in the organic and paid search result pages, in addition to attracting more endorsements, traffic and increasing brand awareness. One thing we can be certain of is that this space won't stand still; evolution will be fast and continuous. However, we can be sure that personalization will be the key in delivering the right message to the right audience.

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