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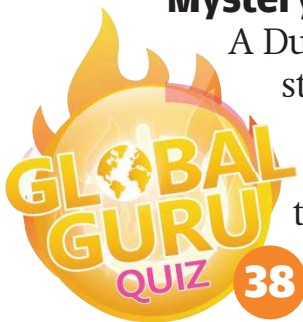
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team toolkit

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TECHNOLOGY

Search, and why it's all semantics

People visiting your website is one thing, but if they can't easily find the products they want, potential sales might be lost. The emergence of semantic search technology might just help. By *Justyn Barnes*

A major challenge for agents with a web presence is helping users to efficiently find a suitable product on their sites. Make life as easy as possible for consumers and you can increase the look-to-book ratio.

Semantic search technology that enables users to type their requirements in natural sentences – rather than filling out lots of boxes or choosing from drop-down menus – appears the logical next step in the battle to improve conversions.

The theoretical advantage of semantic search over a conventional search engine is, put simply, that it can interpret meaning in a more “human” way, rather than just recognise words.

A semantic search engine is designed to make inferences and react. So, you could take a search request such as, “I want a 14-night Christmas skiing holiday in Switzerland with our one-year-old”, and the engine would deduce there are likely to be two adults. The mention of a young child would mean options with childcare and



I want a 14-night Christmas

babysitting services are given due prominence, and “Christmas” implies the dates December 24-26 must be included in the “two-week” period specified. Even if customers misspell words slightly, semantic search will understand what they are looking for.

German company FACT-Finder is leading the way in offering bespoke semantic search solutions. More than 1,000 webshops spread across Europe have adopted its technology, including shopping giant QVC in the UK. FACT-Finder claims that webshops that have done so have reported increased turnover of 10-25%. The travel sector has been relatively slow to embrace semantic search thus far, but that seems sure to change.

“As many as 500 annual ‘human-bear interactions’ are recorded at Yosemite”

PETER ELLEGARD IN AMERICA, P45



INTEGRATING FACT-FINDER TRAVEL IN AN OTA SITE

FACT-Finder Travel will import the OTA's database of hotel facilities, room equipment, etc and regularly update the relevant data. However, if the OTA already has a contract with Giata, a major content provider for the tourism industry, the import may be omitted because the Giata database is already built into FACT-Finder Travel.

FACT-Finder analyses a user's search request and responds with a list of appropriate products. The OTA's existing system checks availability and prices and then – within seconds of the search request being entered – available products are presented to the user ranked in order of relevance. (In future, FACT-Finder Travel may also be able to integrate booking engines so there is no need for an availability check.)

Furthermore, FACT-Finder Travel analyses the behaviour of users and an OTA can use these results to adjust algorithms to improve search accuracy further. Eight months after it went live on the Neckerman Urlaubswelt site Saskia Weigand says Thomas Cook is “still constantly testing and changing things.”



skiing holiday in Switzerland with our one-year-old

Carsten Kraus, chief executive of FACT-Finder, predicts that by 2020, semantic search will be the standard (indeed, Google's launch of its Knowledge Graph tool in May was another baby step toward greater “understanding” of general search requests) but for the time being it can best be applied to specific domains. “With a limited topic like travel, semantic search can work well now,” he says.

Getting onboard

Back in February, Thomas Cook in Germany added FACT-Finder Travel search alongside its conventional search function on the website of Neckerman Urlaubswelt, one of the

company's smaller brands, as a testing platform.

“At the start, customers just typed in hotel names, not realising they could type in real sentences explaining what they were looking for,” says Saskia Weigand, e-commerce project manager at Thomas Cook AG. “But it's getting better. It's not great that we can only present this one search field at the moment, because the customers are pretty used to searching the old way, but we are getting there. The customer feedback we've got has been positive.”

It's too early for Weigand to say whether the technology has increased Neckerman Urlaubswelt's conversion rate, however, but weg.de, Germany's

third largest OTA, has reported a 12% increase in its look-to-book ratio since introducing FACT-Finder. Such an increase is significant in Germany where prices are more or less the same across the market and retention is usually low.

So will British OTAs grab the semantic search baton? Paul Richer, senior partner at travel technology consultancy Genesys, believes such technology can't be ignored. He authored a blog entitled “I have seen the future and it's not Google” after hearing FACT-Finder's Kraus speak at the 2012 TTI Autumn Conference.

“It comes down to return on

investment, and semantic search has a reasonable record for conversions, so it has to be considered,” says Richer. “You'd imagine it is just in its infancy. The computers of the future will have the power for semantic search to reach its potential.”