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How Does Google's Personal Search Affect Your Business?



Thomas Fox is president of Tech Experts, south-east Michigan's leading small business computer support company.

Consider this statement: "On Friday afternoon, Google made the biggest change that has ever happened in search engines, and the world

largely yawned." That quote is from a December 7, 2009, post on Search Engine Land, a website that covers Google, Bing and the other Internet search engines.

Don't worry if you didn't read the post. Since it was early December when Google announced that it would start personalizing all search results, we were getting ready for the holidays.

It isn't clear at first glance just how significant this change will be. A closer look, though, reveals nothing short of a revolution in the making.

Here is what Google did, according to Google: "Today we're helping people get better search results by extending Personalized Search to signed-out users worldwide, and

in more than forty languages. Now when you search using Google, we will be able to better provide you with the most relevant results possible."

A real world example: I do a lot of searches for recipes, and often click on results from epicurious.com. Knowing this, Google might rank epicurious.com higher on the results page the next time I look for recipes.

Other times, when I'm looking for news about the University of Michigan's football team, I search for "Michigan wolverines."

Because I frequently click on www.mGoBlue.com, Google might show me this result first, instead of search results about the animal.

Google is able to do this because they are now cataloging all of your searches for over 180 days. It then uses your search history to customize your results.

If you're not signed in to your Google account, a cookie on your browser keeps a record of your queries.

Sounds pretty innocuous, doesn't it? Better search results? Tailored

to exactly what I need? I like this change! Others, however, might squirm at the Orwellian aspect of an omniscient Google knowing exactly what you want. Whether the change is good or bad is debatable, but it's certainly going to be big.

Until now, search engines have largely delivered the same results to everyone. Two different people could search for Barack Obama and get back the same set of results.

The days of "normal" search results that everyone sees are now over. Personalized results are the "new normal," and the change is going to shift the search world and society in general in unpredictable ways.

How might this change shift the world? Here are a few scenarios:

Narrowing your Internet experience

This change could curtail what we'll call "search-engine serendipity." Search-engine serendipity happens when you search Google with a preconceived notion of what you'll find, but instead you end up exploring new ideas and virgin territory. Personalized results may

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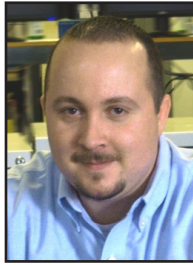
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Windows 7: A Pain-Free Upgrade



Will Alston is a PC hardware technician with Tech Experts.

at all. But an upgrade to Windows 7 can actually be pain-free. Here's why:

XP mode

Windows Vista had plenty of compatibility issues. That's not the case with Windows 7, due to a new feature called XP Compatibility Mode. XP Mode allows you to run older programs in Windows XP and

Most small business owners feel software upgrades are about as fun as having a tooth pulled: Not really that much fun

simultaneously run every-thing else in Windows 7.

If your main business software runs well now in Windows XP it should run just fine in XP Mode in Windows 7.

For even more peace of mind, as part of the upgrade process, we will contact your business software vendor and get their approval before beginning an upgrade.

You can also try this on a "test" PC before rolling it out on your network.

Installation time

The Windows 7 set-up process is significantly faster than Vista or XP installation, which saves your

business money on the upgrade project. Windows 7 also offers some automated setup options that weren't previously available - again, reducing your investment in an upgrade project. Start up time is significantly - and noticeably - faster, which gets your staff to work that much faster at the start of the day.

More drivers and easier setup

When you plug in a new scanner, camera or other device into your computer, you don't want to fight with pop-up messages that tell you to search for drivers.

You just want it to work the way it's supposed to. With Windows 7 that's what you get. No hassle. No fear.

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repeatedly channel you through the same grooves, limiting your exposure to things outside your experience.

Confirm your personal biases

Search Engine Land's Dan Sullivan picks up on this possibility in his post: "Is a search for Michelle Obama showing a racist image? Maybe for one person, but not for another."

For the xenophobic Googler, every search may reinforce his xenophobic worldview because personalization filters sites that don't jibe with his tastes. Another example: Once Google has you pegged as a bleeding heart liberal, it may serve up Huffington Post for every query.



Personalized Search for Everyone

<http://searchengineland.com/googles-personalized-results-the-new-normal-31290>

<http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2009/12/personalized-search-for-everyone.html>

Further reading:

It could reduce the visibility of your website

Since no one but Google knows how its personalization algorithm works, it's hard to know how far-reaching the change will be. But it's plausible that a business' website would no longer rank for certain keywords among certain prospects. If, for example, a person went on an

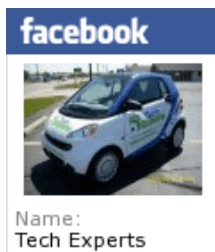
Amazon.com book-buying spree, Google might take note and start displaying Amazon.com for a majority of product-related queries, which is great ... if you're Amazon.com.

Polarize our political system

You can see where we're going with this. If personalized results reinforce our beliefs, we'll soon have Google red and Google blue. The folks in Mountain View have tried to comfort people by saying that it wants "diversity of results." But that poses another troubling question: Who will define diversity? Google?

It could skew your SEO efforts

Since there is no longer a 'normal' set of results, it becomes more difficult to optimize your website. There isn't one bull's eye to aim for anymore: there are millions of them and they're moving all the time as Google refreshes its 180-day cache of your search terms.



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Online Banking: Five Steps To Protect Yourself



Ryan Seymour is a PC hardware specialist and the Tech Experts Service Manager.

I was reading the Wall Street Journal website recently, and came across an interesting article about online bank fraud. The article was about a small business owner in California had over \$100,000 stolen from his bank account.

He only recovered about \$50,000 of it back. The other \$50,000 went to a bank in Europe, where mules (someone who receives the stolen money) started to withdraw the money from the bank account.

How did this happen? The business owner had spyware on his computer that transferred his banking username and password to the hackers.

I always shake my head when I read an article like this, because I know it could have been easily avoided.

Anti-virus and anti-spyware

The first step in protecting yourself is to make sure your computer has anti-virus and anti-spyware installed.

If you're doing online banking, make sure that you're using commercial quality protection - not something you download from the Internet for free.

The stronger your first layer of protection, the safer you are online.

We see computers every day that don't have this simplest of protec-

tion installed; or, worse, the business owner has installed protection software, but then fails to keep it updated or renewed.

Unified threat management

The next step is to invest in a unified threat management (UTM) firewall. A UTM firewall is miles ahead of the simple DSL or cable routers you'd pick up at the office supply store.

They offer solid protection against viruses, hackers, spyware, and the host of other Internet dangers.

The device scans all Internet traffic in real time, and can protect you even before the anti-virus and anti-spyware vendors have updated their software for new attacks.

UTM firewalls can also implement web filtering and prevent the computer from reaching the intended attacker.

Web filtering can block access to websites that contain malware and spyware; it can also protect employees from going places they shouldn't be.

Fortinet is our preferred vendor that makes firewall appliances that do what I describe above. A dedicated firewall and UTM appliance is very effective in helping prevent an attack such as this.

Block SPAM at the source

One of the sneakiest ways hackers can compromise your computer is through email, so you'll want to look for a rock-solid spam filtering solution. Numerous cloud based (hosted) solutions exist that are very inexpensive. A good spam

filter will keep viruses, phishing and other attacks from hitting your email. Reflexion is our favorite cloud based email filtering solution. The product is easy to use, well supported and extremely effective.

With online banking, phishing attacks are very common. Someone creates an email that looks like your bank in an attempt to collect information, you click on the link, and next thing you know, the hackers have your login and password.

Personally, I never open emails from my bank. Most banks will not contact you for important account information with email.

Perform regular maintenance

The fourth step to keeping your computers safe is patch management. Microsoft releases security updates for Windows nearly every week. Having a trained IT professional ensure patches are applied correctly - and quickly - will protect you from any security holes in the software that you're running.

Most small businesses should look at one of our managed service plans, which provides you with "whatever it takes" service at a low fixed monthly cost.

Pay attention

The final step is a matter of common sense. Most people will go to potentially hazardous websites or click on something they shouldn't have. My suggestion is if you are doing Internet banking, it should be on a computer that is used the least.

If you are going to go to questionable websites, don't do it on the computer where you do your banking.



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Analyzing And Cleaning Out Your Computer's Hard Drive



Corey Bogedain is a network technician and web developer with Tech Experts.

These days, hard drive space is incredibly inexpensive. If you're running out of space, installing a new hard drive could be an easy option to free up storage.

Many times, though, hard drives can become cluttered with old and unnecessary information, that, when removed, will give you plenty of free space.

There are a few tips that that will help you find where your storage is being consumed, and potentially save you the investment in a new hard drive.

Disk Space Fan

The first utility to examine is a little application called Disk Space Fan. The standard version of the program is free, and there is also a professional (paid) version. The free version will work for freeing up some space.

Disk Space Fan will show you what folder or folders are using up all of your hard drive space.

When you open the program it will show you all the current hard drives on the computer. Most users will be just working from the C drive. On the C drive there will be a "Windows" folder and a "Program Files" folder.

Next to those folders you will see the size of the files in the folder. This will help you by seeing which folder has more files in it. By clicking on whatever folder you want to analyze you can keep clicking on the folder to find where the most hard drive space is taken up.

This will give you a better idea of where your space has disappeared to. Be extremely careful when deleting files and folders.

If you're not sure if the folder can be deleted, the best practice would be to leave it in place and talk with your computer professional.

The above method works if you are really looking to cleanup space on a hard drive. For other people maybe just cleaning out temporary files or some old program files is enough.

CCleaner

A great application for cleaning up temporary files and folders is a tool called CCleaner. This tool is an all in one tool to help clean up a computer that might have a lot of old and unused files on it. The software is free for everyone to use.

CCleaner will clean extra program files, Internet explorer temporary

files, disable startup items, remove programs that you do not want installed and even cleanup unwanted registry entries.

I am not a person to ever recommend a user to play with the registry but CCleaner does a great job in analyzing the registry and only removing the unwanted registry entries.

The only setback with CCleaner is that it does not have any scheduling feature to allow you to run it regularly without manually running the program every time you want to make a change on the computer.

ATF Cleaner

Finally, if you are a Windows XP user there is a very simple application that I recommend you run every week or so.

ATF cleaner is a freeware application that the user does not even have to install. This application cleans out only temporary files from programs and also the Windows cache.

These are just a few nice little programs that every user can use to help keep their computer running fast and free up disk space.

