

# Bing no longer a search-engine blip

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In Microsoft's expensive, decadelong battle against Google's search engine, no detail is too small.

Derrick Connell, a Microsoft vice president in charge of the engineering side of the 4,000-person team that builds the company's Bing Web [search](#), takes work home with him every weekend.

Connell reviews lists of common queries people type into the search boxes at Google.com and Bing.com. His team has spliced the universe of possible search requests into 40 areas, like nearby places or news. Those categories break up into 152 sub-segments.

In some, Bing displays more helpful results, he says. Others favor Google. Each is a battleground.

"We want to be the best," Connell says. "We believe in our technology."

How much the rest of the world believes in Bing is up for debate.

By one measure, the [search engine](#) now executes a record one out of every five searches made on desktop computers in the U.S., a milestone Microsoft Chief Executive Satya Nadella touted last month in a meeting with Wall Street analysts. But Bing's standing internationally, and in fast-growing mobile search, is a fraction of that.

Still, executives and outside observers say Bing has gone from the butt of jokes and awkward product placement in movies to a tool comparable to

Google's in terms of its technology. The calls to shelve the business or sell it to a competitor have quieted. Microsoft has integrated Bing's underlying data-crunching technology into its other software, and plans to tie it closely to its upcoming Windows 10 operating system.

It remains to be seen whether Microsoft can leverage this changing perception into a profit or seriously challenge Google's status as the Web's default search engine.

## BING'S PREDECESSORS

Bing was officially unveiled six years ago June 1, emerging from earlier, largely unsuccessful forays into search.

Microsoft, like many companies, was inconsistent in its early response to the growth of the Internet. In 1995, then-CEO Bill Gates wrote a now-famous memo exhorting employees to convert Microsoft's tools so that they could be used for the Web.

What that meant for search wasn't immediately clear. Executives wavered on whether the company should build its own Web search technology, or acquire tools built by competitors. Microsoft's first search engines relied on technology to crawl the Web from Inktomi and, later, AltaVista.

Google, the Mountain View, Calif., company founded by graduate students studying in a Stanford University computer science building named for Gates, didn't have such hesitation, quickly rising to dominate Web search. In 2003, Microsoft, based outside Seattle, approached Google about a potential partnership or takeover, The New York Times reported at the time.

Google pursued a public stock listing instead. Microsoft opted to build

its own search platform.

"Looking back, that was a big decision," Sally Salas, then an employee with Microsoft's nascent search group. "And it was the right decision. It took us a long time."

MSN Search, named for Microsoft's popular Web portal, launched in 2005. A year later, a wholesale rebranding of Microsoft's online services dubbed the engine Windows Live Search.

### 'A CREDIBLE ALTERNATIVE'

Connell, 47, developed an early interest in technology, growing up in a home with a computer, but, in peculiar Irish fashion, no telephone. A hobbled Irish economy with double-digit unemployment didn't offer much use for his expertise.

"It was a recession country." Technology, he says, "was a way out."

After a stint working as a programmer of currency trading tools in London, Connell took a job with Microsoft, shuffling through progressively bigger roles in the company's online services arm. He ultimately guided the engineering of search as the company prepared to roll out Bing.

The day before Bing's unveiling, Connell asked a developer to write a few lines of code that would redirect users to the live page from the test site engineers had been using. A blank space was left for the name of the site, still a secret even to employees after months spent vetting potential names.

Candidates already taken or having an unintended offensive meaning were tossed (executives evidently decided that an antiquated definition

for "Bing" in Scotland as a heap of mine waste wasn't a deal-breaker).

"That was actually the thing that I was most nervous about, that the redirect wouldn't happen. It was" - Connell rapped his fist on a wooden table - "your heart beating."

Microsoft's marketing machine, which spends more than \$1 billion each year, kicked into action to promote Bing. Connell and his team worked to iron out the kinks in a search engine that, at first, spit out search results noticeably worse than Google.

"There was a time when Bing launched that it was almost embarrassing," said Danny Sullivan, founding editor of Search Engine Land and a longtime observer of the industry. "Even Bing people would tell you they were kind of embarrassed."

But months after Bing's launch, and after the breakdown of high-profile merger talks, Microsoft and Yahoo signed a 10-year agreement that made Bing's technology the underlying search engine for desktop searches on Yahoo sites. Yahoo's search technology, and more than a few employees, including advertising chief David Ku, migrated to Redmond.

Microsoft sites accounted for 8.4 percent of U.S. desktop search traffic when Bing debuted in 2009, less than half the share of Yahoo and well behind Google's 65 percent, according to comScore.

Bing's share has steadily increased since, to 20.2 percent in April, gaining mostly at the expense of Yahoo, as well as fading search portals Ask.com and AOL. Google's share has remained relatively steady. (Put another way, Connell says, "Google was growing until we launched Bing.")

The bottom line? The technology improved, Sullivan said. "Now, it's a credible alternative to Google."

## THE MOBILE-DEVICES HURDLE

Work remains, however.

Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer, critical of the search deal with Microsoft, told The Wall Street Journal that the renegotiated pact sealed last month was structured to "put more pressure on Microsoft to make the product better."

Web advertising, a \$59 billion business for Google last year, hasn't been strong enough to make Bing profitable for Microsoft. The company's online division lost nearly \$18 billion from 2006 to 2013. (Beginning in mid-2013, Microsoft lumped Bing and some other businesses into another unit, obscuring its financial performance since.)

Microsoft officials have set a target for Bing to break even on an annual basis in the company's fiscal year beginning in July, a goal Connell affirmed without hesitation. "2016," he said. "For sure."

Meanwhile, Bing still suffers from much more limited exposure globally. Surveys of international search market share put Microsoft and Yahoo each in the low single digits, and Google at more than 80 percent.

"Microsoft has been making the investments, but Google is still driving the boat globally," said Mike McGuire, a mobile analyst with researcher Gartner.

That's drawn the scrutiny of antitrust regulators in Europe, but it's unclear whether Microsoft stands to benefit from that.

Mobile devices present another hurdle. People are increasingly searching the Web from smartphones and tablets, realms dominated by Google and Apple. Researcher eMarketer expects the amount of advertising dollars targeting mobile searches in the U.S. to surpass desktop queries for the first time this year.

"If you're not the owner of those operating systems, you have to have something incredibly compelling that makes people say 'I have to have that product.'" Connell said. "We have to be realistic; that's a hard thing to do. But we're going to do that."

Might that product be Cortana? Microsoft's voice-activated digital assistant, powered by Bing-built algorithms, will eventually be released for Google and Apple devices, the company announced this week.

When Bing was bleeding cash in its early years, some Wall Street analysts wondered aloud why Microsoft seemed determined to throw money down the drain to challenge Google in the business of crawling the Web and displaying ads.

But the basics behind search technology - building algorithms that can gauge and react to human intent - have become crucial for the future of computing, analysts say.

"Search is becoming almost like a user interface," said Walter Pritchard, a software analyst with Citigroup in San Francisco. "I think they have no choice" but to continue to develop it.

Cortana, launched in 2014 for Windows Phone, symbolizes search's evolution from typing a term to something more. The digital assistant is designed to help people track their interests, proactively suggesting events and bringing up reminders or warnings of heavy traffic or weather.

"Rather than (people) always searching for information, we can give it to them at the point where we believe they need it," said Salas, now a program manager at Bing.

Google's competing "Now" product performs a similar function. So, too, does Apple's Siri, which, Microsoft officials point out, relies on Bing for its own Web searches.

Bing is finding its way into Microsoft's own products, too. Its algorithms are the search tool in Microsoft's Web-accessed file storage and Office programs, and are slated to be integrated into Windows 10 through Cortana.

"If you want to be a player (across the) ecosystem, you need this technology," Connell said. "We know we have a long way to go, but the team gets these moments along the way that inspire us. If we can get here, yea, we can get there."

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