



# THE MEANING OF SEARCH: How It Shapes Our Lives and Builds Brands

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PUBLISHED  
*October 2013*

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## THE **RUNDOWN**

As marketers, it's easy to reduce search down to metrics and data without considering the impact it has on actual people. The truth is, search has fundamentally redefined how we find and use information. It's become so reflexive and so essential, could users live without it? To find out, we did some research and spoke with a number of experts. Our findings unpack the deeper meaning of search in people's lives, as well as the broad, strategic role it can play for brands looking to connect with them.

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*Could you live without search for three days?*

This seemingly simple challenge was at the heart of the research we conducted with some of our everyday search users. The idea came out of conversations with digital anthropologists, behavioral psychologists and digital content creators. This particular thought from Dr. Alice Marwick first got us thinking:

"I almost feel like search has become like water or air. It's something that people need, that they can't survive without, but a lot of the time they take it for granted or they don't realize how important it is until it's removed."

Could this be true? And if so, then why?

To find out, we embarked on an ethnographic research project in which 18 search users in the U.S. documented when, how, and why they used search throughout the course of their day. We also asked some to go cold turkey—and not use search for three days — and tell us what that experience was like.

Even more interesting than what happened is why. What is the meaning behind the behavior we documented? That's what we'll focus on here, as well as the profound implications these findings have for brand marketers.

## **Why we search**

There are 100 billion searches on Google every month. As a result, we know quite a bit about what people do when they search, and where, when and how they are searching. We freely and publicly share much of this information on our [Google Trends](#) site, through various studies on our [Databoard](#) site and in our annual [Zeitgeist reports](#). This valuable data reveals user trends on a macro scale.

*"What we discovered is that people use search for many reasons — from answering the practical to pondering the poignant."*

But the what, where and when of search is only part of the story; recognizing search's full power and potential lies below the surface in understanding why. This research was

focused on just that, and was also about uncovering the motivations that drive people to search.

What we discovered is that people use search for many reasons — from answering the practical ("*Where can I buy these shoes?*") to pondering the poignant ("*Who do I want to be?*"). These reasons boiled down into six basic categories — or six core human needs — that search can help address:

**Doing:** Searching to convert information into action. This is the functional foundation of search.

Examples: searching for the nearest hardware store, the best price for a TV, or a video on how to change a flat tire.

**Understanding:** Searching to engage with the world by educating ourselves on a particular topic. This is not necessarily related to taking immediate action with the new knowledge.

Examples: searching to understand what triggers heartburn, how to train a new pet, or the process of buying a home.

**Belonging:** Searching to fulfill the need to connect and socialize with others.

Examples: searching to connect with old high school friends or people suffering from the same medical condition.

**Experiencing:** Searching to augment life's moments in real-time, which is particularly compelling in mobile search.

Examples: searching at a concert to learn about the artist, or find movie trailers while watching the Oscars.

**Progressing:** Searching to fulfill the need for ongoing personal growth. This is a continual process with long-term emotional rewards.

Examples: repeatedly searching for ways to live a healthier life, through a better diet, developing an exercise routine, or coping with stress.

**Self-Discovering:** Searching to develop and reinforce a sense of identity. This is abstract and rarely top of mind, but is a powerful, emotional payoff of search.

Example: one user told us, "Google knows the REAL ME! It's a true reflection of who I am... I tell it things I wouldn't tell anyone. To tell you the truth, it probably knows me better than I know myself."

## From information to empowerment

Looking at the vast range of needs it fulfills, search is obviously an important part of our everyday lives. But why? How did this come to happen?

For one, search has redefined the way we find and use information. Before the search technology we have today, it was cumbersome to find and apply information. Think Yellow Pages, encyclopedias, libraries. Now it's exponentially quicker and easier and we can connect to the web anytime from any number of devices. We constantly have the world's information right at our fingertips, and have shifted our time and energy away from gathering and memorizing information to quickly finding, processing and applying it.

Dr. Brett Kennedy, behavioral psychologist, underscores this idea:

"From our earliest existence, humans [have been] constantly searching for answers and trying to find ourselves. Internet search has really captured that process and made everything — whether it's information, products, relationships — all accessible to us."

And as search user Eduardo P. puts it, that access to information adds real value and efficiency to life:

"Being able to use search is a great way to be able to do a lot more in a smaller amount of time. It lets you find what you need immediately. It allows you to better understand things, to better seek information, to make better decisions about where you want to shop or eat. It enhances your life."

This shift in focus from gathering information to processing and applying it means that search is more than just useful, it's transformative. The real magic happens inside our minds, when we process information through our own mental models. We make it relevant to our own lives, and that relevance is what provides meaning. This happens when we do four things:

- **Understand context:** how does the information fit into my life?
- **Find interconnections:** how do these bits of information connect and fit together?
- **Discover greater meaning:** what is the significance of the information?
- **See inherent possibilities:** what can I do with the information?

Todd S., a search user, gives an example of how search can be personally motivational in one's life:

"Search can help you dream big, look up careers of people who influence you, inspire you, role models. It helps you dream what you want to be, what you want your life to look like in 20 years. It's motivating."

By allowing us to do this higher-order thinking, search isn't just efficient, it's empowering. It's about finding information and transforming it into knowledge that can be used to do more, experience more, and ultimately be more. Or, as one of our digital content creators, OKFocus, told us:

"I can't think of a better place to look, to see, to experience, to define yourself than searching the Internet."

In other words, we apply this knowledge to help us understand the world around us and ourselves within it. Building on this, OKFocus, asserts:

"Search is our center for gathering perception."

## **Reconsidering the role of search marketing**

Today, most marketers focus solely on the 'Doing' aspect of search, aiming to entice people to quickly find and "convert" on provided information — whether that's a product to buy, a location to visit, or a number to call. Certainly search excels at these things, but a huge opportunity lies in the bigger picture.

Your brand can join users who seek answers to their uniquely personal questions and explore their uniquely personal curiosities and interests. For just as people search for many different reasons, they search in many different ways. Dr. Marwick put it best:

"I think there are as many ways to search as there are people searching."

This doesn't mean search marketing is unmanageable or unscalable. Rather, it's an efficient way to connect with many people in highly relevant and personal ways. You can deliver the right message at the right time, accompanying and assisting someone in her everyday life, rather than broadcasting a generic ad and hoping she'll pay attention to it.

The key for brands is to think more broadly and strategically about the role search can play. Here are some questions to consider:

### **What are the core needs your brand fulfills — or could fulfill — in people's lives?**

Example: If you sell mortgages, are you helping people in their need to understand the home buying process by promoting a mortgage calculator to empower them?

### **Are you driving awareness and consideration for your brand amongst those showing interest in your category — or the key benefits your category makes possible?**

Example: If you market heart-healthy breakfast cereal, are you accompanying someone on a search journey to achieve a healthier lifestyle?

**What brand associations and core positioning do you drive through other media that you could be reinforcing through search?**

Example: If you've invested heavily in a TV/print campaign about your car's safety, are you communicating (consistently!) with people searching to educate themselves on the safest cars?

**Do you (or should you) have content to market that searchers might find valuable?**

Example: As a kitchen appliance brand, are you surfacing your recipe tutorial videos to empower people who want to progress as cooks?

It's easy to get caught up in the technical and performance aspects of search — like algorithms, clicks, conversions — but let's remember that search is ultimately about people. It helps them get information, turn it into knowledge, and get on with the business of living. Lauren M., one of our search users, summed it up well:

"Search is a habitual part of my daily routine — doing all the day-to-day basics and so much more. It brings me joy in my day-to-day life. Seeing things I've never seen before. It's eye opening. The Internet has so much to provide and so much you can learn from it. It enables your mind to wonder!"

This brings us back to our original question: Could you live without search for three days? The answer: You could, but why would you want to?



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## About the methodology

Google, in partnership with global insight and brand consultancy, [Flamingo International](#), explored the role of search in users' lives today to better help Agencies and Marketers connect with them. We led a series of one-on-one interviews with digital anthropologists, Dr. Alice Marwick and Jed Brubaker; behavioral psychologist, Dr. Brett Kennedy; and digital content creators, Ryder Ripps and Jonathan Vingiano from OKFocus. We also conducted various interviews and exercises among 18 everyday search users, which included keeping journals of their search behavior and experiences, recording of behavior on their mobile devices throughout the day and/or participating in a search deprivation experiment. Eight of those search users also participated in follow-up in-depth ethnographic interviews.