



Google Instant

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Google Instant

Instant results with every key stroke

After running “instant” in beta for almost 6 months, Google officially launched their latest marvel in 7 major markets including UK, US, France, Spain and Germany on the 8th September.

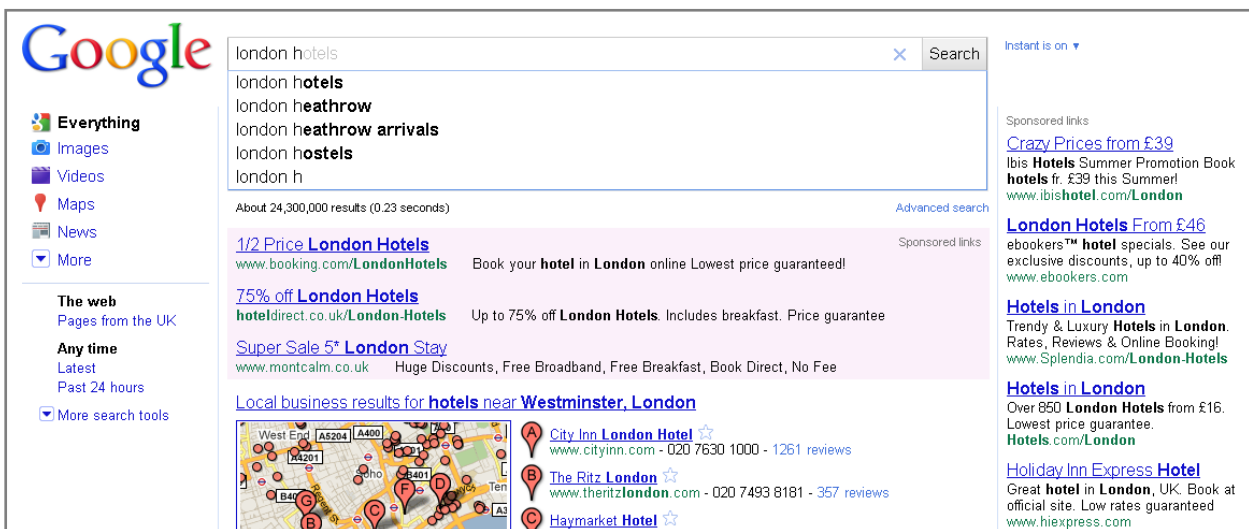
Google’s quest to help consumers find things faster and serve them relevant information has stepped up a gear with the introduction of “Google Instant”. In their own words they have managed to shave off an average of 2.5 seconds per search. By changing the search results page per key stroke a user types, Google are now serving their users highly relevant results at an even quicker pace. They use their vast amounts of historical and real time search behaviour data to predict what users are searching for and couple this with users’ own search history where relevant to give highly accurate results.

In a nutshell Google Instant is the product of shifting through masses of search data in real time while users type to:

1. Predict what users are searching for – before they finish their sentence. An improvement on Google suggest or auto complete launched in 2006.
2. Serve users natural listings and paid ads as they search. This means the page changes per keystroke based on what Google thinks you are searching for. With Google Instant users are served results without having to finish the full intended query.

For example:

If a user who is looking for London Hotels pauses for a split second in typing in the search query, Google will serve natural and paid listings based on the query so far. As seen below typing in the letter “London h”



Google will always suggest what the system deems to be the most relevant results based on historical search data the user personal searches.

Potential impact for advertisers and brand owners



Although Google Instant is the biggest change in the search landscape since universal search in 2008 it will not be available to users who are not signed into Google when searching. Searchers who do not sign in will see the Google results page in its current static form – with the auto complete dropdown but without the changes in results as you search. This means that the majority of Google users will not be using Google Instant when searching. Furthermore, when signed in users can toggle the functionality on and off.

A shorter long tail

As users start getting results *before* they finish typing some advertisers may experience a small drop in the long tail traffic to their site - this counters the trend seen by some advertisers with the introductions of auto complete dropdown.

Users are now more likely to truncate their search query and click an ad or link before having fully finished typing the intended query. This could move traffic from longer tail terms with lower cost per click to head terms with higher cost per click.

Slight increase cost for high traffic queries

As a potential result of less traffic on long tail terms, advertisers may attribute more budget into high traffic keywords that have more competition and higher cost per click. This may manifest itself in a small increase in cost per click on high traffic and expensive keywords.

Change of intent

To lesser extend searchers may be driven away from their original intention. As they start typing they may be diverted as natural and paid results change. This may also present advertisers with the opportunity to divert searchers from their original query by ensuring they increase budgets and achieve a higher share of voice on one and two word queries.

Deeper product awareness and engagement

Many corporate brand searchers bring up additional suggestions of specific models and products. When searching for mobile phone manufacturers Google auto complete often suggests the brand name along with a popular model name. Brand owners and advertisers can capitalise on this by ensuring they bid on all relevant model numbers with the brand name as ads will appear as users type. This will enable users to dive deeper into product pages immediately and increase awareness for models or products that they may not have been aware of.

Reputation Management and negative keywords

Paid search advertisers add negative keywords to their paid search accounts to ensure they do not appear for particular queries. Often this is for legal reasons and to ensure that ads do not show on controversial, negative or debasing searches. The FMCG and pharmaceutical industries, in particular, make use of negative keyword strategies to adhere to official regulations or guidelines. With Google Instant ads can now appear for *non-completed* words. If an advertiser has the keyword *accident* as a negative keyword Google may serve an ad for the query "drug X acciden". Only if the last "t" is typed will Google recognise that it is negative matched by the advertiser. This is a controversial matter that advertisers will no doubt ask Google to address.

SEO and Universal Search

Any fears that Google Instant may change SEO forever are largely unfounded. The impact on natural and universal search is likely to be negligible bordering on none at all. The scientific part i.e. the algorithm will not change and when comparing results to Google "static", the results are exactly the same as instant results are seeded in the static results. Google Instant merely serves them faster – a bit like hitting enter every time you type a letter.



Although the algorithm does not change we have seen above that user behaviour is likely to change to some extent based on the fact that the search experience changes. The obscure long tail keywords may no longer be as valuable as they were before and with the increased importance of auto complete advertisers should monitor any changes in Google traffic to their site – especially the split between long tail, high traffic drivers and brand and product terms. Keyword niches can be harder to come by and smaller advertisers may have to go head to head with bigger brands to compete on more expensive keywords. With the marriage of auto complete and Instant it is clear that Google will have an even bigger say in which keywords send potential customers to your site.

Summary

Google Instant is the next step in the evolution of search. In many ways it is also an improvement of auto complete whereby searchers are presented with suggestions or predictions of what Google thinks you are looking for. It makes search faster and easier while still, in most cases, serving relevant results even if it is not from the first key stroke.

While inherently “instant” and “static” are one and the same Google have produced another engineering and data marvel in understanding user intent. However, this is not yet available to the masses as only signed in users have access to the instant functionality. It is still to be seen whether getting results quicker will change search behaviour and if so, how.