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Are social networks the new search engines?



Dust off your SEM playbooks

While the inner workings of search engine marketing (SEM) has evolved over time, the where (Google) and how (predominantly text-based search ads) of SEM have remained relatively constant for the past two decades.

When a single company, Google, commands a near monopolistic market share (92%), and people's behavior remains relatively consistent (as in, they search for things via a browser or a search app, and then click on a search results), brands haven't had a need to shift tactics or rethink their strategies.

“When they’re looking for a place for lunch, they don’t go to Google—they go to TikTok or Instagram.”

Prabhakar Raghavan
Senior Vice President
Google

But what happens when everything we know about how people navigate the internet starts to change dramatically? This change may already be underway.

An evolution in search

Consider that Google’s own SVP, Prabhakar Raghavan, recently revealed that 40% of Gen Z (18-24 yr olds) prefer to search on TikTok and Instagram than on Google. He shares,

“When they’re looking for a place for lunch, they don’t go to Google—they go to TikTok or Instagram.”

“We keep learning, over and over again, that new internet users don’t have the expectations and the mindset that we have become accustomed to. The queries they ask are completely different.”

That’s a fairly stunning admission from a Google executive, considering how vital search ads are to the company’s revenue. (Not to mention the fact that Raghavan didn’t list YouTube as a go-to for this new behavior, even though a long-held trope is that YouTube is the world’s #2 search engine).

TikTok’s influence is growing

It’s early, but TikTok’s influence is hard to understate. While some might blame TikTok for shortening attention spans, it may be fostering more visual learning styles, while raising the authority of creators over traditional publishers and institutions.

And now, TikTok appears to be looking to capitalize on this behavioral shift through the release of its own Search Ads offering, currently in Beta. As the product is still quite nascent, volume is understandably limited, yet its existence highlights the underlying emphasis these new platforms are putting on different ad solutions.

Make no mistake, if search becomes the norm on social networking platforms like TikTok and Instagram, brands will need different ad solutions and different SEM strategies. Everything about SEM, from

the pricing, the data, the ads themselves, the seeding, and KPIs, may be subject to change.

Prepare yourself for the SEM revolution

Marketers need to dust off their SEM playbooks and start to rethink the way they approach search.

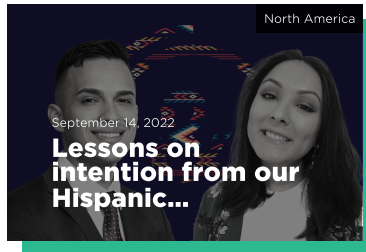
Here are three ways marketers can prepare for an impending social/SEM revolution:

- 1. Go beyond the usual suspects.** Instead of just Google and Bing, begin to ask, “where else can I reach active searchers?” Perhaps different demographics are using unique platforms to search. This applies to TikTok and Instagram, but likely also to Pinterest and Amazon.
- 2. Revamp your search creative, and consider new success metrics.** Traditionally, search operates in the world of text ads and bottom funnel conversion metrics. If you’re buying Search on TikTok, however, creative components inherently require video-and visibility into lower-funnel conversions may be limited.
- 3. Push your new partners.** In these early stages, it’s on marketers to probe these new ad platforms to better understand product functionality, from research and planning tools to targeting and buying models. Ultimately, it’s important to test new advertising solutions being offered by partners to gain early access, learn, provide feedback, and iterate. This is a moment for brands to play a vital role in helping to build out this new medium, and ensure its usefulness in the future.

We live and work in an industry where user behavior is always changing and evolving. We can either adapt to it, or be left behind.

Take a good look at your existing SEM playbooks and get a headstart on leading your clients or brand through this next inevitable evolution.

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