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The Future Of Search: Is Twitter The Chosen One?

by Chris Copeland, 4 hours ago

Over the past three months it has become in vogue to discuss the future of search in one word -- Twitter. With real-time, consumer-driven micro-blogging, Twitter has suddenly become what the next generation of search is to be. I started to discuss this topic in a [column a few months ago](#), but as the buzz keeps getting louder, it seems to be a good time to revisit and debate the merits of the noise and the potential for both Twitter and the crowd sourcing of search to become the future of the space. In doing this, I'll serve up one way Twitter might get at living up to its hype. (Note: From this point forward I'll use Twitter as the example, to save the extra typing of "or another like service.")

The Challenges

In exploring whether Twitter has the ability to become a viable alternative, let's look at the issues it must overcome. The most glaring to me is the role that Google plays in the public consciousness. Google is a trusted advisor, a repository of information, a question and click away. And while it's easy to debate the ease of finding information and the user's dependence on the algorithm to place everything in proper order (compared to the 20th century equivalent, the encyclopedia), it's a vast leap forward.

And that is the first challenge for Twitter: it leaves the parsing in the hands of the consumer. You ask the question and have to determine, based on your network, who you trust more, and the validity of the answer. Twitter is challenged in this regard because currently the options for finding answers are limited to those following you. And, if your network is full of slumdogs like Salim and not the lone millionaire, then you may be out of luck. At best, you will be left waiting until your own Jamal returns to the discussion. And that becomes issue number two. Speed. Search may not always give you the answer on the first click, but in almost all cases, the answers are within the results with the right kind of digging.

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So, if Twitter has so many challenges, how does it overcome them?

1. Buy ChaCha. If a challenge of Twitter today is that you're limited in who can help you answer a question, then let's give the system ways to answer the question. And what better way than to tie together the hottest SMS solution for Q&A with the hottest micro-blogging service. This would enable users to ask their network, as they are already doing -- but when immediacy matters, tie together a mobile solution.

2. Do a search deal, then build your own paid search network. Online, the value of Twitter is through the commentary. Imagine the "relevant" ads one might get if one's Twitter feeds were aligned with an AdSense-like solution. Think about the absurdity that might ensue if each time someone left a tweet, a new series of ads was served, trying to discern what on earth someone meant. But, if a network was built aligning with your tweets or the discussion threads you were engaged in, then that would start to provide more context and value. It would be easy to start with a Google AdSense deal; but if this is for the ownership of the space, then it would make little sense for Twitter to work with the 800-pound gorilla. Instead, it should look at a partnership with the owner of point #3.

3. Be your own boss. One of the least-heralded yet most-intriguing offerings of the last year was Yahoo Boss. The ability to take control of your own search engine is a compelling idea that seemed of little interest to the general public and the business community. But if Twitter rebuilt its user interface to offer algorithmically established results in combination with paid listings and an ongoing micro-blogging feed related to the intent expressed through comment or query, the end product could truly be game-changing.

One of the sad truths of the past five years is that no one has successfully connected search and social from a user standpoint. They remain two distinct channels with minimal integration onto SERPs from social. Both Yahoo 360 and Google Wiki were attempts to bring community into the results page. But if you started from a position of community and worked back towards search, you might find a solution where community and engine could work in tandem.

A rudimentary example of the potential integration is available for the Firefox browser, through the Greasemonkey plug-in and [script](#). The combination inserts a real-time Twitter stream into Google results. And while the plug-in may offer a sneak peek into the future, it does not come close to where this could be for both personal connections and query responses to a given expression of intent. Add to that the effort one must put in to experience mashup, and this is but a taste of what may be to come.

Whether or not Twitter is the future of search is hard to say. As it stands today, I would suggest it is not. Too many users lack the time or community to successfully replace Google in their daily life. But, a solution that could provide search-like organization with the ability to choose from the standard of today, or that of a pre-established network of intelligence, would completely change the space for many.