

Monitoring News Coverage: When it Comes to Online Tools, You Get What You Pay For

A LexisNexis® White Paper

Highlights:

- Business professionals have come to rely on search engines and free “news alerts” services to monitor news coverage about their company, industry and competitors
- The truth is that search engines do not index all of the news content on the Web, and therefore are not capturing everything in their alerts
- This lack of coverage is getting worse daily as news publishers are rapidly moving their content behind paywalls
- New legislation and industry organizations worldwide are also moving to protect the economic value of news content from open Web searches
- The most effective way for business professionals to monitor news content online is to invest in a paid service that aggregates licensed news content, supplementing what is available on the open Web

Overview

Over the past two decades, the Internet has fundamentally transformed every industry. One of the defining characteristics of this new era in the history of global business is that the Internet provides universal access to all sorts of free information.

Business professionals have taken advantage of this free information pipeline to track news coverage about their own company and competitors with the aid of online news portals and free “news alerts” services. Unfortunately, many professionals have fallen prey to a myth that is surprisingly ubiquitous: they mistakenly assume that monitoring news coverage on the “open Web” with search engines and other free tools, such as Google Alerts™, is a truly comprehensive way to discover and access nearly all of the relevant news stories that are published.

The truth is that this has never been the case and monitoring news coverage with free news alerts from various search engine providers has its limitations. These shortcomings have become so pronounced in recent months that those who continue to rely on the open Web and services such as Google Alerts in order to monitor news coverage are likely missing out on a large number of relevant news articles every day.

The purpose of this white paper is to ring an alarm bell of sorts and to inform corporate executives about the recent acceleration in the shortcomings of search engines and other free tools. The lesson, which many business professionals have learned the hard way, is that in online research—as is so often the case in life—you get what you pay for.

Search Engines Not Indexing All News Content

A growing number of independent observers have expressed frustration that the Google™ service and other major search engines don’t monitor all news content published on the Web. Many professionals have anecdotally noted that free news alerts services are often slow to push content to subscribers and SEO bloggers have commented on the search engines’ inability to index content that is posted in certain programming languages¹. But the real fundamental problem that has emerged is the obvious deterioration in how comprehensive Google Alerts is when it comes to monitoring online news content.

A March 2013 “open letter” to Google Inc. specifically addressed some serious breakdowns observed with Google Alerts², documenting an 80% decline in the volume of Google Alerts over the past year. This caused the publisher of *The Financial Brand* to “fully retract” the publication’s prior endorsement of Google Alerts as “an important and efficient tool to monitor mentions of your brand on the Web.” The publisher went on to state that Google Alerts “is now so unreliable that it has been rendered effectively useless.”

Part of the explanation for this shortcoming is that for an article to appear in Google Alerts, it must appear among the top 10 results in Google News™ for the particular search term the user entered into his or her Google Alerts query³. Google News operates according to a rigid and limited computer algorithm, so if your search term doesn’t trigger a news story that lands in the top 10 results for that term in Google News, it will unfortunately not appear as a Google Alert sent to your email inbox.

In addition to this problem, Google and the other major search engines that crawl the open Web can only actively monitor news coverage for sites they have already indexed. If a company with a relatively new website that has not yet been indexed by the major search engines publishes an important story, it will not be visible to their news alerts service.

Many business professionals who rely on Google Alerts to push relevant news stories to them—about their own company or one of their competitors—are surprised to learn that they never saw a critical story simply because it wasn’t in the top Google News results or because it appeared on a site not indexed by Google. This discovery has led many to regard Google Alerts as unreliable as a tool for monitoring news coverage and making business decisions.

As if that weren’t enough, there is an accelerating trend in the media business that is creating what may be an insurmountable obstacle for free news alert services.

Rise of “Paywalls” Blocking Free Search Engines

According to “The State of the News Media 2013”⁴, an annual report on American journalism by The Pew Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, 450 daily newspapers out of 1,380 in the U.S. now have—or plan to adopt—“paywalls” for their content. This is a business model by which a publisher requires readers to pay a one-time fee or buy a full subscription in order to access certain content that sits behind a wall on their website.

Paywalls have proven to be a growth opportunity for long-suffering newspapers, with leading publishers such as *The New York Times*⁵, Gannett and Lee Newspapers all reporting significant revenue increases after incorporating a digital-only subscription into their circulation options for customers. Other prominent newspaper publishers to recently announce paywall strategies include *The Washington Post*⁶, Tribune Co., E.W. Scripps and McClatchy. In the last couple of years, scores of magazine publishers and business-to-business media companies have also implemented paywalls for readers to access their content.

This is an excellent business trend for publishers, but an ominous one for the major search engines. Without access to the protected content, the search engines may only be able to surface a headline or an excerpt of an article that is sitting in front of the paywall, but can’t provide seamless access to the full article. Some content sitting behind a paywall is not accessible to search engines at all. If a business professional is relying on one of those engines—and their free news alerts service—to keep them informed of relevant news stories, they may be left in the dark.

The trend is only accelerating, much to the detriment of the major search engines. Three-fourths of publishers now allow readers to view fewer than 10 articles per month for free and the average number of free articles dropped by 30 percent from 2012 to 2013⁵. As more news content goes behind paywalls, the number of articles properly indexed by Google and the other search engines will continue to decline.

Here is the bottom line: publishers that have moved to paywalls are finding business success, with the average price of a monthly digital subscription increasing nearly 40 percent in the past year⁶. Now that publishers are finding a profitable business model by placing content behind paywalls, this trend is not likely to reverse.

Meanwhile, many countries are proposing new laws or seeing the rise of new professional associations that require search engines to pay licensing fees in order to link to proprietary content. For example, a new law was passed in Germany in 2013 that requires search engines to pay a fee in order to license links and snippets⁷ and 90 percent of Brazil’s publishers abandoned Google News in 2012⁸ when Google refused to compensate them for the rights to their headlines. Moreover, a number of Reproduction Rights Organizations (RROs) have sprung up worldwide, with the mission of protecting and enabling legal access to copyrighted material⁹. These RROs are backed by media companies that offer search engines the rights to search and access their content, but only in exchange for a licensing fee.

The combination of these political and business developments points to the same result: a rapidly growing amount of news content is effectively being placed off-limits to the open Web. This represents a major shortcoming of Google Alerts and other free online news monitoring tools.

Conclusion: The Value of a Paid News Aggregator

So, given the obvious shortcomings of Google Alerts and other free search engine tools, what is a more effective way for companies to monitor news content with online tools? The answer is to invest in a paid service that aggregates licensed news content to supplement what is available on the open Web.

Paid news aggregators, such as LexisNexis® and Cision®, have a number of important advantages over the major search engines that crawl the open Web:

- **Comprehensive**—Paid services aggregate news content from thousands of premium content providers (e.g., LexisNexis licenses content from 26,000 publications), in addition to content from the open Web that has been vetted by full-time editors using their professional skills and judgment;
- **Accurate**—Paid aggregators provide sources and articles licensed directly from respected publishers, guaranteeing editorial integrity and source accuracy;
- **Transparent**—Paid services detail what sources are available for both searches and news alerts, when that content is available and where it can be found at its original source;

- **Maintained**—News aggregator services will often archive their content so that users don't encounter the frustration of a "dead link" on the open Web, and typically provide value-added features such as text normalization and tagging of documents for more relevant search results;
- **Supported**—Providers such as LexisNexis announce regular system upgrades and enhancements to users, illustrating their ongoing investment in the quality of the platform, and offer 24/7 customer support representatives who are available to answer any search questions;
- **Consistent**—Search engine companies such as Google are still relatively young and exploring various business models for monitoring news content, but paid aggregators such as LexisNexis and Cision have established track records in business (e.g., pricing, delivery model, etc.) that go back several decades and have been consistent.

It's clear that relying on Google Alerts and other free online monitoring tools is just not good enough anymore: search engines are not indexing all of the news content on the Web that is relevant; news content is rapidly moving behind paywalls; publisher rights organizations are forming to protect the economic value of that content from open Web searches; and pending legislation further threatens the open Web search engine model.

In life, you usually get what you pay for—and this is true now more than ever when it comes to monitoring news coverage online. For business professionals, the stakes are too great to risk missing out on the whole story.

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