Search Terms: A Window on the Social Mind.

By Max Sutherland

Web search terms are a window on the social mind; they reveal what the other half of the world is thinking about. The media help agenda-set what people are interested in and this is revealed quickly in the search words that people type into search engines. A regular list of the top 200 search terms is available (free by email) and armed with this list, the task of appearing cool becomes a breeze!

There is a top-of-the-pops list available for almost everything these days and that includes what people search for on the web. A list of the top 200 search terms that people use, week by week or month by month, is available (free by email) from sites such as www.sitepsych.com/free/.[1]

Thanks to search engines, we can search for information to get more exposure to things that interest us. But what are these things and how do we get to know about them in the first place? The influence of word-of-mouth has increased, facilitated by the new media - email, texting, viral media and social networking sites like Myspace. The role of the traditional media has lessened but it still plays a huge role in first making us aware of things and then agenda-setting their social importance.[2] With media fragmentation, what has changed is we are no longer all tuned into the same channels or listen to the same radio stations. The media our kids are exposed to is not the same media that we are exposed to.

However the effects of both the old and the new media in agenda-setting what we are interested in can now be more directly and immediately observed because they quickly show up as search words that people type into search engines on the web. The search term 'Steve Irwin' became the number one search term on the web in the week after the Croc Hunter was killed by a stingray. The search terms that are used at any given time reflect what people are interested in, what they are thinking about and what is topical.

A casual inspection of the top 200 list over a 90 day period [3], quickly tells you that the most popular things that people are looking for on the web are sex, music, games, dogs, golf, the weather and map-directions. Sex and music dominate.

Sex is the number one enduring search term, and that motivation is so pervasive that probably one third to a half of the top search terms relate to sex in some way. At wordtracker[4] (where I get my list), you can request the list with the raunchy items removed. Initially I requested the full, unexpurgated list and for this column I decided that I should just ignore those that were sex related. I quickly found it can't be done.

sex, music, games

While it is easy to guess that some popular search terms like Lolita and literotica refer to porn sites, many search terms are not obvious at all until you Google them with a 'what is ....' type question. When you do that, you end up discovering the meaning of words that, well..er.. maybe you didn't want to know anyway - like milf and tawneestone. (If you need to know, you will have to Google them yourself…. but my advice is *don't go there*.)

After I ordered the expurgated list, I found that sex permeates quite a number of the items on that list also. 'Paris Hilton' for example is not just one of the top 200 but is one of *the top ten* search terms

and has been an occupant in the top ten list for more than a year. One would sincerely doubt it is because of her singing or acting ability.

Quite a number of items turn out to be pop singers or musical artists that you've perhaps never heard of (slipknot, korn, shakira). Still others turn out to be electronic games (runescape). In the process of finding out, you discover not only what is popular out there, but you become aware how much of it you didn't even know existed. Half the battle in being cool is in knowing what you don't know.

Over time the list also provides an indicator as to whether things are gaining or waning in popularity. Bricks and mortar retailers for example are improving their position rapidly. All the major bricks-and-mortar retailers that appear in that list of top 200 search terms have been gaining month by month. The price of oil perhaps makes web browsing more economically attractive than the cost of driving around to various malls.

At the end of August 2006, the search 'hit' parade for these bricks and mortar retailers looks like this:
1. Home Depot at #45
2. Wal-Mart at #50.
3. Target at # 90
4. Sears at #103**.**

Home Depot was #57 search term in the top 200 list, two months ago and now it is at #45. All these retailers have improved and all seem to be heavily into product placement in TV shows. One suspects that investment is paying off.

From a marketing point of view, you can use the top 200 list to address a number of questions, such as:
a) What things your target audiences are searching for on the web?
b) What search-words you should target in order to optimize traffic to your web pages?
c) What search words to buy links to, so that your ad appears on the search-results page?

Very importantly the list can also help you identify what trends are becoming hot (before your competitors do).

A side effect of looking at this list regularly is that you can be 'cool' in your kids' eyes. Nearly 18 months ago when I first received the list, my son was rocked on his heels as I asked him had he ever heard of green day and what he thought of 50 cent? If you are over 40, then you would probably be wondering (as I was at the time), what the heck a 'green day' is and why '50 cent' is a big deal? When these terms first appeared on the top 200 list of search terms, I plugged a question into Google asking "what is green day?" etc and discovered that green day is the name of an American punk rock band and 50 cent is the popular rap artist. Presto, I had the answers. This list lets you be cool by knowing what's hot.

Search terms are a window on the social mind and they reveal what the other half of the world is thinking about. Now, armed with this list, the task of appearing cool has become a breeze!

Notes:

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[1] See note four below.
[2] Some years ago, I co-authored a paper (The Subtle Power of Agenda Setting) that discussed how the frequency of something appearing in the media affects how important and popular we perceive it to be. The mass media *don't* tell us what to think but they *do* tell us what to think *about*! They help set the mental agenda of what interests us and what we are interested in.
[3] 90 days to the end of August 2006
[4] They used to be available free in a weekly email from wordtracker.com and I still receive it but inexplicably it is no longer available from their website.