



FLYING BLIND: THE IMPACT OF GOOGLE'S SECURE SEARCH

(And what you can do about it)

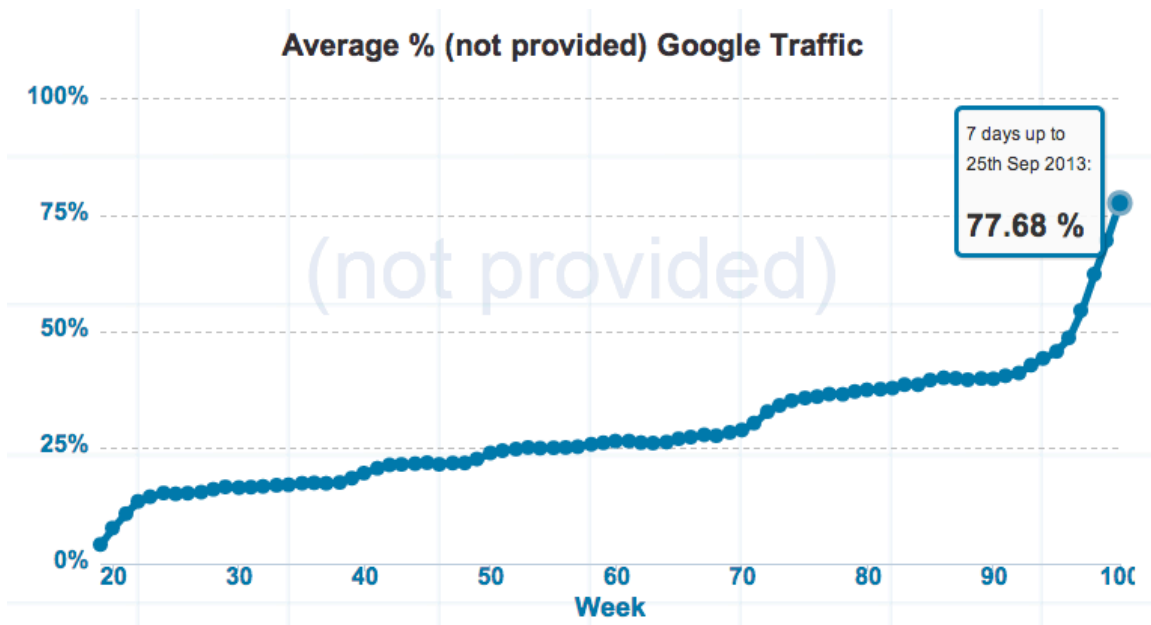
September 26, 2013

THE RISE OF "NOT PROVIDED"

In early September, Google quietly made a subtle change to how they deliver their search results, with the ultimate goal of encrypting all search activity. While this is a great thing for Google users, particularly in the age where privacy is under threat, the net impact for marketers is clearly negative. As a result of these changes, marketers will no longer be able to see what keywords visitors used in Google prior to coming to their site.

The shift to encrypt all search traffic is a culmination of efforts at Google that began in October 2011. At that time, Google began encrypting searches for anyone who was logged into Google, providing a layer of security to protect users from potential eavesdroppers. The net impact? When users were signed in, Google would encrypt their traffic and the keyword that they used prior to visiting a site, preventing this information from being passed along to the web analytics platform. Rather, all traffic from these secure searches were lumped into an aptly named bucket, "not provided."

Google initially suggested that only a small amount of the traffic would be secured. However, over time, they introduced encrypted search into more channels, gradually reducing the visibility that marketers had into keyword traffic.



Above: Average percentage of organic search traffic that is "not provided" by Google. There has been a steady increase over the past two years. Source: NotProvidedCount.com

GOOGLE CONFIRMATION

While there was speculation that Google was headed toward encrypting searches across the board, it wasn't until this month that Google officially confirmed that they were working to secure search for everyone. According to [Search Engine Land](#), Google confirmed the shift, saying:

We want to provide SSL protection to as many users as we can, in as many regions as we can — we added non-signed-in Chrome omnibox searches earlier this year, and more recently other users who aren't signed in. We're going to continue expanding our use of SSL in our services because we believe it's a good thing for users....

It's clear that the recent “hockey stick” growth in “not provided” is a sign that information for organic traffic by keyword is soon to be a thing of the past, at least for traffic from Google.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETERS

As a bit of a data wonk, this is clearly a significant blow to the insights we are able to construct. Briefly, here are the key implications:

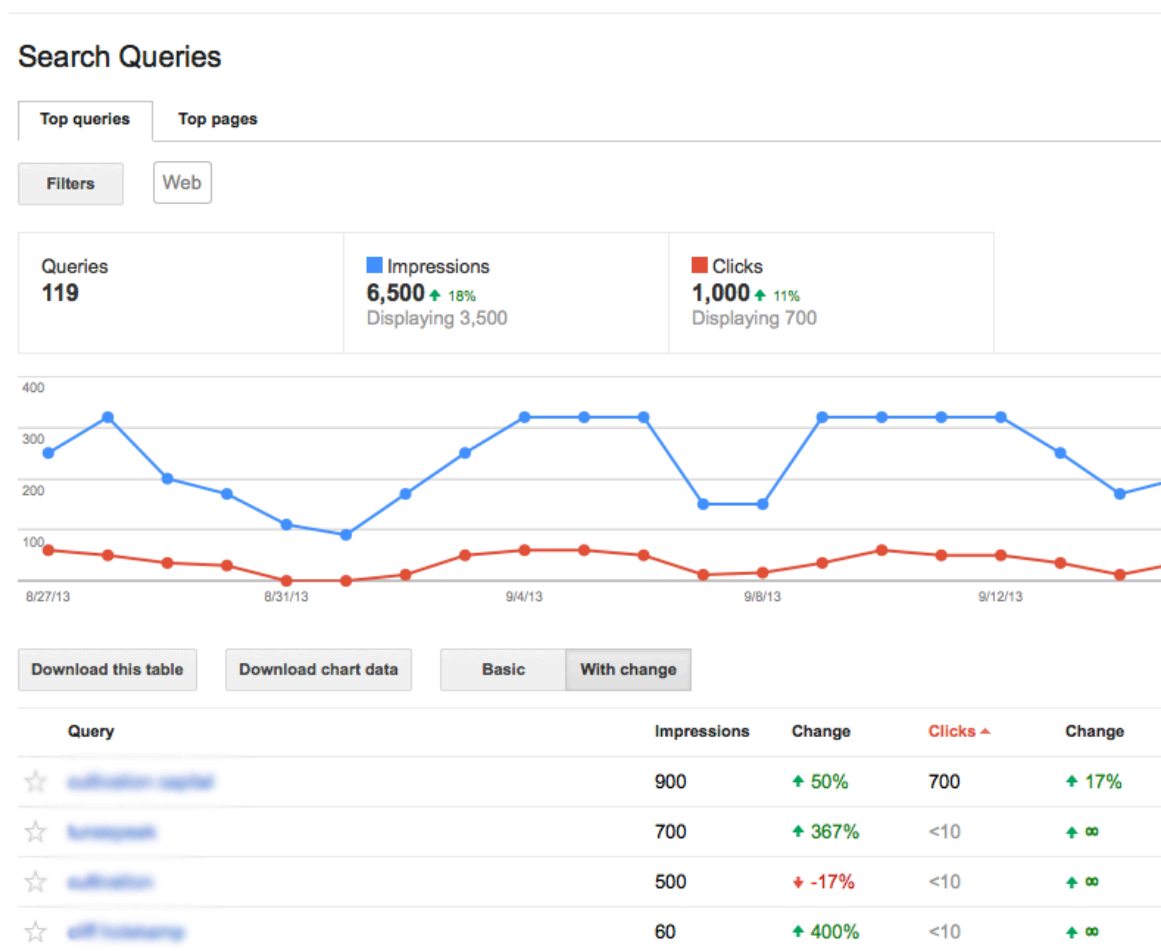
- **Goodbye Sweet Data:** Soon (likely within the next couple of months), Google will no longer provide keywords in their referral data. This means that marketers will no longer be able to see the keywords that are driving traffic to their site, at least from Google.
- **Yahoo & Bing:** Marketers will continue to see referral data from Yahoo! and Bing. In addition, data for the overall organic search traffic will remain accessible.
- **Actionable Search Data Gets Fuzzier:** Without the keyword data, I expect marketers to begin looking for other proxies to give an indication of the performance of keywords. This includes rank tracking (below), examining individual or groups of landing pages and webmaster tools data.
- **Rank Tracking Becomes More Important:** Ironically, the change is likely to increase the importance of rank tracking, something that had eroded in its importance over the past decade. Search is and will always be grounded in keywords. In the wake of the loss of keyword traffic data, rank tracking will once again take on more importance as a proxy for how a site is doing in search, by keyword. Expect reporting to start incorporating estimates of traffic based upon rank, estimated search volumes and CTR

by position.

As marketers, we love having access to as much data as possible. It empowers us to make smart decisions and deliver a better experience for our users. Unfortunately, we live in a world where we have access to incomplete information. It appears that Google's choice will make search one of those places where we are forced to take incomplete data and make the best possible decisions.

Webmaster Tools to the Rescue?

Not all is lost. Despite the change, you won't be completely left in the dark. There is still one option to get (some of) the keyword information:



Google Webmaster Tools: Google provides publishers with data on impressions and clicks by keywords through their Webmaster Central platform. We expect them to continue to deliver this information. It should be noted, however, that the data are approximations and not as precise as past analytics

data.

Note that you're limited to 90 days of historical data. However, we believe by [linking your Google WMT account with an AdWords account](#) (even if you spend nothing), should enable the data to be archives in perpetuity.

SEO MARCHES ON

While the loss of data increases the challenges of reporting on performance and optimization across programs, it is largely in line with the rising tide of content and brand marketing - something that's now prominent in organic search marketing programs. In other words, SEO is increasingly turning to content and brand marketing strategies in order to drive organic results. While keywords will always play a role in SEO, this is another call for SEO practitioners to focus on raising the organic traffic as a whole. Bottom line: earn branded mentions and execute marketing that is less reliant on keywords.

