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## Search Engine Optimization – the rules are changing

Organic search engine optimization, until recently, had been a fairly straightforward endeavor. The goal was to optimize the content on a website so that it would show up in the organic results on one or more of the major search engines – results that were comprised of nothing but other websites. However, in the middle of May 2007, Google began rolling out its new “Universal Search,” something it had been working on behind the scenes for several years. This new search option may have long-term repercussions for every search engine optimization company in the industry if it is something that is preferred by the public at large and if it becomes the standard going forward.

### What is Universal Search?

Someone using Google’s Universal Search will find that a query brings back results that encompass not only web pages, but also videos, blogs, images, news articles, and other media available online. While Google already had in place options for searching each of these areas individually, many searchers did not notice those options or did not know how to use them, a phenomenon that became known as “invisible tabs.”

With Universal Search, there’s no need to select a separate menu item – the search will return results that encompass many different types of media. For example, a search for “breakdancing” might bring up not only web pages about breakdancing, but also blog posts about it, videos showing technique, and news articles about it. It would not, however, give you the reason why you were wearing parachute pants and trapped in the eighties.

However, Universal Search hasn’t been rolled out fully yet. Currently, certain terms will give Universal results, while other searches will remain the same as before. This is a classic Google move – roll something out gradually, see how it plays in the public eye, and then decide what to do from there. Basically, Universal Search as it exists right now is very likely to change, depending on user feedback.

And if the limited queries that now return Universal Search results do not garner positive responses, it’s likely that Google will revert to its previous, webpage predominated results. They obviously don’t want to lose market share, and they already learned a valuable lesson not long ago when they released a new algorithm that was poorly received and which was subsequently dialed back.

### What are the Benefits of Universal Search?

Universal Search brings several benefits to searchers. A searcher no longer has to specify the media he or she is looking for – one keyphrase search will cover everything. And the results from a search will be more comprehensive in many instances, giving a wellrounded picture to the searcher that may include better information than would previously have been found in a search of just one type of media.

### What are the Drawbacks of Universal Search?

The problem with Universal Search is that it can muddy the results, and it can also introduce irrelevant results that a searcher cannot use. A search for “Paris Hilton” (ever heard of her?) will bring up news, videos, and other information about the heiress. But it will also bring up a map of the city of Paris showing locations of Hilton hotels, something most searchers that typed that exact phrase probably did not have in mind. Plus, 28% of Internet users are still using slow dialup connections<sup>1</sup>, according to RVA Market Research.

Many of these people are likely not interested in videos or other results that require much bandwidth, and such users may turn away from Universal Search entirely – there are, after all, other search engines. No, really – there are.

In addition, there is no way to turn off Universal Search; as it exists right now, it is part of the standard “Web” search, eliminating the ability to simply search web pages and introducing a new wrinkle in search engine optimization efforts. Now, a website is competing not only with other websites, but also with all the other media that will be included in the results that an average searcher sees.



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And Universal Search makes it difficult for Google itself to determine the relevance between different types of media, since the factors that determine a web page's relevance are much different than those that would determine a video's relevance, for example.

### What Can You Do Now to Make Sure Your Site Is Ready to be Found in a Universal Search?

Clearly, Universal Search will change how an SEO campaign is run if it catches on. But this is a real if - users' search habits are hard to change overnight, even if you are Google and you essentially define what searching is and how it works. If it does catch on, you'll need to analyze the industry you are in and figure out which types of media might be most important for you.

For example, if you are a real estate firm, images of the buildings and homes you are selling might become a very important part of your site, and so you will want to focus on adding alt tags to each image so that not only does your site show up for certain keyphrases, but your images do as well. If you are a business services firm, you instead might want to focus on news items produced by your company - press releases and white papers - and make sure that those are available to search engine spiders and optimized for critical phrases.

If you are working with an outside search engine optimization company already, now is the time to ask what they plan to do in regard to Universal Search. Your search engine optimization company should at least have an awareness of the magnitude of this new way to search on Google and should be able to present you with some sort of plan of attack, even if they plan to wait to embark upon the plan until they know for sure that Universal Search is going to catch on. If you are looking into hiring an outside search engine optimization company to launch a new campaign, the same holds true - ask your contacts at the firm how they are planning to handle Universal Search. They should at least be familiar with the concept and have a general outline to present to you.

### Conclusion

If you thought that it was just Google that was working on what it calls Universal Search, think again. Yahoo, MSN, and Ask, as well as several minor search engines such as A9, are all working on their own versions of a universal search that will display different media types. These versions are currently still in the testing phase, but they could be rolled out at any time. What all this means for you and your search engine optimization company is that the face of SEO will be changing dramatically over the next several months - or it won't. Only time will tell.

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