Google CTR Study

How User Intent Impacts Google Click-Through Rates
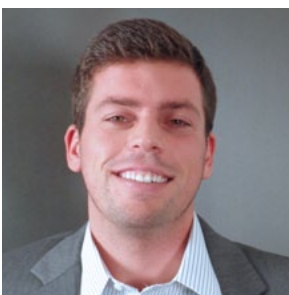
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About the Author

Andrew Martineau

Andrew Martineau is an Organic Search Director at Catalyst, who develops search strategies for large CPG brands. In addition to his client work, Andrew played an integral part in developing enterprise level reporting dashboards.

Andrew comes to Catalyst with industry experience working with Fortune 100 brands, Small-Midsize Businesses, and microsites. From a marketing background with a strong passion for data analytics, Andrew strives to deliver creative solutions to grow a brand's online presence using data to drive strategic decisions.

A special thanks to Steve Hall, Pete Quinlan, Jey Pandian, and Ashley Booth for their contributions to this study.

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Overview

"Many people think about rankings and then stop right there. And that's not the right way to think about things. You want to think about rankings and then you want to think about maximizing your Click Through.

It doesn't really matter how often you show up. It matters how often you get clicked-on, and then how often you take those clicked on visits and convert those to whatever you really want; sales, purchases, subscriptions, whatever it is you're trying to optimize for."

—Matt Cutts: Head of Google's Webspam Team

This means that click-through rate (CTR), while very important, is just one piece of the puzzle to driving business results through search engine marketing. Converting website visits into sales or actions should be priority number one. Search interest, rankings, and click-through rates fuel website visits, which in turn present an opportunity for more website conversions.

Google began with a very simplistic search result page – ten blue links. Its minimalistic design presented a smooth user experience that tended to guide its users' eyes in a standard F-shape pattern that we might expect, given that we read left-to-right and top-to-bottom. Often, this layout resulted in the first few organic search listings winning a very high percentage of a page's click distribution.

In contrast, today a Google search result page is much more cluttered as Google tries to better predict the type of content that a user might be seeking. The page now contains many stimuli (e.g., Google Product Listing Ads, Local Listings, images, videos, news, Google Knowledge Graph, and much more) that may meet the searcher's need, and as such, influence their action.

These shifts in Google's ever-changing UI, along with evolving user intent (e.g., informational, navigational, transactional intent), have caused user click distributions to stray from the traditional F-shape pattern. This study will:

* Provide a CTR analysis across the top 10 Google organic search results
* Gauge how organic CTRs have changed over time
* Determine how CTR behavior is impacted by user search intent, query types, and user device
* Provide the search community with new data and analysis on a complex metric

All findings and analysis presented in this document relate only to the sample brands included in the data set.

SEARCH   CLICK

Previous CTR Studies

There have been several click-through rate studies released in the past. So how is Catalyst's study different? First, the Catalyst CTR study is unique from prior studies. Our research:

⋇ Is more current. Google is constantly tweaking its SERP UI, which can impact average CTRs.

⋇ Contains more data, which can lead to more accurate representations of the true population.

⋇ Contains query categorization that further segments user behavior by search intent and its impact on average CTRs.

Secondly, we have learned a great deal from other industry experts and are always looking for ways to meaningfully contribute back to the broader SEO community.

Below, we compare our study to notable past CTR studies by Slingshot SEO and Optify, which were part of the inspiration for creating ours:

⋇ In the Catalyst study, we define CTR as the percentage of impressions that resulted in a click for a website (via Google Webmaster Tools).

⋇ In Slingshot SEO's study, CTR is defined as "the percentage of users who click on a given domain after entering a search query. CTR is calculated as total visits (via Google Analytics) divided by total searches (via Google AdWords Keyword Tool) for a given keyword over a stable period".

⋇ Optify defines CTR as "the percentage of users that clicked on each position, given that a user clicks on a top 20 organic ranking".

⋇ It is very important to note that Optify's calculation (and the famously leaked AOL 2006 study) is based solely on the top 20 organic positions, whose sum CTR equals 100%.

⋇ Catalyst's and Slingshot SEO's definitions of CTR are comparable, as they both take into account the fact that not all search queries result in an organic click.

	Catalyst	Slingshot SEO[1]	Optify[2]
# Unique Keywords:	17,500	324	200-1,000
# Websites :	59	200	250
Timeframe:	Oct'12 – Jun'13	Jan'11 – July'11	Dec'10
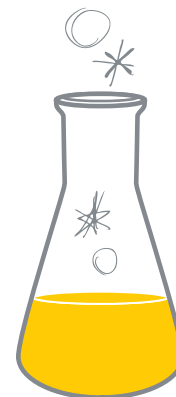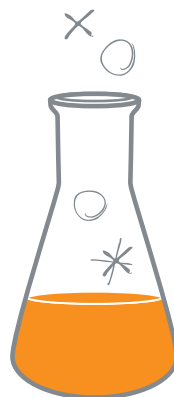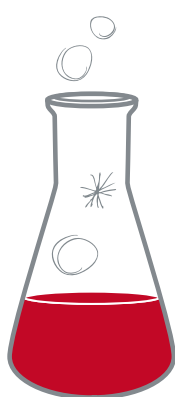
[1] *Slingshot SEO: Google vs Bing CTR Study*

[2] *Optify: How the New Face of SERPs Has Altered the CTR Curve Study*

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Defining Our Terminolgy

Google Search Engine Results Page (SERP):

A listing of results returned by the Google search engine in response to a user's search query. Google SERPs can contain several different "segments." The screenshot highlights a typical SERP containing organic and paid results.

Organic Search Results:

A portion of the SERP that contains only "natural" listing results. These results are listed by Google's ranking algorithm and are not influenced by monetary bids (i.e., Paid Search Results).

Impressions:

The number of times pages from a website appeared in search results. These numbers can be rounded and may not be exact search volume counts.[3]

Clicks:

The number of times a user clicked a website's listing in search results for a particular query. These numbers can be rounded and may not be exact visit counts.[3]

CTR (click-through rate):

The percentage of impressions that resulted in a click for a website.[3]

Average Position:

The average top position of a website on the search results page for that query. To calculate average position, Google takes into account the top ranking URL from the website for a particular query. For example, if Jane's query returns your site as the #1 and #2 result, and David's query returns your site in positions #2 and #7, your average top position would be 1.5.[3]

Branded Query:

A keyword that directly relates to a brand's equity. This can include keywords such as brand names, product names, and slogans. Example: "Boston Bruins."

Unbranded Query:

A keyword that does not relate to a brand. The user has no particular brand in mind when searching. Example: "hockey stick."

Coupon Query:

A keyword whose user search intent is typically transaction-based. In our study, keywords were tagged that contain terms such as "coupon," "promotion," "free sample." Example: "breakfast cereal coupons."

Question Query:

A keyword whose user search intent is typically informational. In our study, keywords were tagged that contain terms such as "who," "what," "when," "where," "why," "how." Example: "can you wear contacts while sleeping."

Query Length:

Classification of search queries that contain one word, two words, three words, or four+ words.

Navigational Query:

Users often use search engines to navigate to a specific website as opposed to entering the URL directly into the browser bar. With this in mind, keywords were tagged that contain web address intent, such as "www.", ".com", etc. Also included were exact match brand name queries (e.g., "boston red sox").
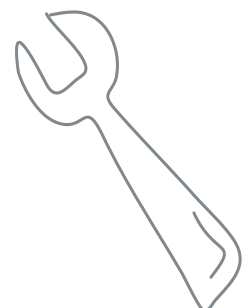
Google Webmaster Tools:

This free tool provided by Google allows direct access to detailed reports about your website within the Google search engine. These reports include search visibility, traffic, indexation, technical errors, and more.

Data Visualization Tool:

A business intelligence tool that enables data discovery, visualization, collaboration, predictive analysis, and more.

Above the Fold:

The portion of the SERP that is visible to a user without scrolling. Typically, the first four organic search results are above the fold.

[3] As defined by Google

Methodology

Data Set

All data was collected via each brand's respective Google Webmaster Tools account, which was then processed and analyzed using a powerful data visualization tool.

Catalyst analyzed close to **17,500 unique search queries** (with an average ranking between 1–10, and a minimum of 50 search impressions per month) across **59 unique brands** over **9 months** (Oct 2012 – Jun 2013).

All websites included in this study are Consumer Packaged Goods (CPG) brands. As such, the associated CTRs, and hypothesized user behaviors reflect only those brands and users.

average_position	UniqueCount(keyword)	Count(keyword)	
1.00	6,070	28,213	Max
2.00	1,818	4,269	Min
3.00	1,056	1,837	
4.00	809	1,249	
5.00	712	969	
6.00	596	753	
7.00	582	697	
8.00	525	616	
9.00	553	664	
10.00	1,255	1,984	
Grand total	**11,498**	**41,251**	

*This screenshot does not reflect the entire set of keywords included in this study, just keywords ranking in whole number positions (e.g., 1.00 ; 2.00). Notice that each whole number position contains greater than 500 unique keywords — a large set of data.

In order to leverage this data set to make strategic business decisions, Catalyst made the following assumptions:

∗ All data sourced from Google Webmaster Tools is accurate

∗ The sample data contained in this study accurately represents the average CTR and user behavior for the true population of Google's search user base

Process

Our process for the study was as follows:

1. Download Google Webmaster Tools search query data each month for each brand

2. Aggregate data into a centralized database

3. Exclude queries with an average position greater than 10.00

4. Exclude queries with less than 50 impressions per month

5. Tag and categorize keywords by predetermined criteria

6. Create graphs and key visualization with data analysis software for analysis and takeaways

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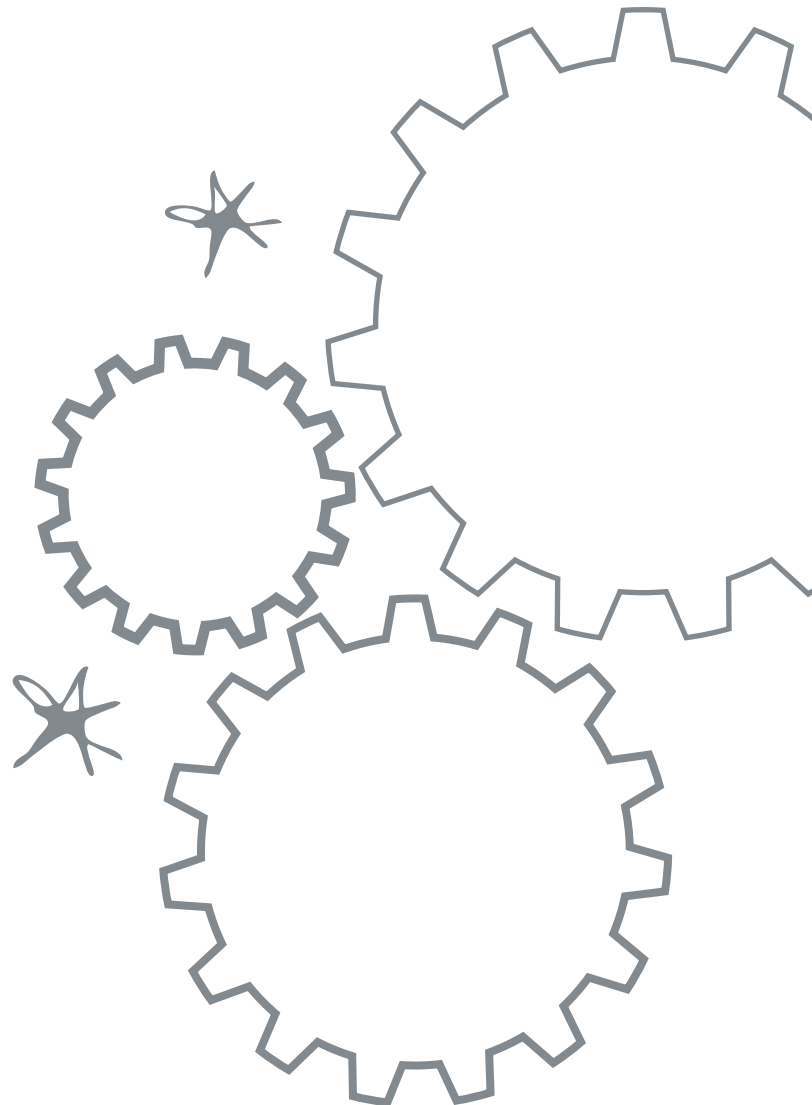
Data Results

Google Desktop CTR

Ranking on the first page is great for achieving visibility; however, your website must rank above the fold to begin seeing substantial traffic gains for a given search query.

To help manage expectations, business owners need to understand that even if you have the first organic ranking, your website will almost certainly never receive traffic from every one of those users/searchers. On average, the top organic SERP listing gets visits from ~17% of those searches.

The top 4 positions, or typical rankings "above the fold" for most desktop users, receive 83% of first page organic clicks.

This data also reveals that 48% of searches result in a page one organic click. So what is the other 52% doing? Two things, the user either clicks on a Paid Search listing, or they "abandon" the search, which we define as:

✳ **Query Refinement** – based on the displayed results, the user alters their search

✳ **Instant Satisfaction** – based on the displayed results, the user gets the answer they were interested in without having to click

✳ **2nd Page Organic SERP** – the user navigates to other SERPs

✳ **Leave Search Engine** – the user exits the Google search engine
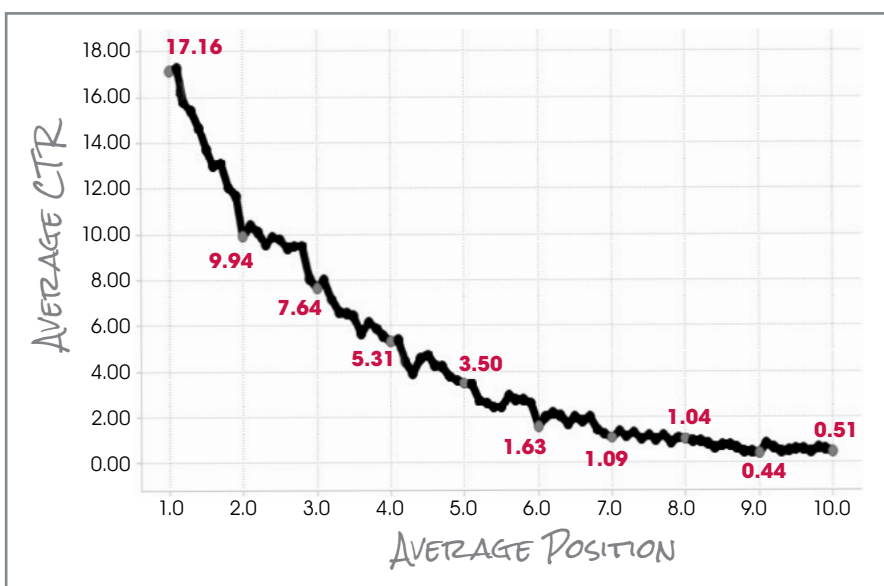
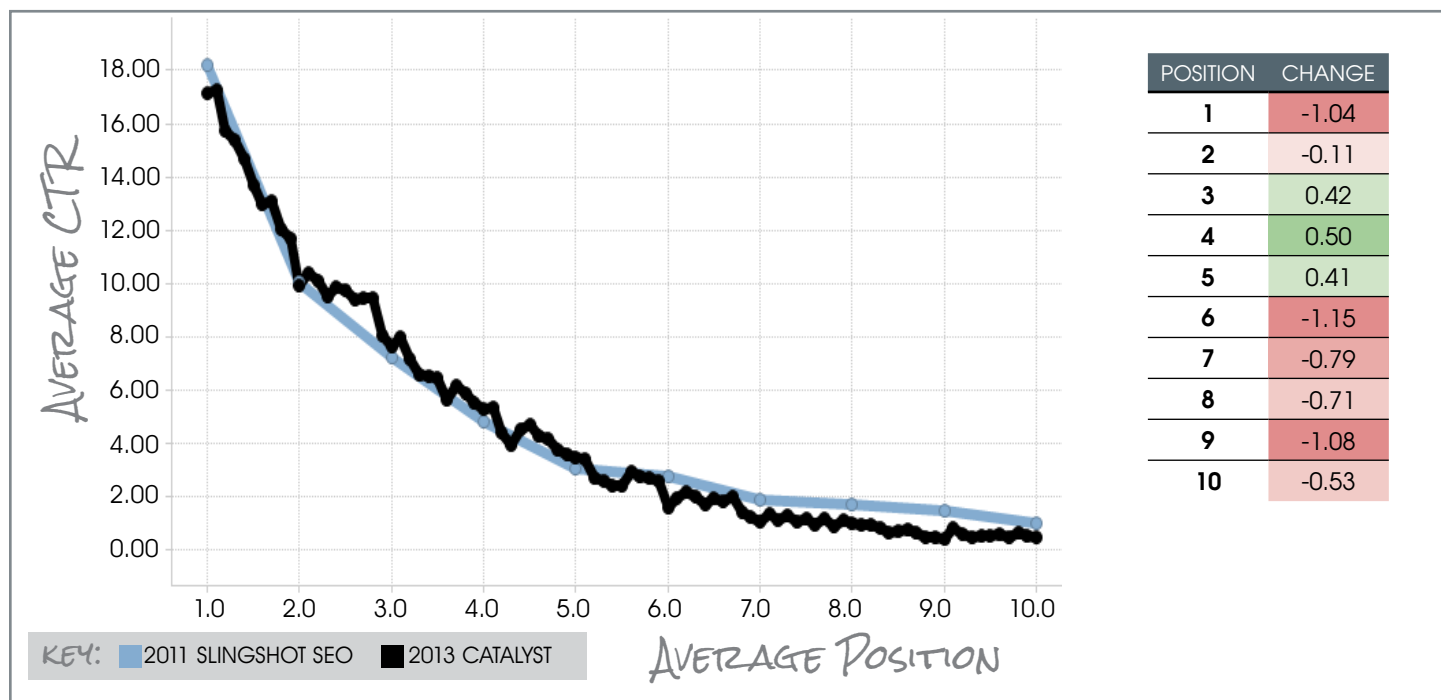*Desktop CTR data set for this chart is comprised of 16,312 unique keywords.
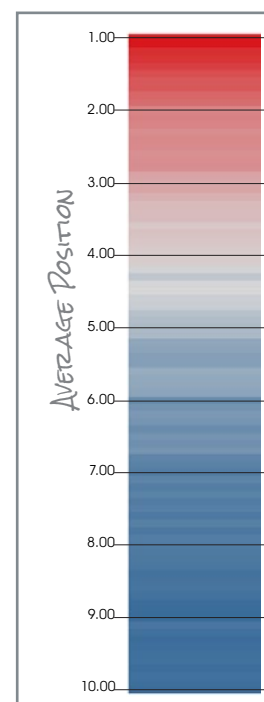
AVERAGE POSITION	AVERAGE CTR
1.00	17.16
2.00	9.94
3.00	7.64
4.00	5.31
5.00	3.50
6.00	1.63
7.00	1.09
8.00	1.04
9.00	0.44
10.00	0.51

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Current CTR v. Previous Studies

Compared to 2011, organic CTRs in 2013 have seen minor fluctuations for all positions, with mid-range rankings (positions 3, 4, and 5) showing slightly higher CTRs.

POSITION	CHANGE
1	-1.04
2	-0.11
3	0.42
4	0.50
5	0.41
6	-1.15
7	-0.79
8	-0.71
9	-1.08
10	-0.53

KEY: 2011 SLINGSHOT SEO 2013 CATALYST

Catalyst CTR data set for this chart is comprised of 16,312 unique keywords.

Click-through rates have not dramatically shifted since Slingshot's 2011 study. Total CTR dropped for first page organic results by 4%. In 2013, the average CTR dropped for all positions except mid-range rankings (positions 3, 4, and 5).

While seemingly minor, these downward shifts could be a result of the continually evolving Google UI. As alternative result types (Product Listing Ads, Knowledge Graph, video, image, etc.) continue to proliferate through the SERP, users' eyes tend to stray further from the historical "F shape" pattern, impacting the CTR by ranking position.

It is interesting that positions 3-5 in our study showed higher average CTRs than the Slingshot study. A possible explanation for this shift is that users could be more aware of Paid Search listings in the top of a results page, so they quickly scan down a few listings to "bypass" these results.

AVERAGE POSITION	SLINGSHOT	CATALYST
1.00	18.20	↓ 17.16
2.00	10.05	↓ 9.94
3.00	7.22	7.64 ↑
4.00	4.81	5.31 ↑
5.00	3.09	3.50 ↑
6.00	2.78	↓ 1.63
7.00	1.88	↓ 1.09
8.00	1.75	↓ 1.04
9.00	1.52	↓ 0.44
10.00	1.04	↓ 0.51

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User Type Focus — Desktop v. Mobile

Mobile average CTR distribution skews higher toward position 1. This is likely due to the smaller screen size and limited viewable results prior to scrolling, combined with the "need" for quick answers.
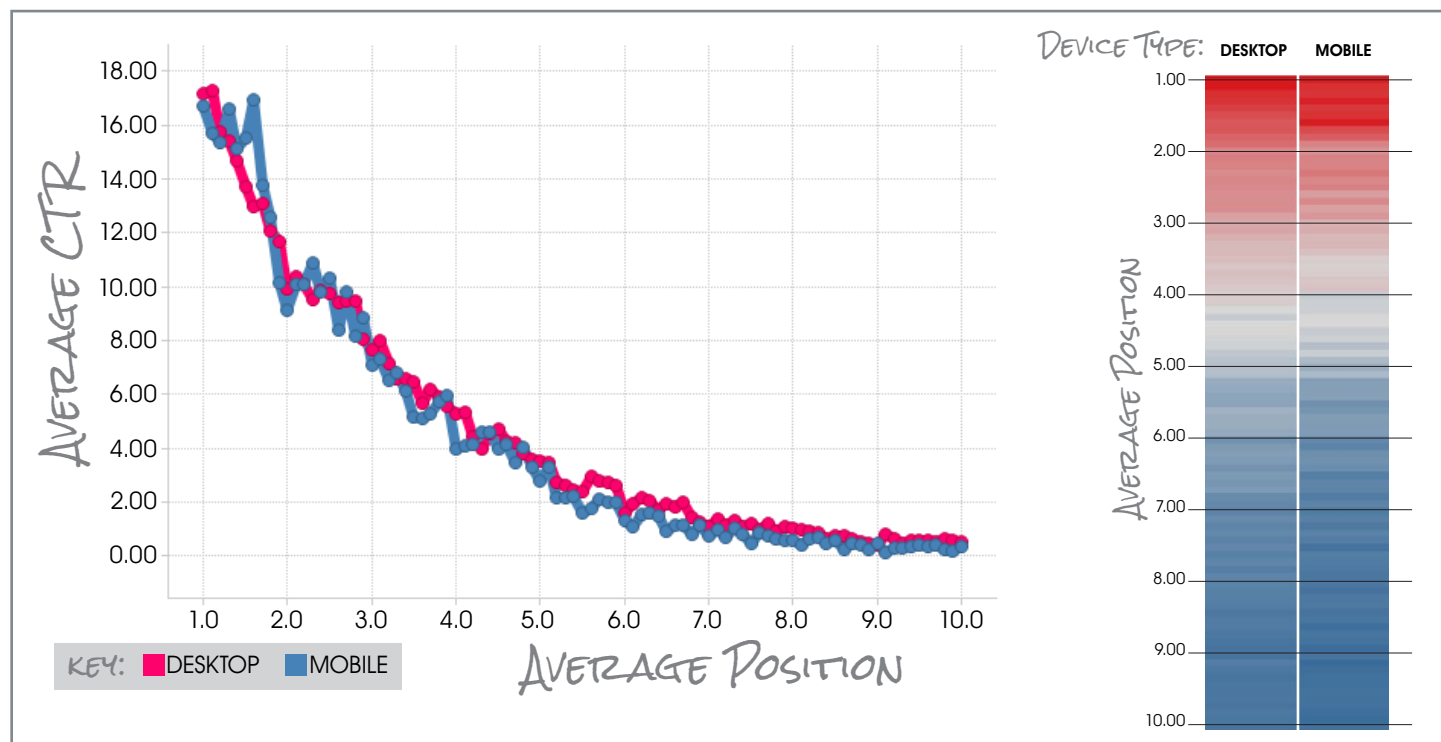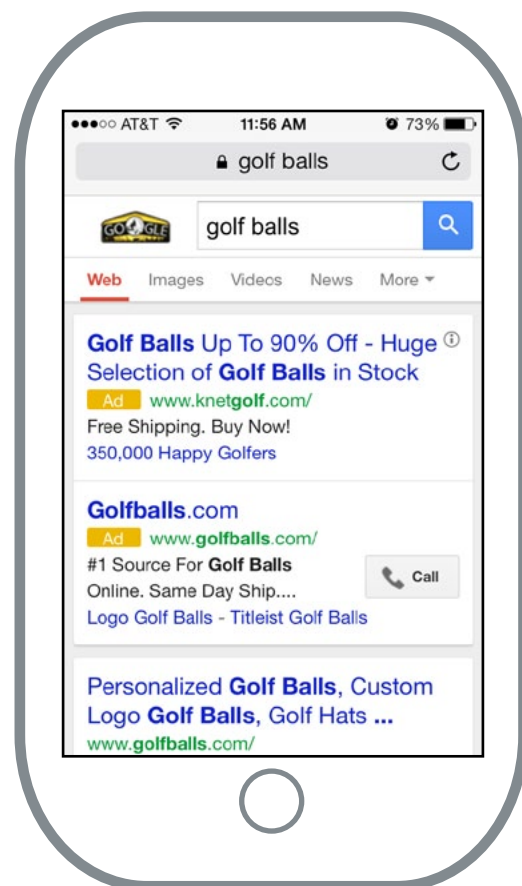

Desktop CTR data set for this chart is comprised of 16,312 unique keywords. Mobile CTR data contains 9,244 unique keywords.

The average CTR distribution for mobile skews higher towards the top ranking (position 1) in comparison to user behavior and click distribution on a desktop. One explanation for this lies within the typical search behavior of a mobile user. A mobile user is likely to be "on the go" and not browsing, but instead looking for specific information as fast as possible. This, combined with the number of results on their screen, makes them more apt to click on the first result they see.

With that in mind, Paid Search ads on mobile devices should have a big advantage over the desktop in earning clicks, as they can dominate the listings above the fold on a mobile phone.

AVERAGE POSITION	DESKTOP	MOBILE
1.00	17.16	16.72
2.00	9.94	9.14
3.00	7.64	7.07
4.00	5.31	3.98
5.00	3.50	2.81
6.00	1.63	1.32
7.00	1.09	0.74
8.00	1.04	0.60
9.00	0.44	0.45
10.00	0.51	0.38

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User Intent — Branded v. Unbranded

Branded CTRs for top ranking terms are lower than unbranded CTRs, likely due to both user intent and the way Google presents results.
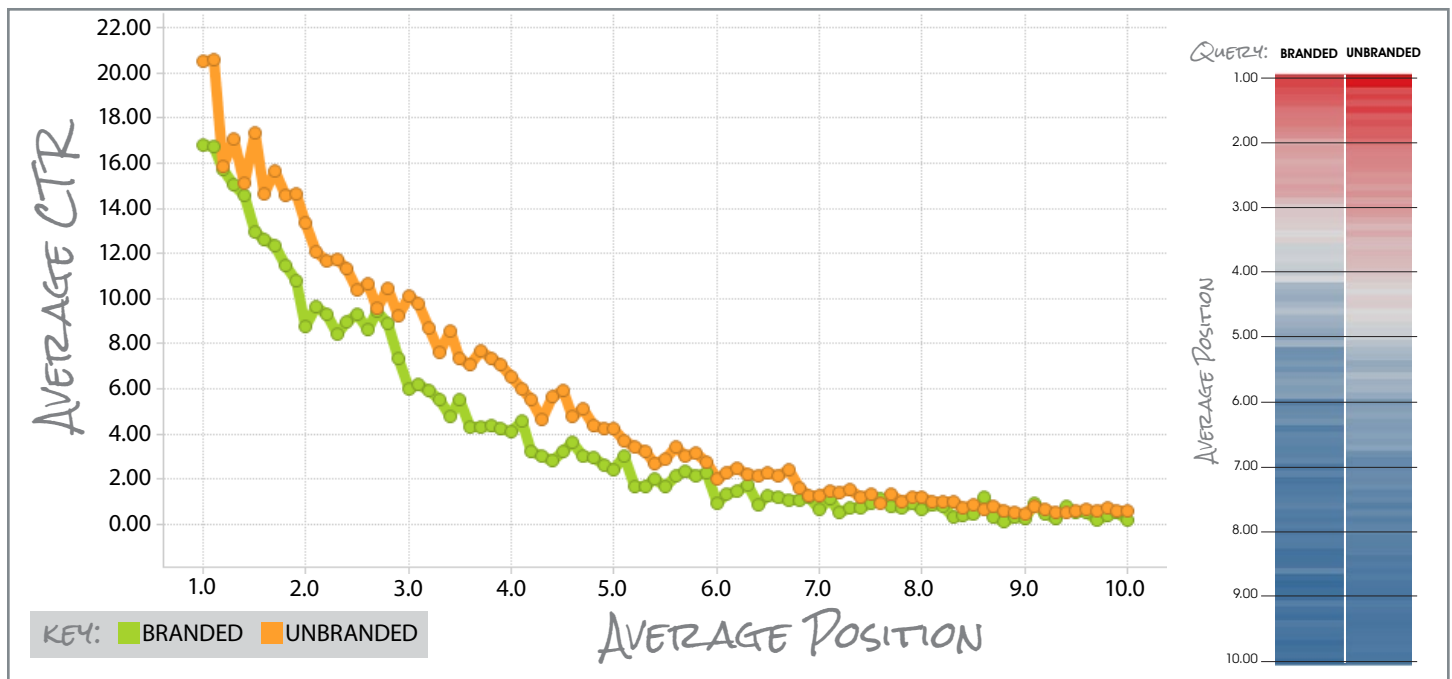
Branded CTR data set for this chart is comprised of 9,469 unique keywords. Unbranded CTR data contains 6,843 unique keywords.

Users who search unbranded queries are often higher in the purchasing funnel: looking for information, without a specific answer or action in mind. As a result, they are more likely to click on the first result, particularly when it comes from a strong brand that they trust.

It is worth considering the strength of the Consumer Packaged Goods (CPG) brands within this study – as such, when these brands appear in the results for those unbranded searches, they are likely very highly relevant to the generic search term. (The CPG brands included in this study are well recognized by consumers, largely due to their large marketing budgets and the age of their brand equity, and are often closely associated with the unbranded products and themes for which they have earned top organic rankings.)

Also, CTRs for unbranded queries may be higher than expected due to Google Product Listing Ads and Paid Search ads encroaching on valuable SERP real estate. Notice in our example, above the fold the user is presented with just one organic result for this unbranded search

AVERAGE POSITION	BRANDED	UNBRANDED
1.00	16.84	20.50
2.00	8.79	13.33
3.00	6.01	10.14
4.00	4.08	6.51
5.00	2.44	4.26
6.00	0.94	2.00
7.00	0.68	1.30
8.00	0.65	1.18
9.00	0.29	0.49
10.00	0.19	0.59

Google CTR Study © 2013, Catalyst Online LLC.

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Informational Intent — Coupon Focus

"Couponers" are much more likely to click the first result; the user just wants to quickly find a deal.

Searches with a couponing focus produced the second highest average CTR across all of the categories that Catalyst researched. This indicates how users searching for coupons and discounts are very likely to click the first result when a well-known brand occupies that position.

Coupon CTR data set for this chart is comprised of 1,427 unique keywords. Non-coupon data contains 14,885 unique keywords.
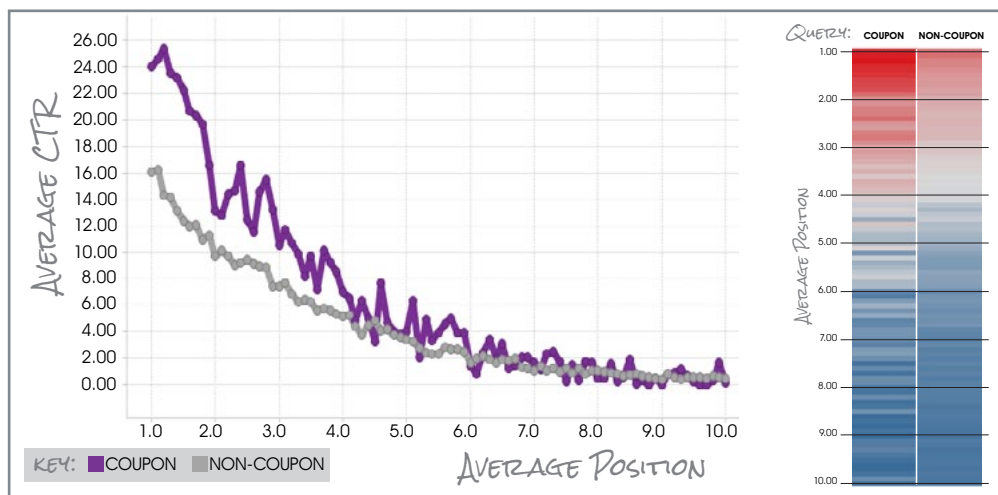
AVERAGE POSITION	COUPON	NON-COUPON
1.00	23.99	16.03
2.00	13.16	9.69
3.00	10.59	7.43
4.00	7.02	5.20
5.00	4.03	3.47

AVERAGE POSITION	COUPON	NON-COUPON
6.00	1.40	1.64
7.00	1.71	1.06
8.00	0.48	1.08
9.00	0.00	0.46
10.00	0.19	0.52

Informational Intent — Question Focus

CTR is much higher when a user has searched with a question.

Searches containing a question produce the highest average CTR across all of the categories that Catalyst researched. Much like "couponers", these users want their query answered quickly, and assuming that they trust the source of the first result, feel that they need look no further.

It is likely also true that question-based informational queries result in less Paid Search ads being served to a user, resulting in more organic listings above the fold and higher organic CTRs.
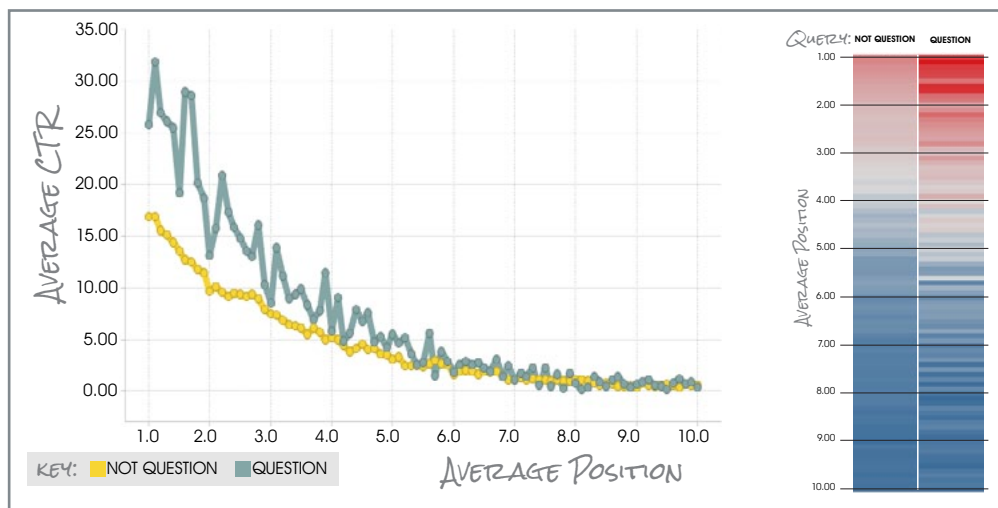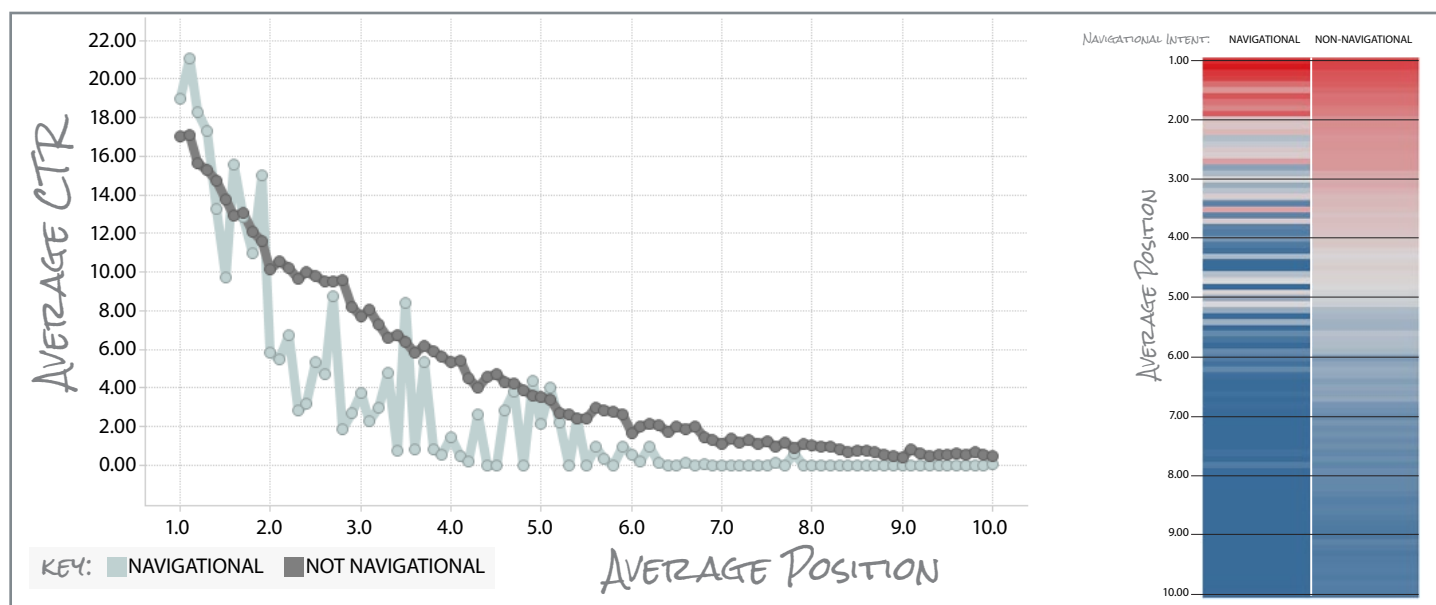

Question CTR data set for this chart is comprised of 1,521 unique keywords. Non-question data contains 14,791 unique keywords.

AVERAGE RANGING	NOT QUESTION	QUESTION
1.00	16.93	25.80
2.00	9.70	13.18
3.00	7.51	8.56
4.00	5.22	5.85
5.00	3.13	5.47

AVERAGE RANGING	NOT QUESTION	QUESTION
6.00	1.60	1.83
7.00	1.09	1.12
8.00	1.09	0.75
9.00	0.39	0.72
10.00	0.53	0.40

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Navigational Intent

Navigational intent drives high CTR with significant drop offs between ranking 1 and 2. Users know exactly what they want.

Navigational CTR data set for this chart is comprised of 431 unique keywords. Non-navigational data contains 15,881 unique keywords.

For searches with navigational intent, notice the big drop off in Navigational CTR for the first position vs. other positions above the fold. This falls in line with what you might expect, as users are attempting to visit a specific website (which almost always ranks in the first position), and then click it in the SERP.

Users who search for actual websites/urls (e.g., contains "www" or "com") are basically taking an unnecessary step, as they could have directly navigated to the web address using the browser bar. This often happens when a user first opens Google's homepage, the cursor is already set to type in the search query box, rather than the navigation bar.

AVERAGE POSITION	NAVIGATIONAL	NOT NAVIGATIONAL
1.00	19.01	17.04
2.00	5.82	10.14
3.00	3.77	7.74
4.00	1.43	5.34
5.00	2.14	3.53
6.00	0.57	1.65
7.00	0.00	1.13
8.00	0.00	1.05
9.00	0.00	0.45
10.00	0.07	0.52

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Search Query Focus – Query Word Count

As a user's query length approaches the long tail, the average CTR for page one rankings increases.
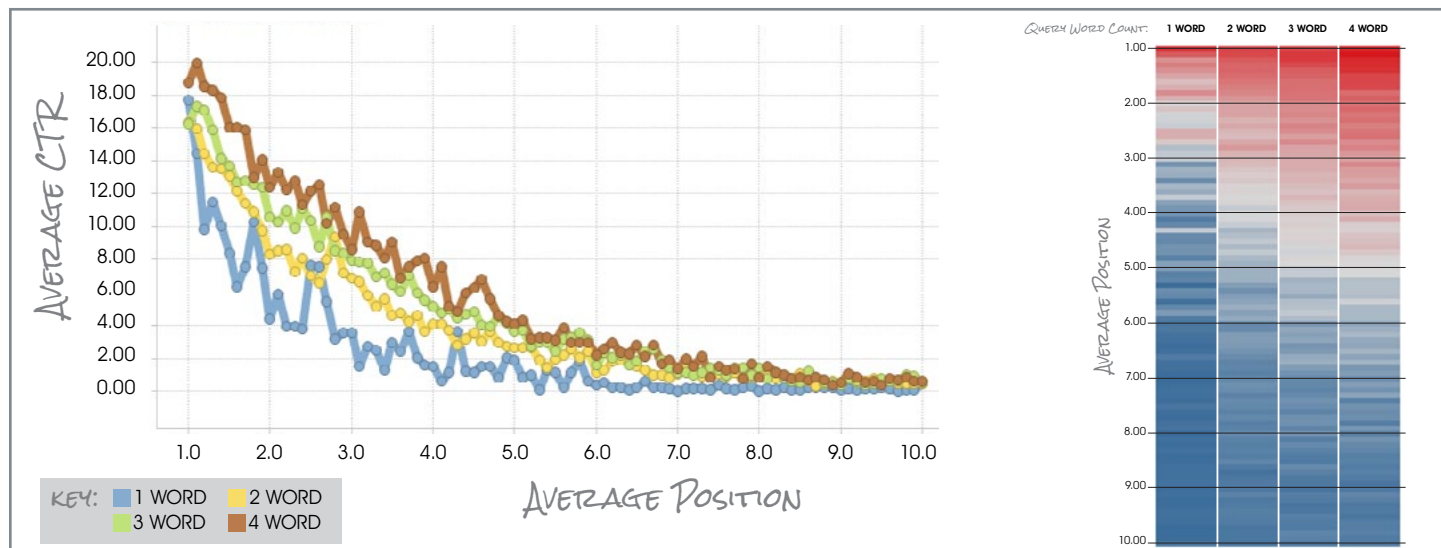
One word CTR data set for this chart is comprised of 1,024 unique keywords. Two word data contains 4,046 unique keywords. Three word data contains 4,894 unique keywords. Four+ word data contains 6,348 unique keywords.

One word query data resembles the CTR distributions of navigational intent search queries, which could be due to the user intent of one word queries actually being more navigational by nature (as the keywords are oftentimes very broad or a specific brand name). Additionally, the intent of users who search with one word queries may actually be to refine their search based on their initial impression of the SERP, so the single word query would become a multiple word query. Just about 30% of one word queries result in a first page organic click, with 60% of those clicks coming from the first position ranking.

If the user does not find what they are looking for within the first result, they modify their search to be more specific, often resulting in the query to contain multiple words.

The click percentage totals represented in this graph suggest that as a user's query becomes more refined they are more likely to click on a first page organic result (~56% for four+ words v. ~30% for one word queries). Furthermore, click distributions across the top ten results begin to spread more evenly down the fold. Meaning, when a consumer's search becomes more refined/specific, they likely spend more time scanning the SERP looking for the best possible listing to match their intent. This is where great calls to actions and eye-catching page titles/meta descriptions can really make or break your CTR.

AVERAGE POSITION	ONE WORD	TWO WORDS	THREE WORDS	FOUR+ WORDS
1.00	17.68	16.32	16.28	18.76
2.00	4.41	8.30	10.58	12.41
3.00	3.56	6.86	7.93	8.64
4.00	1.50	4.10	5.12	6.38
5.00	1.86	2.64	3.61	4.11
6.00	0.37	1.10	1.60	2.18
7.00	0.00	1.08	1.12	1.36
8.00	0.00	1.13	1.45	0.84
9.00	0.08	0.52	0.36	0.53
10.00	0.44	0.42	0.54	0.62

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Factors Influencing CTR

As expected, the data set contains a high level of variability across each keyword's unique CTR.
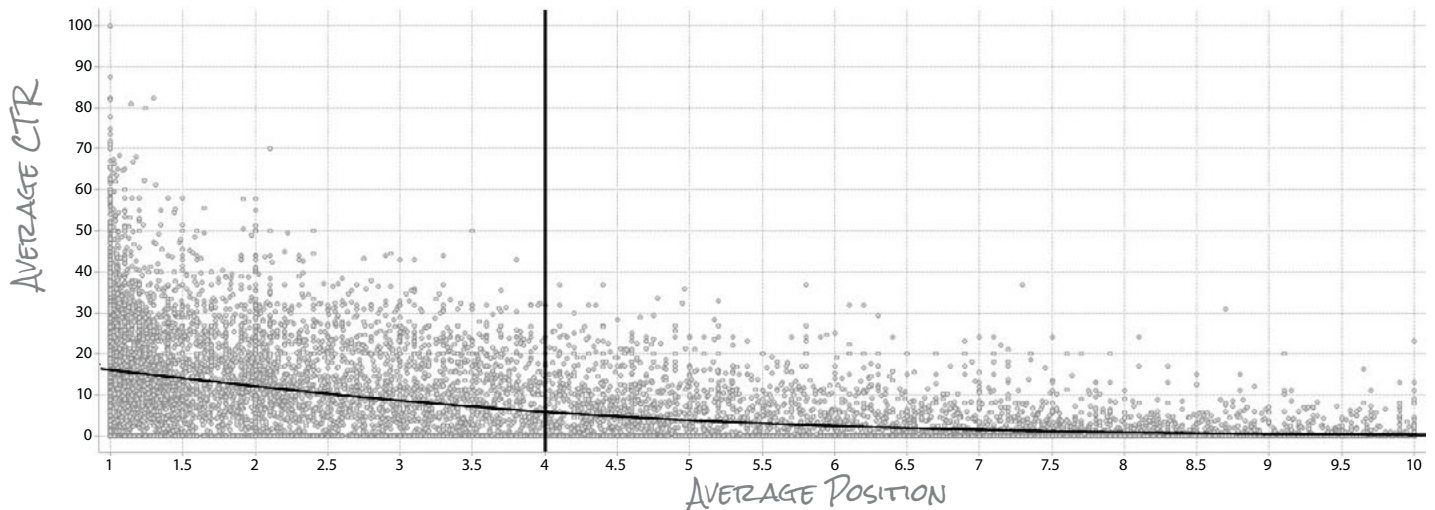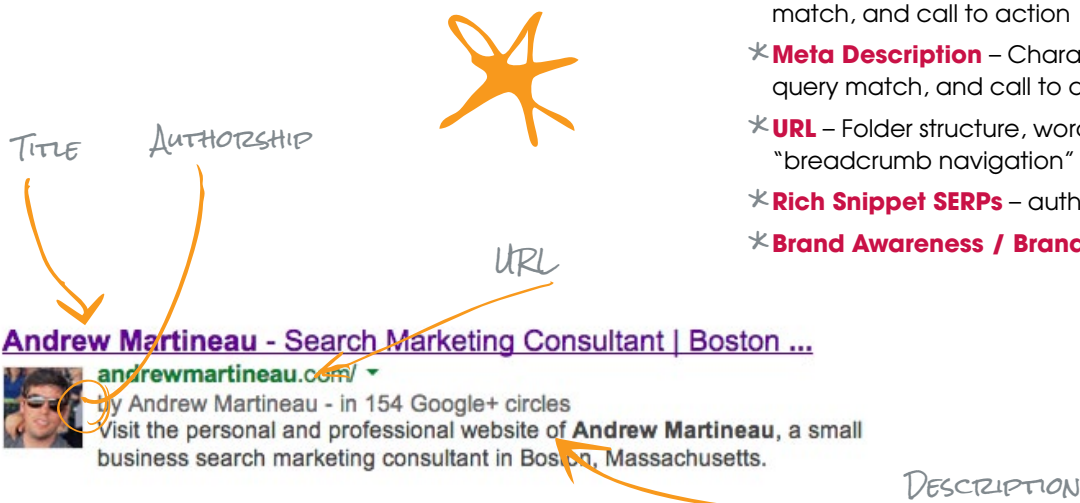

A brand's actual click through rate by position may differ significantly, due to several highly influential CTR factors, including user's search intent, personalized search results, brand awareness, etc. We have outlined many of the important factors that can impact CTR, as follows.

Internal Control

The following factors that can impact CTR are within a brand's control:

* **SERP Position** – Generally, top rankings will be seen first, as well as viewed more often
* **Title Tag** – Character length, word choice, query match, and call to action
* **Meta Description** – Character length, word choice, query match, and call to action
* **URL** – Folder structure, word choice, query match, "breadcrumb navigation"
* **Rich Snippet SERPs** – authorship, reviews, etc.
* **Brand Awareness / Brand Trust**

Title   Authorship

URL

Andrew Martineau - Search Marketing Consultant | Boston ...
andrewmartineau.com/ ▾
by Andrew Martineau - in 154 Google+ circles
Visit the personal and professional website of **Andrew Martineau**, a small business search marketing consultant in Boston, Massachusetts.

Description

External Control

The following factors that can impact CTR are outside of a brand's control:

- **User Query Intent Mismatch** – When a keyword returns diversified results that do not align to the user's search intent
- **Paid Search Ads Capturing Visitors** – Paid Search/sponsored ads competing for the click

  E.g., Paid Search ads moving the organic listings down the fold. Highly competitive terms will have three pay per click ads at the top, and often include Google Product Listing Ads.

- **Blended SERPs** – The SERP contains blended listings

  E.g., Video thumbnail, author bio thumbnails, image results, Google Product Listing ads, local listings, Knowledge Graph

- **Personalized SERPs** – The SERP displayed is often very tailored to the individual user based on user data, including web history, social circles, etc.
- **Authoritative Competitors in SERP** – SERP contains naturally authoritative sources

  E.g., Wikipedia, Amazon, Walmart, MayoClinic, NYTimes

- **Non-Ideal SERP Snippet**

  E.g., Google pulls in page content to populate search listing snippet

- **Search Abandonment**

  Query Refinement

  Instant Satisfaction

  2nd Page Organic SERP

  Leave Search Engine

The Value of a CTR Audit

With the factors to the left in mind, a CTR audit could be performed to highlight opportunities outside of improving rankings that could increase organic traffic to a website. This type of audit could provide actionable recommendations to improve the click through rate for high ranking search queries flagged as needing improvement.

A CTR audit would allow a brand to compare its data to industry average CTRs for positions on the first page of results. A selection of the highest opportunity or priority keyphrases along with reasoning for why CTRs may be lower than average could then be presented, along with recommendations for improving the CTR.

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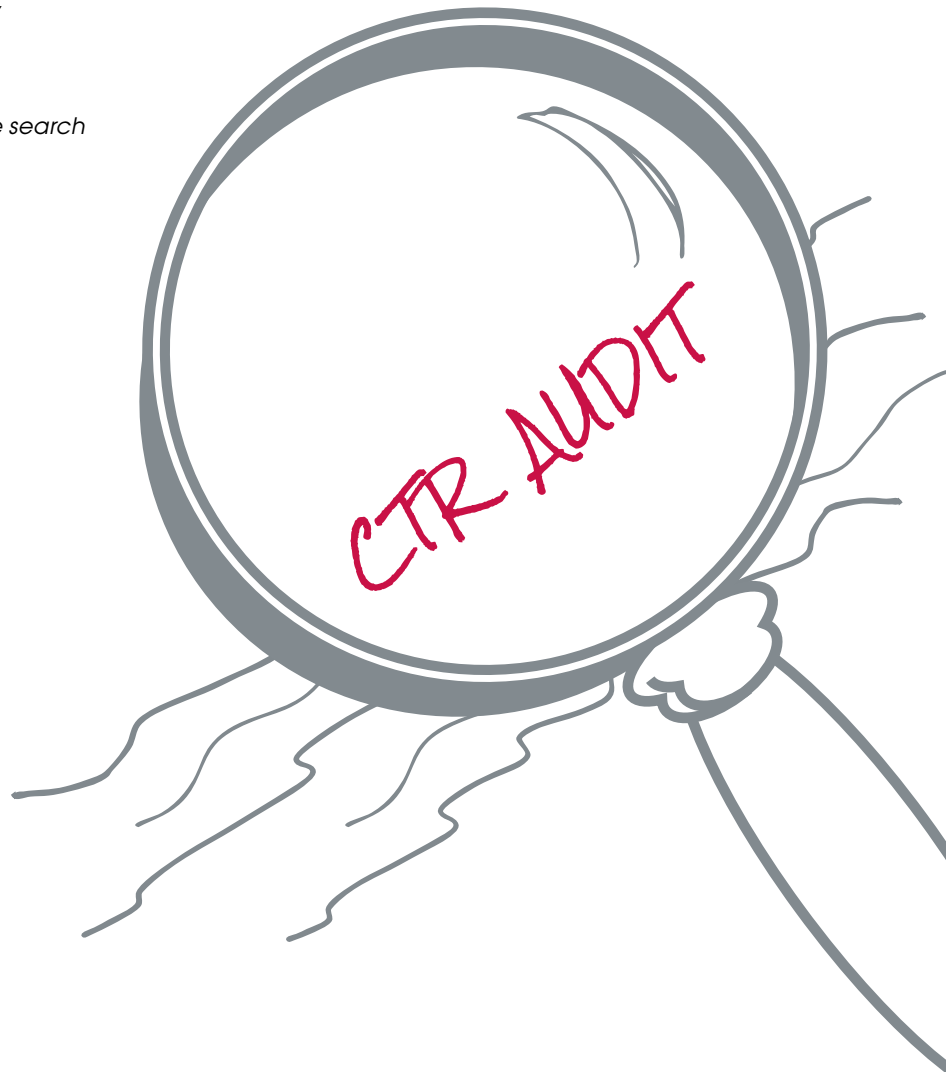
Business Uses

Leveraging click-through rate data enables us to further understand user behavior on a search result and how it can differ depending on search intent. These learnings can play an integral role in defining a company's digital strategy, as well as forecasting website traffic and even ROI. For instance:

## 1. Forecasting Website Performance and Traffic

Given a keyword's monthly search volume, we can predict the number of visits a website could expect to receive by each ranking position. This becomes increasingly valuable when we have conversion rate data attributed to specific keywords.

2. Identifying Search Keyword Targets

With Google Webmaster Tools' CTR/search query data we can easily determine the keywords that are "low-hanging fruit" (keywords that a brand ranks on, but just outside of achieving high visibility/high organic traffic typically below the fold on page 1 and on all of pages 2-3.). Once targeted and integrated into the brand's keyphrase strategy, SEOs can then work to improve their Search Engine Results Page (SERP) rankings for that particular query.

## 3. Identifying Underperforming Top Visible Keywords

By comparing a brand's specific search query CTR against the industry average as identified in this report, we can identify underperforming keyphrases. Next, an SEO can perform an audit to determine if the low CTR is due to factors within the brand's control, or if it is caused by external factors.

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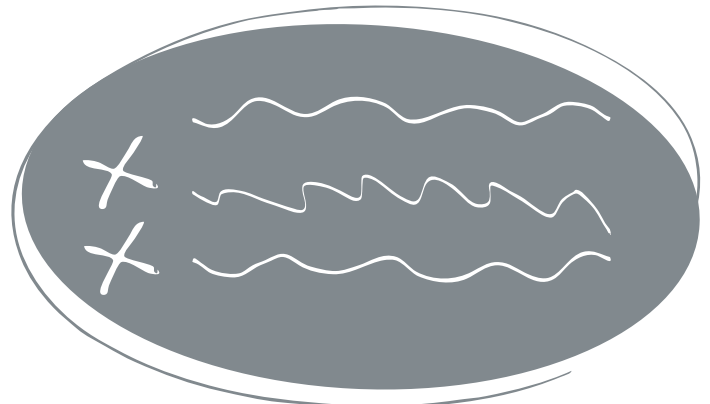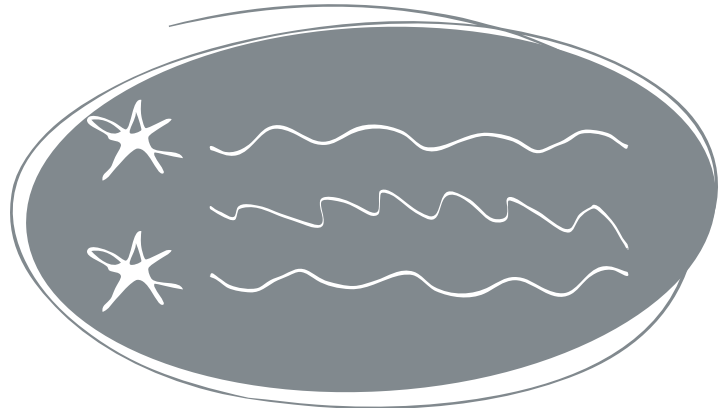
Key Takeaways

1. Website conversion rates should be priority number one. Search interest, rankings, and click through rate fuel website visits, which in turn present an opportunity for more website conversions.

2. Ranking on the first page is great for achieving visibility; however, your website must rank above the fold to begin seeing substantial traffic gains for a given search query.

3. On average, 48% of searches result in a first page organic click. The rest is dispersed across Paid Search clicks and Search Abandonment.

4. In 2013, overall CTR dropped for the first page organic results by 4% (compared to 2011).

5. Mobile average CTRs skew higher toward position 1. This is likely due to the smaller screen size and limited results showing prior to scrolling, combined with the "need" for quick answers.

6. Branded CTRs for top ranking terms are lower than unbranded CTRs. This is likely due to both user intent and typical Google results when combined with a relevant, well-known brand.

7. Coupon intent is skewed highly towards the first position. The user wants to quickly find a deal, and likely trusts the well-known brand.

8. CTRs are much higher when a user has searched with a question.

9. Navigational intent drives high CTR with a big drop off between positions 1 and 2. Users know exactly what they want, and Google appears to be delivering them the right results.

10. A brand's actual click through rate by position may differ significantly, due to several highly influential CTR factors, with only a handful that can be directly influenced by marketers.

11. SEO teams should perform CTR audits to highlight opportunities outside of improving rankings that could increase organic traffic to a website.

12. As a user's query becomes more refined, they are more likely to click on a first page organic result (~56% for four+ words v. ~30% for one word queries).

13. Calls to action and eye-catching page titles/meta descriptions can make or break your CTR for long tail queries.
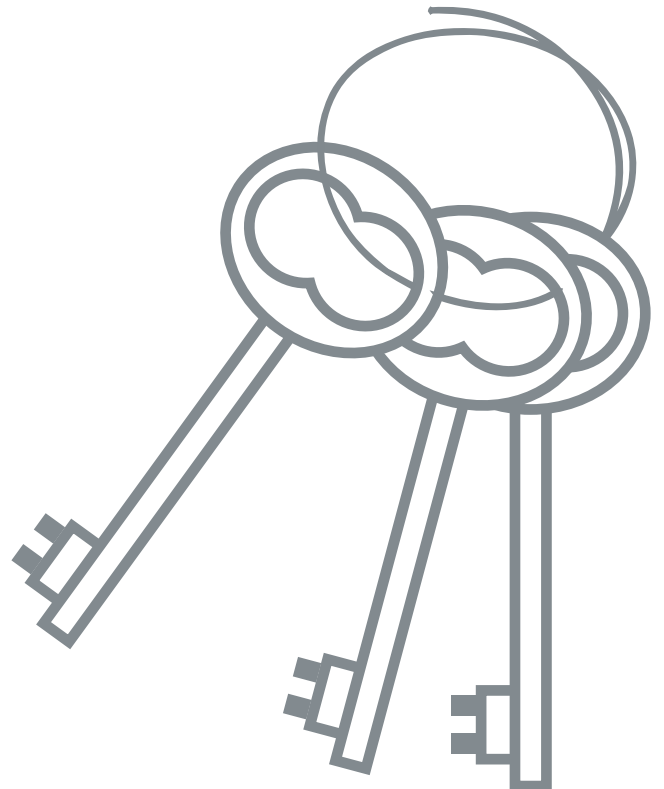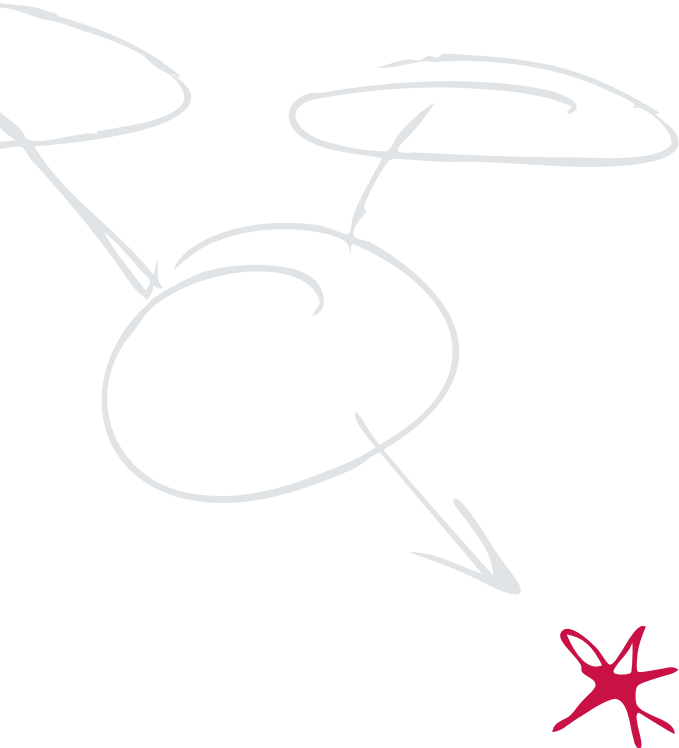
About Catalyst

Catalyst, a pioneer in developing strategic digital marketing services since 1998, is renowned for search marketing excellence in servicing Fortune 1000 brands. Headquartered in Boston with offices in New York, Chicago, Seattle, Toronto and Montreal, Catalyst serves numerous B2B and B2C clients in a variety of industries. The search engine marketing firm prides itself on being *THE* Search Innovator of the industry. Catalyst's offerings include: search engine optimization (SEO), paid search marketing, Social SEO, content strategy, digital asset optimization, mobile search, e-retail optimization, local search optimization, global search, competitive reporting, and more. Catalyst is a wholly owned subsidiary of WPP, a world leader in marketing communications. For more information about Catalyst, please visit the company's website at CatalystSearchMarketing.com.

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