

optify

The Changing Face of SERPs:
Organic Click Through Rate

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The Changing Face of SERPs: Organic Click Through Rate

Executive Summary

As part of a series of research projects we are conducting on the Optify database and given recent changes to Google and Bing's search engine results pages (SERPs), we designated an ambitious goal for ourselves – come up with a new Click-Through-Rate (CTR) curve. Previous CTR curves include the all-famous, 2006 AOL CTR curve, as well as other more recent attempts to provide updated curves. For our research, we used a small sample set of our database, constructed from organic keyword visits (Google US) from a variety of B2B and B2C websites for the month of December 2010.

The three main questions we intended to answer were:

1. Given the recent changes to SERPs, what is the new CTR curve for organic results?
2. Is there a correlation between organic click through rate and CPC value for the same keyword?
3. What is the effect of search volume on click through rates?

When we completed this research, we arrived at the following answers and conclusions:

1. Ranking is important only as a mean to predict CTR. While you should always aspire to rank higher, real value comes from business results, not rank.
2. There is a negative correlation between CTR on organic results and CPC value of sponsored results; as CPC value goes up, you can expect to get less clicks on the organic results.
3. Search volume affects CTR. Long tail terms (under 100 monthly searches) yield higher overall CTR on the first Search Engine Result Page (SERP), while head terms (over 1000 monthly searches) yield higher CTR on the first results but lower average CTR on the first SERP.

The results described in this white paper, emphasize the importance of ranking on the first page of Google. Furthermore, they show how ranking first on page one can yield accelerating benefits equivalent to tripling the number of organic visits from second position to first. Since rank and search volume are not business results but mere KPIs for most businesses, we decided to focus our analysis on visits from organic search. Even though it is not a business performance metric either, we presumed it was the best KPI measurement of the bunch because of its common usage across all types of businesses. The results of our analysis clearly show that in order to truly measure your success, rank and search volume are not enough. Since the CTR for a number one position isn't the same for long tail as it is for head terms, or for "expensive" CPC terms as it is for "cheap" CPC terms, the only way to truly measure your success (our primary takeaway from our analysis) is business results. Whether those are pageviews, visitors, leads, customers or even sales, we figured that visits are easily transferable to those metrics. This whitepaper describes the research and results we found and includes a recommendation section to help you understand how you can use this data.

Research Methodology and Constraints

We used organic keyword visits (Google US) gathered from Optify’s software for a variety of B2B and B2C websites for the month of December 2010. We looked at visitors from organic search to these companies’ websites and mapped those keywords to their rank on Google US SERP. We then analyzed the average and median click through rates for those keywords based on their position on the SERP.

250 sites were randomly chosen as the sample set for this research and from which over 10,000 keywords were analyzed. After filtering the keyword set to include only keywords that qualified under the research criterion (search volume, rank), for each rank position we analyzed (all positions on the first SERP and the entire second SERP), we had between 200 and 1,000 keywords.

Background

A few years ago, AOL leaked their search volumes (<http://techcrunch.com/2006/08/06/aol-proudly-releases-massive-amounts-of-user-search-data/>) and SEO aficionados created one of the first CTR curves. Those curves have been used thoroughly in the SEO industry as a cornerstone for ROI calculators and theoretical debates and as a means to justify SEO efforts. These CTR curves are now outdated. Given recent changes in the way search engines render the SERPs (Search Engine Results Page) and the increasing importance of social in search, we thought it was time for a new CTR curve and to answer a few basic questions.

Google SERP Click Through Rates - The Raw Numbers

Rank #	Click Throughs	Percent %	Delta #n-1	Delta #n1
	19,434,540	100%		
1	8,220,278	42.30%	n/a	n/a
2	2,316,738	11.92%	-71.82%	-71.82%
3	1,640,751	8.44%	-29.46%	-80.04%
4	1,171,642	6.03%	-28.59%	-85.75%
5	943,667	4.86%	-19.46%	-88.52%
6	774,718	3.99%	-17.90%	-90.58%
7	655,914	3.37%	-15.34%	-92.95%
8	579,196	2.98%	-11.69%	-92.95%
9	549,196	2.83%	-5.18%	-93.32%
10	577,325	2.97%	-5.12%	-92.98%
11	127,688	0.66%	-77.88%	-98.45%
12	108,555	0.66%	-14.98%	-98.68%
13	101,802	0.52%	-6.22%	-98.76%
14	94,221	0.48%	-7.45%	-98.85%
15	91,020	0.47%	-3.40%	-98.89%
16	75,006	0.39%	-17.59%	-99.09%
17	70,054	0.36%	-6.60%	-99.15%
18	65,832	0.34%	-6.03%	-99.20%
19	62,141	0.32%	-5.61%	-99.24%
20	58,382	0.30%	-6.05%	-99.29%
21	55,471	0.29%	-4.99%	-99.33%
31	23,041	0.12%	-58.46%	-99.72%
41	14,024	0.07%	-39.13%	-99.83%

Click Through Rates of Google SERPs based on AOL-data.tgzAOL
 Click Through Rate Table Source: Red Cardinal <http://bit.ly/ISREw>

Question #1

Given the recent changes to SERPs, what is the new CTR curve for organic results?

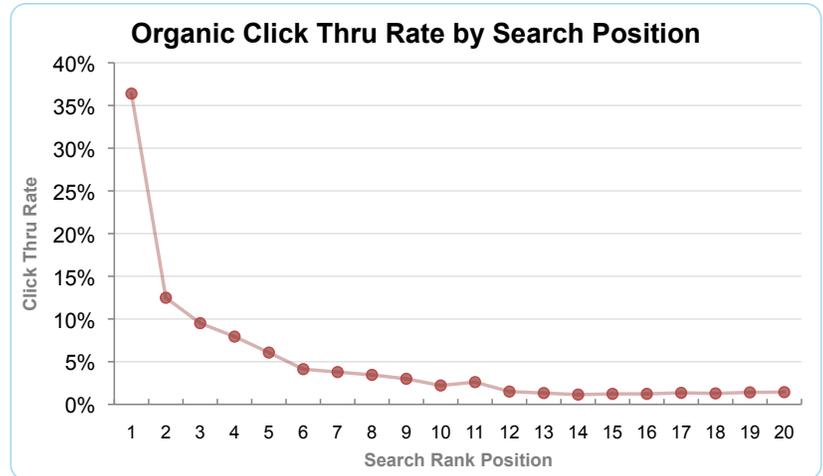
New Click Through Rate (CTR) Curve

To answer this question, we looked at the organic keyword visits (Google US) gathered from Optify's software for a variety of B2B and B2C websites for the month of December 2010. The first set of results supports the old claim: ranking on the first page is far more valuable than ranking anywhere else.

These results clearly show that with an average 37% click through rate, the benefit of ranking number one is very valuable, and with 60% of the clicks going to the top three (usually above the fold), ranking at the top of the first page is more valuable than ever.

Unlike the old AOL data, ranking first on the second page has some benefits; there's a slight bump for position eleven (the first result for page two) over the last position on page one (position ten).

The implication of these results is that working to move keywords up within page one can yield accelerating benefits; a quick ROI analysis would indicate, if you double your investment to move from the second position to the first, you could triple your visits for that keyword.



Rank #	Average CTR	Median CTR	Delta #n-1	Delta #n1
1	36.4%	25.0%		
2	12.5%	9.1%	-65.68%	-65.68%
3	9.5%	7.1%	-23.84%	-73.86%
4	7.9%	5.5%	-16.53%	-78.18%
5	6.1%	3.8%	-23.54%	-83.32%
6	4.1%	2.7%	32.01%	-88.66%
7	3.8%	2.6%	-8.26%	-89.59%
8	3.5%	2.0%	8.71%	-90.50%
9	3.0%	1.8%	-13.33%	-91.77%
10	2.2%	1.5%	-26.07%	-93.91%
11	2.6%	1.3%	17.80%	-92.83%
12	1.5%	0.7%	-42.37%	-95.87%
13	1.3%	0.7%	11.71%	-96.35%
14	1.1%	0.7%	13.72%	-96.85%
15	1.2%	0.5%	7.55%	-96.61%
16	1.2%	0.5%	0.10%	-96.61%
17	1.4%	0.5%	9.63%	-96.28%
18	1.3%	0.5%	-4.76%	-96.46%
19	1.4%	0.5%	9.57%	-96.12%
20	1.4%	0.6%	1.57%	-96.06%

Click Through Rates of Google US SERPs based on Optify data

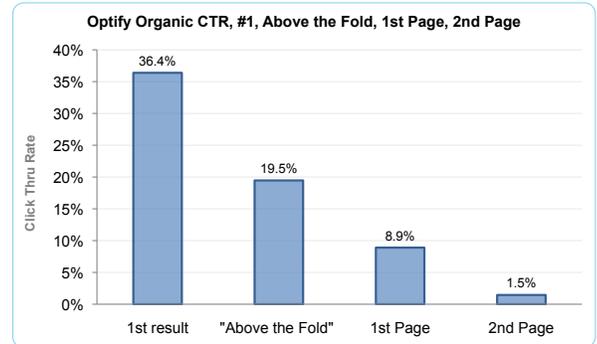
Question #1 (cont.)

Given the recent changes to SERPs, what is the new CTR curve for organic results?

Given the volatile nature of SERPs, especially in the last few months, your exact position on a page is less predictable than the page you're going to rank on. For that reason, we looked at the average CTR on page one versus the average CTR on page two.

We found that the average CTR on page one is 8.9%, far higher than the 1.5% CTR average on the second page, emphasizing even further how important the first page is compared to any other page and position. This means your SEO efforts should be

focused on moving keywords to the first page and not necessarily to the first position. It also means, that ranking below page two, is good only for tracking and looking at trends, but has almost no business value.



Optify vs. AOL

Rank #	Average CTR	Median CTR	Delta #n-1	Delta #n1
1	36.4%	25.0%		
2	12.5%	9.1%	-65.68%	-65.68%
3	9.5%	7.1%	-23.84%	-73.86%
4	7.9%	5.5%	-16.53%	-78.18%
5	6.1%	3.8%	-23.54%	-83.32%
6	4.1%	2.7%	32.01%	-88.66%
7	3.8%	2.6%	-8.26%	-89.59%
8	3.5%	2.0%	8.71%	-90.50%
9	3.0%	1.8%	-13.33%	-91.77%
10	2.2%	1.5%	-26.07%	-93.91%

Click Through Rates of Google US SERPs based on Optify data

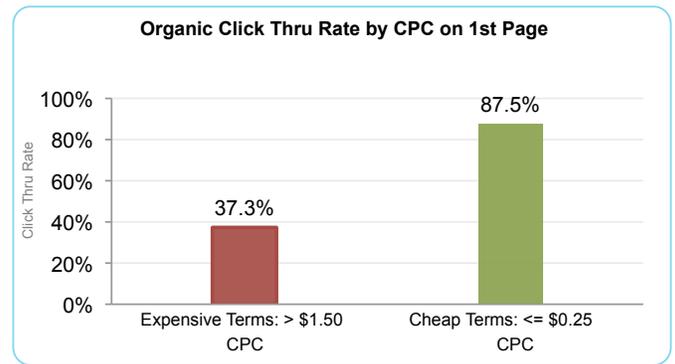
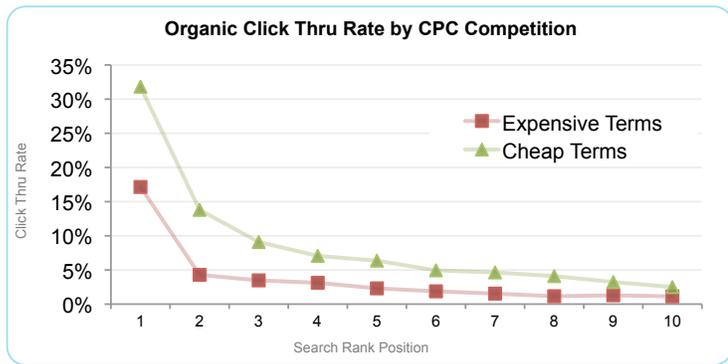
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1	8,220,278	42.30%	n/a	n/a
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4	1,171,642	6.03%	-28.59%	-85.75%
5	943,667	4.86%	-19.46%	-88.52%
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9	549,196	2.83%	-5.18%	-93.32%
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Click Through Rates of Google SERPs based on AOL-data.tgzAOL
Click Through Rate Table Source: Red Cardinal <http://bit.ly/ISREw>

Question #2

Is there a correlation between organic CTR and CPC value for the same keyword?

To test the effects of the CPC value of a keyword on its CTR, we compared “expensive” CPC terms, over \$1.50 CPC on AdWords, to “cheap” CPC terms, under \$0.25 CPC on AdWords.



The graph on the left shows that expensive CPC terms see a lower organic CTR than cheap CPC terms. We found that cheap CPC terms will likely see over 30% CTR on position one while expensive CPC terms will see less than 20% CTR on position one. **The graph on the right** elaborates further on the implications of these results; cheap CPC terms will likely yield over double the CTR on the first page than expensive CPC terms. In other terms, given two keywords with the same search volume one being a cheap keyword, and one being an expensive keyword, your potential organic traffic is nearly three times greater on a lower CPC term.

The flipside of this analysis is that if you’re bidding on expensive CPC terms, you’re probably getting your money’s worth; Google’s business is advertising and our purely organic search analysis indicates Google’s doing a great job of acquiring clicks on ads over organic links.

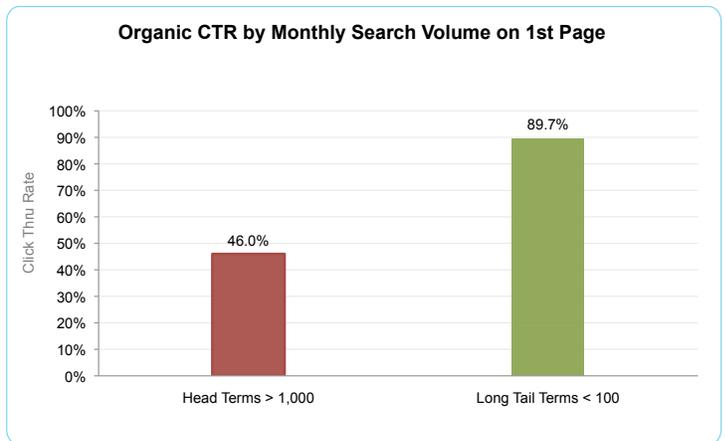
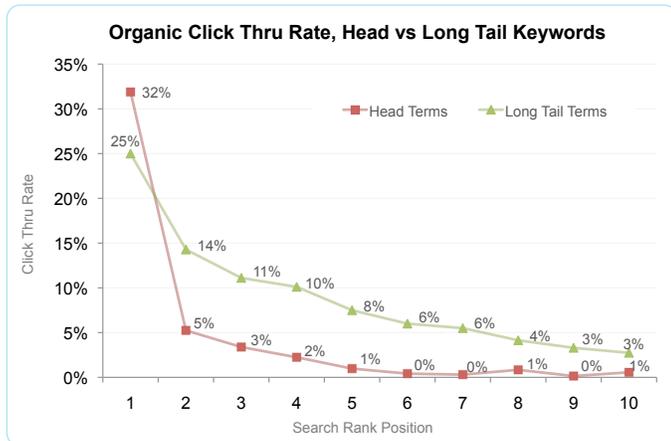
Rank	Expensive Terms	Cheap Terms
1	17.1%	31.8%
2	4.3%	13.8%
3	3.5%	9.1%
4	3.1%	7.1%
5	2.3%	6.4%
6	1.9%	4.9%
7	1.5%	4.6%
8	1.2%	4.1%
9	1.3%	3.2%
10	1.1%	2.5%
Average	3.7%	8.8%

Click Through Rates on Google US 1st SERP for high vs. low CPC value terms based on Optify data

Question #3

What is the effect of search volume on click-through-rates?

To show the difference in CTR between keywords with different search volumes, we compared head terms to long tail terms. We defined head terms as keywords with over 1,000 monthly searches (Google US) and long tail terms as keywords with less than 100 monthly searches (Google US).



We found that while head terms yield higher CTR for position one (32% for head terms versus 25% for long tail), long tail terms show better overall CTR on page one (4.6% average CTR for head terms versus 9% average CTR for long tail terms).

The immediate implication of these results is that if you're optimizing for head terms, you will not see huge benefits until you get to the top few positions. If you are optimizing for a long tail term, you can see decent CTR almost anywhere on the first page and there is less incremental benefit of moving up in search results. With that said, from a share volume perspective, first page rank for a head term will probably yield more visitors than first position for long tail term

Rank	Head Terms	Long Tail Terms
1	31.9%	25.0%
2	5.2%	14.3%
3	3.4%	11.1%
4	2.2%	10.1%
5	1.0%	7.5%
6	0.4%	6.0%
7	0.3%	5.5%
8	0.8%	4.1%
9	0.1%	3.3%
10	0.6%	2.7%
Average	4.6%	9.0%

Click Through Rates on Google US 1st SERP for head vs. long tail terms based on Optify data

What does this mean for you?

- 1. Tracking and measuring your keyword rank should be part of your daily SEO activities, but it's definitely not enough.** There are numerous SEO tools and services that will illuminate your rank for all your keywords, compare them to your competitors, research them across multiple search engines and even show you how they trend over time. Although, as long as you can't tie these results to business results (i.e. revenue), you're just guessing.
- 2. With that said, the basic concept of SEO stays the same – rank higher to drive more organic traffic to your site.** Ranking for the first position, or at least on the first page, is still more valuable than anywhere else.
- 3. Invest in getting more terms to page one first, then worry about advancing to first position.**
- 4. Choose your target keywords wisely and make sure you look at the CPC value as well as the search volume.**
- 5. If you're interested in more than just visits and pageviews, measure success with the right metrics.** If your goal is leads, sales or signed customers, make sure you have the mechanism to track and measure those metrics all the way from source to completion.
- 6. Getting a lot of long tail keywords to page one might be easier and more valuable than getting a few head terms to page one; it all depends on your goals and strategy.**
- 7. Stay on top of SEO best practices and updates.** The changing face of SERPs is not a short-term fad; as long as there are search engines, SERPs will continue to change.

About Optify Research and Optify Labs

Optify is conducting empirical research on third party databases as well as on its own database. We follow general research guidelines and methodologies to provide insights into the latest developments in search and social and to guide our product development to best serve our customer base.

Optify Labs is an experimental playground where we test and try new ideas before integrating them into the Optify product. Optify Labs also helps us test insights provided by our research and learn how to make search and social optimization easier, faster and more profitable.

About Optify

Optify delivers an integrated top-of-the-funnel solution for marketers responsible for fueling their company's growth. Optify helps professional B2B marketers reach more buyers and generate more demand for their products or services month-after-month.

The Optify Inbound Marketing Software Suite brings together the enterprise-class SEO, social marketing, website analytics and tools that B2B marketers need to increase awareness of their business, influence buyers across social networks, and engage with prospects at the earliest point of their buyer's journey.



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Resources

Optify:

Search Might Not Be Moving Into Social, But Social's Moving Into SERPs
<http://bit.ly/fqA574>

Google-Bing Search Wars Heighten, Companies Rate Top Social Tools
<http://bit.ly/enBXEd>

Red Cardinal:

AOL Release (and quickly remove) Search Records of 0.5MM Users
<http://bit.ly/h8EhiU>

SERP Click Through Rate of Google Search Results – AOL-data.tgz – Want to Know How Many Clicks The #1 Google Position Gets?
<http://bit.ly/g617Lr>

BlogStorm:

Google Organic SEO Click Through Rates
<http://bit.ly/bfLVKp>

TechCrunch:

AOL Proudly Releases Massive Amounts of Private Data
<http://tcn.ch/ccMgs9>

SEObook:

How Much Money is a Top Google Ranking Worth to Your Business?
<http://bit.ly/cW3B1T>