
The 'Facebook-ing' of Retirement Income

By David Macchia *Tue, Aug 25, 2009*

Should you be concerned about where you rank in search engine results? Yes, says David Macchia.

Facebook, the hugely popular social networking site, recently enabled its millions of users to enjoy a more personalized Web experience by allowing them to register “vanity URLs”—user-defined web addresses that lead directly to their Facebook pages. At exactly 12:01 AM on Saturday, June 13, Facebook flipped the switch.

The popularity of Facebook’s move was astounding. Within three minutes, 200,000 users had registered personal URLs. Within 24 hours, 5.75 million people had claimed their preferred web addresses.

Facebook was actually late to the game of offering personal URLs. In the past, its policy was to restrict the availability of personal URLs to certain high-profile people. (How high-profile? You can check out Barack Obama’s Facebook website at <http://www.facebook.com/barackobama>.)

Both MySpace and Twitter beat Facebook to the punch in offering personal URLs. Like these other popular social networking sites, Facebook realized how powerfully people respond to personalization. LinkedIn has also recently joined the personal URL stampede.

One of the drivers of personalized URLs is the fact that people enjoy searching the Web for all manner of things... including themselves! Perhaps you’ve “Googled” your own name.

People not only like to search the Web for information about themselves, they also want to make it easier for others to find them in search results generated by Google, Bing and other popular search engines. Personal URLs make locating people and businesses much easier.

Web search is second only to email in popularity. And at its current growth rate, Web search may soon overtake email as the number one online activity. Oh, and it’s good for you. Recent research suggests that searching the Web stimulates the brain more than reading books. It apparently stimulates parts of the brain that control decision-making and complex reasoning.

Says Dr. Gary Small, a professor at the Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior at UCLA, “A simple, everyday task like searching the Web appears to enhance brain circuitry in older adults, demonstrating that our brains are sensitive and can continue to learn as we grow older.”

If the hundreds of billions of Web searches conducted each year are any indication, people must be getting smarter by the day. According to research from the Pew Internet & American Life Project, in a typical day half of all Internet users search the Web. Moreover, not just young people are searching.

The implications for retirement income businesses

You may wonder what all of this has to do with the retirement income business. The answer is that, regardless of your particular role in the retirement industry, you have a direct or indirect connection to investors. Investors' behaviors and preferences matter to you. With millions of investors routinely searching the Web, it's prudent to examine the changes in the way investors learn about and evaluate products and services.

Often times the most active Web searchers are the best prospects for retirement income services. Pew's research indicates that 40% of adults between the ages of 50 and 64 use search engine sites on any given day. In households where annual income exceeds \$75,000, 62% of people search the Web every day.

Let's say that you are a financial advisor who offers retirement income planning services. Your relationship with your clients has traditionally been face-to-face. Should you be concerned about where *you* rank in search engine results? If you aren't easy to find in Google, Yahoo or Bing, does it matter? I believe it does. And it should concern you.

Here's why. The global economic disaster and stock market crash exacted a huge economic and psychological toll on millions of Americans who are approaching retirement or are already retired. In the chaotic aftermath of trillion-dollar losses, investor confidence has been badly shaken. Reestablishing trust and confidence in this climate is no easy task.

Eventually, millions of investors are sure to seek our new approaches to retirement investing. Many already have. To the extent that investors believe they need to evaluate new investing strategies, searching the Web will be more important than ever. Having a *quality* online presence will be essential to your success. Not having a quality online presence will diminish your potential for success.

"The Internet is no longer a niche technology," said Jonathan Carlson, president of Nielsen Online. "It is mass media and an utterly integral part of modern life. Almost no aspect of life remains untouched by online media. As our lives become more fractured and cluttered, it isn't surprising that consumers turn to the unrivaled convenience of the Internet when it comes to researching and buying products."

When it comes to experiences delivered via the Web browser, financial services companies don't set consumers' expectations; consumers set consumers' expectations. Investing in the technology and content necessary to meet their expectations-including personalization-is becoming essential as you search for *your* success in the business of retirement.

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