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New MSN Search May Be a Google Killer!

By Mike Banks Valentine

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The Second Look at MSN's Search technology is available for public beta testing. I've given it a spin myself and must say that I'm impressed. Although they have no ads on the SERP's of the preview site, I'm sure they will load it up with the 15 or more Overture "sponsored sites" which clutter the results pages on the current search results by the time the new public beta reaches its official launch. Take a look for yourself:
<http://techpreview.search.msn.com/>

I've publicly complained about the lack of click-through traffic of top ranked sites from both Yahoo and MSN search http://searchengineoptimism.com/Google_refers_70_percent.html Even though most of my web sites and those of clients are very highly ranked in all three search engines, Yahoo and MSN send less than one quarter of all search traffic to any of those sites. Google sends the rest – over 75% of search traffic referred comes from searches originating on Google's English speaking sites in the UK, Australia, Canada, etc.

Is that because nobody can see past the PPC ads (Overture Sponsor Ads) on MSN search? No, the "Sponsored Sites" aren't THAT dominant on the SERP. Is it because only one fourth the number of people search at MSN and Yahoo? No, it can't be explained that way either. Who knows? Maybe those who search at MSN and Yahoo simply want to search without bothering to visit those top ranked sites? Could it be that the blue color and the "Sponsored Sites" label actually dissuades people from dropping down to the organic results or those sponsored links

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are more clicked at MSN than at Google? I just don't know.

If the test I ran today proves to be a reflection of where they are going with their new search technology though, I'll be nothing short of ecstatic on public unveiling of the "New" MSN search. As a matter of fact, I may be about to fall in love with MSN search.

In this test, I did some searches for several terms I am targeting for myself as well as several other phrases I'm targeting for SEO clients. ALL of those searches rank our sites in the first page or two at all three of the top tier

search engines. The search I've emphasized here in this test though, was for the phrase "Domain Name Tutorial" at: http://www.website101.com/Domain_Name/

I chose that phrase because, inexplicably, it doesn't rank well for me at the current official MSN search and may prove to be a perfect example of the difference between the new and old versions on public launch of MSN search later this year or early in 2005.

Google ranks our domain name tutorial at #1 in results, the current "official" MSN search ranks it somewhere in sludge of all castoff sites. In other words, I couldn't find it in the first 200 results at the current "official" MSN search and wasn't in the mood to click through any more results pages to find it.

A search for Domain Name Tutorial at the public beta of MSN search ranks it at #1 as does Google, but Google delivers a full 90% of all search engine referred traffic to that Tutorial.

I use a web traffic statistics service to monitor my web stats and the report I spend the most time pouring over a couple of times a week is the "Search Phrase" report, which shows what search phrase brought the click-through to my site from the search engines.

The current MSN search shows visitors in ones and twos for several of my top ranking search phrases, while Google sends hundreds per day on several of those searches. If MSN made the beta search site official, would we see any higher traffic

numbers from them? That question has got dozens of webmasters speculating in the forums about what they can expect from MSN when they go live with their new technology in the near future. <http://www.webmasterworld.com/forum97/190.htm>

I'll be very happy if my test results do reflect where MSN is headed, since it's hard to beat number one for those search phrases I tested today! This test leads me to believe that MSN is emphasizing directory and filenames that include keywords and are weighing inbound links pretty heavily. Page structure, title tags and text links also appear to be weighted substantially in their new algorithm.

Yahoo currently shows two "Sponsor Results" offset in blue, at the top of the SERP's when you've done a search for anything that has PPC bids at Overture, as does Google with Adwords ads. (Yahoo adds three more at bottom of the page and Google none).

MSN shows three PPC ads labeled "Sponsored Sites" offset in a very pale green at the top of the SERP's and one at the bottom of the page following organic search results. Will MSN continue showing more ads than everyone else and, consequently lower organic search click-throughs?

All I can do at this point is to cheer MSN on and hope they continue on their current path as demonstrated at the beta site. It will make everyone (webmasters relying on organic search) happier if MSN starts sending more search traffic to their sites, rather than to the "Sponsored Sites." Conversely, Overture advertisers may start wondering where their PPC traffic has gone. Maybe then those heavy PPC players will start to see the value in organic SEO, you never know.

Maybe MSN is toying with their very own PPC program . . .

Mike Banks Valentine practices Search Engine Optimism at: <http://SEOptimism.com> and operates a search engine blog where you can read this article with active links to web resources <http://RealitySEO.com/2004/10/msn-search-technology-preview.html>

Google Slavery...Old Habits Die Hard

By Kirk Bannerman

For the first few months after Yahoo decided to go their own way with natural search (and MSN

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decided to get serious about the search business), the search results provided by those two could only be described as bizarre. Enough time has now passed that the dust has somewhat settled and there are three main (from a traffic standpoint) sites for quality natural searches.

The term "natural search" is to distinguish true searches, as opposed to paid advertisements which appear in the search results for many search engines these days. I guess you can't really fault the search engine companies from wanting to make some money (actually, BIG money) selling ad space, but the debate over the virtues of natural search versus paid advertising search is something that could take up a very large book and still have no clear resolution...much like arguments revolving around religion or politics.

Like most people that have been working as online home business entrepreneurs for a few years, I was strongly conditioned to the need to "feed the 800 pound gorilla" of the search engine world. Basically, "if Google didn't love you", it was very difficult to get any meaningful natural search traffic to your website. Since Google was actually the search engine that was serving up the results for most of the popular search portals, if Google didn't look kindly upon your site and rank you well, you would not be ranked well for most of the high traffic search sites on the Internet.

However, the search landscape changed dramatically early in 2004 and things have been very fluid and interesting since that time. Its not that Google has stumbled, or become ineffective as a search vehicle, its just that major players like Yahoo and Microsoft (via MSN) have decided to make a major thrust into the search business.

Having been firmly conditioned (since shortly after 1998) that Google was the "supreme deity of search engines", I took the highly publicized search entries of Yahoo and MSN with more than the proverbial "grain of salt".

Throughout a very recent two month period, one of my websites occupied the #5 position on Google, Yahoo, and MSN for a very popular and important (at least in my line of business) three word search term. This situation provided an opportunity to measure the current popularity of each of these three search providers.

If asked "before the fact", I would have guessed that Google would still be the overwhelming #1 search choice and that Yahoo and MSN would be distant #2 and #3 choices. Therefore, I was somewhat surprised by the results that were tabulated during this recent 60 day period.

For the period in question, the search popularity results were as follows: Google: 34% Yahoo: 31% MSN: 20% All others: 15%

Granted, the above results are for a single search term over a particular 60 day time period, but the

results clearly show that Yahoo and MSN are already important players in the search business.

Webmasters that stick to the old ways and focus entirely on Google are missing out on a lot of search traffic these days if they are not also well ranked by Yahoo and MSN.

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Kirk Bannerman operates a successful home based business and coaches others seeking to start their own home based business. Visit his website at

for more details.

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