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Google's Integration of Social Content in Search is a Good Development for Consumers

David Balto (Law Offices of David A. Balto) · Thursday, January 12th, 2012

In the past six months since Google's public disclosure of its Federal Trade Commission (FTC) antitrust investigation, much of the debate around the issue has been focused on the evolution of search–how it has changed over the past decade, how information is presented to users, and where information comes from to provide users with the very best and most useful search results. As we all well know, search engines like Google have become an incredibly powerful tool and are hardly recognizable from their old format of traditional "ten blue links."

Today, search is smarter and more dynamic–rich with real-time content, news, images, maps and reviews. Search no longer provides users a simple road map to the Internet – users utilize search to find answers to questions, and Google, Yahoo! and Bing have all adapted toward this model to stay relevant in a fiercely competitive environment.

The source of this information is also changing how search is adapting to user demand. More and more, users are not just relying on traditional search, web sites and public information, but also the input and opinion from those within social networks. A product review from someone you don't know is one thing, but weighing it against that of a friend, family member or coworker is something entirely different and exciting. In essence, the value of social data in search is becoming critically important to how we weigh information, formulate opinions, and make decisions. As search engines strive to personalize search results to respond to each consumer's individual and subjective search criteria, what better way than to instantly connect the searcher with those he or she already knows and trust?

The result: social networks and search are converging into the next iteration of search.

So it's no surprise that Google earlier today announced the integration of its Google+ social feature into its own search results. But some commentators are already raising eyebrows and suggesting this further hurts Google with its current dealings with the FTC.

Interestingly, Microsoft anticipated this fundamental shift in how users value information and the importance of personalized search results stemming from a user's social media presence. In response, it integrated much of Facebook's data last year into Bing. This has helped Microsoft build its user base and provide users with more relevant search results by including data from Facebook's colossal platform–a walled garden of over 800 million users who spend more time on its site than the next four most popular web brands combined. More importantly, Facebook has

locked other search engines out–denying others access to its content.

Google+ is the company's only legitimate source of social media information. Facebook's deal with Microsoft is exclusive, granting only Bing access to Facebook's trove of personalized data points. Twitter, whose license with Google expired in July, also fences Google off from its information.

So, why is Google labeled as the bad actor by its competitors for such a move? Rather than trailblazing, Google seems to be simply playing catch-up. Google's announcement only further demonstrates the importance and value of social data and how it impacts the decisions users make every day. Without access to content to social platforms like Facebook or Twitter, it is only logical that it incorporate its own social data to remain competitive and maintain its ability to provide results that users want. The final result for consumers is a paradigm shift in the understanding of search, and further reaffirmation that competitors strive to provide the best search results possible.

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