

# **Online search habits in North America: Why social networks are the new Google**

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“If the news is that important, it will find me”, said a young American woman to a trend hunter from the then-Presidential candidate Barack Obama's campaign. Inadvertently, the woman was showing how the web is evolving. Canada and the USA have record figures concerning the use and penetration of the internet, and there, online search habits are no longer linked to “most sought keywords”, but to how collective intelligence and social networks bring concepts to the masses. This phenomenon must be seen as a taster of what is to come for the rest of the world, since it is very likely that from now on, Facebook and Twitter will be the new Google, and that content will seek the users and not otherwise. For companies, this is a radical change.

## Key trends

- Facebook is the new Google;
- The geolocation revolution;
- The old way: The most sought-after terms.

## Commercial opportunities

- Our friends' opinions on a product or a service were never as important as they are with social networking. That should be the companies' main target;
- Social networks are a very efficient mechanism for knowing details about consumers, and there are many tools and special search engines which can be used to do this, such as a Google Social Search, SocialMention, Yo Name, Snitch.name or Samepoint, among others;
- North American consumers and companies are the “pilots” where most innovations for the future will take place and where new forms of communication and interaction appear; to see what is going there is to enter the future;
- Foursquare and other location tools can be used as good diffusion strategies. A campaign by McDonalds, for example, managed to raise the number of consumers who claim to eat at its restaurants by about 33%.

## Background

In March 2010, the USA experienced a watershed event in the history of internet searches: For the first time, social network Facebook surpassed Google in terms of number of visits for an entire week, according to web analysis firm Hitwise, and so it ranked as the most visited site in the country. “The growing popularity of Facebook's online games is one explanation for the site's surge in traffic”, the company reported but another cause is the increasing use of the social network as a “starting point” for the Internet”, a concept usually dominated by Google. American and Europe media analysts said back then: “Facebook is the new Google” or “The web is becoming social.”

Internet searches are not over, though, but are geared towards the users' friends and acquaintances. This means that the information reaches people through their virtual contacts, who transmit virtual content “virally”. That's why an ever-increasing number of users seek information “ambassadors”, who act as opinion leaders. Since information “gets infected”, searches reveal – like never before – a lot about consumer preferences and trends in several markets.

## Facebook is the new Google

“News and search are under fire. In a fascinating twist, Google's machine logic is being supplanted by Facebook's crowd logic.” This phrase was coined by Wilson Rothman, deputy tech-sci editor of American media chain MSNBC. He goes further with his analysis, adding: “Why build an autonomous artificial intelligence when you can devote the same programming resources to building systems to translate the whims of the masses into usable results? Why stop at music, video or food recommendations, the stuff you see already posted on the walls of your friends? Why not turn the sum total of 500 million people's wall postings into humanly intelligent news blotters and search results?”

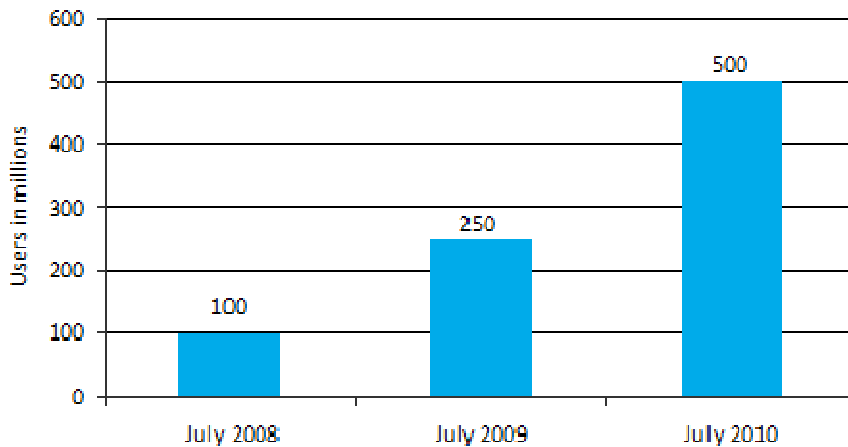
In North America, the analyst's foresights are already part of reality. “Consumers are increasingly turning to social networks and discussion forums to search for information and recommendations for products and services,” thinks Dilip Venkatachari, CEO and co-founder of Compass Labs, an online advertising agency. Kazuho Okui of Naan Studio, creator of Echofon, a popular Twitter application, adds that “social media emerges as the platform for consumers to search for products they're interested in purchasing; the ability to understand, evaluate and react to this content in an unobtrusive manner.” In fact, both companies sealed an alliance to research into what consumers are seeking and commenting on more effectively.

The figures show it. Americans are changing internet usage habits and, increasingly, they are spending the bulk of their time online on social networks such as Facebook, According to a report released by Nielsen Online in August.

“It’s not a new trend, but the numbers are getting bigger”. “Social networks led the pack last year with 15.8% of our online time spent there. But that figure has grown 43% in a year, now up to 22.7 percent of our time.”

**Chart 1 Facebook users globally: July, 2008-2010**

Users in millions



Source: Facebook.com

## The geolocation revolution

A booming trend in the USA and Canada is the obsession of smartphone users for “territorial searches” and the so-called “geotags”. The increase in sales of incorporated GPS devices has broadened the desire for “hyper-local”. Twitter, Facebook and photos uploaded to Flickr or Picasa, among a long list of applications, already allow the geolocation of people and the trend is rapidly reaching many others. Foursquare, mobile device software which allows users to “check-in” at the places one enters is a hit in large urban areas in the USA, and many brands already use it. “Is Foursquare really effective as a platform for bringing in new business?” wondered Mashable, a specialist site in social media. “McDonald’s seems to think so”, it answered itself. According to the company’s head of social media Rick Wion, the McDonald’s Foursquare Day Campaign, with a total cost of only US\$1,000 because it took place on the internet, “increased check-ins by 33%.” “We consider check-ins the same as a person entering the restaurant,” tweeted Wion. Geolocation is a very broad trend and is having an impact on a very large number of markets: There are services which show the prices of houses for sale as one walks or drives by, and services which send discount checks close to the place where one is at. Once again, it is content reaching users.

## The old way: The most sought-after terms

It is clear that “collective intelligence” will not eliminate search engines, at least not at the moment. The top searches or fastest rising terms on Bing, Yahoo or Google are still useful as great trend-hunters. What do they show in 2009 and 2010? Mainly, three things: Americans’ love for celebrities, increasing online watching of videos and games, and the aforementioned rise of social networking.

The 2009 Year-End Google Zeitgeist found out that, in the USA, the fastest rising terms were celebrities (Michael Jackson, Natasha Richardson, Farrah Fawcett and Lady Gaga), social networks (Twitter, Facebook and hi5) and online series and videos (Hulu - an online platform used to watch series such as Glee).

In the case of Canada, Google Zeitgeist 2009 also shows a growing interest in the hyper-local and geolocation: Blackberry, Craigslist, Kijiji (free classified ads) and Google Street View are three of the fastest rising terms. Furthermore, “map” is among the most popular terms.

## Outlook

The way people consume and seek information on the internet is constantly changing. The lead role of “collective intelligence” through social networks such as Facebook and Twitter is far more mature in North America than in the rest of the world. It is possible that many trends born there will then be spread to Latin America and even other parts

of the globe. What will be the trends from 2011 onwards? Experts point to online services through crowd computing, entertainment with online games and TV shows, adapted to new mobile devices, such as the iPad to be joined by over a dozen new tablet PCs.

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