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Social, Search, and Forward-Thinking SEO by Trevor Southwold

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Search engine optimisation is as difficult to pin down as the search engine algorithms that inform it. Because these algorithms evolve all the time, search engine optimisation is by necessity a mercurial industry in which nothing remains the same for long.

To be successful as a professional in the SEO industry, it is not enough to adapt to algorithmic updates as and when they occur. Such updates happen so frequently (and often with little or no announcement or elaboration) that an effective SEO professional must stay ahead of the game, armed with an intimate knowledge of what search algorithms try to achieve and where they are likely headed in future.

Some commentators have suggested that internet search is moving in a social direction. Logic supports this view because the goal of a search engine is to deliver the best possible user experience (thus expanding and retaining its user base, thus increasing advertising revenues) and social signals can help to deliver an individual user the most relevant results for a given search query.

Rather than taking a 'one size fits all' approach, search engines that factor social signals into the equation are able to target results more closely to search users. If 10,000 friends of User A express a positive attitude towards a particular piece of content, but 0 friends of User B express a positive attitude towards it, User A is more likely to find the piece of content interesting than User B (if only because his or her friends do).

Despite the movement towards using social signals as a ranking metric, some professionals have been quick to point out that, in certain search engines, social signals have little significance, therefore SEO professionals should focus their resources elsewhere. This can be seen as the 'conservative' view of SEO: new ranking metrics are gradually introduced but dismissed by proponents of the old metrics, who wield the cautious adoption of newer metrics by the powers that be as conclusive proof of their inadequacy.

However, over time it is likely new ranking metrics (such as social signals) currently in a 'testing' phase will emerge to greater prominence. The initiative will then be in the hands of those SEO professionals who paid attention in the early days to the ranking metric potential of social signals.

Although we are far from the death of backlink-driven relevance, it is important to remember that the major search engines did not get where they are today by resting on their laurels. In counting links, they found an original and effective way to determine relevance and value. Now that counting links is no longer original, and less effective due to widespread abuse of the system, it is certain that search engine operators are searching for the next big thing.

The shift towards social should not be underestimated by professionals in the SEO industry. It is all too tempting to stick with what one knows and pay little attention to the developing social sphere. However, considering how boundaries between internet search and social media are eroding, it is important to start developing social media presences for both one's own business and its clients. Getting a foot in the door now will pay dividends later.

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