Challenges faced by Live Search in creating a Compelling Experience

Ben Young

What are the challenges for Live Search in creating a compelling search experience?

The fight for search engine market share has been a battle of the titans. Microsoft's contender 'Live Search' is one of the top three. This essay will give an overview of the background history of Live Search in order to gain insight. Evaluation of the theoretical framework proposed by Hoffman, Novak & Yung (2000) will be used to explore whether Live Search has room for improvement in creating a compelling experience. This theory is centered on flow and the constructs which impact it. From there each of the constructs Skill/Control, Challenge/Arousal, Telepresence/Time Distortion and their relative influences will be explored and looked at in relation to Live Search. Limitations of the theory will be discussed. Finally an applied framework to creating a compelling experience for Live Search will be proposed.

Background

Live Search begun as Msn Search in 1998 (Aaron Wall, 2008). Following Google's successful monetisation Microsoft begun to take Msn Search seriously (Aaron Wall, 2008), developing in house technology and re-launching as Live Search in 2006. Fast forward from 2006 to now Microsoft's US Market share has dropped from 12.1% of searches during May 2006 (Hitwise, 2006) to 5.89% in May 2008 (Hitwise, 2008). Live Search has not had the aggressive growth of its competitors in an expanding market. Creating a compelling experience is vital for Live Search to compete.

ben@bwagy.com | blog.bwagy.com

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework to be used is from Hoffman, Novak & Yung in their paper "Measuring the Customer Experience in Online Environments: A Structural Modeling Approach" (Hoffman, Novak & Yung, 2000). They posit that a compelling experience is driven by flow. Flow is defined within the proposed framework as:
"the state occurring during network navigation which is 1) characterized by a seamless sequence of responses facilitated by machine interactivity 2) intrinsically enjoyable 3) accompanied by a loss of self consciousness, and 4) self reinforced" (Hoffman, Novak & Yung, 2000, p. 23).
A prior model "Conceptual Model of Customer Experience" developed by Hoffman & Novak (Hoffman & Novak, 1996) was utilised as a starting point. The model specifies an explicit structure of the direct and indirect influences on flow. Data was collected from two online surveys focused on Flow and Web Usage. From these results a more refined model was constructed. It is surmised to achieve a state of flow that "consumers must perceive a balance between their skills and the challenges of the interaction and both their skills and challenges must be above a critical threshold" (Hoffman, Novak & Yung, 2000, p. 23). If a balance is not achieved consumers may become bored or irritated. A revised highly correlated model connected flow with the constructs; Skill/Control, Challenge/Arousal and Telepresence/Time Distortion. StartWeb, Interactive/Speed, Importance and Focused Attention hold an indirect influence on flow. The indirect constructs affect flow through the directly connected variables.

ben@bwagy.com | blog.bwagy.com

Skill/Control

Initially Skill/Control will be explored. Hoffman, Novak & Yung (2000) defined skills as referring to a users "capacity for action during the online navigation process" (p. 27). Control was defined as being two fold the user's perception of how a website responds to their inputs and their perceived ability to successfully navigate. Control taps into the capacity (skill) for action. What are the implications for Live Search? Live search needs to ensure that their service requires a low capacity for action, thus enabling a larger audience to hold the necessary skills to engage with. Lowering the capacity to action barrier affects a user's perception. Should they view it as requiring a lower capacity their perception of being able to successfully navigate should be positive, surmising in a better position for Skill/Control to lead to flow.

Indirect influences play an important role in Skill/Control. The revised model dictates that two further constructs StartWeb and Importance affect it. StartWeb is the depth (in time) of the consumers experience using the internet an external factor that cannot be influenced by Live Search. However it can be managed in a similar manner to Skill/Control. Ensuring that the Live Search experience is not hindered by experience level through ease of use effectively eliminates the negative influence of the construct. Importance in relation to the consumer is about the level of relevance the website provides. Information of higher importance is going to engage the consumer more so than low relevance and enhance Skill/Control. Furthermore providing a streamlined path to flow and a compelling experience. It

ben@bwagy.com | blog.bwagy.com

has been demonstrated how Skill/Control can highlight areas of improvement.

Challenge/Arousal

Challenge/Arousal provides further opportunities for improvement. Hoffman, Novak & Yung (2000) define challenges as specifying "consumer's opportunities to action on the web" (p. 27). Arousal acts as a theoretical correlate of the challenge. That is a user challenged leads to Arousal. Furthermore in order to avoid boredom users must perceive that "the web contains challenges congruent with their own skills" (Hoffman, Novak & Yung, 2000, p. 27). Therefore Challenge is focused on opportunities for action. How can Live Search provide challenges and enhance the opportunities for action? Live Search can explore avenues such as minimising the user skill barriers. Jakob Nielsen Usability Expert demonstrates this in an experiment by lowering the language barriers on a website to accommodate 30% of internet consumers with lower literacy increased task completion by 133% (Nielsen, 2005). Decreasing the challenge level all users benefited. Nielsen's example highlights the benefits of ensuring a challenge congruent with consumer's skills.

Indirect influences Interactive/Speed, Startweb and Importance yield interesting findings. Interactive/Speed refers to waiting time between inputs/responses and the time taken to load the website. Nielsen discusses search dominant users (users focused on using search to locate information) focus is on finding information as fast as possible (Nielsen, 1997). Live Search needs to ensure firstly that search results are quickly delivered upon request resulting in higher

ben@bwagy.com | blog.bwagy.com

interactivity and finally that consumers are able to load their service in minimum time. Startweb's influence is subject to the same manner as in Challenge/Control, minimise the experience level required for the challenge to ensure this constructs minimum impact. Importance in relation to Challenge/Arousal acts slightly different. Viewing Importance through this lens provides insight into the search results of Live Search. Search results to inputs need to be relevant, increased relevance leads to increased importance. Thereby Live Search needs to draw all these elements together, offering an easy to user interface with low skill required, hasty response to inputs and fast load times. Flow is more likely to occur and then lead to a compelling search experience.

Telepresence/Time Distortion

Hoffman, Novak & Yung (2000) define Telepresence as the perception that the virtual environment with which one is interacting is more real or dominant than the actual physical environment. Linked to Telepresence is Time Distortion which is "the perception of time passing rapidly when engaged in an activity" (Hoffman, Novak & Yung, 2000, p. 27). Often described by consumers are losing track of time or that time seemed to go by very quickly. Question for Live Search is how can these constructs be stimulated? Focused attention is the answer that is how engrossed the user is on the website. Focused Attention directly influences Telepresence/Time Distortion. The model delves deeper suggesting Focused Attention can be influenced by two constructs discussed prior, Challenge/Arousal and Importance. As is being revealed the model is complex and can result in an upward or downward spiral of success. Working backwards Live Search can

ben@bwagy.com | blog.bwagy.com

comprehend what this means. Should Live Search successfully stimulate Challenge/Arousal and Importance consumers are going to engage with the site positively leading to Focused Attention. Once Focused Attention has been achieved Telepresence/Time Distortion chance of occurring increases which leads to flow thus concluding in a compelling experience.

Practical Applications of Live Search

In order to explore the practicality of the arising framework a series of searches were completed on Live Search (12/06/08) and a competitor Google. Search 1 the objective was to misspell a term to gauge the response to the inaccurate input. The misspelling was 'waterblaasting' instead of 'water blasting'. Google returned with an option of selecting the correct spelling 'waterblasting' allowing the user to select this option. Live Search simply returned no results. As a point of comparison both are providing challenges. Google's challenge is faster providing a prompt for the user to respond easily by clicking the correct spelling. Live Search's challenge is harder by providing the user with no prompts other than to simply search again. Through the Challenge/Arousal perspective predicted behaviour would be Arousal on Google and boredom or irritation on Live Search. Google's challenge is likely to be more successful. Search 2 conducted on the same day hard a different objective, to try a term that would return no results. Query 'blastin123455' was inputted into Google and Live Search. Google returned no result and suggested 'try different words'. Live Search also returned no results and suggests 'try rephrasing keywords or using synonyms'. Difference in language is dramatic with

ben@bwagy.com | blog.bwagy.com

Google's response appealing to a wider literacy range. These practical applications indicate how quickly the framework can be utilised to indicate plausible reasons or Live Search having room for improvement in creating a compelling experience.

Limitations

Hoffman, Novak & Yung (2000) explored the limitations of their model of which have implications for the arising framework. Situation Involvement has not been explored which may be of relevance to Live Search. A motivated user whom is seeking timely information i.e. stock quotes level of involvement will differ from a user seeking funny videos. Varying involvement may impact on the relevance of various constructs. Moreover the distinction between task orientated & experiential navigation has not been made. Arguably all searchers are seeking something therefore are goal or task orientated. Impact on the model and its influences may reveal a stronger model for furthering Live Search in achieving a compelling experience. Additionally Demographic Variables were proposed as an avenue of further research. The impact of these remains unknown but needs to be noted in light of the strength of the model. Limitations aside the model proposed holds a strong foundation for which Live Search can start from.

Conclusion

In summary the model put forward by Hoffman, Novak was explored in light of Live Search's challenge in creating a compelling experience. Background of Live Search was discussed. Through exploring the

ben@bwagy.com | blog.bwagy.com

model an applied framework was constructed for Live Search. Skill/Control focused on ensuring that barriers to skill were low and such that users perceived a greater navigation success rate. Challenge/Arousal highlighted the need for low barriers to challenge in order to maximise the potential consumer base likely to accept the challenge. Lowering the challenge barriers increased arousal. Moreover it revealed how hasty load times and response to inputs encouraged greater interaction. Relevance of results was highlighted as an indirect influence to Challenge/Arousal. Finally Telepresence/Time Distortion was explored to its core of based upon Challenge/Arousal and Importance creating Focused Attention. Practical applications were made which highlighted the immediate benefits of viewing Live Search through the model. Limitations highlighted further research will strengthen the framework for Live Search. Viewing Live Search through the resulting framework highlights areas for improvement in creating flow and in turn a compelling search experience. Live Search can utilise this knowledge to better equip them in the ongoing struggle for search engine market share.

ben@bwagy.com | blog.bwagy.com

Biography

Aaron Wall. (2008). Search Engine History. Retreived June 10th, 2008, from http://www.searchenginehistory.com.

Hoffman, D.L., Novak, T.P. (1996), "Marketing in hypermedia computer-mediated environments: conceptual foundations", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 60 pp.50-68.

Hoffman, D.L., Novak, T.P., Yung, Y.F. (2000), "Measuring the customer experience in online environments: a structural modeling approach",*Marketing Science*, Vol. 19 No.1, pp.22-42.

Jakob Nielsen. (1997). Search and You May Find. Retrieved June 12th, 2008, from http://www.useit.com/alertbox/9707b.html.

Jakob Nielsen. (2005). Lower-Literacy Users. Retrieved June 12th, 2008, from http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20050314.html.

Hitwise. (2006, June 19). Google At 65 Percent Of All U.S. Searches In May 2007. [Press release]. New York: Hitwise.

Hitwise. (2008, June 10). Google Receives 68 Percent of U.S. Searches in May 2008. [Press release]. New York: Hitwise.

ben@bwagy.com | blog.bwagy.com