

How “Search Engines” Changed Our Lives...

“Just Google it,” someone says. You've probably heard this particular phrase many times over the last few years. So common that it has entered our causal lexicon. And, what do you do when someone chimes in with that directive? As any good student does you go online and you enter in a few different keywords. Moments later, a page full of “answers” comes up on your computer screen and you are on your way...or are you?

Before we answer that last question, let's quickly go back about twenty years and take a look at the “old” you – before social media and technology became the source for all things good or bad that it is today. There was no FaceBook. There was no Twitter. “Just Google it” would have been as absurd as suggesting someone just “fly up to the moon and as the guru of answers”. Instead of instantaneous results popping up on a web page, you were required to drive or walk to the library and lug a few large perfect-bound books to a table. Or, maybe if you had access to large enough libraries, you got to peruse the data on microfiche. And who didn't enjoy the visual candy afforded by miles of news articles and images whipping across your field of vision at breakneck speeds, as you tried to get to a specific entry? Aside from the Dramamine stockpiles you needed you also encountered pretty serious rigor. You could literally spend days finding and supporting one fact...one answer. Place upon that, no real way to corroborate your finding without extensive trial and tribulation and let's just agree that answers were a little more difficult to come by.

And yet, over the intervening years we've gone from a dynamic of searching relentlessly for answers in a sort of “intellectual vacuum” at the library to mingling with others while “searching” for information online. Now, flying to the moon, at least in terms of finding answers to your questions with rapidity, is not so far fetched. How could going from hours upon hours of research to find answers to now, spending minutes (at the most) to locate solutions or answers NOT change who we are as a culture? It would seem prerequisite.

Of course, not all is jolly as we work towards more and more speed in “finding answers”. As our ability to refine search engines and create more and more accessible information we encounter a pretty startling dynamic unavailable in previous years.

On the flip side of “just Google it” we find a caution. For everyone to whom much is given, of him shall much be required. This sort of, we'll give you the info, but you better use it wisely warning is common for our current age of knowledge and speediness – or even, hastiness. But I bet you didn't know the exact reference is a passage from the Bible; Luke 12:48. And further more, I bet you didn't realize that from the Google search I just did to cite the source I came up with over 114,000,000 results. 114 million results!

The fact of the matter is, the instantaneous results we are given have a deeper underlying cultural, psychological, and consumer-oriented edge to them that we couldn't have imagined. Furthermore, it's glossed over for favor of simply getting to the bottom line...any bottom line. And that is probably the biggest potential pitfall we'll face as technology doubles every 1.5 years, as millions of search results appear before our very eyes, and as we accept the results as...well, results. The “answers” we are given often are based not upon well founded research, or even the painstakingly collaborated, intellectual rigor that we might expect with older traditional research methodology...going to the library to find answers. Instead, it is not unreasonable to suggest most of our results, come from a world of amateur answers. Or perhaps even

worse (yes – I am going to say it), from those who are paid to develop results to lead to a purchase.

Think about Wikipedia. It's a forum essentially developed on the premise that you and me, and my neighbor are able to give everyone else answers to everything. It is built on the wisdom of the crowds mentality. And, I don't know about you...but I really haven't researched my answer as well as I should have. In fact, I probably just checked Wikipedia.

Yes, there is a science and art to developing search results – just ask anyone who works for Google, Microsoft or Yahoo. But to what end is this science? To get me answers, or to push me to results? And how does that affect my future actions and response to my environment. Finally, is that even something those search engine designers care about? It'd be ignorant to say no. But it is equally ignorant to say there is not a vested interest somewhere in the development of our search engine world that ultimately doesn't care about me...or you. Rather, "it" cares getting better results to generate better sales, and so on and so forth.

As a marketer I understand all too well the complexity of helping develop "results" for search engines and I can tell you my primary directive is to help lead you to my client as a result of your key word query. Nothing bad about that, certainly...but it does cause you to think doesn't it? How much search is manufactured and how much is not. I feel confident bringing up the marketing angle since good marketing can clarify and help you get to good information – but via the same methods less scrupulous "marketers" can also drive online traffic to some less than helpful solutions.

I understand the importance of the ability to get to knowledge previously untapped via the social movement model. But in that understanding is also the inherent concern that of those 114 million results from Google, about 113 million results are from people who simply want to increase traffic, sell me their product, or potentially even harm my computer with malicious code. And, not to be a doomsayer...but that very source information (Google or not) is what I count on to retrieve answers. And I, needless to say, am not alone in that reliance.

So, as you suggest to your friends "just Google it" be sure to remember, every search, every answer provided will affect how you live your life. You aren't just searching for "dog health", or "movie tickets"...you are also searching for "finding love" and "how to handle loss". To whom much is given, of him shall much be required, admonishes the bible. The next time you just Google something think about what are you doing with the information you "search" for and how is it impacting your culture, your intellectual understanding and your life.