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## HOW SOCIAL MEDIA AFFECTS SEO

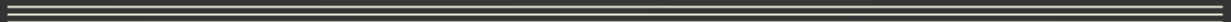
BY NEIL PATEL



As search engines make deals with social sites like Twitter, it's obvious that social media affects SEO. [Matt Cutts](#), who works in Google's Web Spam team, [once said](#):

I filmed a video back in May 2010 where I said that we didn't use "social" as a signal, and at the time, we did not use that as a signal, but now, we're taping this in December 2010, and we are using that as a signal.

But the question really isn't if social media affects SEO.  
It's more so on how it affects SEO, right?



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# THE RISE OF GOOGLE'S SOCIAL SEARCH FEATURE

Now, before you think that the increased relevance of social search recommendations is some sort of new craze resulting from the launch of the Google Plus social network, consider that Google launched the first version of its [Google Social Search](#) tool back in October 2009 and rolled the service out to all users in January 2010.



If you look at the screenshot above from the launch, [Danny Sullivan](#) made a few interesting observations about this new functionality.

The first is that Google's initial social search launch was rolled out as a separate tool, versus a full integration into a user's main results page. In order to use the service, you needed to be logged in to your Google profile and actively access the "Social" feature in the navigation bar.

Danny also noted that the specific connections Google was recognizing to populate its social results pages included blogs in your Google Reader, any contacts in your Gmail/Gchat accounts and any contacts you were connected to via profiles listed in your Google Profile. For example, if you were connected to a friend through Digg and had listed your Digg account within your Google Profile, that friend's content could appear in your social search results.

# THE IMPLICATIONS OF GOOGLE SOCIAL SEARCH

Now, fast forward to 2011... not only are these social recommendations showing up on main search engine results pages, there's evidence that they're displacing results that would have displayed based on traditional SEO. And that an author's authority on social networking sites is influencing traditional SEO.

Just for a minute lets consider the idea that social recommendations might shake up traditional search engine results pages through personalized search. In a test by [Rand Fishkin](#), he noticed that when he searched "cupcake madness" while logged in to his Google account the results were different.

Logged in:



The screenshot shows a Google search for "cupcake madness" with approximately 4,230,000 results. The search results are dominated by social media shares and news articles. The top result is from Jennifer McCoy's "Cupcake Madness" on Huffington Post, dated August 9, 2010. Below it is an article from NBC Washington titled "Cupcake Madness Reaches New Heights" dated August 11, 2010. The third result is a social share from "The Everywhereist" titled "New York Cupcakes: a descent into madness" posted on June 20th, 2011, by Geraldine. The left sidebar shows navigation options like "Everything", "Images", "Videos", "News", "Shopping", "Recipes", and "More". The location is set to "San Francisco, CA".

## Logged out:



Do you know why the results were different? In the first image, the result from the Everywhereist blog shows up only because of Rand's wife is the owner of the site. Once he logged out, the result is replaced by the site that earned the third place spot through traditional SEO.

The effects of this change are huge because if you only invested in traditional SEO you can be bumped from the search engine results in seconds. So should you even worry about conventional SEO anymore? Do things like backlinks, keyword-optimized content and on-page optimization still matter?

Although those questions are important, answering them doesn't take into account the full impact of the newly increased influence of social media on SEO. To do that, you need to look at how Google and the other search engines are quantifying social networking authority as a ranking factor within the traditional search engine results page as well.

## AUTHOR AUTHORITY: THE LATEST RANKING FACTOR?

In December 1st, 2010 Danny Sullivan [interviewed Bing and Google representatives](#) on how Facebook and Twitter may impact search engine rankings. One of the questions he asked was the weighting of Twitter users and links shared in their tweets...

### Bing responded with:

We do look at the social authority of a user. We look at how many people you follow, how many follow you, and this can add a little weight to a listing in regular search results.

### Google responded with:

Yes, we do use [tweeted links and RTs] as a signal. It is used as a signal in our organic and news rankings. We also use it to enhance our news universal by marking how many people shared an article.

And in response to the question, “Do you track links shared within Facebook, either through personal walls or fan pages?” the search engines had the following to say...

### Bing said:

Yes. We look at links shared that are marked as “Everyone,” and links shared from Facebook fan pages.

### Google said:

We treat links shared on Facebook fan pages the same as we treat tweeted links. We have no personal wall data from Facebook.

Based on their answers, you can assume that social media plays a role in influencing the search engine results by giving preference based on the authority of the author and the number of times a piece of content is shared on social networking sites.

In [SEOMoz's 2011 Search Engine Factors Ranking report](#) almost 132 SEO and social media experts predicted that social signals at the page level and domain level would have a greater impact on search engine rankings than traditional SEO factors.





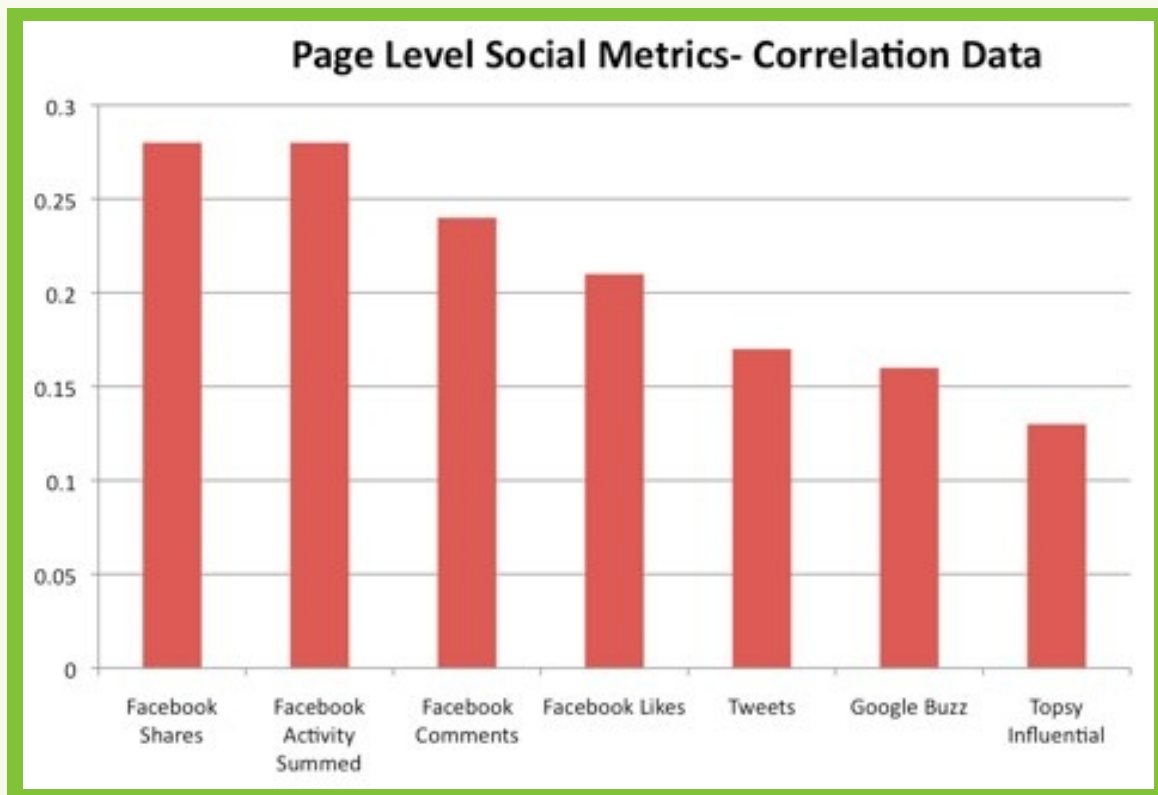
## SPECIFIC SOCIAL MEDIA AND SEARCH ENGINE INTEGRATIONS

Of course, it's one thing to know that social factors are increasingly affecting search engine rankings, but it's another thing entirely to see what integrations are already in place and influencing results pages. By understanding exactly how the search engines use this data, you can come up with a marketing plan designed to rank in this new socially optimized world.

The following are the integrations currently in place between the search engines and each of the big 3 social media sites:

### Facebook

Although Facebook doesn't make information stored on its personal profiles available for indexing, content shared on fan pages is fair game. In fact, according to an analysis of the data generated by [TampaSEO](#), Facebook shares are one of the social signals most closely correlated with high search engine rankings:



And while the correlation doesn't mean that Facebook shares by themselves lead to [high rankings](#), it's worth noting that Google and the other search engines also give preference to content shared on Facebook via annotated social search.

In the current Google Social Search implementation, content shared by Facebook contacts receives preferential positions in the search engine results, as well as with a picture of the person who shared it. By increasing the social proof of these results, Google increases the chances that this content will receive clicks.

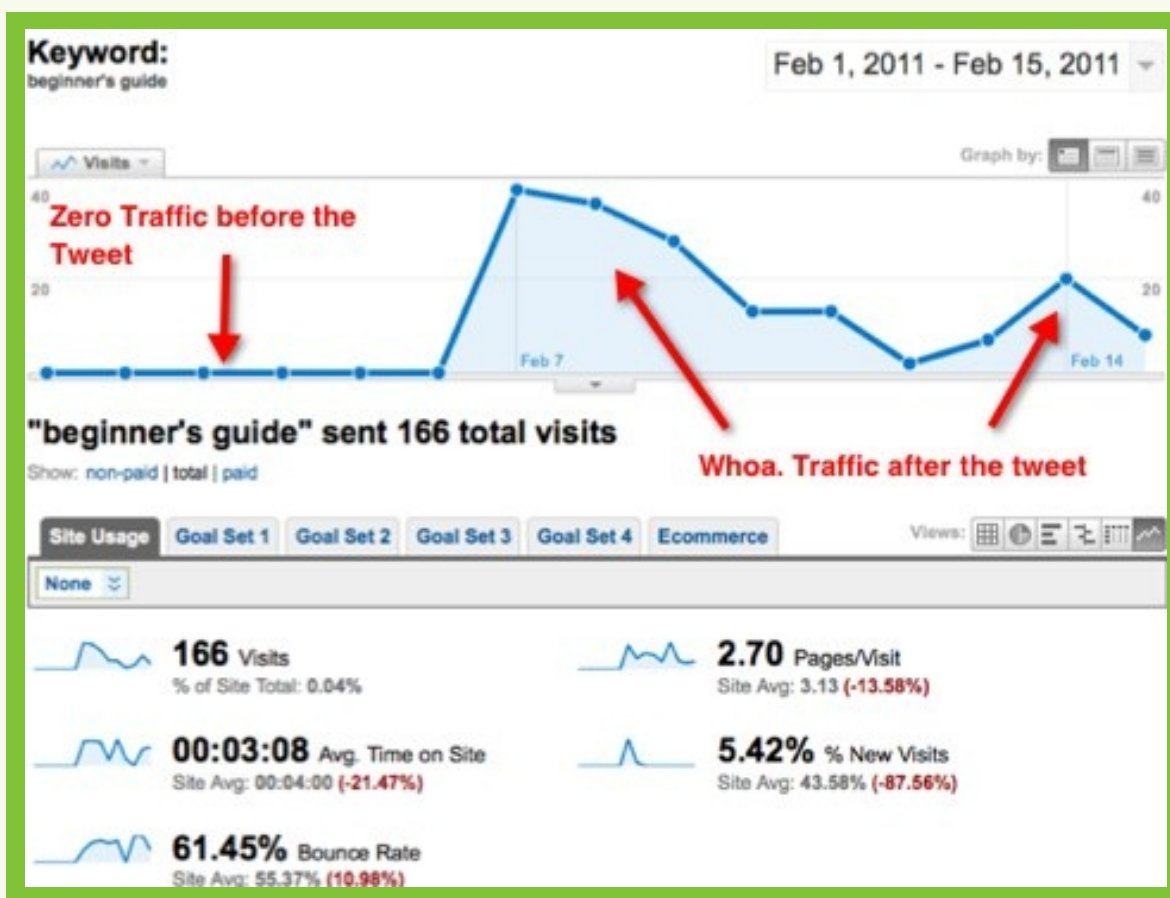


## Twitter

One of the clearest integrations between social media and the search engines is the [Twitter Search Engine on Bing](#). This tool enables you to search tweets in real-time from within the Bing search engine. And with the [recent updates](#) tweets are now in the Bing News feed, as well as a preferred treatment for content "liked" by your Facebook and Twitter contacts.

And while the ability to search for tweets via Bing may not send much traffic to your social networking profile, there's evidence that tweets or retweets of links by legitimate users on Twitter can lead to a bump in traditional SEO rankings as well.

[Jennifer Lopez](#) did a case study showing that after a tweet introducing her Beginners' Guide to SEO was retweeted by Smashing Magazine, she noticed an immediate impact in terms of both traffic and rankings for a previously un-tracked keyword.



## Google Plus

As [Chris Brogan](#) said:

A social network made by Google impacts search.

*It doesn't get much clearer than that.* As a social networking service, as well as a search giant, Google has all the data necessary to implement changes to the search engine results based on social media. For example, they could hypothetically use the data generated by webmasters using Google Analytics, Webmaster tools, or their toolbar, plus the amount of traffic sent via social media sites by specific users. It's not a big leap to assume that data from these services could be used to tie your website to authority social networking profiles and then increase your rankings.

And although evidence is difficult to come by as [Google Plus](#) is still new, you can already see the integration between the Google Plus network and the Google search engine results pages via social search annotations and the "+1" button that appears next to search results when you are logged into Google.

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Ebook designed by:  
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