Understanding Search

On the Internet, people learn by searching. Through trial and error, they hone in on relevant content. You can learn from this activity and use it to increase your company's visibility and lead generation, but first you need a working knowledge of the somewhat esoteric discipline of keyword analysis.

Let's use an example: A Google search for "disposable surgical tools" returns roughly 64,000 links, while a search for "single use surgical tools" returns just 3. Obviously, the former search phrase is better, because it returns a much larger pool of suppliers for the customer to choose from.

The same logic applies to social media. A search for "disposable surgical tools" on YourOpenBook.org (a Facebook search engine) returns zero results, showing that no public conversation about "disposable surgical tools" exists on the world's most popular social network. On the other hand, a Google blog search reveals an active community of bloggers discussing topics related to "disposable surgical tools," showing blogs are a much livelier channel for marketers of these products.

Keywords research is the Holy Grail of online marketing. Once you learn what words and phrases your customers use and where they use them, you can seek out and engage the people you want to reach. In this chapter, we walk you through the process of listening with

keywords and using them to optimize your web site and social media interactions for search.

Your overarching goal is to come up with a list of the popular words or phrases that your customers use to find and discuss your business. These may not be the same words *you* would use. Businesses tend to speak in terms of solutions while customers speak in terms of problems. The onus is on marketers to identify the search behaviors that lead people to a web site.

Your keywords must be accurate, but accuracy doesn't always yield the best results. For example, if you're blogging about "solar cells" but your customers are searching for "solar power," you're speaking two different languages. There are dozens of data points to consider, and just as many online tools to apply. We can't cover them all, but we will provide an overview of how to create an effective business-to-business (B2B) keyword strategy.

Keyword Research

We start with the process of finding the keywords your customers are searching. If you didn't know that businesses looking for "solar cells" were actually searching for "solar panels," how would you figure that out? Google offers basic tools for expanding your awareness of relevant keywords.

Start with the Google Related Searches (see Figure 7.1). At the time of this writing, Related Searches are found at the bottom of the first page of search results. They provide an even larger stable of keyword variations to consider. You should also look at how Google Instant, which displays popular search results as each letter is typed, selects top choices. This is another indication of your keyword competition.

Your keyword strategy should be consistent with your marketing strategy. If you're selling credit card processing terminals primarily on price, for example, adding keyword modifiers like "cheap" or "discount" will help frugal searchers find you. If you're a premium
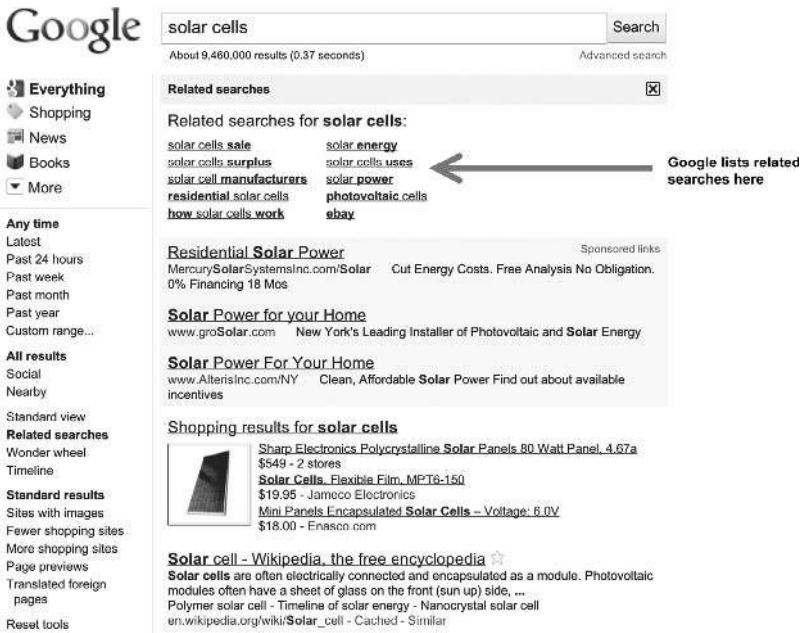
Figure 7.1   Google Related Searches.

provider, on the other hand, you might focus on early-stage, buying-cycle keywords like "how to process credit card transactions."

Trade terms and jargon are actually useful in this process because they can be used to reach a more qualified audience. Blogger Jim Cahill of Emerson Process Experts attributes much of his excellent search visibility to listening to his engineers. "The language they use to solve problems is rich in the keywords of their field," he says. "They're talking with customers all the time, and they speak the language of the customer."

Keyword research is a process. Electronics assembly materials company Indium Corporation uses blogs to search optimize its site for electrical engineers. "It was hard getting it down to 85 keywords. But we didn't want to have hundreds. We wanted to start relatively small and grow from there. We brainstormed in numerous sessions

what keywords were effective in reaching our goal, which was getting found," said Rick Short at Indium.

When choosing keywords, be selective. B2B searchers are looking for efficiency, so keywords should closely match the content on the page. Never plant keywords indiscriminately next to content that isn't relevant to them. You'll shoot yourself in the foot.

"Typical B2B purchasing agents want to get in and out, allowing them to put one more check mark beside their ever-growing to-do list," wrote Gord Hotchkiss, president of search marketing firm Enquiro, in a MediaPost article. "They will not be in a forgiving mood if you send them down dead ends or tie them up in confusing navigation. This is all about making their job easier."

Once you have an idea of the different keyword variations that your customers are searching, you can use Google Insights for Search (Figure 7.2) to find out which phrases are searched most. Figure 7.2 shows that "solar power" is a much more popular search phrase than "solar cells." We can also see the seasonality and geography of
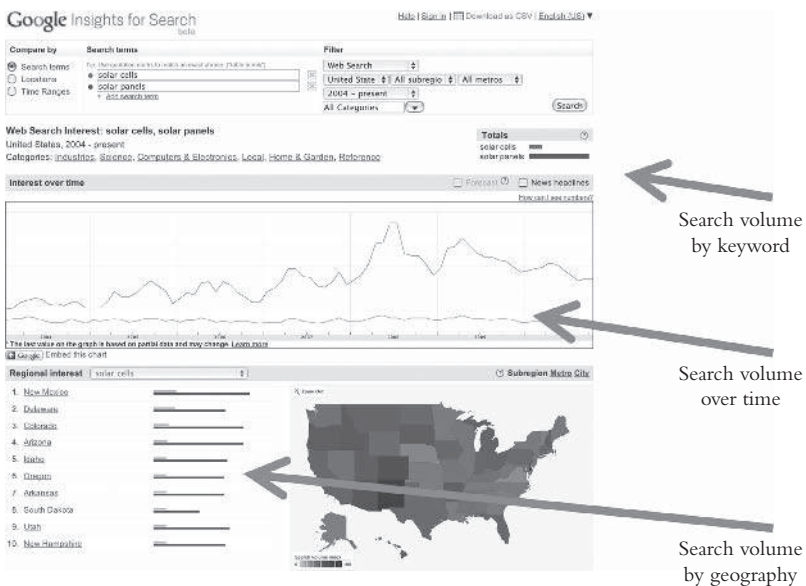

Figure 7.2   Google Insights for Search.

these search phrases. Searches for "solar power" peak in the summer months, probably because electricity rates are higher. That signals an increase in potential buyers and a greater opportunity for marketers to get found at that time of year.

Advanced Search

Use complex queries, which string together several different keywords in a single search, to ask a search engine a specific question. The Boolean operators AND and NOT establish the logical relationships between the keywords you're searching. Use quotation marks around a "multiple-word search" to narrow results to an exact phrase match. Without quotation marks, a search engine returns web pages that use all three words separately. So any page with "multiple" and "search" would show up in the results, whether they appeared in succession or not.

A search for "solar cells" AND "wholesale" would return any web page with the phrase "solar cells" as an exact phrase match and the word "wholesale" somewhere else on the page. On the other hand, a search for "wholesale solar cells" would return only web pages with that exact phrase. By the same logic, a complex query for "solar cells" NOT "solar system" would return web pages with the phrase "solar cells" and exclude web pages with the phrase "solar system."

Rules for Building Complex Queries
1. I'm interested in information on solar electricity but not the solar system.
   Search: *"solar electricity" NOT "solar system"*
2. I want to see which words people are using to search and discuss solar panels online.
   Search: *"solar panels" OR "solar electric" OR "solar electricity" OR "solar cells"*
3. I want information only about wholesale suppliers of solar panels.
   Search: *"solar panels" AND "wholesale NOT retail"*

Use geographic keywords to localize complex queries. A quick search in Google Insights reveals that demand for information about "solar panels" is highest in Colorado, Arizona, Michigan, Ohio, and Indiana. Equipped with this knowledge, try inserting geographic modifiers like "colorado" and "phoenix" to your search phrases to see if you can focus in on regional opportunities. B2B keyword modifiers like "RFP," "RFI," "wholesale," "manufacturer" or "price quote" with a term like "solar cells" are more likely to surface busines-to-business opportunities.

Not all keywords can be tracked for volume. When you drill down on low-volume keywords, Google Insights may display a "Not enough search volume to show graphs" message. In that case, try a tool like Trellian or Wordtracker, both of which offer free versions. In Figure 7.3, Trellian reveals higher-volume search phrases than "solar panels arizona." The numbers in the left column are proportionate to

Figure 7.3   Trellian.

the other phrases in the chart. They indicate the ratio of searches to the other queries listed.

The discovery in Figure 7.3 that "home solar electric panels arizona" and "RV solar panels in arizona" are higher-volume terms than "solar panels arizona" indicates that this keyword cluster is aligned with consumer demand in that region. On the other hand, a Trellian search for "power cells" (Figure 7.4) reveals B2B-oriented keyword variations like "wholesale solar cells" and "solar cells surplus."

For B2B marketers, absolute search volume is less important than relevant search volume. Google Insights showed us that although "solar panels" got more searches than "solar cells," those searches do not appear to be coming from business customers. When we compared the related searches from Trellian for "solar panels arizona" to those
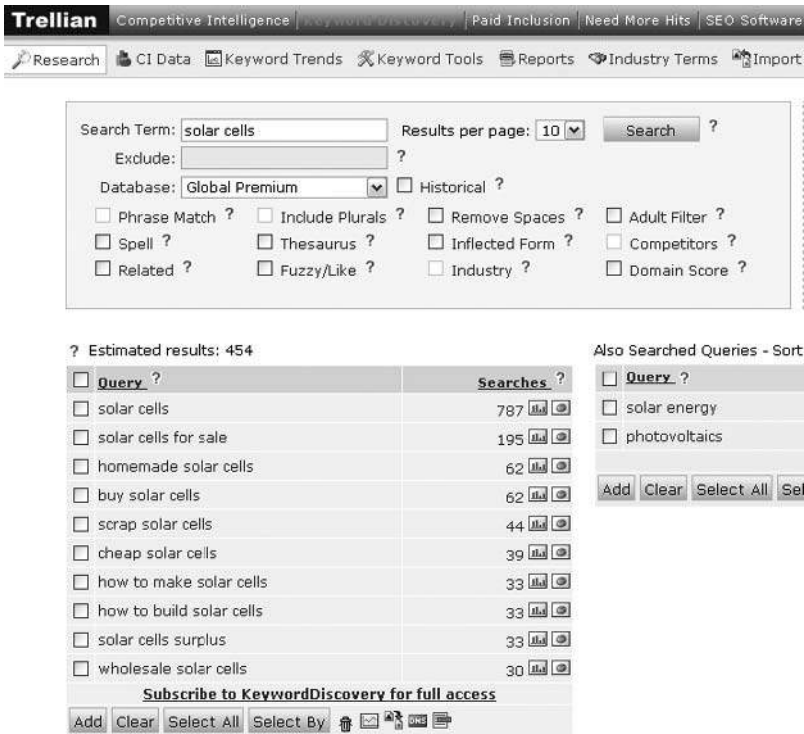

Figure 7.4 Keyword Variations Indicate B2B Demand.

from "solar cells," we saw that the latter keyword was surrounded by searches more likely to have been made by business customers.

Keyword strategy is important, but don't be so rigid in your approach that you intentionally avoid using sensible language just because it doesn't rank high. "Twenty percent of searches done in Google every day have never been done before, so create relevant content about your business, even if people aren't looking for it yet," writes Kipp Bodnar on the HubSpot blog.

Volume vs. Relevance

It's important for B2B marketers to understand the value of performing against low-volume search terms. "In B2B SEO [search engine optimization], keyword relevance is more important than popularity, because relevant terms and phrases have a greater probability of conversion," says Lee Odden, chief executive officer (CEO) of TopRank Online Marketing. Similarly, "solar panels" may be a higher-volume search phrase, but for customers in Arizona looking for wholesale suppliers, the broader phrase is less relevant and less likely to result in a site visit than a result that specifies "wholesale."

Relevancy and Bias

Relevant keywords are terms and phrases that your customers use when they're looking for the products or services you offer. But sometimes, the keywords customers search are distasteful to marketers. What do you do if you're uncomfortable marketing against the high-volume keywords your prospective customers are searching?

Let's say your customers tell you that an important value of solar cells is that they minimize greenhouse gas emissions. So you decide to publish a corporate social responsibility page with resources to help business customers quantify the environmental impact of switching to solar electricity. You want that page to be as visible as possible on search engines.

You search "greenhouse gases" in Google Related Searches (Figure 7.1) and find the phrase "global warming" is related to that

search. You go to Google Insights for Search (Figure 7.2) and learn that "global warming" actually gets searched more than 10 times as often as "greenhouse gases." You decide to optimize your new web page for the phrase "global warming" by using it in the headline, sub-headline, and lead and closing paragraphs of the web copy.

You send the new page to management and legal for approval, and they change the phrase "global warming" to the less politically charged "climate change." You argue that any company that cannot embrace the popular lexicon is in denial because its image is mis-aligned with its perception. But that doesn't cancel out management's concerns, because the company may be concerned about alienating some its customers. Google Insights provides no demographic break-downs for its search volume reports. While "global warming" may be the most searched phrase, in the United States it has become a bitter wedge issue between partisans. "Climate change" is more politically correct.

B2B keyword strategy is about embracing relevant, popular lan-guage, but it's difficult to convince management to embrace keywords that alienate potential customers or conflict with brand aspirations. "If they see themselves as the low-cost leader, it's going to be tough to get them to search optimize for a keyword like 'cheap,'" said Greg Jarboe, the father of the search engine optimized press release, who learned this experience firsthand through his work with Southwest Airlines.

"One way to search optimize for alternative messaging that's inconsistent with a company's brand messaging is through a company blog that's intentionally written in a more informal tone, so as not to compete with the more formal messaging on the corporate website," says Odden. "And in the blog, you might create a post that's an argu-ment for embracing 'climate change' over 'global warming,' which would require the use of both terms."

Mechanics of Search Engine Optimization

Now that we've established that SEO is closely aligned with keyword strategy, let's break down the fundamentals of how to use keywords to optimize your web content and online conversations for search.

SEO is not about coming up first when people search the name of your company, CEO, or trade name. Google gives you that one for free. The idea is to rank highly when people search for terms related to a business problem or need your company solves. Showing up on the first page of search results is the objective, because few searchers go beyond there.

SEO has become a profession is its own right. Blogs like Search Engine Land and Search Engine Journal are just two of the many online outlets covering the business, while traveling conferences like Search Engine Strategies and Search Marketing Expo are now world-wide events where specialists debate the intricacies of advanced topics like local search, mobile search, and landing page design.

If you want to specialize in SEO, these resources are top notch. We won't go into all the technical details, but we will give an overview of the process to aid in your understanding of how Google ranks web pages and what that means for you as a B2B marketer. To do that, we have to geek out just a little. If you can grasp these basic concepts, you'll be a more strategic online marketer.

An *inbound link* is a hyperlink that transits from an external web domain to your own. If Wikipedia is linking to your web site, that's considered an inbound link, because it transits from Wikipedia.org to yourwebsite.com. Inbound links are critical to understanding search engines.

One of the ways Google beat Yahoo! at the search game was by using social intelligence to establish relevancy. Yahoo! returned search results based on keyword density. The early search leader scanned the web and counted the number of times a phrase appeared on the page as a measure of relevancy. The web page that had the most mentions of "solar cells" ranked highest for that term. But this approach was rife with problems.

Marketers began stuffing their web pages with irrelevant key-words. They'd repeat the phrase "solar cells" over and over in white text on a white background just to elevate their search rank. The pages that ranked highest as a result weren't the most useful, just the most repetitive.

Google swooped in with a novel approach. Rather than use key-word density as a measure of relevancy, it consulted the wisdom of

the crowd through inbound links. By treating inbound links as recommendations, Google minimized the impact of keyword spammers. Marketers could keyword-stuff their pages to their hearts' content, but if external domains weren't linking back to their web site, Google would pay little attention.

The Google algorithm is the Coca-Cola formula of the modern age. No one outside of Google knows exactly how it works, but the notion of the inbound link as a metric of relevance is now widely accepted. Getting others to publish hyperlinks from their web site back to yours is central to effective SEO. This approach is less susceptible to gaming, because it's tougher to control other web sites than your own. Inbound links are the currency of SEO.

"People are asking us to link to them all the time," says Nick Fishman, CMO of EmployeeScreen.com "We decide who to link to on the basis of relevance and expertise. Our reputation is all we have. We don't endorse just anybody that wants a link from our site."

There are different strategies for luring links. Some approaches exhibit a blatant disregard for ethics. These are known as "black hat" SEO and involve practices like launching a blog on a free service such as Blogger and writing keyword- and hyperlink-stuffed pages that link to a target web site. If you go this route, be forewarned that it may work against you. Google is very sophisticated at finding black hat sites and disqualifies them from consideration in search rankings.

White hat SEO, on the other hand, involves regularly publishing information that's genuinely useful to customers, using relevant keywords, and publicizing content in a way that makes it easy for people to find and to link to it. "Quality content will always be found," says Mike Moran, co-author of *Search Engine Marketing, Inc.*

Competitive analysis is about understanding who is currently ranking well for the phrases you desire and determining whether they're vulnerable based on the quality of their inbound links. Not all of the top-ranking sites you encounter will be real-world competitors. In the B2B space, a lot of academic and governmental institutions also compete for customers' attention.

Once you've discovered relevant keywords, check which sites rank highly for those terms. Search the phrase that matters to you and visit the top-ranking sites. Read their content and see how their

site is organized. Ask yourself if you can do better. If so, you've just discovered a good keyword opportunity. If not, add modifiers to your search until you find an area of opportunity.

Remember, the sites that rank highest are the ones with the best inbound links. Use Yahoo! Site Explorer (Figure 7.5) to see who's linking to whom. Cut and paste any URL into the "Explore URL" field and check the inbound links to that URL. To see all inbound links to any web domain, just click on the "Inlinks" button, set the "Show Inlinks" drop-down menu to "Except from this Domain" option, and set the "To" drop-menu to "Entire Site" option. There are 5,163 links to all the pages at SiliconSolar.com. Unless you can lure better links, it's highly unlikely you'll outrank that site for that phrase.

Not all inbound links are equal. An inbound link from a site with a large number of high-quality links is more valuable than one from a site with just a few, or one with links from black-hat link farms.

Figure 7.5   Use Yahoo Site Explorer to see inbound links from external domains to any web site or web page. Remember, if you find inbounds from high traffic sites such as .govs, .mils, or .edus, it may be tough to rank for the keywords the site your analyzing ranks high for, unless you can lure more or better inbound links.

A link from Wikipedia, for example, is much more valuable than one from most other web sites because Wikipedia itself has so many inbound links.

In Figure 7.6, the larger circles are sites that have more "link juice" because they've got the most or the best inbound links. Site B ranks highest because it has the most inbound links. Site C ranks second highest because it's the only site with a link from B, which has the most links. The arrows indicate the inbound links and the numbers are the percentage likelihood you'll visit that circle.

Not all domains are equal. A link from a .gov, .mil, or .edu domain is particularly prized since owners of those domains must be qualified by a government or academic bureaucracy, which have tighter restrictions on outbound links. A site with a lot of inbound links from .gov or .edu domains is exceedingly difficult to topple.

For inbound links to have search rank value, they need to be attached to *anchor text,* which is the blue link text. Publishing the URL SiliconSolar.com on a web site doesn't give Google much to go on. However, using the term "solar cells" as anchor text for a hyperlink to
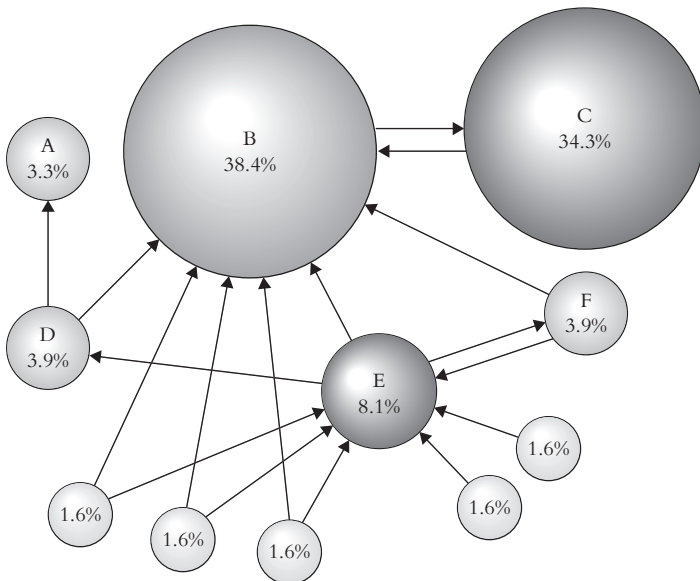
Figure 7.6   Google Page Rank Diagram.

that URL is very meaningful. Google looks for other sites that use that same anchor text. If it keeps finding the phrase "solar cells" pointing to siliconsolar.com, the search engine assumes that URL is relevant to that search query and ranks the site accordingly.

The best way to rank high in Google for a particular keyword is simply to have the best, most accessible content online about that search phrase. You can't game search these days. If you have the best information on your web site, you'll rank high because people will link to it.

Don't be too aggressive in the use of keywords in your web copy. Cramming all the keywords you can onto every page won't help and may actually hurt you. Readability is more important than repetition. Quality content is what gets results.

Lee Odden suggests making a list of all your keywords and mapping them to the various sections of your web site. Then he varies the usage of those terms evenly across those pages. That way he can use all his strategic keywords, but without cramming them into a single page.

In a guest post on the Search Engine Land blog, Proteus SEO managing director Galen DeYoung wrote:

> Customers "may start with search terms related to their problem or need (e.g., speech privacy). Or they may use search terms that involve the name of a potential solution (noise masking systems). They may start broadly (office acoustics) or narrowly (healthcare acoustic design), or they may be looking for the solution provider (noise consultants) or the industry (acoustical consulting). The key to B2B SEO is a complete understanding of the prospects, their issues, and their likely actions as they search for solutions. Good optimization considers all potential starting points of the B2B searcher."

Because B2B purchases involve multiple decision makers, all with varying needs, B2B marketers should adopt a keyword strategy that includes phrases likely to be searched by different job titles. For the chief financial officer (CFO), that may be "cost savings of solar energy." Engineers may look for "high-output solar cells," and the purchasing manager may search "wholesale solar cells."

Unlike the impulse-driven world of consumer marketing, B2B buyers need consensus to make smart decisions.

"The goal of most B2B searchers is research," writes De Young. "Your job is to increase the number and quality of those encounters by offering opportunities for them to engage with you. SEO helps not only create the first encounter, but, ideally, it also creates multiple subsequent encounters throughout the buying cycle." If you've ever searched different keywords and continued to see the same company rank high in the results, that's a company that's getting it right.

Once you know the keywords in mind, you can apply that knowledge to your content strategy. For example, keywords could become the editorial calendar for a corporate blog. You might publish a blog post about solar energy savings, create a technical bulletin about high-output solar cells, and even tweak the language on your pricing page to incorporate the term "wholesale energy cells."

It's also important to make your pages visible. Search engines aren't necessarily going to find every page in your site. The deeper a page is buried in the navigation hierarchy, the less visible it is. Search engines start at the root domain and attempt to index every page that is linked to from another page. But not all pages are linked. For example, a landing page that is put in place for an e-mail promotion may not be incorporated into the site's navigation scheme. There's a high likelihood that such pages will escape search crawlers. Using a site map to index every page increases the chances that such pages will be found. This is important because search marketing firm HubSpot has documented a strongly positive correlation between the number of indexed pages and median leads.[1] "For every 50 to 100 pages of indexed pages in Google, leads achieved double digit growth," HubSpot reported. "Lead growth experiences significant acceleration for customers with more than several hundred indexed pages."

Social Media Optimization

You can also use keywords to find customers on social networks, but you need to first validate those keywords in social media to see if the phrases people search for on Google are the same ones they use on

Facebook. That can be tricky, because social network search engines don't necessarily work the same way that Google does, and much of the content may be shielded from public view. Social network search is growing in importance, though. In March 2010, Facebook passed Google in all monthly visits for the first time, although Google still leads by far in the number of unique visitors. "The search that happens behind the login on social networks is becoming increasingly important," says Odden. "Companies need to consider optimizing their content within social networks as well."

In fact, a new kind of search is emerging based on ask–and–answer principles, according to Andrew McAfee, principal research scientist at the MIT Sloan School and author of *Enterprise 2.0.* Twitter users understand this well. If you're looking for a steakhouse in Chicago, you can search the web for restaurant reviews, or you can ask your followers. It you're being followed by people you know and trust, they may yield better information faster.

This introduces another whole level of complexity. Search optimizing the corporate web site is one thing, but Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn are creating a new kind of search metaphor that will require a different—and still mostly unexplored—kind of optimization.

People are already learning to leverage this technique. LinkedIn members are optimizing their public profiles on the assumption that hiring managers will increasingly find them by search and Facebook marketers are experimenting with www.youropenbook.org which searches public Facebook status updates. "In the future, there will be no job boards. There will be a global marketplace of talent online, and employers will search it for new hires," says Frank. The United States Marine Corps Recruiting Command might search "just graduated high school" on www.youropenbook.org to find prospective recruits. Another way to optimize a LinkedIn profile is by joining and participating in trade groups. In Chapter 13, we describe how status is the currency of professional networks.