

BLENDED SEARCH

FOR BRAND VISIBILITY

By CT Moore

Wired magazine's Editor-in-Chief Chris Anderson once said, "Your brand isn't what you say it is, it's what Google says it is." And for most Web-based businesses, this is true. Considering Google alone nets upwards of 150 million visits per month, managing your brand's visibility through search is paramount to your success.

Blended search offers a powerful way to influence what search engines say about your brand. It can help you capture more listings (positions) in the search engine results pages (SERPs), and make existing results more appealing to users.

Blended Search Explained

You might have noticed that on some searches, Google and the other major search engines feature a variety of results such as news, images, and video. These are "blended" or "universal" search results. They appear because the search engine also queries through their other indices (images, video, news, etc.) and, if they find relevant results, those are displayed alongside standard results on the main SERPs.

Video and image thumbnails stand out visually, appealing to users because they promise engaging content. Similarly, results from a search engine's news index are appealing because they appear more credible and timely than other, similar content.



In terms of volume, the top-tier search engines limit each domain to only two listings per SERP (outside of sitelinks). However, by using a mix of blended search optimization and social media, your branded content can capture more real estate on the SERPs and even help bump your competition from the first page.

Content Strategy

All major search engines offer users image, video and news search. Because search engines generate results based on what ranks well in each of these verticals, optimizing for blended search involves developing a content strategy for each category. This means not only producing content, but also optimizing that content in each of these verticals — both on-site and off-site.

On-site Blended Search Optimization

When multimedia content is optimized for your brand's name and keywords, it serves as a strong indicator to search engines that it's relevant to your brand. There are two sides to on-site blended search optimization: optimizing the content that's already there; and, producing additional content for search engines to index.

Optimizing existing content for blended search tends to refer to images and, sometimes, video. Three steps can help optimize this content, and each is an opportunity to assign an additional layer of meta data (such as your brand name) to your site's multimedia content.

1. Use strategic keywords in file names — e.g. name your logo "brand-logo.gif."
2. Use descriptive titles and tags when uploading that content to hosting sites.
3. Use "title" and "alt" tags when embedding media on your site.

Another way to optimize on-site for blended search is by adding a photo gallery and/or newsroom. A photo gallery with properly tagged images is a strong indicator to search engines that these images are relevant to your brand, and a newsroom can help produce additional content as well as links to existing content — bolstering your primary search ranking.

Off-site Blended Search Optimization

To help sidestep the two-listing SERP limitation, it is necessary to extend your blended search strategy to other websites.

Individual pages can have good ranking when they're on a strong domain. By uploading content to established sites you can benefit in two ways. First, you help ensure that content has good ranking for your brand name. Second, you can leverage the authority of that domain by linking back to your site and pages from your profile.

News: Mainstream news media coverage can require public relations expertise, which can be costly and time consuming. The alternative to ranking in Google News is to issue press releases through major online newswires.

Create two versions of your release; one for your site, and one for the wire services. Separate versions will keep Google from marking it as duplicate content, but make sure your brand appears in the title and body of both several times. Then, submit to a newswire that is respected by Google News — there are several affordable options including PRWeb and PR Leap. Finally, only after it's live and has been indexed by Google News, consider submitting it to free newswires — but verify they are indexed in Google News before investing the time to do so.

Images: Popular photo sharing services such as Flickr and Photobucket offer an added channel to distribute branded content. Again, make sure to use appropriate keywords to name all the image files before uploading them, add tags, and write image descriptions. Then consider embedding these hosted images on your blog, taking the opportunity to use title and alt tags.

Video: Optimizing video content for blended search is much like optimizing images. Simply name your video files descriptively, upload them to popular hosting sites, give them relevant titles and tags, and then embed them on your blog or website, adding descriptive title and alt tags as mentioned above.

Social Media: Your brand can also capture more real estate in the SERPs by link-building your video and photo accounts, and setting up other branded profiles on popular social networks such as Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook. Start by linking profiles from your corporate site with appropriate anchor text such as “my brand on Twitter” —blog sidebars and corporate “about” and “community” pages are great places for such backlinks.

The key to optimized social media profiles is keeping them active. Aside from idle profiles not ranking well, they also reflect poorly on a brand by making it seem apathetic and anti-social.

Managing Visibility

Blended search optimization can be an effective way to manage your brand's real estate on “the new front page.” It can help you both capture additional listings in the SERPs, and have those listings stand out from the competition.

That said, it won't replace proper search engine optimization. Before search engines can properly identify all of your brand's online content, they must identify the brand itself — and that means ensuring that your site's code and content are both giving search engines the right impression. ■

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