

YAHOO! ADDS GREATER FUNCTIONALITY AND RELEVANCE TO BOOST ITS SEARCH MARKET SHARE

A conversation with the Director of Customer Insights, Yahoo! Search Group

The bigger the Web gets, the harder it is to find the information you need. So search is the principal starting point for many Internet users. The Google juggernaut has virtually swept the search function, to the point of actually becoming a verb in the Internet user search lexicon. But the original Internet search giant, Yahoo!, still has a significant share of the market, and tertiary players such as Ask.com are vying for a bigger slice of the search pie. Benchmark recently caught up with Michael Kronthal, director of customer insights, Yahoo! Search Group, to get his views on the state of search and Yahoo!'s ongoing technological advances in the search arena and their impact on the user experience.

Benchmark: In the most recent Keynote Customer Experience study for Internet search, Yahoo! finished a solid second across the board to Google, with the exception of home page design, where Yahoo! came in first. What kind of strategies are you exploring to try and capture some of the leadership in Internet search?

Michael Kronthal: First is really focusing on our end-users and working to deliver them the best web experience possible. We're investing aggressively in innovation in this area. Our users are key. At the same time we're investing aggressively in technology and platforms to allow us to drive innovation.

We have some new search features that have come out recently that are proof of the power of this investment to help users accomplish their web search goals.

We're focused on three key areas: Product enhancements like the recent Search Assist and some of the enhanced shortcuts; Integration with other products and services like our oneSearch on the mobile device, Yahoo! Answers and other special properties. And then key distribution and partnerships with companies like HP, Acer, as well as Apple with their iPhone.

Benchmark: Can you elaborate a little bit on the new features that you've added to the site?

Michael Kronthal: Absolutely. One of the things we know from our research is that our users struggle when they are searching

on an unfamiliar topic. They often don't even know how to start their search. So in early October we launched a significant new feature roll-out, which includes Yahoo! Search Assist. Essentially it helps users overcome one of their key pain points, which is how to craft an effective query. As they begin to type their query or their keyword into the box it suggests other keywords that might be related to what they're typing. It also provides them the correct spelling of those keywords.



The new Yahoo! Search Assist functionality automatically offers to correct user spelling and suggests other keywords to focus their search.

And after they've conducted their initial search, Search Assist actually suggests related concepts based on their query to help them follow the right path to get the job done.

We know from our research that another pain point for users is that search engines often don't provide the ultimate answer. They only help them down the path of finding the answer. And what we want to do at Yahoo! is actually start to begin to deliver what they really need within the search experience.

So we're not just focused on the process of searching but really on the act of finding. And to that end we have also introduced enhanced shortcuts that actually deliver the most relevant information that our users are seeking for particular types of searches.

So for example, if you type in the name of a movie at the very top of the search results page you get a link to a video trailer. You get local show times in your area, a link to a deeper description of that movie as well as reviews from critics and other Yahoo! users, right there at the top of the search results page. We're trying to deliver the most relevant information to our users immediately following their search to help make their job easier.



Yahoo!'s enhanced shortcuts are designed to deliver the most relevant search results. Type in the name of a movie, for example, and it offers links to the trailer, reviews, local show times based on your zip code, and the official site.

Benchmark: OK, Search Assist, enhanced shortcuts — any other important new features?

Michael Kronthal: Another thing that makes search more effortless for users is something that we call “category narrowers.” So when someone is doing a search in a particular category, we actually suggest some related links for them to explore. So if you typed in “restaurants in San Francisco” you may get some suggestions about, well what type of cuisine are you interested in? Italian, Mexican, Chinese, American. Also related to that would be links to user reviews around the most popular restaurants in San Francisco as well as some additional links related to the search query.

What we're doing here is leveraging the best of breed sites both within the Yahoo! network as well as some other sites outside of the Yahoo! network to bring the most relevant information to our users as easily and effortlessly as possible.



On the search results page, Yahoo! Search Assist invites users to “explore concepts” related to their query; these category narrowers help users refine their criteria to arrive at more relevant results.

Benchmark: How much does the search engine actually have to do with user preference and how much of it is branding? Evidently

with all the work you're doing Yahoo! believes that there's a lot to be done in terms of capturing audience through the product itself.

Michael Kronthal: I think they're both important. The way I look at it is that branding gets customers to the door step. But if you're going to keep them in the house you have to deliver the general search quality and relevance they expect from a search engine.

Benchmark: Right. But what about user loyalty? Is there a core group that you count on as coming to Yahoo! for search? And if so, what do you do to keep them coming back?

Michael Kronthal: Yes, loyalty is an important factor, and what we do to keep them coming back is really delivering a best-of-breed customer experience. That relates to our strategy to make search effortless, social, and safe for our customers.

The next generation of Yahoo! search will continue to advance our understanding of user intent to help deliver the results that they need to accomplish their goals.

Benchmark: How do you go about evaluating the user experience to know that Yahoo! search is delivering what users want?

Michael Kronthal: We use a variety of tools and we study our customers and our products continuously. If you think of the research process as a timeline, at the very early stages we do foundational research to really understand who are our customers, how does search fit into their day-to-day lives, what tools are they using in addition to the search engine, and how can we do a better job of helping them overcome some of the pain points that they're experiencing?

From there we take those insights and we begin to involve our customers in actually conceiving what the solutions will be. There we use a variety of tools around concept testing and concept ideation where we actually will involve our customers in activities that help them project what their ultimate needs and desires would be from a product. This kind of participatory design really helps us to understand the underlying needs, emotions, and motivations that our customers have.

Benchmark: Yes, but how do you evaluate users' actual interaction with the site?

Michael Kronthal: At the very early stages we'll use tools like paper prototyping — before we even build anything on the screen, we're using paper versions of the design, where we can really explore what the most intuitive interaction would be for our customers. As things evolve further we'll again involve our customers to evaluate more functional prototypes where you can really get a sense of how this product is going to work under a

more real-life usage scenario. With these techniques we're able to identify areas that are confusing and create usability issues. We also use eye-tracking tools that capture the movement of a customer's retina across the screen to optimize the visual design and layout of a page to increase discoverability of the important information and reduce visual noise.

The goal is to make sure that the product is as easy, effortless and intuitive to use as possible, so that our customers can just immediately understand what it is and derive the intended benefit from it.

Benchmark: OK, so this is all usability lab type testing on small groups of users. How do you evaluate the experience across a broader range of users, particularly after roll-out?

Michael Kronthal: We look at the remote tools as being very valuable when we want to get feedback from a larger number of people. We use tools like Keynote and other kinds of tracking methodologies to evaluate how we're doing, to measure improvement and changes in our customer's experience, to measure the impact of product changes on the customer experience, as well as to identify areas that we need to work a little bit harder to achieve the goals and meet the needs of our customers.

Remote tools like Keynote also allow us to do certain experiments where we might be comparing slightly different versions of the product to really help us identify what the optimal version is.

Benchmark: On a different topic: One of the things that we've been noticing, and certainly Yahoo! has been noticing as well, is Ask.com ratcheting up their visibility in the market place, particularly promoting the "AskEraser," which gets to the privacy issue. How important do you think this is to consumers?

Michael Kronthal: Here at Yahoo!, one of the core fundamental tenants of our company is the relationship that we have with our end-customers, and the trust that we have with them and the information that they share with us. Our global policy is that all search log data is anonymized within 13 months of collection, except where the customer requests otherwise or where we're required to retain information to comply with our legal obligations.

Benchmark: What are some examples of users requesting otherwise?

Michael Kronthal: The enhanced movie shortcut, for example. You have an opportunity to provide your zip code so that we can, on future searches for other movies, provide the local show times at local theaters.

In general, we give users the opportunity to provide us feedback

about how they would like to have their data handled, and that's just part of the relationship.

Benchmark: How about looking into your crystal ball for a minute. What does search look like five years from now? What are the differences in functionality and interface and usability?

Michael Kronthal: My crystal ball shows me that the next generation of search and of Yahoo! search will really continue to advance our understanding of what our customers are trying to accomplish and to leverage that understanding to deliver the best results and experience regardless of the particular type of content they're searching for. In the future, people will be sharing information on a massive scale and we believe that is also the next chapter of growth for the Web. We're looking to tap that valuable knowledge and integrate that into our Web search experience. So that Web search is not just searching Web sites for information but also delivering the knowledge that individuals have through their collective experiences.

Benchmark: So one giant social network?

Michael Kronthal: Yes, we'll actually be leveraging the knowledge that exists within the one giant social network.

Benchmark: Do you see any big differences in the way people are going to interact with search?

Michael Kronthal: I think that search is really becoming a starting point for people to the Internet. So their expectations of relevance from a search engine and its ability to deliver what they want in an easy and secure manner will increase. I think that's when our strategy of really focusing on the needs of our customers will help us chart the future for Yahoo! Search. Because by keeping aware of what our customer needs are we'll be able to adapt and evolve with their needs to continue to deliver relevant and high quality experiences no matter how it changes.



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Michael Kronthal is responsible for leading the Yahoo! Search Group's Customer Insights Team. Kronthal and his team are responsible for driving customer-centric decisions on product, marketing, and user experience strategy and design. Prior to joining the Search Group, Kronthal led the Customer Insights Team for Yahoo! Personals, a leading online dating service. Kronthal has an undergraduate degree in Anthropology and Sociology from Washington and Lee University and a MA in Applied Anthropology from American University.