



## SEARCH INSIGHTS:

# Discovering and Testing Brand Associations

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### THE **RUNDOWN**

Brands work hard to establish their identities. Does it match what consumers think? Search data can be a helpful gauge. When people search, they often use a combination of terms. These “co-searches” hint at the mental connections they make between topics, products, objectives, and so on. When looked at in aggregate, this data offers a reflection of how and when consumers are thinking about a brand. Marketers can use this information in a number of ways—to inform new partnership opportunities, highlight natural spokespeople, test the strength of brand associations and inform future positioning to name a few.

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Every brand marketer has a strong belief about what its brand stands for. After all, marketers spend time, money and significant effort defining a key value proposition they hope will lead to marketplace success. Campaigns, products and creative strategies are all designed to support these carefully thought-out brand identities. But does the reality in the consumer's mind match our objectives? Do the brand associations line up with the positioning we intended?

Search data can help us find out. It's a valuable tool for examining a brand in numerous ways, including how well it stands for what we think it should. By tapping into the vast data set made up of millions of consumer searches about brands and their competitors, we can gain a sense of the perceptions and associations consumers hold. In this series we've already explored the use of search data as a [brand planning tool](#) and showed how search data reflects the collective [moments and movements in our society](#). We also showed how marketers can use search data to gain new insights into [categories](#) and [competitive landscapes](#). Now let's take a deeper look into how to use search to investigate associations and positioning.

## **Co-searches uncover connections**

We often think of a "search" as a singular occurrence. In reality, however, people often use a series of queries when they search. This means that each search session contains a combination of terms (or "co-searches"). These can naturally uncover connections between brands, topics and objectives.

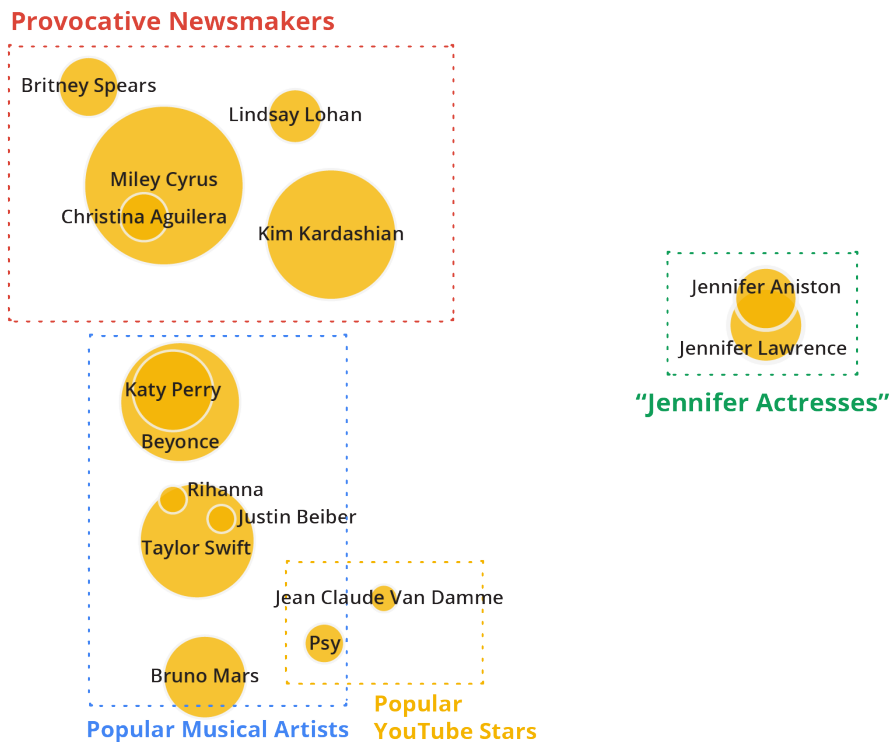
Take a recent party I planned: I started looking for decorations, then searched for gifts and party favors, researched fun party recipes and finally searched for places to buy the items I wanted. Those searches can be strung together, showing which "needs" queries matched up with which "actions" queries. By connecting millions of such strings, search data offers a reflection of how—and in what context—consumers are thinking about your brand.

## **Surfacing brand associations through search**

Co-searched terms can help brands not only understand their associations but also pinpoint products, services or people that are natural candidates for partnerships that will drive home desired brand associations. They can also uncover other brands that may be sharing your brand's search territory.

Let's illustrate this idea with some celebrity brands. The bubble chart below shows some of 2013's popular actors, personalities and artists. The size of each bubble represents the relative search volume, and the adjacency of bubbles shows the likelihood of those people being co-searched. You can see that celebrities naturally fall into groups with shared associations, simply based on search behaviors. Not only did Miley Cyrus and Kim Kardashian dominate search (by volume) in 2013, but their public reputations also linked them with other provocative newsmakers including Lindsay Lohan and Christina Aguilera.

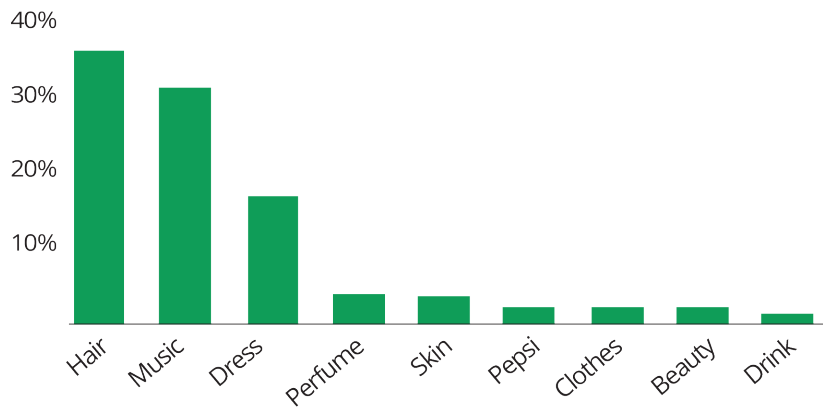
*Search Share and Brand Association  
Map United States, 2013*



*Source: Google Trends for Marketers*

Now let's look at various attributes with which these celebrity brands are associated. Interestingly, "hair" is the highest co-searched term among the attributes we were curious about—even more so than "music." These folks are clearly setting trends and turning heads with their hairstyles.

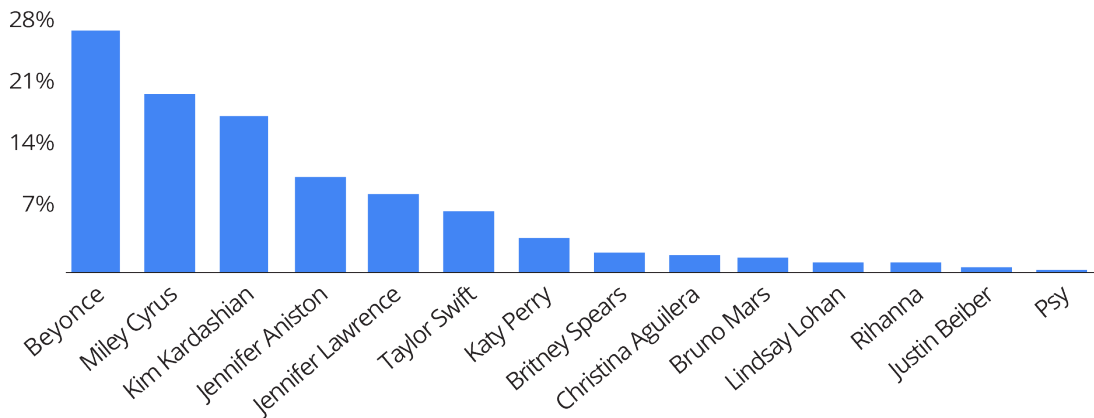
Attribute Interest Share Across Chosen Celebrity Brands  
United States, 2013



Each bar indicates the percentage of that specific attribute searched with any of the celebrity brands out of all searches that included any of the attributes with any of the celebrity brands. Source: Google Trends for Marketers

Whose hair has us captivated? Beyoncé is most strongly associated with the term, and actresses Jennifer Aniston and Jennifer Lawrence are in the top five. Given that celebrities are constantly updating their looks, changing the time frame would likely shift the lineup. Similarly, a brand’s association with a certain attribute can change over time relative to the competition, so marketers should take a pulse in an ongoing way.

Celebrity Brand Interest Share for “Hair” Attribute  
United States, 2013



Source: Google Trends for Marketers

Take analyses like this for a spin with your own brand. You can define the attributes and competitive set you want to examine. If the associations revealed are desirable, that's fantastic. Keep reinforcing them through your creative, media, product decisions and the like. If there's room for improvement—say you wish you were more associated with “healthy snacks”—consider using not only your tried and true branding efforts but also search advertising. Advertising against category keywords like “healthy snacks” could help spotlight your brand and strengthen the positioning you're after with an audience already showing interest in your category.

## **Search “endorses” brand affiliations**

Like corporations, celebrities often have key affiliations with specific entities (for example, brands, events, initiatives). By reviewing search data, we can examine whether planned partnerships are panning out and check out tangential associations that are naturally occurring. Some celebrities can build strong associations across multiple brands. Beyoncé, for example, has two significant affiliations according to search share, thanks to her ad campaigns with L'Oréal and Pepsi. Kim Kardashian makes a bit of co-searching splash for every brand on the matrix. As expected, though, she shows strongest affiliation with Sears due to the Kardashian Kollektion there.

A great example of how search can reflect the impact of marketing efforts is the [recent Volvo Trucks ad](#) featuring Jean-Claude Van Damme. The ad, which shows the action star doing splits on moving tractor trailer trucks, has received more than 65 million hits on YouTube. While Van Damme has limited media presence compared with other celebrities, his association with Volvo is especially strong. Instantly, brand and celebrity became aligned in the minds of consumers, boosting search interest for both.

Celebrity Brand Search Share by Brand  
United States, 2013

	Volvo	Coke	Aveeno	L'Oréal	Pepsi	Samsung	Sears
Jean Claude Van Damme	84%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Taylor Swift	2%	42%	0%	5%	5%	10%	7%
Jennifer Aniston	1%	1%	88%	5%	0%	3%	3%
Beyonce	2%	8%	0%	50%	84%	17%	9%
Miley Cyrus	5%	16%	0%	6%	2%	21%	12%
Kim Kardashian	3%	5%	3%	17%	2%	17%	46%

% represents allocation of searches relative to brand and celebrities listed  
Source: Google Trends for Marketers

Your own brand may have partnerships that connect it with another brand, event or emerging trend. Search data allows you to quickly assess whether consumers are making those linkages as you intended. If those associations are not strong, you can devote additional attention to media and content to strengthen them. Or you might use search data to identify new relationships that can help inform decisions about the next sponsorship, media and partnership opportunities that come across your desk.

## Identifying brand identity through search

Shaping and managing brand identity hinges on understanding consumers and what they think. Search data presents an opportunity to tap into billions of queries revealing just that. As a start, type your brand into [Google Trends](#) and see what comes up. Look specifically at "related searches," which includes topics and specific queries. Additional tools such as Trends for Marketers let you dig further into a set of brands and attributes you specifically care about, allowing you to examine co-search behavior more deeply. Grab your Google sales partner to explore the power of those tools if you haven't already. By analyzing co-searches, brands can find new partnership opportunities, identify strengths and weaknesses in brand associations, and keep tabs on those brand identities you've worked so hard to establish.



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