



Eye Tracking Report: Google, MSN and Yahoo! Compared

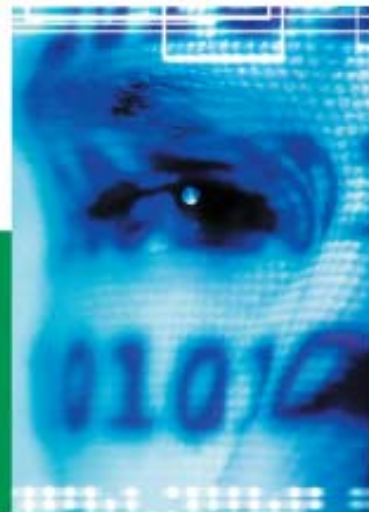
November 2006

Released by Enquiro

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Single-user \$149 Corporate \$298

An in depth look at interactions with Google,
MSN & Yahoo! using Eye Tracking Methodology



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FOREWORD

Our original *Eye Tracking Report I: Google* study started to quantify what user interactions on the Google search results page looked like, not just by the actions taken, but also by capturing where users looked. The original **Golden Triangle** image has since been referred to an extraordinary number of times. I have it on good authority that a number of people at all the major engines have gone over the study in some detail. We have also seen both major and minor changes in the layouts of all the search results pages that seem to address many of our original findings and we suspect that this is not a coincidence.

Our research has always been aimed at gaining a great understanding of how we use search engines. It's the nature of the human interaction that fascinates us. Eye tracking is a wonderful way to gain greater insight, and the first study pushed our level of understanding forward significantly. Follow up studies by the Nielsen Norman Group confirmed much of what we identified in this first study.

It's been gratifying to have many search marketers express their thanks for our undertaking of that initial research study. Andy Beal said we rocked, not once, but twice! Jim Hedger called it one of the studies that "made an enormous impact on the industry". A number of reviewers, including Chris Sherman and Anne Holland, gave it an enthusiastic two thumbs up, calling it fascinating, insightful and a must-read for search marketers.

So, this is our follow up effort. Because the scope of the original study was restricted to Google that left one big question: What about the other engines? This study addresses that question.

Changes in the engines before and after the study

Before we get into this report, we have to share a phenomenon with you that came from sharing some of the findings of the study in the preliminary stages, well before we could get the report completed.

We speak at a lot of industry shows, and in the beginning of this year, we started sharing some very preliminary findings. Immediately after talking, we were sought out by some representatives of the search engines, who wanted to discuss our findings. Being generous sorts of souls, we obliged, and offered our opinions on our findings. Partly because of this sharing of information, and partly because of the ever dynamic nature of search engines, we began to see changes in the way search results were shown on some of the engines. This means that some of our observations are on search result presentations that have since changed. We will still offer our original observations, but will try to note where results have since changed and what the implications of those changes might be.

INTRODUCTION

We thought this would be easy. We were wrong.

In the first eye tracking study, when we looked only at Google, we noticed a number of things in looking at the interactions that we wanted to compare with MSN and Yahoo. This study was to be the logical extension of the first. To provide some consistency to the first study, we decided to include some sessions with Google as well. What we didn't realize was that it increased the scope of the first study by a factor of 3. And we've had several people tell us that the first study was a lot to get through!

So, after months of analysis, writing and rewriting, we at last have the report done. At least, we have it done for now. As always, in looking for answers, we uncovered substantially more questions.

It quickly became apparent that this report was not nearly as linear as the first one. Because the first study focused on one engine, we could walk through our findings in a fairly straightforward manner. But in this study, we were looking at three engines. It increased the complexity of trying to tie the information together in a logical way substantially.

Finally, at the 11th hour, we realized that the content followed four logical tracks, and so that's how we've organized the report. Although the tracks make frequent reference to each other, we found it was better to follow these main topic areas:

- Perceived Relevancy
- How We Scan a Listing
- Interactions with the Engines
- Marketer's Insight

In addition, we have the introductions and methodology sections. Here's a brief summary of each of these sections, and who will likely find each section most interesting.

Perceived Relevancy

The big finding in this study was the difference in interactions between the 3 engines. The question that brought up was: why? It could be a difference in the quality of results, but for a number of reasons, we thought there was much more to it than that. We believed it had more to do with how participants in the study perceived the results. In this section, we go to some lengths to compare how search results are presented in MSN, Yahoo and Google and the differences between them that lead to that perception of relevancy. This section looks at results from a few different studies that have compared the actual relevancy of search results, then goes on to explore a number of design elements, such as white space, use of fonts, the proportions of the page, the **Golden Section** theory and

the impact of launching a search from a portal rather than a dedicated search page. This section is probably of most interest to those who are designing and working with search engines, although it does provide insights for marketers in how we determine relevancy.

How We Scan a Listing

There is a fascinating process we go through when we interact with the search page. In this section, we go through that process in detail. We follow a group of searchers on a 500 millisecond by 500 millisecond time lapse, seeing exactly how they scan a page. We look at how we assimilate information and look for scent on the page, determining which listings are important to us. We examine how we divide the page into subsets of 3 or 4 listings, and then make our choices. And finally, we look at how fundamentally important user intent is to this whole process. This section would be of interest to marketers and the search engine usability people alike.

Interactions with the Engines

This is the bulk of the quantitative data we gathered in the study. We present the facts and figures on what interactions looked like with each of the engines, broken out into the various sections of results page real estate, including top sponsored, side sponsored, top organic (first 3 listings), bottom organic (bottom 7 listings) and vertical results. We also look at the success of clicks on various parts of the page and the impact of return visits to the page. This section is probably also of equal interest to marketers and search engine designers and usability specialists.

Marketer's Insights

Finally, we take all the data and boil it down into some strategies for the marketer. How you can apply these findings to boost the performance of your campaigns. We look at doing a SWOT analysis on a search results page to gain your unfair share of click throughs, look at the impact of position on potential conversions, explore how banner blindness can occur on a search page, show how to use information scent to your advantage in the various sections of the page and quantitatively determine what is the best position to bid for on the page.

We hope this report builds on the foundation of understanding that was begun by the first eye tracking report. We believe that the information contained in this report, when applied strategically, can significantly improve the performance of any campaign. These are the same insights that we apply for our clients.

Finally, please share your feedback and comments about the report with us. Just email us at research@enquiro.com.