



HOW Google INSTANT affects SEO

Google Instant is a new search enhancement that shows results as you type.

As a user, the most obvious change is that you get to the right content much faster than before because you don't have to finish typing your full search term, or even press "search." Purported benefits are:

Faster Searches: By predicting your search and showing results before you finish typing, Google Instant can save 2-5 seconds per search.

Smarter Predictions: Even when you don't know exactly what you're looking for, predictions help guide your search. The top prediction is shown in grey text directly in the search box, so you can stop typing as soon as you see what you need.

Instant Results: Start typing and results appear right before your eyes. Before, you had to type a full search term, hit return, and hope for the right results. Now, results appear instantly as you type, helping you see where you're headed, each step along the way.

What are the implications for SEO?

With the debut of Google Instant, marketers will have to work smarter on their SEO (Search engine optimization) to gain one of the top organic rankings on the first page of a Google search. At the same time, paid search advertisers will probably have to step up their pay-per-click (PPC) spending just to hold their current sponsored positions relative to the competition.

The first key change Google Instant causes is the addition of a drop-down "suggestion box," which attempts to predict queries. This, depending on the query, occupies one to three of the advertisement positions on the critical first results page. Google is rendering the paid and universal search listings as high as possible, but is pushing the SEO results "below the fold." Before Google Instant, a standard web search would yield four organic listings above the fold. Now this doesn't happen until searchers commit to their search and the page re-renders.

This means that top ranking is now more important than ever. Users are less likely to scroll below the fold as related results are instantly reconfigured as a search query is completed. Previously, searchers would type in a query, check the results, refine the search and then repeat the process until they found their desired result. Now, the potential exists for Google Instant to help with the delivery of this process.

This means SEO tactics will have to change. Traditionally, we've seen that users tend to spend a good deal of time examining meta descriptions. Therefore, it was recommend to place 'calls to action' in your meta description to grab searchers' attention and get them to click.

However, with results changing so quickly, we now see advantage to moving 'calls to action' into title tags, since users spend less time examining the results. Today, searchers seem to rely more on the parts of the results they can examine quickly.

Google Instant and the long-tail key phrases

Perhaps the biggest impact Google Instant will have is on long-tail searches. Consider this example: Someone goes to Google to search for "Memorial Mass Enrollment" After typing in "Memorial," they see a paid ads for Memorial Day 2010, Wounded Warrior Project.org and Seraphic Mass and an organic entry for UMass Memorial Medical Center. It remains to be seen whether most users will finish their search and ignore the populating results? Or, will the page populating with results distract searchers as they continue to use Google the same way they have for years?

Arguments can be made for and against the increasing importance of long-tail search results, but there will be some effect from Google's Instant search. Popular belief is that Google tested the accuracy of its predictive search results over the past years, and found it to be accurate — say 25 percent of the time it predicts correctly. (This is just an example.) That means that 25 percent of long-tail searches will be rendered correctly off the first keyword, and some percent of users will click on the results.

The other 75 percent will modify their searches as unsatisfactory results appear. For them, it can be argued that long-tail search will gain in importance because they'll see right away that their initial search wasn't going to work, and will thus alter their search query until they see results more to their liking. Time will tell whether the conversion rates on those "predicted" results increase or decrease versus the full-search query conversion rates.

We recommend continuing to incorporate long-tail terms into your SEO programs. Closely monitor before-and-after performance to see how user behavior has adapted to these changes. Do this for the top 10 to 25 multi-keyword phrases for your SEO program for 30 days. Then, if performance degrades, you'll know that your SEO tactics on long-tail search have to change.