

Bing to duel Google with Facebook-friendly format

May 10 2012, By MICHAEL LIEDTKE , AP Technology Writer



Microsoft's Bing search engine is heading in a new direction as it drills deeper into Facebook's social network and Twitter's messaging service to showcase information unlikely to be found on Google.

The changes, unveiled Thursday, will reshape how Bing displays its search results. It represents Microsoft's most dramatic shift in Internet search since the [software maker](#) introduced Bing as a "decision engine" nearly three years ago.

[Microsoft Corp.](#) is counting on the new format to loosen Google's stranglehold on the lucrative Internet [search market](#). In the process, Microsoft hopes to turn a profit in its online division, which has lost more than \$6.3 billion since Bing's June 2009 debut.

Bing replaced "Live Search," a mostly futile attempt to challenge Google. Microsoft touted Bing as a Google alternative that would provide more meaningful results by helping people make important

decisions, such as picking a doctor and finding the best time to buy an airline ticket.

For the past two years, Bing has been taking advantage of Microsoft's close relationship with Facebook to tap into the personal data on the world's largest network. But it hasn't come up with an approach compelling enough to lure away most Web surfers from Google.

Although Bing has been far more successful than Live Search, virtually all of its gains have come at the expense of Yahoo Inc., which began relying on Microsoft's [search technology](#) in 2010 as part of a 10-year partnership between the companies.

The latest effort to challenge Google will start next month. Microsoft plans a marketing blitz on television and the Internet to promote the changes. Anyone seeking a peek during the next few weeks of testing can go to <http://www.bing.com/new> beginning Tuesday.

The revised system presents Bing's results in three columns, or panes.

The left column will feature the familiar blue links drawn from Bing's computer formula for finding the most relevant results.

The middle section, called "Snapshot," is reserved for completing tasks, such as getting directions, making a hotel reservation or buying movie tickets. This feature isn't expected to be available during the testing phase.

Once available, Snapshot will provide a space featuring movie show times and an option to buy tickets in response to a search for "The Avengers." Searches for hotels will bring up pictures of rooms and information on amenities, as well as the ability to make reservations.

The "Sidebar" column on the far right side will be the centerpiece of the new Bing.

Sidebar is where Bing users logged into Facebook will see recommendations culled from their Facebook network. From there, people will be able to post on friends' Facebook pages without leaving the results page. The results from a Bing search can even be shared on friends' Facebook pages with a question about the topic.

For instance, a search for "Kauai hotels" might list your Facebook friends who have been to the island. You can then use the Sidebar box to posting a note on a friend's page seeking advice.

The Sidebar column also will highlight relevant tweets, including those from people you might not follow. The feature will also suggest experts on topics related to certain search requests and list their [Twitter](#) handles, along with any blogs or other websites where they share their insights.

Most of the personal data that Bing is pulling from Facebook and Twitter is unavailable to Google because its search engine doesn't have the same access to those information-sharing hubs as Microsoft does.

"This is a big, bold bet that we think is going to surprise a lot of people," said Lisa Gurry, Bing's senior director. "It's a fundamentally different way of looking at search."

It's also an admission by Bing that its previous attempts to incorporate Facebook data into its search results haven't worked out.

For the past year, Bing has been customizing search results based on the recommendations expressed by the number of times a user's Facebook network had pressed a "like" button on topics related to a search request. Gurry said Bing discovered that most Web surfers don't want the results

influenced by their friends to be co-mingled with answers generated by a computer program.

That culminated in the decision create Sidebar so a separate area of the results page is devoted to the social networking suggestions.

Bing's experience underscores the difficulty that all search engines have had figuring out how to blend the influence of social networking into their results, said Altimeter Group analyst Rebecca Lieb.

"Different parts of the social graph are good for different reasons," she said. "When I am looking for advice about a movie, I probably don't want to see a recommendation from one of my 'foodie' friends. What Bing is doing looks like a very elegant approach, but it remains to be seen if people are going to like it."

Lieb doesn't believe it's a coincidence that Bing is announcing its Facebook-friendly makeover as the world's largest social network prepares to complete the biggest initial public offering of stock. The media frenzy surrounding Facebook's IPO, expected next week, can only make more people more curious to see how Bing is highlighting results from the social network, Lieb said.

Microsoft has been working closely with Facebook since it bought a 1.6 percent stake in the social network for \$240 million in 2007. It has proven to be a tremendous investment. Microsoft's Facebook stake is now worth \$900 million to \$1.2 billion, depending on the price set in the IPO. And now Bing can pore through the reams of information being posted by Facebook's more than 900 million users, 18 times more the social network had when Microsoft bought its stake.

Twitter also has been selling Microsoft expanded access to its tweets since 2009. Google Inc. lost its special privileges to the same stream of

data last summer because Twitter didn't renew a licensing agreement.

That partnership unraveled right around the same time Google launched its Plus social network to counter the growing popularity of Facebook and Twitter. In a move that has amplified questions about its objectivity, Google began this year to favor results drawn from Plus while excluding publicly available information from [Facebook](#) and Twitter.

The bias has provided more fodder for an intensifying Federal Trade Commission investigation into allegations that Google has been stifling competition by highlighting its own services and burying or completely ignoring links to its rivals' websites.

Despite Microsoft's massive investments in search, Bing hasn't been able to ding Google so far. Microsoft has nearly doubled the 8 percent share of the U.S. search market that it held when it rolled out Bing, but virtually all of those gains have come at the expense of Yahoo Inc.

Google ended March with a 66 percent share of the U.S. [search](#) market, up by a percentage point from June 2009 when Bing entered the fray, according to the research firm comScore Inc. Bing's share currently a distant second at 15 percent.

Unlike its rival, Bing intends to include relevant recommendations from a wide range of [social networking](#) services, including [Google](#) Plus.

"We are not trying to build an empire by favoring some services over others," Gurry said.

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Citation: Bing to duel Google with Facebook-friendly format (2012, May 10) retrieved 7 May

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