



Would You Trust a Free Taxi?

According to Google's latest annual 10-K filing, more than 85% of its revenue comes from advertising—which is actually listed as a risk factor. Add to that the fact that you can't escape from Google's relevance-ranking filter bubble and the recently surfaced problem of fake local business listings in Google Maps (is.gd/N2SQBG), and I have started re-evaluating how I think—and talk—about Google.

Part of the job of an info pro has always been to build information literacy among our clients, users, and patrons. We've spent years explaining what can and can't be found through the web, what social media can be used for, and when to rely on the professional online services. Info pros often encounter the Lake Wobegon effect, though. Just as all children in Garrison Keillor's fictional hometown are above average, so everyone believes that they are above-average searchers. They get good-enough results whenever they're looking for the closest dry cleaner or the latest news, so most users have come to the mistaken belief that Google is actually evaluating the content in the search results page and showing the most reliable information first.

Breaking through that complacency is a challenge, but I recently landed on an analogy for Google's search results that may more effectively convey the problems to our clients and patrons. Here it is: Imagine a taxi company that offers rides anywhere you want to go. They're practically ubiquitous, and a luxurious self-driving vehicle can be summoned on a moment's notice. And did I mention that it's free? How do they do it?

Then imagine that this cab company is owned and operated by a chain of restaurants, and regardless of where you wanted to be taken, you would always wind up driving by one of its restaurants first. It's a great service as long as you understand that, if you climb into the cab and say, "What's a good place for seafood around here?" you will get taken to one of the taxi owner's restaurants.

Just as the convenience of a free ride might be worth the detour by Sam's Seafood Emporium, so a general-purpose search engine designed to sell ads by providing a great search experience will be fine if you're just looking for the latest sports scores, a how-to video, or a quick answer to a question. But we info pros need to remind our clients and patrons that Google is calibrated to handle *average* search queries well.

In fact, an increasing number of Google queries are answered without the searcher doing anything beyond ask-

ing the question. Type a query like "restaurants near me" or "cheap flights to hawaii" and you'll see a featured snippet or instant answer at the top of the search results. Speak the query to Google and she (and why do virtual assistants always default to a female voice?) will read you the first answer. If a particular webpage isn't in the top five search results, most users will never see it. As it is, we info pros have to remember to go to the third or fourth page of results to get past the most-SEO-optimized pages. (Read the Search Engine Land write-up of a recent survey at is.gd/Wt8wml to see how many users click no more than one or two results, how many merely skim the snippets for the answer, and weep.) The increase in these so-called zero-click results means that search results will become even more skewed for the simplest match rather than the most relevant content.

Related to this, Google recently updated the guidelines its analysts use to evaluate search results for relevance. This is important, as these ratings affect Google's search algorithm. The 166-page Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines (is.gd/sVGjJK) discusses how to gauge E-A-T (Expertise, Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness), an important factor in evaluating a page's quality. While content with a high E-A-T rating is an admirable goal, Google's example of a high E-A-T page is that of Visa credit cards. Perhaps a page within visa.com would be useful if you wanted to know specifically about Visa's products and services, but as an info pro, I always look at a corporate website with the assumption that it will be a less-than-impartial source of information, so I would prefer a neutral third-party source. Google's assignment of authority to well-known consumer brands may be appropriate for some searches, but it hinders the ability of researchers to find more in-depth content.

While Google (and my theoretical restaurant-sponsored free taxi service) is great most of the time, we need to continue to remind our clients of the difference between a general-purpose search engine and a specialized, value-added online service or other research tool that isn't driven by delivering your attention to its advertisers.

Mary Ellen Bates (mbates@BatesInfo.com, Reluctant-Entrepreneur.com)
loves her Google Fi phone, despite her concerns about the Google-borg.
Comments? Email the editor-in-chief (marydee@xmission.com).