COLUMNS

Four metrics for adding neighborhood-level data to go hyper-local

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Web sites and mobile applications which present information in terms that reflect local context resonate better with target users and will win in the long run.

This statement may seem obvious, but with the rapidly expanding number of services available to consumers, companies seeking to attract and retain users must ensure that their user experience "feels local."

Consumers have recognized the value of information organized and presented according to well-defined, culturally-recognized community areas.

Setting store by corner

In terms of geography, the common denominator for local context is clearly the neighborhood.

More than half the world's population lives in cities and that portion is estimated to grow to 70 percent by 2050.

Neighborhoods are the most common and natural way for people to talk about local places within cities, whether they are telling you where they live, where they hang-out with friends or where to find the best pizza.

A quick check of some popular Web sites will tell you that many companies, including, Google, Twitter, Trulia, HelloMetro and Yellowbook are already using neighborhood boundaries to put search, display and interactive maps into hyper-local terms for their users.

But many sites do not offer the neighborhood dimension yet and they may be missing a vital piece of the hyper-local equation.

They might use ZIP codes, Census areas or other substitutes, but these all lack cultural and local meaning.

At the same time, product and marketing professionals face a challenge in trying to make a clear and convincing business case for a relatively narrow enhancement, such as adding more intuitive search options.

Fortunately, there are now a variety of tools and techniques to help evaluate the merits and potential payoff from adding new Web and mobile capabilities.

Measure of metrics

Here are four metrics to help build a business case for adding neighborhood-level data for everything from advanced Web search to neighborhood geo-tagging on social networking sites:

1. Web search and search engine optimization: Using Google's Keyword Tool, you can quickly get a sense of expected monthly search volume on neighborhood-related keywords.

Using your standard organic and pay-per-click AdWords conversion metrics, you can calculate the number of additional visitors or users you can expect by adding search and display by neighborhood.

As an example, the Google Keyword Tool estimates that the top 100 keyword phrases including the word neighborhood' yield more than 7 million monthly searches.

A more specific search for keywords that contained the words homes and neighborhoods yielded an estimated monthly search volume in excess of 75,000.

2. Competition: If the leaders in your industry are already offering a view into data and services by neighborhood, then you need to make the move to keep pace and avoid losing valuable traffic.

Conversely, if you can gain competitive advantage by adding this new capability, you can steal visitors from the competition and increase visitors.

One way to look at numbers associated with the competition is to track them on Alexa, a free online Web ranking service.

Alexa uses sample data from their browser toolbar to rank traffic on Web sites and allows you to track your rankings relative to your competition over time.

3. Survey: Web site visitors like to know that you are listening and one great way to solicit feedback is through short, Web surveys.

As you consider the value of adding neighborhood data to your site, get direct input from visitors.

A survey will give you direct statistical evidence and add a key dimension to your business case analysis.

4. Google Analytics: Your organization is probably already using this tool to track and measure all types of Web site metrics.

Setting up custom reports and dashboards to monitor relevant traffic tied to Web enhancements, such as better search and map display, ensures that you have the baseline numbers you need to quantify changes over time.

You can also setup Google Analytics to track click-paths through your site to see what features visitors use most.

So, whether it is adding a hyper-local dimension to your Web presentation or simply improving usability, it is clear that there are now more tools and data available than ever for managers looking to build a rational business case for Web and application enhancements.

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