



## The State of Search in 2012

By Mary Bowling

Those of us immersed in Search work in a world that moves at warp speeds and changes continually at a lightning-fast pace. So, each year it's wise for us to stop, take a breath and consider what has happened in the past year and consider what uncharted paths Search may take us down next.

We step back from the day to day details, try to focus on the big picture and look for patterns that give us clues as to what Search may become in the future.

When I first started thinking about this article, I naturally thought I'd write about the different types of Search that are most important to us as marketers: Organic Web Search, Local Search, Mobile Search and Social Search.

But as I tried to organize my ideas, I realized that there really is a seismic shift taking place in our universe. Web Search used to be the sun and everything else revolved around it.

Ready or not, as we travel into our future, Social will be at the center of our universe.

## **The Shift to Social**

Social has moved beyond Search, it now has a life of its own that is often independent of Search. Our desktops, laptops, mobile phones and tablets are high-powered tools that we use to be social and Search is just a part of their function.

As we move into 2012, this is what I believe everyone involved in our industry needs to come to grips with. And we need to encourage our clients to realize it as well, since being social is now a critical strategy for successfully marketing online.

We can see this happening on the screens of our devices both large and small. Bing and Google integrate Social into Search at every opportunity.

Bing has Facebook, Twitter and Nokia deals along with Skype, which it will leverage as much as possible.

Google is doggedly consolidating its social efforts into Google+. The addition of Google+ pages for businesses and brands may be the impetus it needs for wide scale adoption. But, if you don't go to Google+, you can be assured that Google will bring Plus to you, as it will be integrated into all things Google.

However, through all of this we need to remember that the audience will be the determining factor as to whether a business adopts particular social platforms or not. We should not try to dictate to our customers and prospects where to interact with us. Instead, we need to go where they are, not only to interact with our current audiences, but to grow those audiences and grow our level of interaction with them.

It's no longer going to be enough for a business to have a community manager or two sitting in a cubicle orchestrating their social presence. We've found a lot of automated ways to be social, but users are becoming increasingly sophisticated in identifying and dismissing them. True engagement will gain in trust and value in 2012.

Customers now expect brands to be listening and responding to them online. So, the most successful organizations will have an ever-increasing percentage of socially savvy people on staff who can exercise their business skills in online social environments as a part of their daily tasks.

Businesses will find even more new ways to use Social to attract and interact with audiences. Customer service departments will increasingly communicate with their customers in real time via social media. Product testing and development will also move into a social spotlight as more brands realize the incredible power of engaging influencers online.

## **Web Search**

We are just seeing the tip of the iceberg with Search and Social. Social sharing will increasingly affect Search results and Web Search will become even more personalized as greater numbers of searchers recognize the benefits of signing in to see what their social circles are doing, saying and recommending.

In 2012, the Web will become even more democratized. Social shares are the new links, enabling everyone who is online to influence what they and their circles of friends see. Instead of webmasters voting with links from their Web pages, we can all *like, follow, share, rate* and

*review* to show the Search Engines what we feel is the best content on the Web.

So, your content needs to be more popular among Internet users than other content about your topic on the Web as Bing and Google continue to raise the bar for ranking well in their search results. It will be difficult to rely on just a few stellar pages bringing links and traffic to your Web site. Instead, you'll need to create reference-grade content throughout your Web site and eliminate pages with low-quality content.

You need to be a trusted, authoritative source of information on your topic. And you need to make that content both sharable and popular so that it will rise to the top of the Search results.

Freshness will continue to help your pages rank well, so you need to regularly add new content and time stamp it, so its freshness is clear. Viral content that you actively push out across social sites will have the greatest impact since it is likely to spur immediate engagement. Become a Google News source, if you can, and consider publishing more Press Releases focused on newsworthy topics.

Google's current focus on freshness has hurt some great evergreen content. If you're experiencing this, it's time to repurpose that content on a new URL and introduce it to new audiences.

## **Local Search**

It's estimated that somewhere around 20% of all searches are local in nature. With reviews, ratings, check-ins and socialized shopping playing a prominent role in Local Search, it is already very social and will become even more so in 2012.

Bing Local is focused on building social partnerships and adding useful new features for searchers and businesses.

Google is taking Local Search into the streets with community managers, city-specific Twitter streams, sponsored local events, Get Your Business Online initiatives, *MapUps*, *Business Photo Shoots*, *Offers* and *AdWords Express*.

Customer service for Google Places will continue to improve because Places is closely tied to an increasing base of small advertisers and those business owners are demanding it.

Google has made several forays into crowdsourcing business data with some undesirable side effects. It must now think it has a handle on it, so expect an increase in crowdsourced information about local businesses and other places in 2012. This will be done with the help of human reviewers at MapMaker and Places and mobile users relaying their edits in real time from real places.

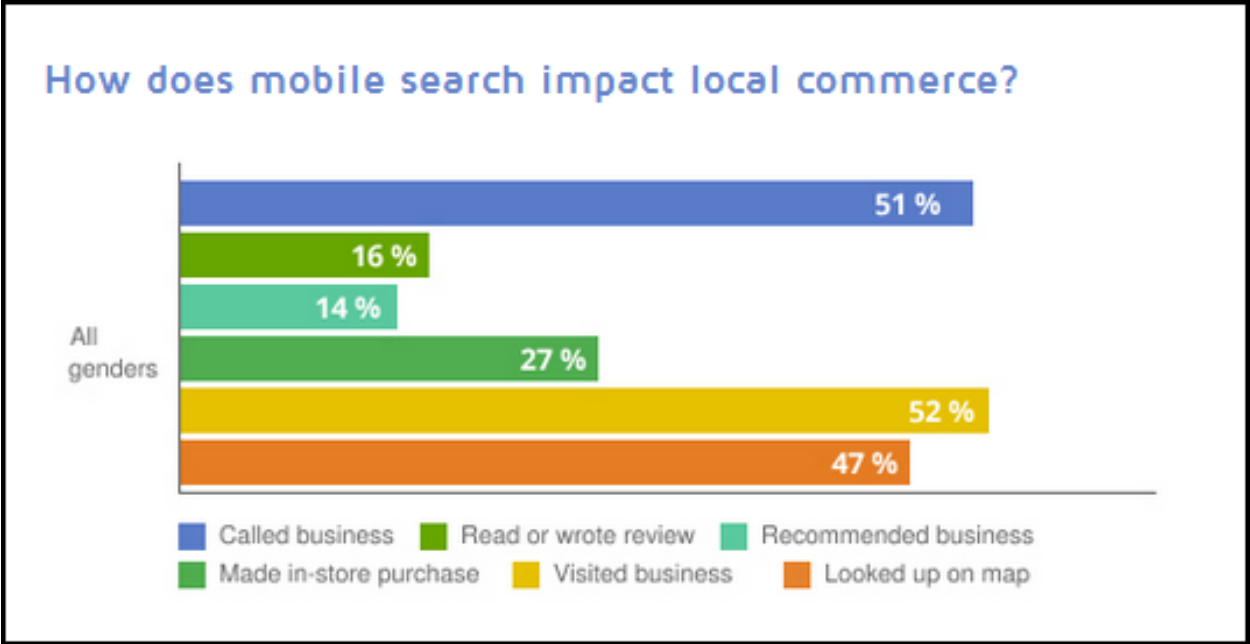
One of the best ways Bing Local and Google Places can attract new businesses to their directories is by proving value, so expect them to find new ways to help businesses measure the offline success of their online Local Search efforts in 2012.

## **Mobile Search**

Even dumb phones are totally social. Smartphones combine that socialness with Search, especially Local Search. On mobile devices Local Search intent is assumed. Google estimates that 40% of searches from Mobile devices are local in nature and tells us that 14% of the clicks from Google Search come from mobile devices. Over the past year, it

has not been uncommon for Web sites to see triple digit, year-over-year growth in visits to their Web sites from mobile devices.

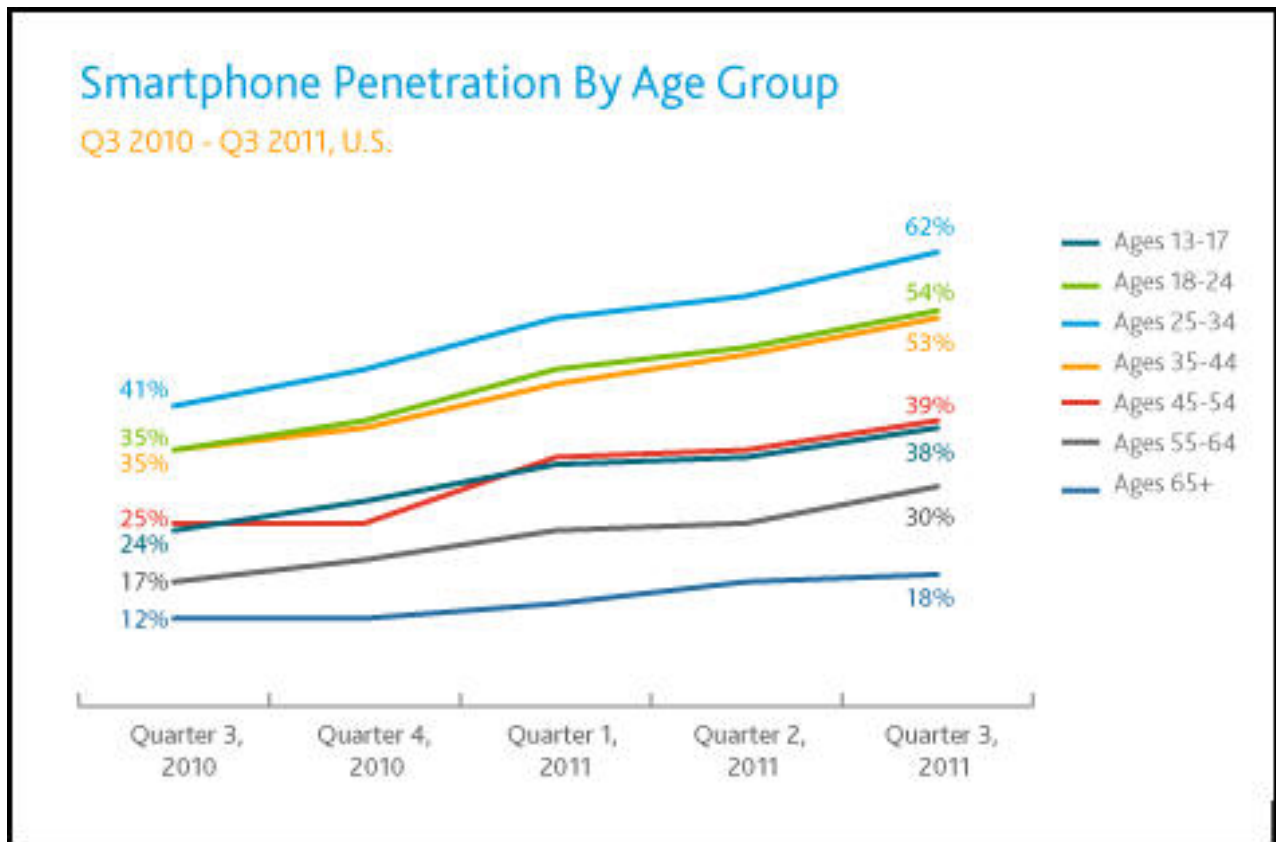
Google tells us that it anticipates 44% of the searches for store locations and last minute gifts to come from mobile devices this holiday season. Being listed on local maps will become increasingly critical for businesses, since mobile users are often using maps apps or apps with maps when searching for places to shop.



Source: <http://www.ourmobileplanet.com/>

We've tipped the scales in Mobile and this growth is likely to become even more explosive in 2012, as smartphone adoption is fueled by faster networks, better devices with more functionality, greater file compression, an enormous library of apps, consumer fascination with personal electronics and the hope that our economy is improving.

It's estimated that between 37 and 43% of all mobile phones in the US are now smartphones. While usage is growing in all age categories, more than half of mobile subscribers under 45 now use smartphones.



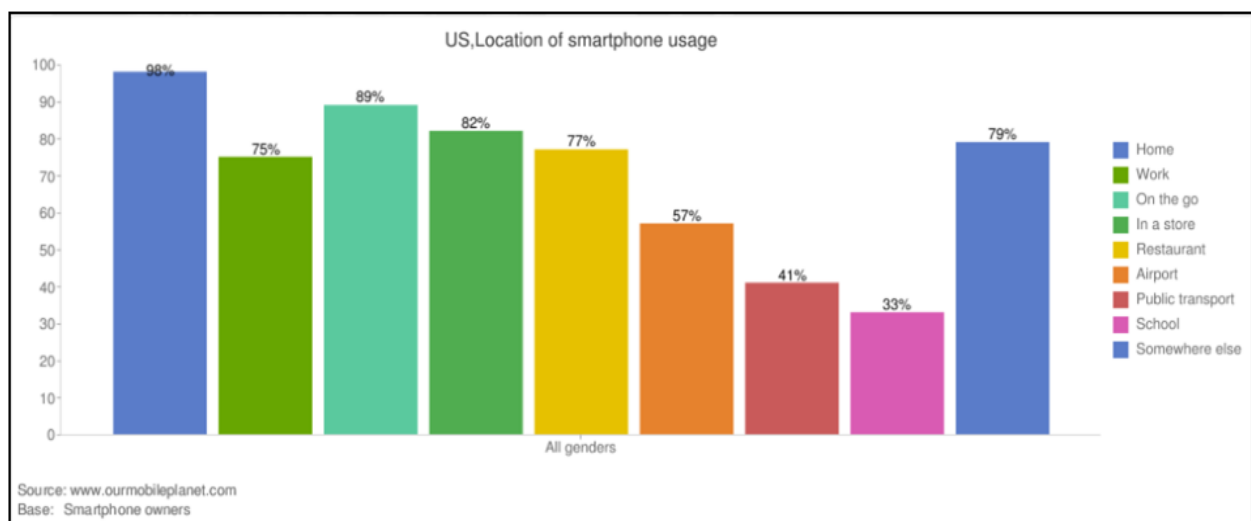
Source: <http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/>

Those who don't have an Internet-enabled mobile device don't really comprehend the impact they have on Internet usage and user habits, especially among the young. People are using these devices in unexpected ways. They consider them as replacements for a laptop and a way to stay wired 24/7 regardless of their location or activity.

We tend to think of tablets as replacements for laptops, but tablet users are quickly finding ways to communicate via voice using their

devices, prompting some of them to give up their smartphones as well as their laptops.

Mobile users are almost always engaged. They are signed into their accounts at Google, Facebook, Twitter, Foursquare, and so on, so they seamlessly flow between mobile search, local search, product search, interaction on social sites, entertainment, email, text messaging and voice communication.



Source: <http://www.ourmobileplanet.com/>

Users will find more new ways to use their mobile devices in 2012 and business and brands will find new ways to connect with them via strategies like geo-fencing apps that successfully meld push and pull advertising together into a ubiquitous marketing mashup.

Expect the distinctions between Web Search, Local Search, Mobile Search and Social interaction to become even blurrier in 2012.



## **My Wish List for 2012**

I wish Google and Bing will give us more rather than less data regarding traffic and engagement, including better data about Local and Mobile Searches.

I wish Bing and Google will both enable simple, free call tracking via Google Voice and Skype. In my opinion, this is the single best thing they can do to prove their value - to undeniably prove their value - to small business owners and those who do their marketing.

I wish Google and Bing would update their Local results more quickly and that they GREATLY improve their support and transparency for listing businesses.

I wish that all small business owners stop fearing and despising reviews and ratings and instead think of them as a way to improve their products and services and to attract new customers to their doors.

I also hope that all businesses embrace Social media and happily integrate it into all of their online marketing efforts, since social is now the center of the wired universe.