

Unlocking Google's Vince Update

Wed, Sep 23, 2009 | Posted by [Dave Peiris](#)

Google's Vince update, which first affected the US results early in 2009 and then later the UK results in July, is still a mystery. It looked at first like an update designed to boost brands, as [Aaron Wall first mentioned](#) but how could Google, a search engine that relies on algorithms, possibly determine which sites were brands? [Matt Cutts](#) later announced that *'within the search ranking team we don't really think about brands'*, and mentioned that *'we try to return whatever we think the best results are for users'*. Which makes sense, but doesn't help to explain **how** brands might have received a boost.

There was some talk about how the large brands that gained a boost after Vince also frequently appeared in the *related search results*. And this is where we think we're close here's the science part (concentrate):

Theory #1

The related searches are now driven by user data

. In the past a search on something like 'hotels' used to bring up results that looked very similar to the 'hotels' keyword, almost as if it had been run through the AdWords keyword tool. Search terms like 'hotels ireland?', 'hotels in scotland?', 'hotels in newcastle?' and 'hotels england?' appeared in the related searches. At some point, quietly, around December of 2008 this changed significantly. Looking at them now for the UK (and using Google's fairly new expanded 'related searches' option) I'm seeing more brands being listed like Travelodge, Last Minute and Premier Inn. The most likely idea here is that Google is now using more user-data to populate these related searches. Theory #1 is that for high volume terms that have a large number of people refining the query, Google records all queries that are refined and the **most often searched terms following the original query form the related searches**. That sounds complex, but really it just means when people search for 'biscuits?', don't click on the results but instead search for 'mcvities?', Google records that and will list it in the related searches if enough people refine their search like that.

Theory #2

When people search for 'X?', can't find what they are looking for within the results and instead refine the query to 'Y?', and then one of the results gets a much higher click-through rate than expected (e.g. the result in position 1 gets 70% of the clicks instead of the usual 50% or so), then that listing becomes a candidate to rank for 'X?'. To put that into context, if people search for 'biscuits?' and then refine the query to 'mcvities?', and one of those results gets a huge click-through rate (which will probably be UnitedBiscuits.com who own McVities) then that result gets a chance to rank for the original search term 'biscuits?'. So, in short, **related search results that do well may be brought into the original search**.

From there, Google will also have to check how well it fares ranking on the (probably) competitive term 'biscuits?'. I'd expect it to place it anywhere in position 6-10 and then see what the click-through rate looks like. If it looks good, or was better than the result it replaced, it can stay or move up. Else, it might move down or be removed completely. So there should be a stronger focus on click-through rate for these terms,

although Google will also need to make sure that the site is authoritative and that the page is relevant to the original term so it's very likely that there'll be a stronger focus on both [authority links and keyword-rich links](#), as [Richard Baxter](#) discovered.

Can we prove these theories?

It'd be incredibly difficult to prove for sure either of those ideas because it involves user data that we don't have access to (which is probably why the Vince update so far remains unsolved), but we **can** look at things that can indicate that we're on the right lines.

Firstly, there's some evidence that Theory #1 is right, and that Google now strongly uses user-data (and particularly what people searched for after the original query) to form the related searches. Here's what happens when people search for 'time in new york'.

Related searches for **time in new york**:





time in california	world clock	current time in new york	new york stock exchange
time in los angeles	est	time difference in new york	new york times
time in london	ba	time in new york right now	dialling code for new york
time in florida	gmail	time in new york city	new york marathon
time in sydney	currency converter	local time in new york	telephone code for new york

Mixed into those related searches are 'dialling code for new york' and 'telephone code for new york'. If Theory #1 is right, that implies that people are often searching for the time zone in New York, finding out that it's waking hours and then calling someone they know, which is classic user behaviour.

Theory #1 is possibly best proved though by searching for anything that brings up a Google one-box. If someone searches for something, then finds the information without having to click through at all the next search they make will, in many cases, be completely different. They've got their answer and moved on. Let's try 'weather' with its lovely, helpful one-box.

Weather for **London** - [Change location](#) - [Add to iGoogle](#)

18°C | °F
Current: **Mostly Cloudy**
Wind: W at 10 mph
Humidity: 68%

			
Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
19°C 12°C	20°C 11°C	19°C 12°C	20°C 12°C

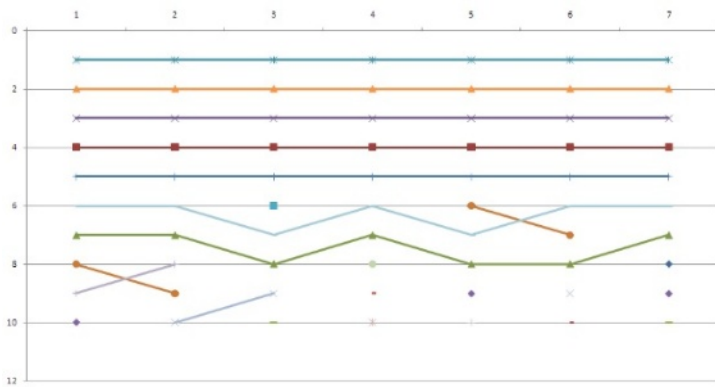
Related searches for **weather**:

facebook	ebay	bbc weather	weather uk
met office	news	weather forecast	weather london
hotmail	youtube	world weather	local weather
yahoo	bebo	10 day weather	itv weather
argos	metcheck	weather channel	weather forecast

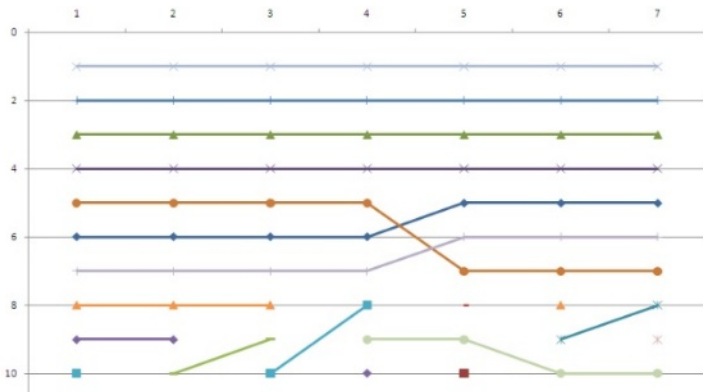
Facebook, Hotmail, Yahoo, Argos, Ebay, YouTube, Bebo ? nothing to do with the weather and everything to do with user data. Awesome.

Theory #2 is slightly harder to demonstrate, but not impossible. If Vince is all about mixing in results from related searches back into the original query then Google would most likely need to place them in a lower position (probably positions 6-10) while it tests out their click-through rates. Positions 1-5 should, in theory, be more likely to remain static so that the user experience is relatively unaffected. Tracking rankings for the generic terms 'car insurance?', 'shoes?' and 'hotels?' over a period of 7 days has led to the creation of the below graphs, days at the top and positions on the left. (I've lovingly stolen the graph idea from [SEOMoz and Distilled](#)).

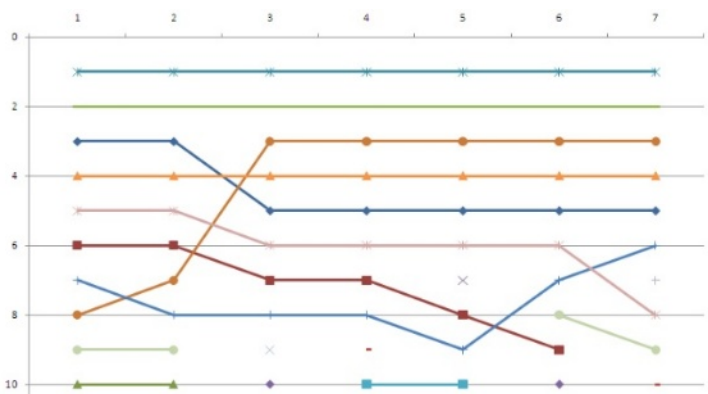
Car Insurance:



Shoes:



Hotels:



It's clear that the SERPs have been bouncing around massively in the lower half of the results, while the top listings are hardly touched.

And now for an example ? something that has been puzzling the iCrossing team since Vince was the appearance of direct.gov.uk in the car insurance SERP, it wasn't a bad page but there were probably better results that could have been there. And why did it keep dropping out and then reappearing? Check out the related searches for ?car insurance?:

Searches related to: **car insurance**

- [car insurance new drivers](#) [performance car insurance](#) [car insurance groups](#) [swift car insurance](#)
- [direct line](#) [car tax](#) [car value](#) [esure](#)

?Car tax? is an interesting related search but I can imagine why it?s there. It?s possible that there?s a huge number of people that, on buying a new car, search for car insurance and then after looking at the search results decide to instead get the car tax sorted out first. And Direct.gov.uk has the first two positions for ?car tax?, including sitelinks, so it?s click-through rate must be massive.

So, with Theory #2 in action, Google keeps trying to bring it somewhere around position 6-10 for the original search ?car insurance?, finds that the click-through rate is too low and then drops the result.

And that, folks, are some of our theories on Vince.

A joint piece of iCrossing research from [Liz Ayers](#) and [David Peiris](#)

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