

How to use Google+ to Drive Traffic and Improve your Visibility Online

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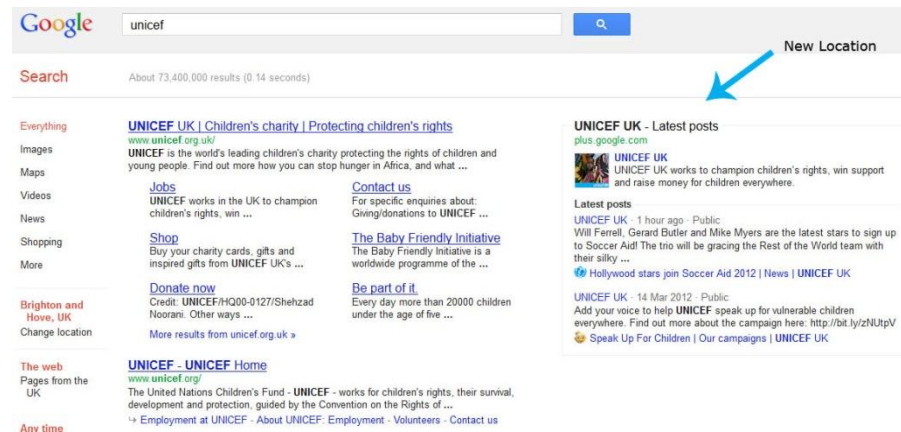
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What's New with Google?

An Overview

Developments are afoot once more for Google, with a new format for the integration of Google+ searches making its way onto our screens. This new format means that brands on Google+ can now occupy a much larger proportion of the search results screen than they did previously. This appears to be a simple progression of the new **Search Plus Your World** update that we discussed back in January, which primarily sees the Google+ page recommendations/latest posts appear at the top right of the screen as opposed to its previous location within the search listings.



Ultimately Google want to build what they believe to be a true representation of organic results (albeit with bias towards their own search platform) and are looking to shake up the way that results are displayed as well as the quality of these results. Having their own search platform means that they can build a (possibly) truer picture of what a searcher is trying to locate, while subsequently reducing the authority that links alone have in influencing results. This puts more pressure on companies to be creative with their SEO strategy.

What does this mean for your SEO strategy?

Google+ is becoming the third most dominant feature within search results after organic and paid listings. For businesses on Google+ this is going to become key for your natural search strategy as appearing in the top right of search results (in a space usually reserved for paid search ads) will mean more visibility and an additional place for users to access your social content. It's also important to note that as with previous Search Plus Your World, this format change is visible even if a user isn't signed in to a Google+ account meaning it will reach a far greater audience than was previously possible.

Currently, the format is only available for some results (Google-owned sites like Gmail & YouTube, and certain brands including online magazine Search Engine Land and charity Unicef UK) but it's clear that Google+ will begin playing an even bigger role in search results in coming months. If you prepare now you will ensure greater visibility for your brand when the format is fully rolled out.

This could also signal real changes in search behaviour and search psychology as a whole. Previous **studies have shown** that 10-50% of participants looked at side bar ads – The new format could alter things dramatically, as users begin to see the side bar as a source of relevant



information which correlates to their search term, rather than as advertising space. This could have beneficial consequences for paid search ads appearing underneath these new results, though it could also signal inflated PPC bids as the first three results will be occupied by Google+ results, making the 'above the fold' space for paid ads even more sought after.

What is clear is that this new format will have an effect on click-through rates for both organic and paid search ads, which will ultimately affect search forecasts; CTRs may need to be re-analysed taking this into consideration.

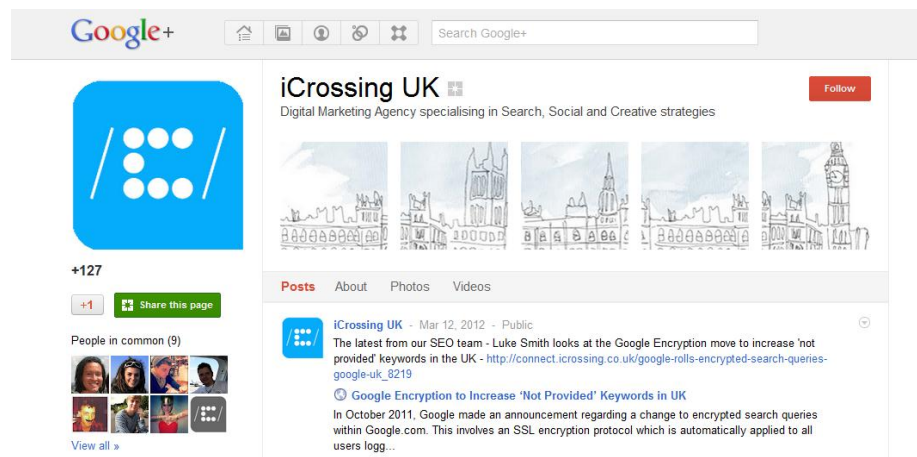


Getting Seen - Our Recommendations

Get Involved

If you're not already on Google+ then it's time to get started. It is becoming all too clear that Google may start showing preferential treatment to those companies that are engaging with it and will likely prioritise Google+ pages of a company over results pertaining to standard web pages. Previously there has been debate about whether people are actually using Google+ and [our own research](#) has demonstrated a large number of people signing up only never to use it again. However, whether or not people and companies are using the platform, their search results will be affected, so it's key to ensure you have and maintain a presence. If you haven't done so already, sign up to a company profile and get your employees signed up in a professional capacity too.

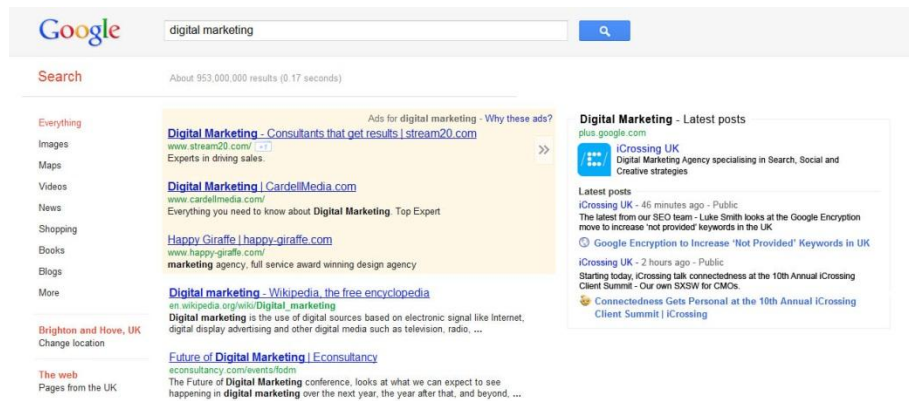
If you are already signed up, have a good look around your profile to ensure you have provided as much detail as you can about who you are, what you do and how you can help the searcher. Customise your profile so that it sits in line with your brand; use the appropriate logos and try to match the language you employ in the 'about' section to descriptions you use for your site (optimised, of course). Think of creative ways to make your profile stand out; for example [using templates](#) (like the iCrossing UK page below) that allow you to chop up images into a flowing design on your about page.



Get Creative

It's all very well having a profile, but key to its success both socially and for the new search format is ensuring that you create and share interesting, fresh and relevant content. This concept isn't a new one; marketing and social media best practice always point to the importance of content, but it is something that will be even more applicable to the new format and to the larger social-search environment moving ahead. As the UNICEF image on page 2 shows, the new results are the "latest posts" so the chances of your content being visible in this area if it isn't fresh are very slim, especially if Google utilises this format for non-brand terms as well as specific company searches (see below example).

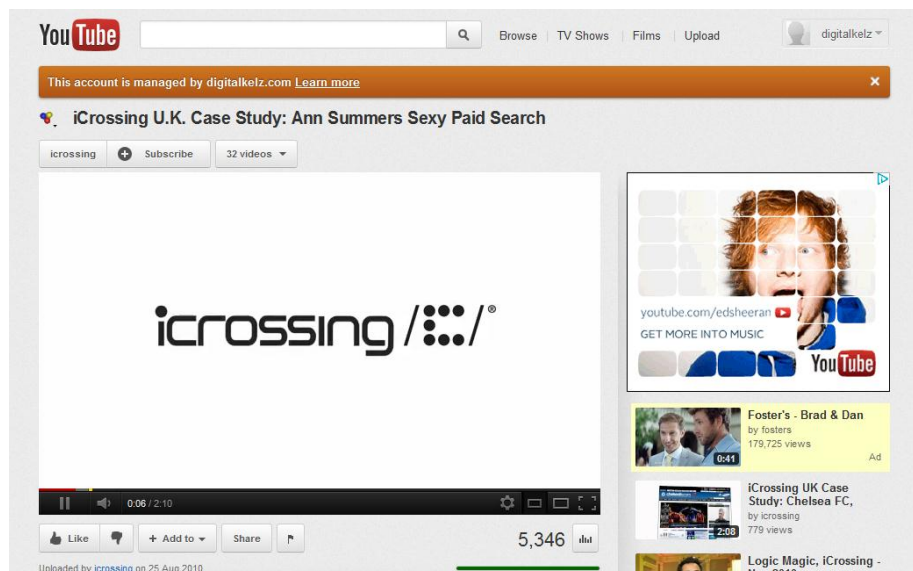




Video Content

Remember that Google owns YouTube and that **over 4 billion videos** are watched each day. Podcasts and short videos are now easy to create for even the least tech-savvy of us and can play a crucial role in both your social and search campaigns. There are a multitude of ways that you can optimise a video (so much so that the topic deserves a separate paper) but the key point for this new update is getting the content out there and having it shared. Ensuring you are making the most of Google's available features and platforms will in turn ensure that you stand a better chance of appearing in the new – and more importantly 'latest' – results. Create, optimise and share; the more relevant and up-to-date you are with recent trends in your industry, the more likely it will be for you to appear in these results.

If you aren't in the position to create your own videos, or you are struggling to decide what the topic/theme should be, then try to apply some creativity to your campaign. Start a competition for existing followers and fans and have them create the content for you. Be wary however, as this will require a much greater need for social monitoring than when producing your own content.



Alternatively, provide examples of recent work and successes (as above) with case studies. Getting shared and viewed by your competitors and peers because you offer useful advice and tips is also a good way to reach your audience and build authority.

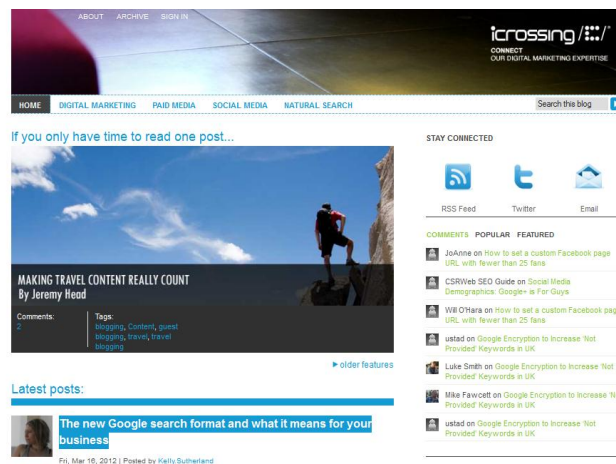


Images

Imagery is of course another key point, especially as Picasa is now integrated with Google+ Photos and that since the **suspension of Picnik services** in January all creative editing of imagery for Picasa users is now done via the Creative Suite within Google+. Many companies seem to believe that photos or static imagery aren't relevant to their particular brand or service, but when it is used in conjunction with a social strategy images can be very powerful. They can make a company appear more social, more lifelike and more approachable. It is also about having a certain amount of control and playing a part in the way your brand is talked about and perceived. Upload pictures of staff events, outreach activities and anything else that may be relevant to products of services you offer. It will help people engage with and feel connected to your brand – and you can optimise them too which will give you both social and search benefits.

Written Content

Finally, blogs are often misunderstood by brands, but are a really useful way for your company to gain backlinks and increase both social and search visibility. Here, it's about quality over quantity and keeping your customers informed about new trends and insights as well as the odd company update. If you are providing new information that is interesting and relevant, then people are more likely to pay attention. There isn't a company or industry that can't benefit from writing their own content and there is a creative angle to be found in every piece of news, so start becoming thought leaders rather than consumers and you will have a much greater chance of appearing in the 'Latest Results'. Just make sure that everything you write is then posted to Google+ with the relevant links and ensure that you have set the privacy to public so that your content has a chance of appearing in the Google+ Sparks results. This will mean that your content is being found by the people that are directly searching for interesting content on Google+; the more circles you are in and the more you are shared and +1d, the better.



Measured Success

Integrate your Networks

Although there will clearly be a focus on sharing Google+ content, it is important to remember that though the network may have a large amount of subscribers, a much smaller number are utilising it and engaging with friends, family and brands. It is therefore vital that other company social profiles are maintained and used as a link between your site, content and Google+.

Informing your fans or followers that you have a Google+ page, and encouraging them to add you to their circles, are initial steps to encouraging your existing social users to interact with you on your other platforms, too. Linking from Twitter or Facebook to content on your Google+ page will also increase the chances of you appearing in the new search side bar. Never think that your networks must be used in isolation – they are a powerful marketing and search aid when combined, provided you understand their unique strengths and individual differences.

Measuring your Reach

Many companies don't understand the power that social networks can have because they fail to measure their effects in a useful and consistent way. Some companies may see immediate results, but for others it takes time, and all too often companies give up posting and creating content because they don't feel an immediate benefit. With the new search format it is about building up content and posting links to your external sites over time so that your Google+ page builds integrity and credibility with your customers and authority with Google.

On a creative level the best recommendation we can give is to ensure that your Google+ account is linked to your analytics package. Monitor the effects which posts have proved popular; what was shared and what wasn't.

But don't just look at figures – assess what comments were made about your content and Google+ posts. What can they tell you about the interests of your target demographic? Might this knowledge help you build new audiences? Online engagement can help discover new types of customer and open up new prospects. Once you start to get a feel for what works and what doesn't, you can begin to adapt and grow your content strategy in line with this. You may find a better sharing response from a particular medium – whether that is imagery, video or written content. Learn from this and give the user content in their preferred medium, rather than what you feel they should be consuming. This will help give you a better understanding of your overall marketing strategy, as well as feeding in to your social and search campaigns.

On a technical level, it would be wise to ensure that daily monitoring of both organic and paid traffic at keyword level is taking place. If you do experience any severe drops or fluctuations then check to see if Google+ results are appearing for these keywords. When this begins to happen you should become more active in order to manage traffic flows and ensure that each area is covered. We have already seen recently that keyword-level traffic is dropping due to Google moving toward secure search; this has meant that “not provided” is being sent into referral results, so it is even more crucial now to keep a close eye and monitor changes in your search traffic and terms if you want to ensure successful results.



Will the effort *really* make a difference?

In short; yes. What's important to remember is that the more your Google+ content is shared the higher authority Google will give your page. Getting more and higher value +1s will likely be crucial to this and the only way that will happen is if you are creating content that people want to share. Producing regular, informative and entertaining material that people can engage with is going to have a huge effect on whether or not you appear in the new results. Getting started on this now will help improve your chances of being there when the format gets rolled out. As Google themselves told [Search Engine Land](#):

“We’re continuing to experiment with the ways we can help you find and interact with the people you’re looking for or who may be related to the topic you’re searching for.”

This is the next inevitable step to ensuring that users find the most up-to-date and relevant information for their search queries, and one that any business can adopt when experimenting with their SEO, social and content strategy.

