White Paper

Universal Search results in the Google SERPs

- Review 2012 and Forecast 2013: USA -

Executive Summary

This white paper is an analysis of Universal Search integrations in Google search results and specifically their distribution, number and development in the USA for 2012. Here, universal integrations is taken to mean the integrations of video, image, map, shopping or news results within the organic search listings that Google displays.

The significant trends highlighted in the study, which is based on an analysis of google.com search results for a data set of millions of keywords over the course of 2012, include:

- A dramatic reduction in the number and proportion of shopping integrations displayed in Google search results during 2012 - which appears to coincide with the switch to a paid model for Google shopping in the USA.
- A reduction in the number of video integrations which have long been the most frequently displayed integration.
- An increase in the number of news integrations and a rise in the overall number of news sources for which news integrations are displayed.

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What is Universal Search?

Since April 2007, search engine results listings have been more than just a series of 10 blue links. Almost six years ago now, Google began to integrate boxes containing additional media, which appear between the actual organic search results which, depending on how relevant they are to the search query, also generate higher click rates.

This extension to include, for example, videos, images, maps, shopping results or news in Google SERPs (search engine results pages) is generally known as Universal Search integration, sometimes also referred to as "enhanced search" or "blended search".

Overview of integrations

In search engine history, there have been - and still are - various forms of integration in Universal Search, some of which vary considerably in relevance. This study has examined the following forms of integration, which are considered to be the most important:

- Videos
- Images
- Maps
- Shopping
- News

Influences

The number, position and frequency of universal integrations vary not only depending on the search (= keywords), but are also influenced by personal search history, which is determined in turn by user behavior and also depends, among other things, on whether the user is logged into Google, whether he is searching using the Google Chrome browser, where his IP is located and whether cookies are being saved, etc. Last but not least, Google itself continually changes the variations of these types of integration.

Topicality of data

The data was collected for the whole of 2012, from January to December.

Data pool

This analysis is based on search results for several million keywords analyzed over the course of 2012. The data pool was generally consisted of the first five pages of search results. But for some detailed analyses, only the first of the SERPs was used – news results, for example, are only displayed on the first page.

An initial, general observation from the data: over the whole of 2012, in the USA, the proportion of keywords with at least one Universal Search integration declined.

At the beginning of 2012 the proportion was still about 86%, but over the year it fell to 75% by December. It seems that Google is optimizing Universal Search and is actually only displaying additional results when the user is expecting them.

1. Movement in Universal Search

Video and shopping integrations are declining, images and news are gaining ground

Over the course of 2012 there was considerable movement in Universal Search. If one considers the distribution of integrations of videos, shopping, images, maps and news, a clear trend becomes apparent from about halfway through the year: image integrations gain at the expense of video one boxes, which have had a substantial lead for many years. Moreover, shopping integrations are falling, for which there may be a good reason.

Enhancing the result pages for certain searches with integrations is an extremely important factor in Google's aim of wanting to always deliver "the best results" to the user for his/her specific search as quickly as possible.

Ideally, Universal Search makes further queries by the searcher unnecessary, avoiding a search having to be extend into the area of long-tail keywords (i.e. the performed search gets longer because the user adds detail to the search term if he has not found the expected result initially). This means that with the integration of media into the SERPs, Google provides the optimum range of interpretation of the user's intention. This increases the likelihood of meeting the user's demands successfully and simultaneously minimizes the search effort and the number of queries whilst upholding the intention of the search. In short, the user should be able to find exactly what he is looking for as quickly as possible.

Universal Search: Distribution of the types of integration in the USA

The following graphic shows the market shares of the individual types of integration within google.com:

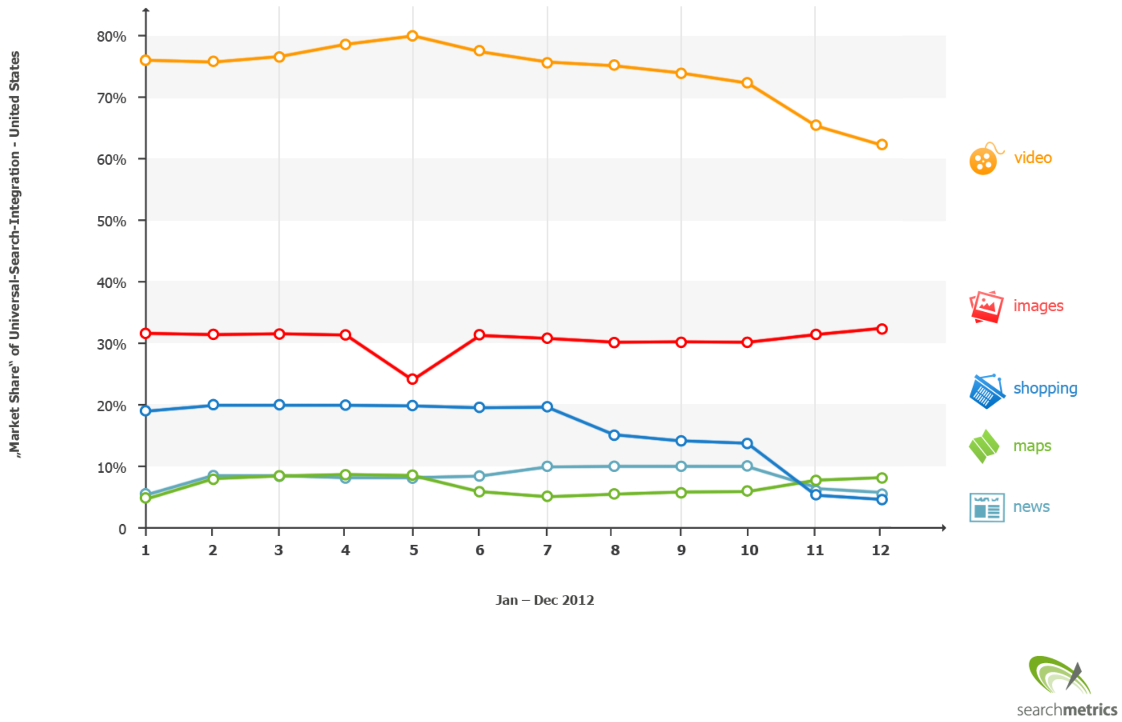
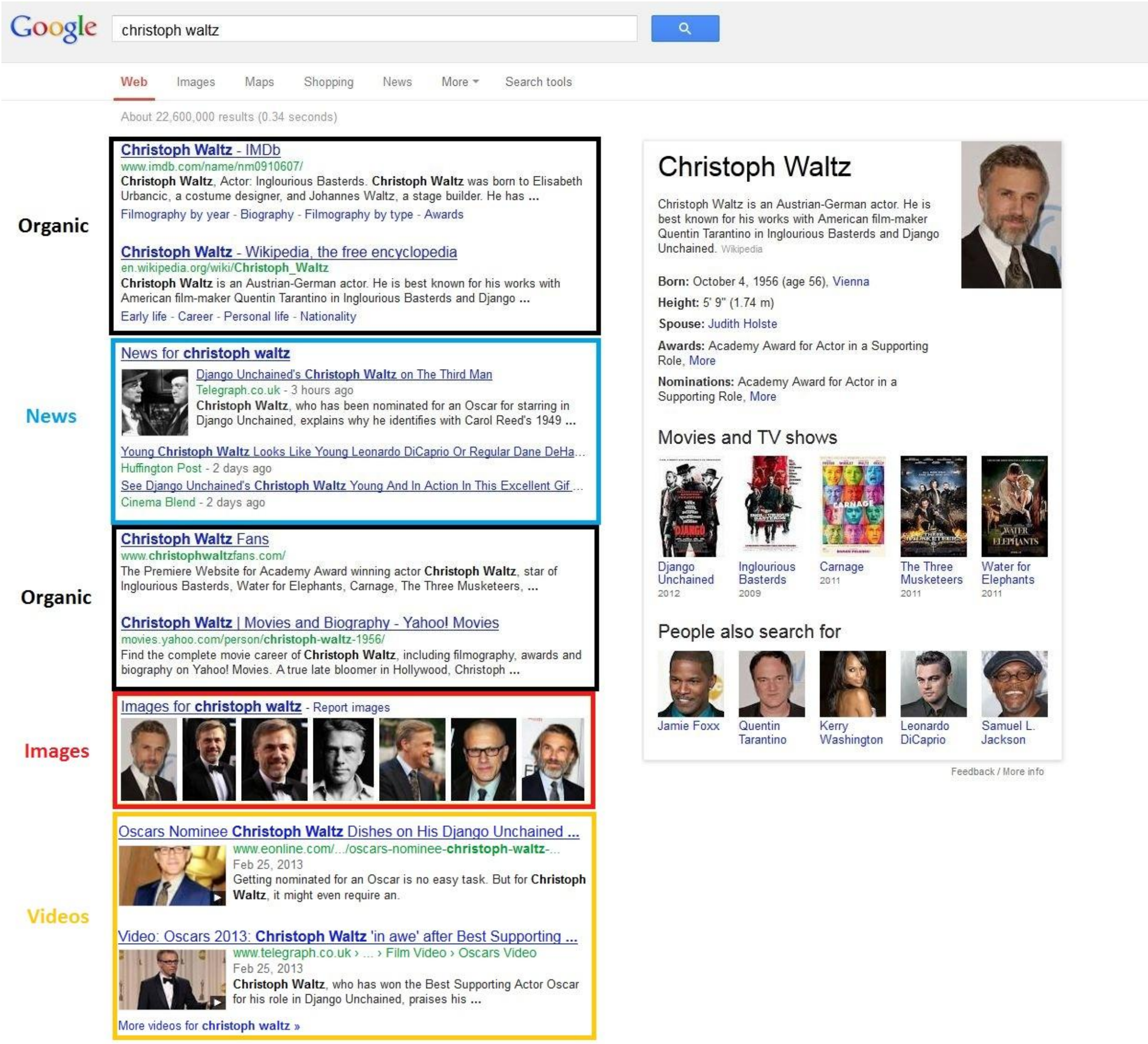


Chart 1: Universal Search US – Market share in %

Note: Although there are search results without Universal Search integrations as well, the total sum of all One Boxes is, of course, over 100%. Often several integrations are displayed simultaneously for a given keyword. In a search for Austrian-German actor, "Christoph Waltz", for example, all news (Oscar winner, for instance) and images and videos (film trailers and interviews) are integrated.



Screen shot 1: Search results page for the keyword "Christoph Waltz" (edited)

Turning to the analysis, there was hardly any change to the distribution of market shares before the spring. Video has long been the most important form of Universal Search integration, followed at some distance by image integrations and shopping results. Nearly all of the curves remain very stable until March/April, with one exception: the integration of videos peaked slightly after March, before falling back gently in July through August to the starting figure of the spring. Since then the percentage share of video integrations in Universal Search has fallen continuously.

The reasons for the increase include the (sporting) events in the summer of 2012 – firstly the UEFA European Championship in Poland and Ukraine (8 June to 1 July), closely followed by the Olympic Games in London (25 July to 12 August). The video peak was accompanied by a fall in image integrations.

To digress for a moment to make an international comparison, this trend was significantly stronger in Germany. There increase in video One Boxes over the same period in Germany was much greater (which may be because the degree of importance or public awareness of the events, which was much lower in the USA).

The curves only become really interesting when one considers their progress over the second half of the year. While the trend for integrations of maps remains almost constant - and the curve relating to news integrations gets interesting when potential growth is studied more closely (more on this later) - the developments in Universal Search for video, images and shopping are very interesting.

In the USA, the number of shopping integrations declined continuously in Universal Search from July 2012 onwards. The decline, which amounts to over 50%, took place in several stages – a slow downward trend up to October 2012, followed by a big drop in November.

It seems as if Google was actively involved in this. At least, an examination of individual shopping integrations leads to an extremely revealing insight, which will subsequently play a role.

First, let's return to the integrations of images and videos. Why are these so important? One thing is clear – visuals matter. Images and videos bring traffic. There is a good reason why it is said that "a picture says more than a thousand words". The expressive power of an image captures the viewer’s attention much more quickly than text, however short. Videos also have a very high click rate because of the prominent form in which they are displayed – and their popularity has been demonstrated by tests which examined the click rates for text compared with video.

Currently, the status of video as the most prominent integration seems to be slowly changing. And although the proportion of images in Universal Search integrations did not increase in an unusual way in 2012, image integrations did increase continuously over the whole year in absolute numbers (Chart 2). In other words: image integrations are showing up in search results for more (different) keywords.

By contrast, the proportion of video integrations has declined considerably following the brief peak. Although images have not (yet) become video killers in Universal Search, a trend is becoming clear.

To sum up: all the curves are relatively stable at first, but towards the end of the year both video and shopping (in "stages") lost significant ground, while image, map and news integrations increased.

These tendencies are confirmed by a detailed analysis focusing on the percentage growth rates of the individual integrations.

Percentage trends in Universal Search integrations in detail

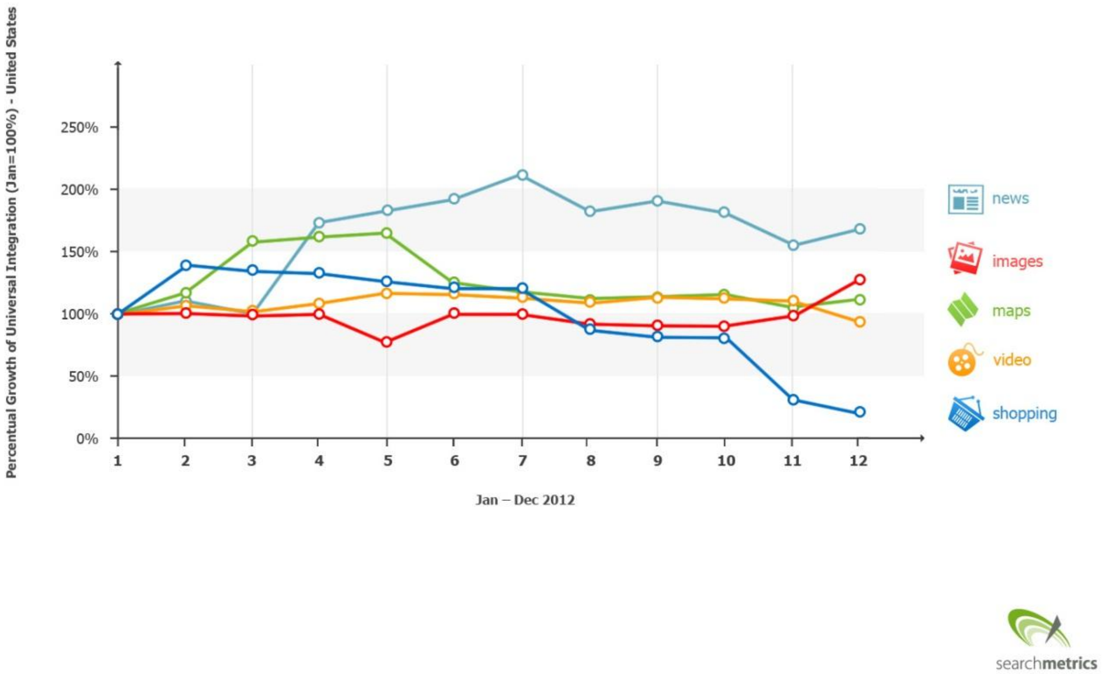


Chart 2: Universal US – Growth in %

The second chart clearly shows the increase in image integrations, the decline in video (comparatively "slight" over the course of the year) and the (by contrast, drastic) drop in shopping One Boxes. Once more, the latter is particularly clear here. Equally noteworthy in this context, however, is the obvious rise in news integrations in Universal Search, which amounts to about 160% in the USA over the whole of 2012 and which was not evident at all in Chart 1.

Map integrations in Universal Search, on the other hand, showed positive growth at the start of the year but fell away again towards the end of the year.

The comparison of integrations in Universal Search will be followed by a detailed analysis of individual types of integration hereafter. Particularly interesting are, of course, the losers: video and shopping.

2. Shopping: Google as market leader

A reminder: shopping integrations in the USA have declined in terms of market share when compared with the other integrations and also number of shopping integrations fell (far) below 50% in terms of percentage growth

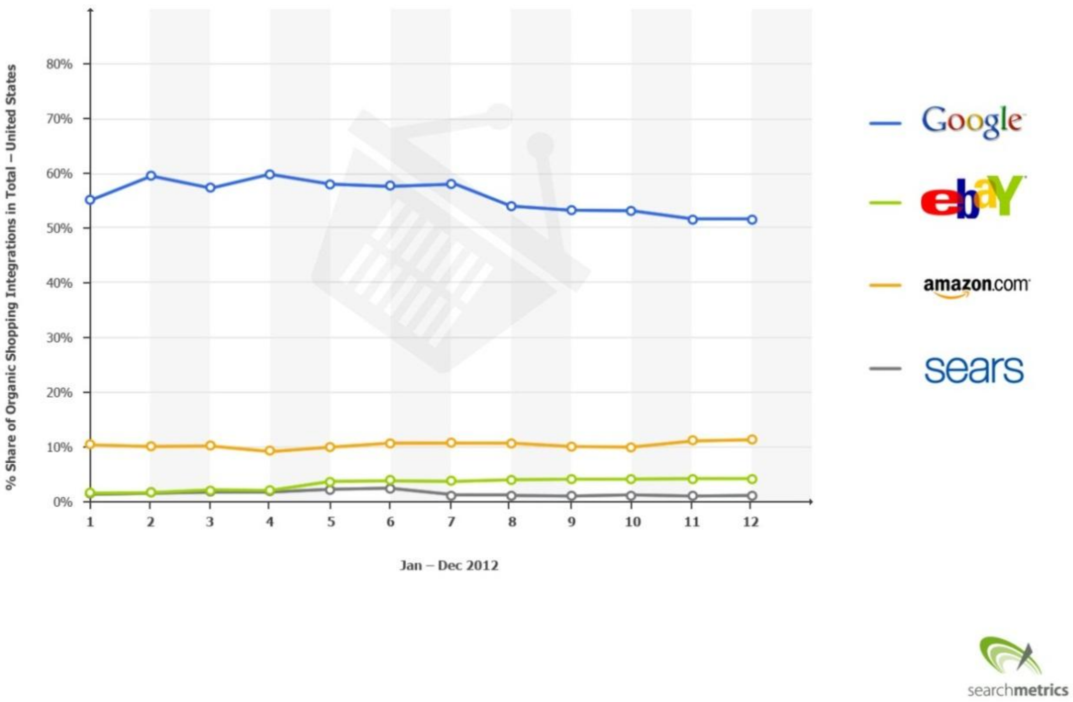


Chart 3: Shopping US – Market share in %

If one subsequently examines shopping integrations broken down by "competitors" or "sources of shopping integrations" in USA, it is noticeable that the number of Google integrations was far above that of its competitors even at the beginning of the year.

From the middle of 2012 very few direct links to shopping providers such as Amazon or Sears were shown in the Universal Search integrations. Rather, in the shopping boxes Google primarily provides links to results pages within Google itself. The offers from other providers are then brought together (these pages were not part of this analysis). From there, users can then click through to the provider or to product pages.

In the USA, there has been a charge for inclusion and display on these Google shopping pages since the middle of 2012. Google now requires providers to pay for the privilege of appearing in shopping integrations. At the same time, it is noticeable that the presentation or listing of shopping results within Google shopping is not sorted by product price.

3. Video integrations: YouTube as the market leader

YouTube, Google's own video service since the takeover at the end of 2006, has been the measure of all things as far as video integrations in Universal Search are concerned. The other providers, which include not just those who offer video services, have a very low market share – even when combined – and this also declines slightly over the course of the year.

Video integrations in the course of 2012

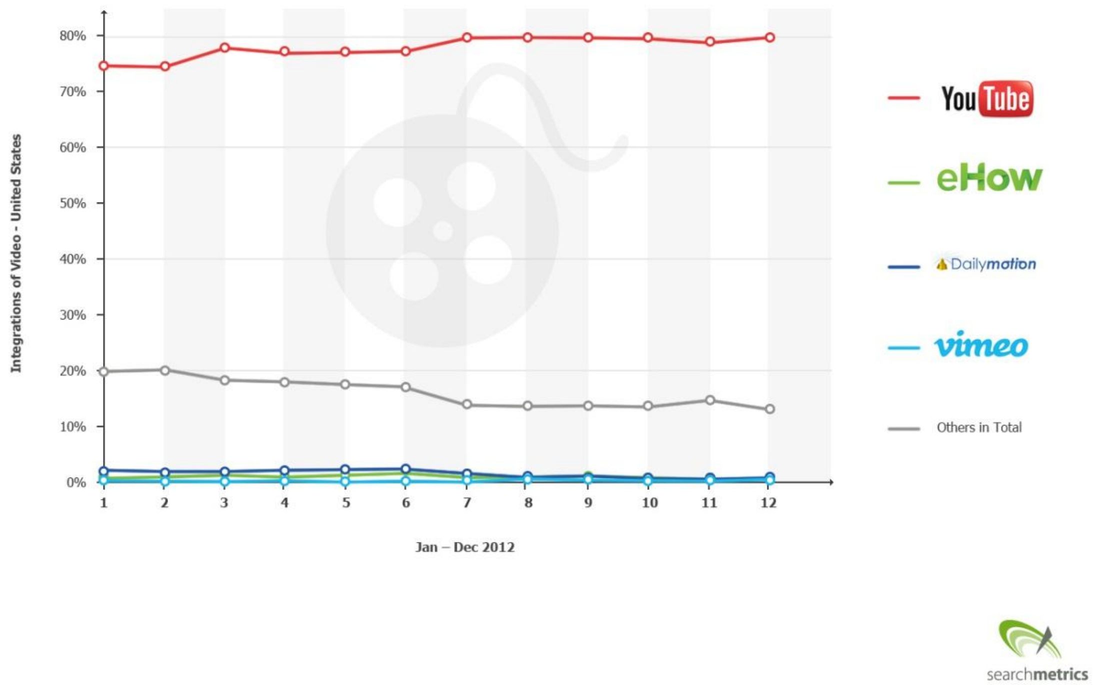


Chart 4: Video US – Market share in %

In the USA, there was little movement in 2012. A slight upward trend in YouTube at the expense of its competitors is barely noticeable.

Both halfway through the year and at its end, the proportion of YouTube integrations rose in comparison to the competition. As you might expect, this trend is reversed among the competitors.

The special case of Germany: Irrelevance of video because of the GEMA block

As with shopping integrations, about eight out of 10 video integrations in Universal Search in the USA are from Google itself. Building on this, we will now briefly digress and attend to the peculiarities of video integrations in Google Germany.

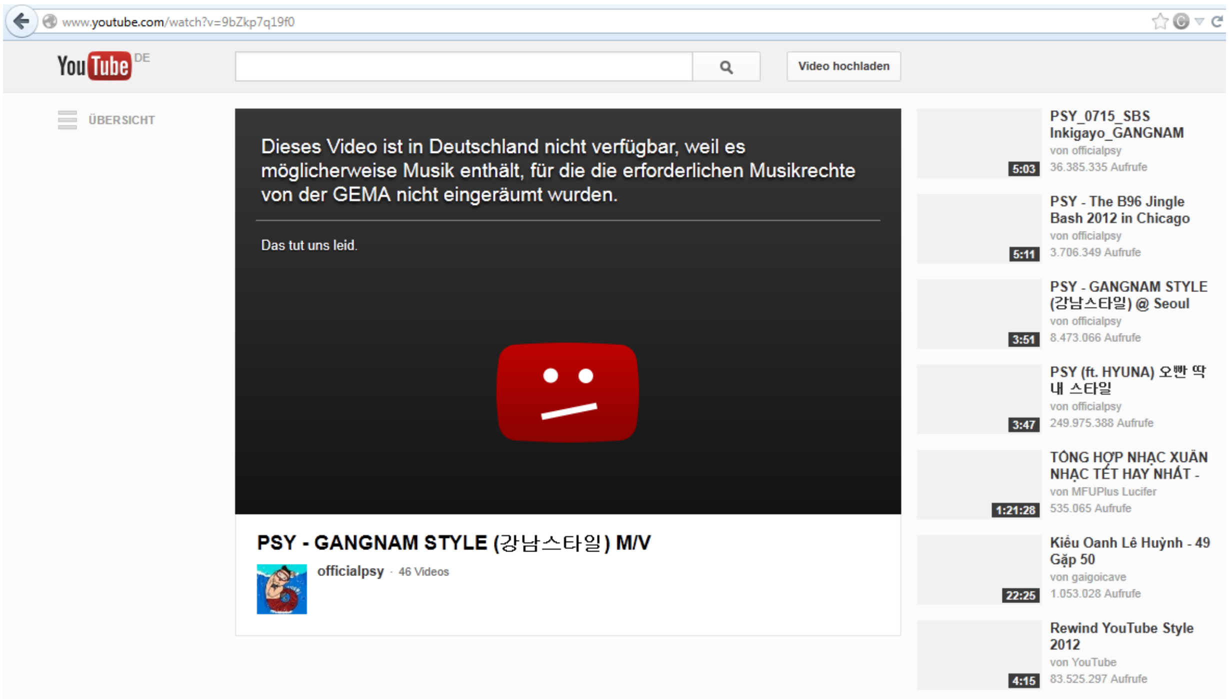
One peculiarity about Google.de distinguishes the German market from the US market as far as the usability of integrated videos is concerned: the role of the "Gesellschaft für musikalische Aufführungs- und mechanische Vervielfältigungsrechte" (Society for Musical Performance and Mechanical Duplication Rights), abbreviated to “GEMA”.

In Germany, a considerable proportion of videos on YouTube cannot be played as a result of copyright legislation monitored by GEMA, which represents the proprietary rights of the music industry (or the participants in it) as a state-certified collecting society. The proportion of YouTube videos that are blocked in Germany in the SERPs will be part of a separate investigation of Universal Search by Searchmetrics. However, some recent studies from third parties in this connection suggest that about 60% of the most popular videos are blocked in Germany[1].

Figures that have not (yet) been verified by Searchmetrics suggest nonetheless what seems to be a clear trend: despite the irrelevance resulting from the GEMA confinement, Google does display certain videos to the user in the SERPs.

Both the general perception and sampling supports this thesis. In 2012, for example, no video was clicked on more often than "Gangnam Style" by the South Korean artist Psy. The clicks on the music video with that title had already far exceeded the billion mark before the end of the year. The YouTube video, together with the artist's YouTube channel, was always high up in the German rankings. Clicking on the video, however, always led to a blocked image with a link to GEMA.

[1] Source: OpenDataCity / Datenjournalist, on welt.de "Deutschland ist Spitzenreiter beim YouTube-Sperren", 28.01.2013. http://www.welt.de/wirtschaft/article113175744/Deutschland-ist-Spitzenreiter-beim-YouTube-Sperren.html



Screen shot 2: "Gangnam Style" video on YouTube – Blocking by GEMA

The rankings on the first result page for this keyword were in fact slightly different in our observation period – and in some cases competitors ranked ahead of YouTube; but the irrelevant YouTube video of "Gangnam Style" always remained among the top search results, even though it cannot be viewed in Germany. This is just one of many examples.

Video rankings by provider

The following chart compares the average initial position of a video integration from YouTube with that of its competitors. The basis is the first two search result pages:

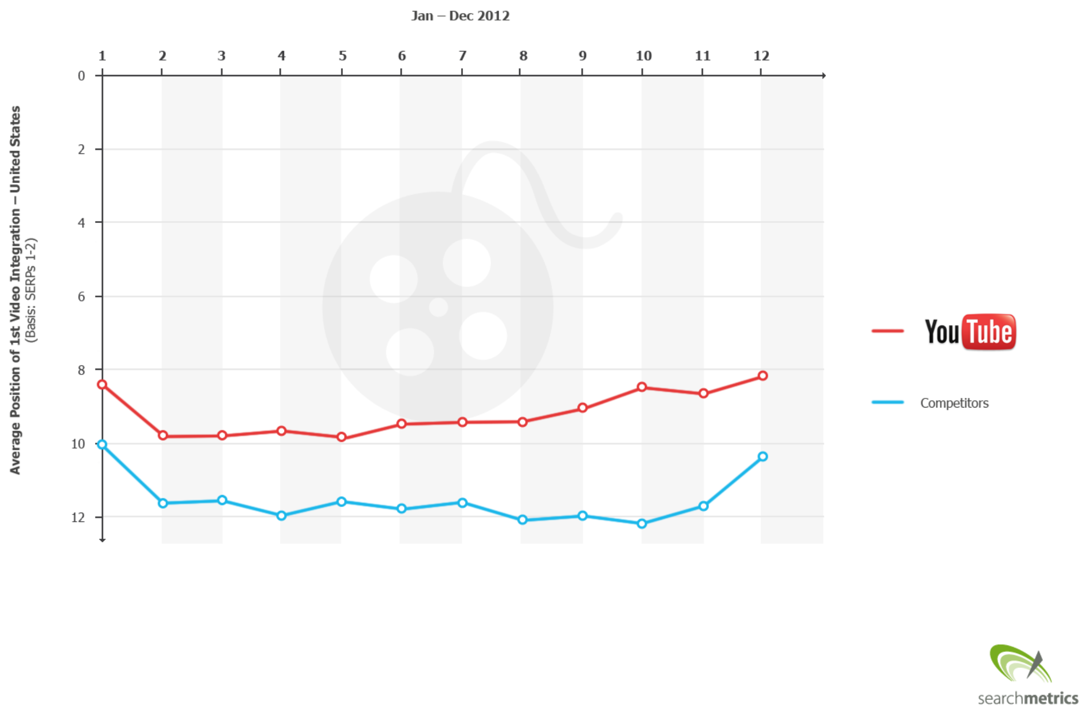


Chart 5: Video US – Average position of 1st video integration (SERP 1-2)

In the USA, the average first video integration of YouTube is about two positions ahead of the average first position of a competitor's video. In February, both curves dropped by two positions, but towards the end of the year climbed back to the starting level; the relative distance tended to remain constant, except for the October and November figures.

It is well known that one of Google's most important principles is to always provide the user with the best search results. Going back to the situation in Germany referred to above, the question we should ask is: how relevant is a blocked video to a user performing a search? The answer is of course obvious: the relevance is virtually zero. However, those videos that (should) have a significantly greater relevance in the search results (if the YouTube video is blocked by GEMA), namely those of competitors, rank considerably lower.

In other words, the Google algorithm means that, on the basis of the ranking factor, the YouTube result is of course very high from an objective-technical point of view, even if it is not the most relevant. A very large number of video views outside Germany and very strong external links simply predestine this page to be the best result from the theoretical perspective of the algorithm. In practice, however, this does not apply in Germany. This exposes a weakness in the Google algorithm.

For example, with search terms for which there is both a German (to take Germany as an example again) and an international offer of a brand it is frequently noticeable that the international offer ranks higher in Germany – despite the English content and certainly a higher bounce rate than the German version. This is clear, for example, with imdb.com.

The US version of the film database frequently ranks higher in Germany than imdb.de. Google's algorithm here includes a very large number of general parameters, instead of country-specific ones, which explains the imdb.com ranking and probably the YouTube ranking too – even if these are not the most relevant results nationally.

So why does Google show its users a large percentage of virtually useless search results? Despite all of the explanations based on the algorithm, the overriding suspicion is that the search-engine company would like to pass the dispute with GEMA on to the users, who will tend to complain about GEMA when they click on a blocked video, rather than about Google's video portal.

4. News integrations: Number and sources increasing

The growth in the distribution of news integrations is made very clear in charts 3 and 4. As far as percentages are concerned, news is the integration that shows the biggest proportional increase in 2012. In other words, there are more and more keywords for which news integrations are displayed. Not only that, but the number of integrated news items per One Box is increasing as well.

The question that arises is whether Google is merely showing a wider range of news from the same providers or whether it has also increased its circle of news suppliers (domains). Is it just the number of news items that is increasing, or the number of news sources too?

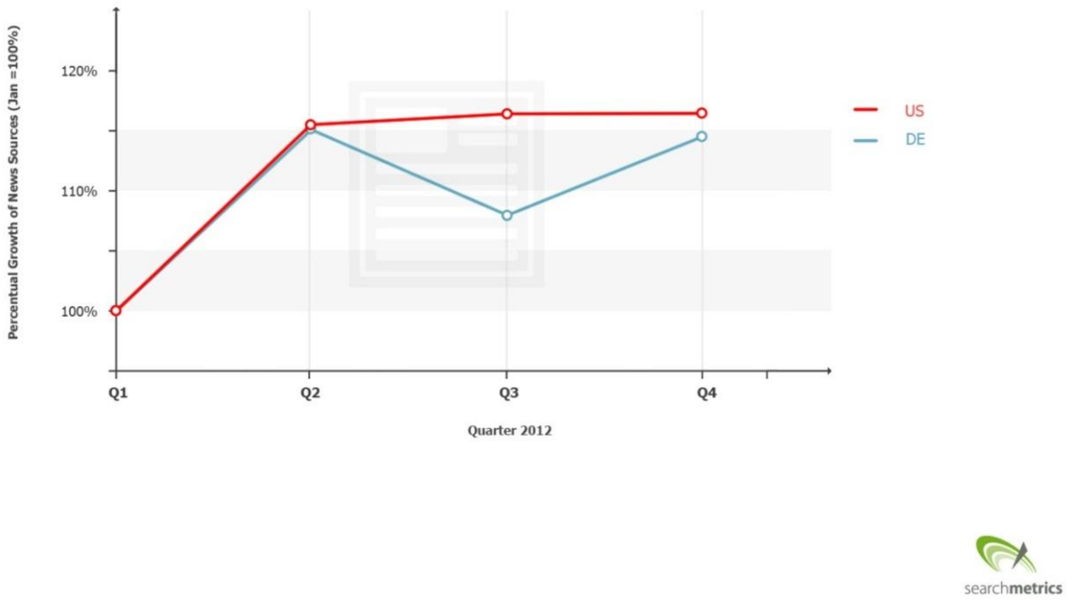


Chart 6: News Sources DE / US – Growth in %

Chart 6 shows that, from the first to the second quarter of 2012 in particular, the number of news sources has risen significantly. This tendency matches the curve showing the growth in integrations over the same period (see Chart 2).

So the increase in news integrations in Universal Search is linked to an increase in news sources. Not only are more news items therefore being shown from the same news sites, but in the course of 2012 a wider variety of news providers were represented in Universal Search than at the beginning of the year.

This is a good sign, as greater diversity is desirable in the field of news. Opportunities therefore also open up for small providers to position themselves well in the field of news and to attract a lot of traffic through news integration, which is usually shown right at the top in current results.

Summary of Universal Search 2012

Summary of the most important developments in Universal Search in 2012:

Video integrations have fallen continuously since the middle of 2012, after a brief increase at the beginning of the year, whereas the integration of images in Universal Search has increased slowly but steadily, especially in absolute figures.

Shopping is THE loser in 2012. This will probably continue in 2013, as Google will be including only shopping ads that have been paid for in the long term. This approach has now been introduced in several countries. Most recently, Google launched paid shopping listings in Europe in February 2013.

The percentage of map integrations has remained more or less constant or has increased slightly. News integrations have roughly doubled in terms of percentage growth – and the number of news sources has also risen.

As far as the detailed analysis of the two losers – shopping and video integrations – is concerned, a preference for Google products is evident within these types of integration. Eight out of ten video integrations come from Google (YouTube). As far as shopping is concerned, too, three out of four integrations are from Google shopping.

In general, Google tends to cut back on displaying Universal Search integrations in the search results. In the USA, the proportion of keywords with integration has declined by about 10% in the course of 2012.

About Searchmetrics

Searchmetrics is a pioneer and leading international provider of search and social analytics software for enterprises and online agencies. With its unique server infrastructure and software solution – Searchmetrics Suite™ – Searchmetrics helps its customers and partners by aggregating and evaluating large quantities of data covering website rankings, keywords and relevant competitor groups.

Searchmetrics Suite™ offers a unique insight in search engine and social media visibility of websites in 124 countries. This insight is of vital importance for companies engaged in inbound marketing because prominent visibility in search engines is indispensable in getting their content seen by potential customers online.

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