



## The Ultimate Guide to Google Personalized Search

In early 2007 Google re-launched their personalized search program and that combined with other moves at Google this year have led me to believe there is much to be understood in this area as we move into 2008. These issues are extremely important for consideration in you marketing efforts so get strapped in for the ride.

This guide was originally a **4 part series** on the subject recently that covers *WHY* it is important as well as *HOW* it works and *WHAT* the SEO enthusiast should do to compensate for such changes.

We have put them together with some minor edits in this document as well there is a link at the end to a TON of resources and further reading

We hope you enjoy the journey and find it useful in your future SEO endeavours.

*It's all about YOU!*



**Discuss this topic on our forums;** <http://forums.site-reference.com/topic/7215/The-Ultimate-Guide-to-Google-Personalized-Search/>

**More below;** Part I

## Part I - Why Google Personalized Search is Important to You

I know we've been down the road of fear and loathing with personalized search before. I know that most folks **never felt the need to worry about it** – all smoke and no fire it would seem. I know that once a year or so there are new concerns about what personalized search might someday mean to the average SEO practitioner, (back to 2003?). So why would I hammer the head of this well beaten nail yet again?

I believe **some events last week** have brought new light onto this topic.

For the uninitiated, Google's Personalized Search is a service that attempts to get to know you and your searching habits better, in hopes that it will be more relevant in the future from culling your ongoing activities.

Or as **Google likes to put it**; *"search algorithms that are designed to **take your personal preferences into account**, including **the things you search for** and **the sites you visit**," which they believe ultimately will, "have better odds of delivering useful results".*

I find the use of the term '*better odds*' interesting, if by design or not, since much of the underlying technologies incorporate a probabilistic model for delivering results.

You could call it '*educated guessing*'.

Getting signed up for a Google account is pretty easy as it is automatic across **Gmail, AdSense, Orkut, Group Alerts, Google Analytics** and many other services. Personalized Search is turned on by default and as Danny Sullivan put it, *"I completely missed that this was added as a default choice to the **new account sign-up page**. In fact, I missed it twice, as I tested the system by making two different accounts."*

So what has changed you asked? Well, let's add to that mix the **Google Computer** and **Google-Phone** (OS and partners) to also consider.

**More below**; the not so distant future

How a Computer and a Cell phone  
could change SEO...



## The not-so-distant Future

Envision for a moment if you will, a time far, far away... 2 years from today (*a long time in technology land*), where we see this type of savvy consumer;

1. Talking on their Google Phone
  - Searches via Google
  - Use G-mail
  - Jacked up to Google Earth
  - Other Google services
2. Using their Google Computer
  - Google Desktop installed
  - Uses Google toolbar enabled FireFox for surfing
  - Searches Google via multiple access points
  - Uses G-mail
  - Social activities (including Google properties and partners)
  - Other Google services
3. Logged into account at work (because it will be easy to synchronize)
  - Searches Google
  - Checks G-mail
  - Social activities (*even at work? Never*)
4. Has a Small Website (maybe a Baby Boomer AdSense Retirement Plan)
  - Uses Google Analytics
  - Uses G-Checkout
  - Networks via Orkut/LinkedIn

Can you see this person? Or even a partial match? I can - and it has me thinking a lot more about personalized search and **how it affects the process of optimizing a site**. With these developments more and more people, if they realize it or not, will be logged into Google services than ever before. This in turn means targeting a given term becomes more **elusive and fluid an undertaking**.

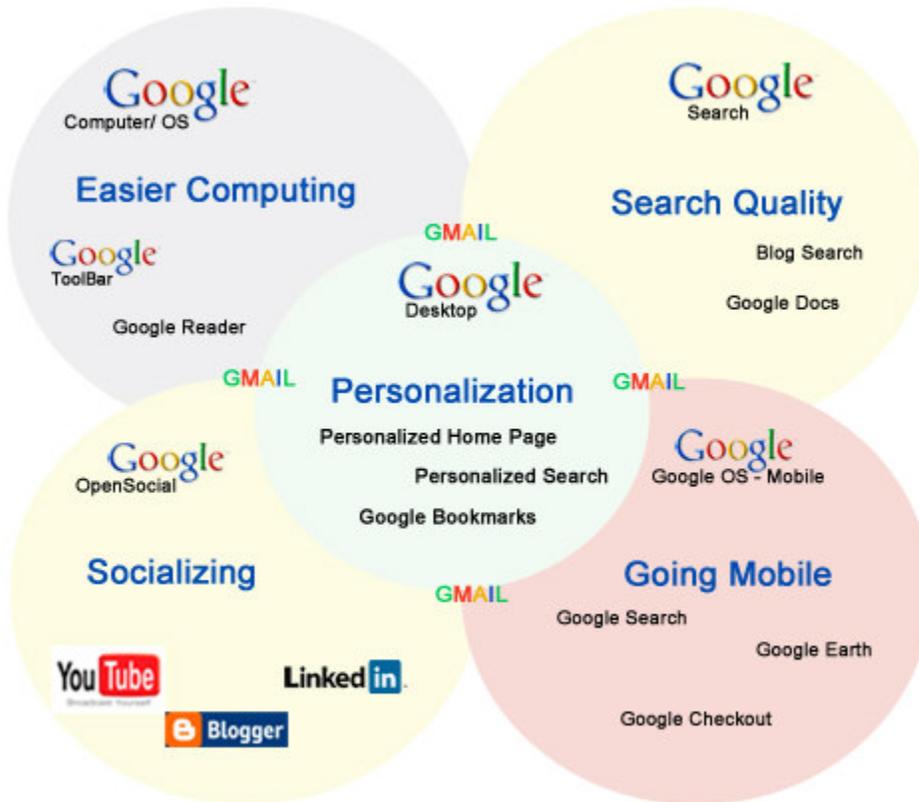
That is nothing new to those that have followed Personalized Search, what is new, is the delivery system or more appropriately, the collection system. With Google now mobilizing into more devices, users being able to track themselves across multiple platforms will be at a premium. I see a great deal of '*personalized searching*' going on in the near future.

**More below**; the not so distant future cont'd

the not so distant future cont'd

Further to that, these same methods can also be applied to which Paid Ads that the end user clicks on in order to adjust them according to perceived conversion preferences – *behavioural targeting* if you will. That means these issues apply **not only to SEO folks**, but the PPC crowd as well, and there is much to consider.

I believe understanding aspects related to personalized search and user performance metrics will be important for the successful SEO/SEM consultant in the years ahead.



**More below;** time to get personal

## It's time to get personal

The main thing to understand is that a given document in a set of search results can be valued or de-valued depending on;

1. the number of times it is selected from a set of results
2. the number of times it *wasn't* selected
3. sites with similar characteristics of a selected document
4. amount of time and depth on spent a given selection
5. bounce rates for selected items
6. historical behaviour on the above (seasonal fluxuations?)
7. location of result relative to searcher (especially important for Mobile)

No longer can the SEO practitioner think simply in terms of **ranking for a main index query result** since there are so many other potential rankings for documents that aren't as readily available in the traditional sense. Theoretically rankings could seemingly drop a few places but traffic actually increase due to a niche crowd following that is assisting your rankings via personalized search activities and being popular among a given sub-set of users.

We may have to gauge the efficacy of a SEO campaign by actual conversions (traffic) instead of merely achieving rankings in the main targeted index (.com , .ca , .co.uk). I would have to think that **keyword research would be more important than ever.**

Considering it is largely driven by **user performance metrics**, you can also assume that those able to write better Titles and Meta-Descriptions would have an advantage as getting the user to engage with the SERP listing upon initial presentation would be at a premium. Quality content as well would begin to take on a **more meaningful role** than it has in the past, as bounce rates and user satisfaction now starts to play into actual search results rankings.

Many SEO professionals haven't given much thought to the ramifications of personalized search as it hasn't developed much reach in the general public – until now. With the proliferation of Google services across multiple platforms and devices, **more and more people will be using personalized search**, if they realize it fully or not.

**More below;** the Future

## The Future

As one **Googler** put it;

*"In the future users will have a much greater choice of service with better, more targeted results. For example, a search engine should be able to recommend books or news articles that are particularly relevant - or jobs that an individual user would be especially well suited to."* -

A sort of '*Universal – Personalized Search*' if you will; At least this job won't get dull anytime soon, huh?

I would like to take you a ½ step further. What if all of this data was also added to user performance data from the fortunate souls that managed to get away from the grasp of Google? You know, those of use without a Google Computer/Phone or Desktop rolling? No problems, they can be tracked via cookies, Google ToolBar, IP address and even cell tower triangulation (or so **I heard Bill muse**).

Sure, the signal one would get from this data isn't the greatest, but it does speak soft whispers in the search engineer's ear I would have to imagine. By combining the known data and the unassigned user data we could certainly come up with some type of signal that would affect even the core organic rankings.

This is not a wild stretch of the imagination either. There are a few recent Google patents that support such a system; but more on that another day. The main point is that recent activity in the form of the Google Computer and the upcoming Google Phone applications, will undoubtedly raise the number of Google Personalized searchers which is something to ponder.

If you haven't started to wrap your head around the concepts of **personalized search and user performance metrics**, it may be time to consider it. The more avenues Google finds to acquire and track consumers, the more prominent a position personalized search aspects will play in the world of search engine optimization.

**More below;** Part II – I have seen the future and it is VERY personal

## Part II - I have seen the future and it is VERY personal

### Personalized Search and User Metric SEO

So have you been listening? You know, when I was saying that **understanding Google's 'Personalized Search'** would be very important moving forward in the world of SEO? Sure you did, but you simply blew me off 'cause we have **all heard this before** and no one in the industry seems to be making much of a fuss, right? Why listen to this whacked out wandering web Gypsy? He's cute and kinda funny... but he doesn't really live on the cutting edge right?

Well straighten up and listen here my apathetic apostles lest you flounder in **SEO purgatory** in the years to come. There is a new wind a blowin' and the Good Ship Google has set a course that most certainly has ramifications for all of those seeking SERP nirvana.

### We are the Google – Resistance is futile

When we left off I was talking about the pervasive nature of **Google accounts over a variety of offerings**, all of which automatically assign you a Google account and have personalized search turned on by default. Even the venerable GreyWolf ranted earlier this week about the **Borg and his Google desktop** and how he struggled to turn off the Personalized Search aspects buried within it's deepest bowels. We will be haunted by the ghost of personalized search (PS) for years to come my friends, **heed these warnings well**.

The **Google computer** is just loaded with data grabbers from the obvious Google Toolbar, right down to the operating system, Google Desktop and more. I think it is safe to surmise that the G-puter will be around for a while since **it sold out** as fast as a bottle of *Chivas Regal* during dollar days at the local hooch shop. We can also assume with its minimum specs (and bargain price), that these **aren't exactly the power users** that will be able to unlock the mystery to exorcising the personalized search demons, if they even know that it is there at all.

Now let's add to that the other new born babe in the Google kingdom, the **G-mobile; or 'Android'** as it has aptly been dubbed (that name still makes me feel all warm and fuzzy). This little fella is most certainly no small fry and with a **\$10 Million dollar prize** for the best new applications for it, he is patrolling the streets with a pretty big carrot on that stick. Should your voyeuristic nature leave you pining for a peek; check out the **Demo Video for Android**, (link in resources). Do you really think anyone is going to wrestle with those little buttons to try and disable personalized search? Think again.

**More below;** Google the social butterfly

## Google the Social Butterfly

If that hasn't begun to bend your beliefs to that of which I speak, then **let's get social**. Google is pressing forward in the Social Space as well. Remember, that when you sign up for many of the Google properties, you get a Google account with the ubiquitous, ever-present, personalized search turned on by default. The more properties, services and devices, the more ways there will be to end up using PS without even knowing it.

Among Google's strategy in the Social space is the recently announced '**Open Social**' an open platform for developers to create applications geared at the Social web-space and they have **a pretty impressive starting cast** right out of the gate.

Among other partners, one heavy weight of note is **MySpace**, which is actually still **the # 1 social networking** site that there is (sorry FaceBook, maybe next year). They top out with more than 100 million unique visitors per month, as of September. Then we also have little known Google networking site, Orkut, introduced in January 2004, is in sixth place in worldwide page views, with about 25 million unique visitors in the month September - no small potatoes there farmer boy!

## Welcome to SEO 2.0 – A brave new world

And why stop there? Why not start getting into some other markets by adding **Google TV** and the **Google Magazine** while we're at it right? I am going to crawl way out on a limb here and venture a guess that, **should these plans come to fruition**, the happy end users will also get a nifty little Google account set up with.... Oh come on... let me hear you say it... with personalized search; snuggled deeply under the blanket.

It will make perfect sense for people to be logged into their Google account at all times to access information and preferences across multiple platforms, properties (websites) and devices. The potential **reach and implications for personalized search** is truly staggering and cannot, and I do repeat... CANNOT, be overlooked by the conscientious Search Engine Optimizer.

**More below;** User Performance Metrics and You

## User Performance Metrics and You

Much of what is under the hood is what is called '*user performance metrics*' (UPM); in simplest terms, the actions that a user takes have a bearing on future search results. This can be bounce rates, search query refinements and even calculating probable matches based on co-current searches.

Now if that hasn't gotten your attention, there is every reason to believe that UPMs could also find their way into the ranking of documents (websites et al) **in the core regular index** in one manner or another. There are a few patents that Brother Bill sent me a while back that discuss just such concepts that can be used for PS or even the regular index.

Certainly it would be what is considered to be **a weak signal**, but one cannot disregard such concepts. I do believe it is entirely possible for user performance metrics to be used in some aspect, in the regular index, though likely not as heavily weighted as it would be in a PS application. I will write about those aspects (regular search and UPM) more in the weeks to come. For now I am simply looking at the Personalized Search implications.

In the end analysis, you cannot ignore Personalized Search in your SEO toolbox; it simply must be understood. And just exactly what should you be learning about it? What steps can be made to combat this boundless behemoth and seemingly user controlled rankings?

Move onto Part III for some thoughts on the technical aspects involved and how you can leverage them.

**More below;** Part III – How Personalized Search Works

## Part III - Google and Personalized Search: How Personalized Search Works

### What every SEO should know about personalized search

Up to this point I have explained some compelling reasons to give personalized search concepts a second look in your SEO efforts. Most of the reasons related to the increasing pervasiveness of **Google Accounts**, **Personalization** and **User Performance Metrics**.

#### We established;

Google Search is **King**

Google accounts are **pervasive**

Google Computers **are hot**

G-Mobile gives **another avenue**

**Open-Social** brings reach

Google **TV** and **Magazines**? O come..on...

So Google Battles Microsoft....**for world domination**.

And of course.... Google accounts and ultimately, Personalized Search are even more pervasive than ever - Right? Ya follow? Do ya? Good me mateys...moving along.



### What is this Personalized Search and Why Should I Care?

Personalization is simply **an attempt to deliver more relevant and useful results** to the end user (searcher/surfer) and minimize less useful or potentially unlikely results. In a personalized search world, one important element exists that makes it desirable to the end user; **the ability to customize**, through their actions, or passively, the results that are returned to them in future sessions. Be it of a more useful set of results, or a set of results with less irrelevant, or Spammy entries, it has some attractive features.

Now, let us now begin to imagine how over time this system would also begin to augment the results with related content to selections which you preferred (historically) by trying to **understand your surfing, reading and clicking and even scrolling patterns**. What now begins to emerge are search engine rankings that are based upon a variety of **User Performance Metrics** (UPMs) as well as the more traditional ranking mechanisms.

**More below;** How personalized search works cont'd

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