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BRANDS IN THE BLENDER

Search engines are no longer just gateways to useful websites. The links are still there but are now accompanied with images and videos that are all relevant to your search too. It's time to make sure your brand is visible across all types of results.
 By Matt Brocklehurst

What football team does Wayne Rooney play for? I would bet his salary (ok, one day's worth) that virtually everyone in the UK and the majority of the world knows the answer. My wife, a Trinidadian with a less than zero interest in football, knows the answer. Web-bots however don't seem to follow the beautiful game.

A search on Ask's main search page returns images of him playing for Everton. On Microsoft Live Search the picture is actually of Barcelona's Thierry Henry but the accompanying caption says "Rooney...". Google, on the main search page, shows an insulting cartoon of Wayne, though to be fair he's wearing the United red. Yahoo! has the EA Sports video which is up-to-date, sort of, but still no Red Devil shirt.

All pretty disappointing for Wayne, with a confusing and insulting mix of imagery, and more so for the Manchester United brand – he's their man now and has been since August 2004. Of course you can't really blame the Web-bots. Occurrences such as this are more to do with marketers only just beginning to make the most of the fact that we're now getting images and videos – not to mention maps, news, books etc – far more frequently and more deeply imbedded in the results on page one.

The name increasingly given to this evolving model is Blended Search. The best-known example is, unsurprisingly, Google Universal Search (GUS), launched in May 2007. Microsoft Live Search, Ask and Yahoo! have a different twist on how they display results. Ask, for example, has a split three-pane display while Google stands firm on the linear listing. The motivation is essentially the same: to give the user the best answer on one page from one search regardless of whether the answer comes from a video, image, webpage or other "vertical" search. Being able to actually view the whole video or expanded image on that same page is sweeter still for the user.

A radical change in search results

It's been a big deal in the search world with the clever back-end machinations and important user interface decisions provoking blogs-a-plenty. Danny Sullivan in Search Engine Land described the launch of GUS as "the most radical change to its search results ever".

So what should marketers, whether in business to business, at an SME or working for a household brand, be doing about it? Well, you need to get your brand "in the blender". Though I'm fearful of adding to the jargon, you could say

that Blended Search Optimisation must now form a part of your SEO.

Put simply, a few years ago your SEO objective was to elevate your website to the top of the rankings on your brand name and pertinent keywords. The techniques and tactics, though complex, could as such be directed to this one goal. The explosion of social media and networks may have already led you to broaden your goals, to look at social media optimisation (SMO) and to embrace the likes of Technorati, Digg and YouTube. Now developments in blended search mean that, if it hasn't already, your SEO strategy has to extend beyond your own website.

Optimisation, the tagging, the keywords, the choice of content and structure, can no longer be site-centric. It must now also encompass optimising video, images, maps, product listings on review sites, blogs, aggregators and so on. With Google, and the others, pulling and blending from a myriad of specialised or vertical searches you need to be everywhere with consistent, up-to-date and integrated messages and images.

Let's focus on video, the real boom area online. YouTube alone reports 150 million video clips being played daily. So how do you optimise your videos when hosted by a third party? Firstly, don't just focus on YouTube. Put your video on MSN video, Yahoo! video, check out MySpaceTV and don't forget Google Video. For each host, encode your video to the highest possible quality allowed. Crucially, make sure you apply the principles you would when SEOing your site to the videos you distribute. Use good, descriptive titles, clear descriptions and relevant tags and keywords. Basically, develop your tags as you would your keywords.

Having uploaded and tagged your videos you're in the running to appear on the blended search pages. But you should go a step further and create a buzz. Submit your video to Digg. Blog on it and get it in RSS feeds. Link to your videos from your own site. Include video clips (and photos) on your press releases and they'll be used, especially by the bloggers and news sites. E-mail friends, colleagues, suppliers and clients if relevant. Research firm eMarketer estimates that 76% of users tell a friend about online content either weekly or monthly.

A lot of work, yes, and you could say that life suddenly got more complicated... but it's worth it – the returns are real.

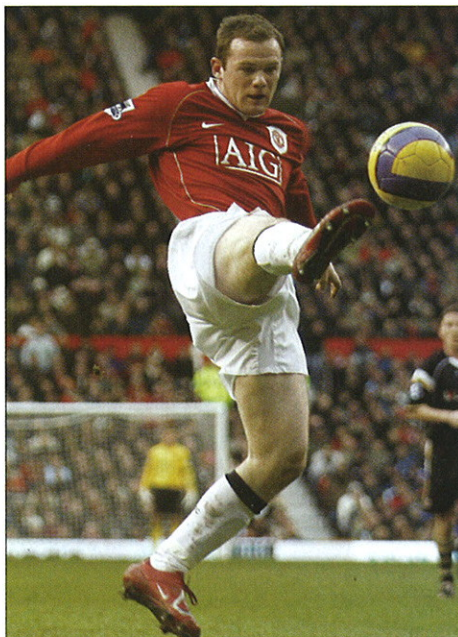
More relevant content

Blended search models mean new opportunities. The ability to provide relevant content via multiple formats means more tailored communications across a broader set. You can also capture more listings on that all important first page plus use the messaging in your PPC ads to complement them. All of which means you can get a higher conversion rate and more brand awareness.

The flip side is that if you don't optimise across the Web there will be other images appearing that are out of your control and grabbing the limelight. A search for McDonald's on Google, for example, returned only one image, from CNET news, of a worryingly obese child "lovin' it" just a bit too much and stuffing his face on a Big Mac. With all the money being

On the same page: Search engines are now displaying relevant videos and pictures

The screenshot shows a search engine interface for 'Ask.com'. The search term 'wayne rooney' is entered in the search bar. Below the search bar, there are sections for 'Narrow Your Search' and 'Expand Your Search'. The 'Narrow Your Search' section lists various links related to Wayne Rooney, such as 'Wayne Rooney Wallpaper', 'Biography of Wayne Rooney', 'Wayne Rooney Statistics', 'Wayne Rooney Girlfriend', 'Wayne Rooney Profile', 'Stats on Wayne Rooney', 'Wayne Rooney Facts', 'Wayne Rooney Family', 'Where Does Wayne Rooney Live', and 'Life of Wayne Rooney'. The 'Expand Your Search' section lists 'Manchester United', 'England Football Team', and 'Old Trafford'. To the right of the search bar, there is a 'Wayne Rooney' section with a link to 'Wayne Rooney on ITV.com for Free!' and a search bar for 'Search pages from UK only'. Below this, there are sections for 'Images' and 'Video'. The 'Images' section shows several small thumbnail images of Wayne Rooney. The 'Video' section shows a video titled 'Over The Room' with a duration of 01:10, and another video titled 'The Football Wrap' with a duration of 03:50. Below the video section, there is an 'Encyclopedia' section with a link to 'Wayne Rooney' and a brief description: 'Wayne Mark Rooney (born 24 October 1985 in Liverpool) is an English footballer. He'.



spent on positioning McDonald's as being healthier, wouldn't it have been better for McDonald's to also have some pictures of its new "wrap"?

Blended search across all the engines is evolving fast and furious and so too must marketers. Don't and you'll be stuck in the past – like a Rooney in an Everton shirt. ●