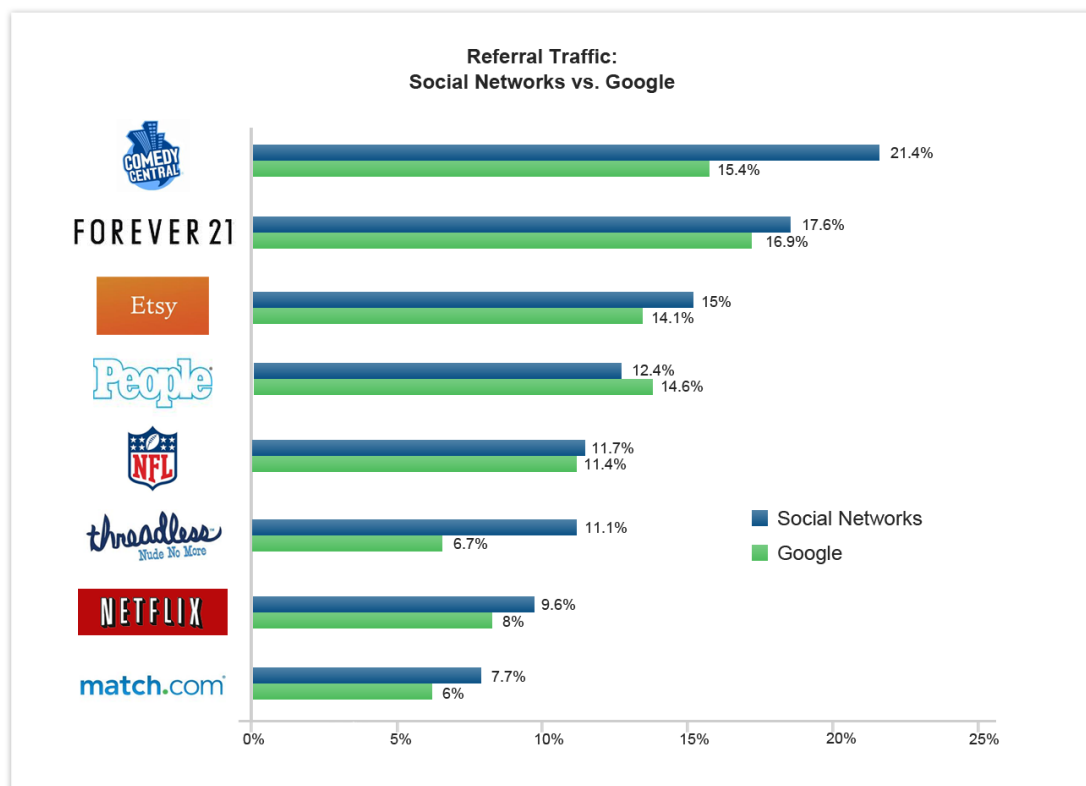**gigya**

Social, SEO and the Open Graph: What To Do Now

This paper covers best practices for:

- Where social and search intersect
- The Open Graph and social network search
- Action items for websites today

The evolution of Facebook's search engine has once again brought the intersection of social and search into the headlines. Powered by Microsoft and a semantic web vision consisting of Facebook's enormous user base and the Open Graph protocol, the potential can't be ignored. But while there is plenty of controversy, there is little clarity for online businesses around **what to do today** to comprehensively optimize their own sites for all of the traffic-driving capabilities that bridge social and search.

As the chart below illustrates, there is little doubt that social networks have become an important new source of traffic for online businesses, requiring specific optimization strategies.

Referral Traffic: Social Networks vs. Google

Site	Social Networks	Google
Comedy Central	21.4%	15.4%
Forever 21	17.6%	16.9%
Etsy	15%	14.1%
People	12.4%	14.6%
NFL	11.7%	11.4%
Threadless	11.1%	6.7%
Netflix	9.6%	8%
Match.com	7.7%	6%

Source: Compete, August 2010

And while social networks are leveraging their social assets to make semantic search a reality, the familiar search engines are also looking at social as the future, evolving their algorithms and structures to incorporate social information.

The benefit for online business? Increased traffic. The benefit for people? Greater relevance and a more personalized web. At the end of the day it's about discovery – how people find where to go on the web – and the company that "wins" is the one that will be able to deliver the most relevant, personalized discovery experience.

So where do Social and Search intersect today? How can online businesses use the tools available to socially optimize their own sites for increased traffic? What are the other benefits? Let's take a look.

Channels of Traffic for On-Site Social Optimization

Let's begin by looking at the three sources of traffic, or channels of discovery, for which you can socially optimize your site:
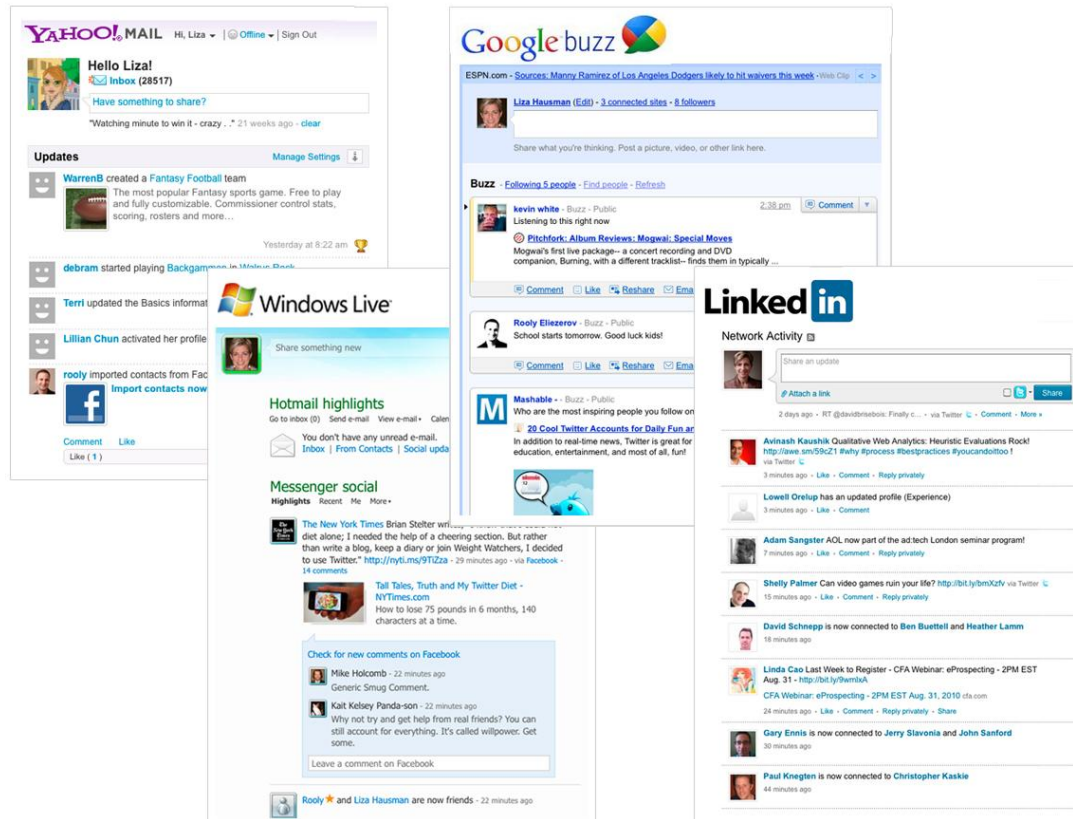
- Feeds
- Traditional search
- Social network search

Today, these differ significantly in terms of social influence, search intent, and volume driving potential. The following graphic, plots the three types based on those differences; credit goes to Danny Sullivan, editor-in-chief of Search Engine Land, for the inspiration:
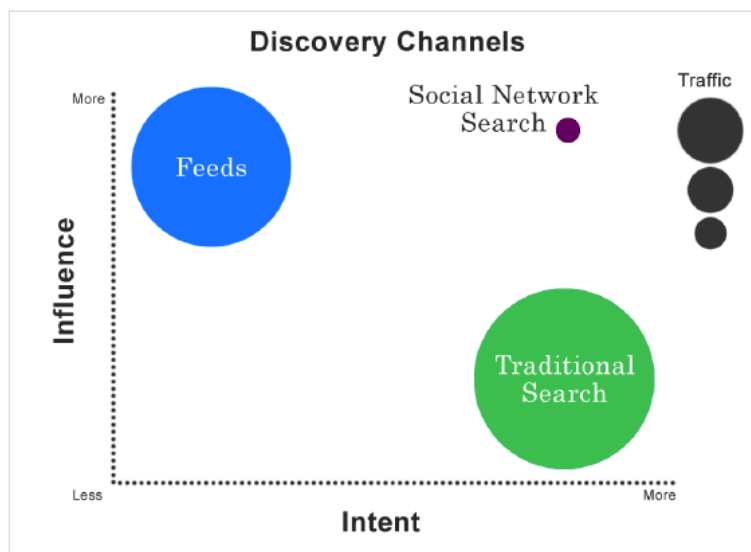
Feeds

Feeds as a source of content discovery are characterized by 1) low search intent: the person viewing the items is not necessarily looking for that content or any content in particular; the item was pushed to them, and 2) a high degree of social influence – meaning that the item is viewed as worthwhile by a person or entity to whom they are connected. They also can drive a large volume of traffic, as noted in the first chart.

What are feeds? Feeds are a live stream of activity shared on social networks and across the web by someone or something with which the user has a relationship. There are many possible types of online relationships, a revolutionary concept introduced by the social networks. Facebook began by connecting real-word friends. Twitter created a more open public structure, connecting any person with anyone else they deem worthwhile, from Ashton Kutcher to Barack Obama to Saul Bellow. Both networks also enable connections between people and businesses or brands. Any person can "follow" Southwest Airlines on Twitter and "like" Coca-Cola on Facebook. LinkedIn was built to connect people based on business relationships, and similar to Facebook also gives individuals the ability to establish relationships

with groups of people, from business associations to interest groups. With feeds, social networks make these diverse relationships more powerful. They enable passive discovery and facilitate the transfer of information from one to a highly interested and relevant many. The majority of traffic coming to websites from social networks is the result of people clicking on an item they see in their feed, an item shared by someone with whom they have a relationship.

Most people are aware that the Facebook and Twitter experience revolves around the feed, but LinkedIn, Yahoo, Google, and Windows Live Messenger have also introduced feeds, acknowledging the power of this form of discovery and its traffic-driving potential.

Traditional Search

Traditional Search is characterized by a high degree of intent, and is capable of driving an enormous volume of traffic, but has relatively little social influence. Intent is high as a search is actively made on a specific term for which the searcher has both interest and a goal in mind. However the results rank low on the social influence spectrum; they are not determined specifically by your personal preferences or the wisdom of your personal network. Today however, the major search engines aren't sitting still. Microsoft has partnered with Facebook, and Google is making strides to incorporate social activity into their search results.

The first step Google took was to incorporate real-time searches on Twitter into their search results. The death of Michael Jackson was a turning point in real-time search: not only was Google unable to return relevant results, it acted like it was under attack. When millions began searching for "Michael Jackson," most got the response "your query looks similar to automated requests from a computer virus or spyware application". Google spokesman Gabriel Stricker made it official: "It's true that between approximately 2.40PM Pacific and 3.15PM Pacific, some Google News users experienced difficulty accessing search results for queries related to Michael Jackson and saw the error page."

Today, Google incorporates real-time results into the main search results page when the volume of activity warrants it, but in most cases places them into a separate section of search called "updates" as pictured below:

With the introduction of Google Buzz, Google is also experimenting with search results that are based on what they know about your social graph, as in this example that appeared at the bottom of the search results for a search on "recipes":

Social Network Search

Social network search is exciting because it sits in the upper right quadrant of the discovery chart – ranking high on both social influence and search intent. In order to properly describe social network search, we first need to review the concepts of the semantic web and the Open Graph. The idea behind the semantic web is that the Internet can be more usefully or relevantly organized and described by the relationships between people and social objects, rather than just the relationships between pages, i.e. the hyperlink-based system on which traditional search has been based.

"The semantic web captures the relationship between people and social objects."

So what is a "Social Object"? Here is what the Facebook social graph looks like today[1], a combination of connections between people, groups, entities like business or celebrities, and social objects:

---
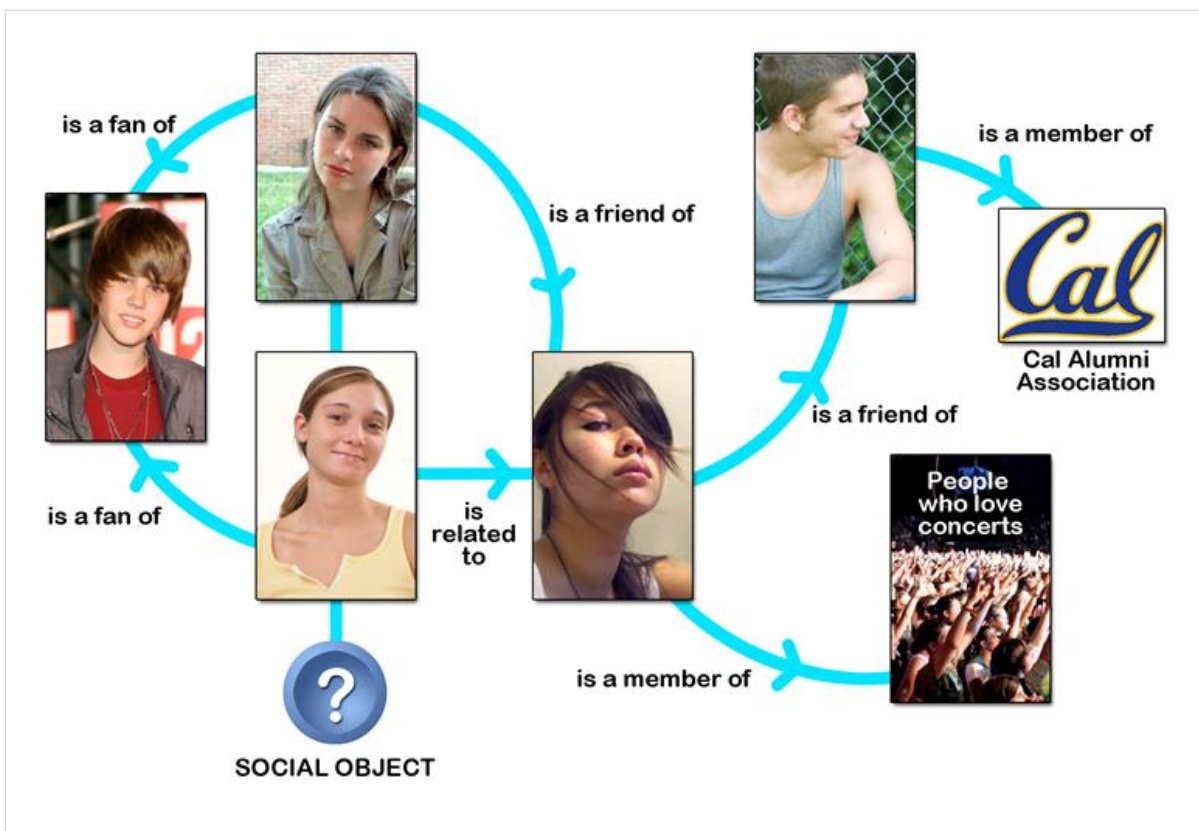
[1] Dare Obasanjo, "Facebooks Open Graph Protocol From A Web Developers Perspective"

But what use are the connections between all these people and groups and entities? "The Social Object, in a nutshell, is the reason two people are talking to each other, as opposed to talking to somebody else. Human beings are social animals. We like to socialize. But if you think about it, there needs to be a reason for it to happen in the first place. That reason, that "node" in the social network, is what we call the Social Object."[2]

For example, you and your mother are members of the Cal Alumni Association – Cal is the social object. Your teenage daughter and her friend are discussing who is more is the bigger fan of Justin Bieber: Justin Bieber is the social object. Two guys at the car wash become instant buddies because they both have a new black Audi A5: the Audi A5 is the social object. Your cousin adopts a baby: the adoption and the baby are social objects. The Zynga game Mafia Wars is a social object.

Both Facebook and Twitter have introduced their own approaches to semantic search. Facebook's system consists of two parts: the Open Graph Protocol and the "Like" button. The former is a system for classifying social objects on the web, the latter a mechanism for notifying Facebook to index the page and gather the information, a process which also results in sharing the object with the person's Facebook network. Twitter's Annotations are similar in that they provide a mechanism for classifying social objects, however those social objects consist of tweets, not pages, and there is no separate mechanism by which the user tells Twitter to capture the information, simply sending the Tweet does the trick. The metadata is "carried along as an additional payload as it travels through the Twitter network."[3]

So how does this semantic data affect social network search results? Let's look at an example. On Facebook, a search on "Inception" pulls up search suggestions as the user types that look like this:

---

[2] Hugh McLeod, "social objects for beginners"
[3] GigaOm "twitter-annotations-are-coming-what-do-they-mean-for-twitter-and-the-web"
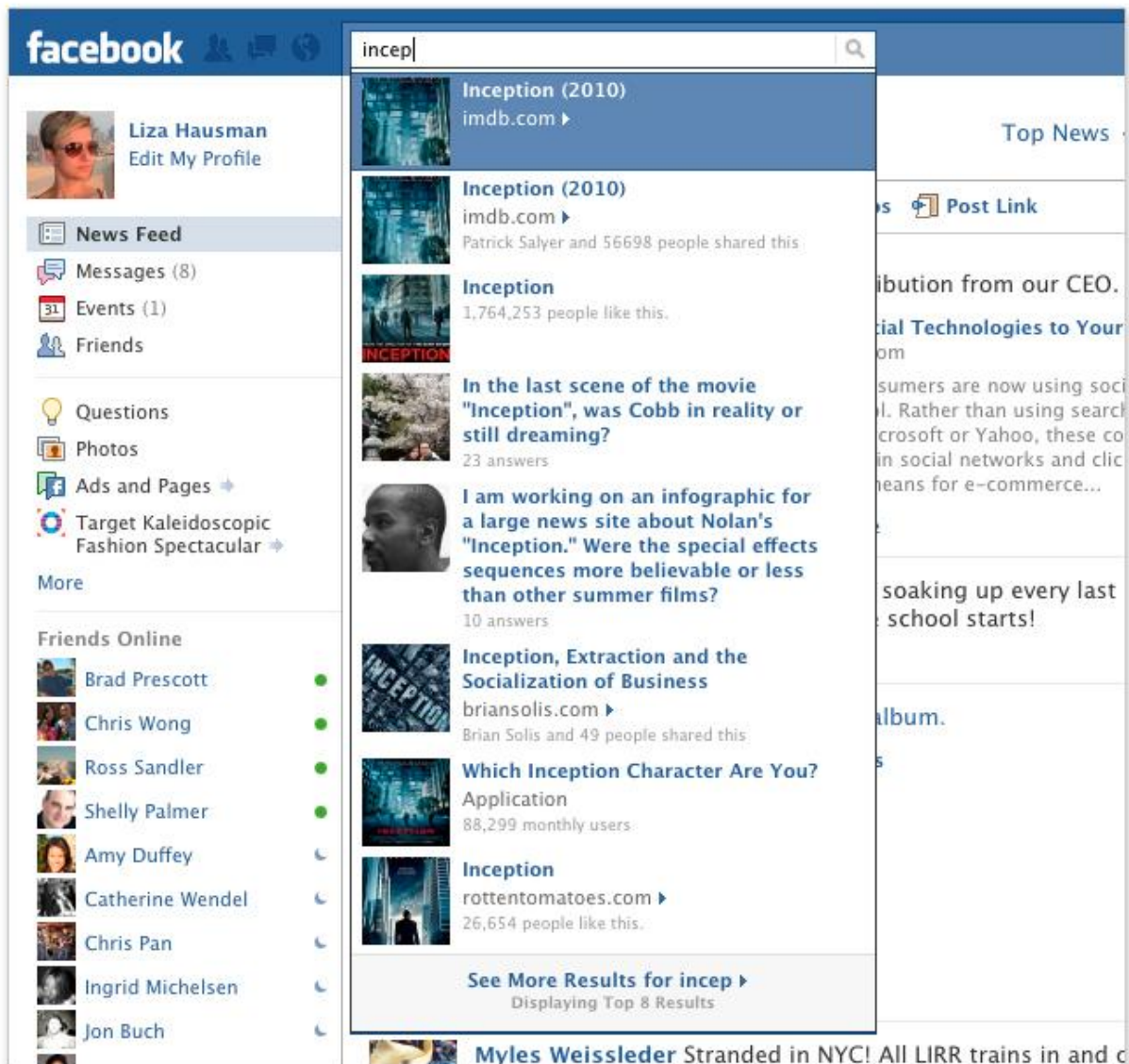
The first result displayed is the Inception page on imdb.com. As it happens, the searcher in this case has already clicked the "like" button on the Inception page on imdb.com, and so this user and the social object "inception movie on imdb" are connected and Facebook is aware of that connection. Note the search results displayed in positions #2 and #3 – one web, one a Facebook page. As it happens, one of the searcher's Facebook friends has also clicked the "like" button on the Inception page on imdb.com, and the search results list both his name as well as the number of other people, not the user's friends, who have liked it. The hierarchy of results displayed appears to be a) display items I have liked b) display items my friends have liked c) display items other human beings (Facebook users) have liked.

If the user declines to select any of the suggested results, Facebook displays a full page of search results consisting of a) Popular Facebook Pages with the term "Inception" (not shown in the screen capture), b) Posts by the searcher's friends that contain the term "Inception" and c) Web Results from Bing that match exactly those displayed when a search is conducted directly on Bing.com, as shown below:

Dare Obasanjo, one of Microsoft's most influential tech thinkers wrote an excellent blog post on the Open Graph and its implications, noting "Any site can become part of the Facebook social graph. This is a very powerful and liberating concept both from the perspective of what it enables Facebook's platform to do, but also because it gets rid of some ugly forms of lock-in. For example, Robert Scoble would no longer need to maintain a brand presence on Facebook at http://www.facebook.com/scobleizer that is different from his website at http://www.scobleizer.com to stay connected with fans of his blog who are Facebook users."[4] This logic applies equally to any business or brand with a presence on Facebook and Twitter, though Twitter presence has always been far less tied to the Twitter page itself.

Social Network Search today is still quite small, comprising only 2.7% of all searches in March.[5] Furthermore, the majority of searches on Facebook consist of two words, suggesting that most searches performed there are done to find people. But the size of the Facebook user base and the high activity level of the Twitter user base suggest that once Social Network Search as a product is ready for prime time, Facebook and Twitter can place it front and center in the user experience and quickly gain share. Doubters should examine how quickly Facebook's Places has gained on Foursquare to see the power of an installed base. Of course there are limitations, at least for the near future. Whereas Google indexes every page on the web with or without site owner or visitor effort, the site owner must tag social objects, and users must push the metadata to Facebook and Twitter (via Tweets and Likes). This means that not every page will become part of the semantic web quickly, if at all. As many have questioned – is every social object something that can be "liked"? Perhaps this is an area where Google, or Facebook together with Bing, will deliver a breakthrough innovation.

Action Items

So what should a site do today? Here are the 4 "musts" of on-site social optimization for any businesses looking to drive traffic:

1) Facilitate social referrals

Social referrals are the number one way to drive traffic to your site from social networks today, and are also a growing element of traditional search. Here are six key areas on which to focus:

---

[4] Dare Obasanjo, "Facebooks Open Graph Protocol From A Web Developers Perspective"
[5] GigaOm, "facebook-search-already-bigger-than-ask-aol" 4/9/10

- *Remove friction from the sharing process*. The social networks and portals all make second-generation sharing tools6 available to third party websites that enable users to share without leaving your site, and with a single click.

- *Prompting people to share*. Just as important, prompt users to share after they complete activities such as watching a video or taking a poll. If users are taking the time to take action on your site, chances are they want that activity exposed to their network. Don't wait for them to find a share button, they've already moved on to the next thing. It's your job to help your users by providing options to share right within the site flow. Prompting people at the right times, and incorporating auto-sharing features can increase sharing by as much as 500%.

- *Enable sharing to multiple feeds*. The feeds on Facebook, Twitter, Yahoo, Google, Windows Live and more have all become viable and sizeable sources of traffic for websites who have implemented these second-generation sharing tools. Be sure to give your visitors multiple options for sharing, as well as the ability to share to multiple feeds at once.

- *Optimize your content for performance.* Second generation sharing tools give your site the ability to specify image, copy, links and more for every item shared. Be sure that each of these elements is optimized to drive the maximum number of return clicks whenever someone views it in a feed. Is the image compelling? Does the copy make sense? Is there a call to action? If you're not driving many return clicks, your content could be the culprit.

- *Shorten all links*. Not only is link-shortening critical on limited character platforms like Twitter where you may lose all return clicks if your link doesn't fit, but it is also critical for tracking return traffic from all providers. This effort is critical for tracking ROI. If brand is a concern, it is possible to create branded or vanity URLs.

- *Remember your social content*. The moment a person contributes content to your site – from experiences to photos – is the point in time most likely to result in a share, so make it easy for them.

2) Ensure social content is both search-engine friendly and feed friendly

While most sites make their core content accessible to search engines, from the product catalog to the expert knowledge base, many don't realize the importance of making their user contributed content both sharable and search-engine friendly. Comments, reviews and forums are the most popular type of user-contributed content, and most of the platforms that offer these features are built with SEO in mind, but check that you are taking advantage of all of the tools available to structure the content. Also be

sure you are incorporating all of your content opportunities, for example if users can contribute recipes, photos or other rich content, ensure that it is also accessible and well-structured.

3) Add semantic search classification

While social network search volume is small today, there are several reasons to add semantic classification to your site's pages as well as to tweets made from your site. Why add Open Graph Tags, Facebook Like buttons and Twitter Annotations? First, they offer another opportunity to generate feed items, increasing the amount of sharing happening on your site, and driving traffic back to your site from the feed. Second, Facebook's Open Graph and Twitter's Annotations are clearly a foundation on which to build a search product, so start building this structure into your content now to take advantage of this trend ahead of your competition. Best practices include:

- Capture as many levels as possible when classifying each social object. For example, don't stop at tagging an Elizabeth George novel as "book," be sure to also classify it as "mystery."
- Use FBML (Facebook Markup Language) to get maximum exposure in the feed.
- Include higher-level objects like your brand and website.

"Facebook, Open Graph and Twitter's Annotations are clearly a foundation on which to build a site search product"

4) Enable social discovery from within your own site

Optimizing your site for social discovery also includes providing social and even semantic web context to the content and activity discovery mechanisms on your own site. There are two primary ways of doing this today:

- *Social sign-on*. Websites can best leverage social graph and semantic data by enabling their users to sign-in with an existing social identity, which gives the site access to rich user and friend data depending on each user's privacy settings. This is a capability the social providers make available to third party websites; however using a vendor can simplify the process of both adding and maintaining this functionality for one or more providers. With social sign-on in place, a website can apply both social network and semantic data to create custom features. For example, a site can add an activity feed that incorporates users from multiple social networks, as well as the specific activities that a site wants to display. At the other end of the spectrum,

consider Amazon's new personalized pages. In the example below, after signing in with a Facebook identity, the Amazon user is presented with two social discovery features: 1) A list of friends who have birthdays in the coming week. Clicking on the gift suggestions link below each friend's photo brings up search results based on the books and movies that friend has "liked." Amazon is taking the semantic data of the likes and applying their own search algorithm to it. 2) Purchase suggestions for the Amazon user based on books and movies that their friends have "liked." The suggestions are accompanied by a display of how many of the user's friends have "liked" the item, as well as photos of those friends. The friend's name appears when the user mouses over any photo.
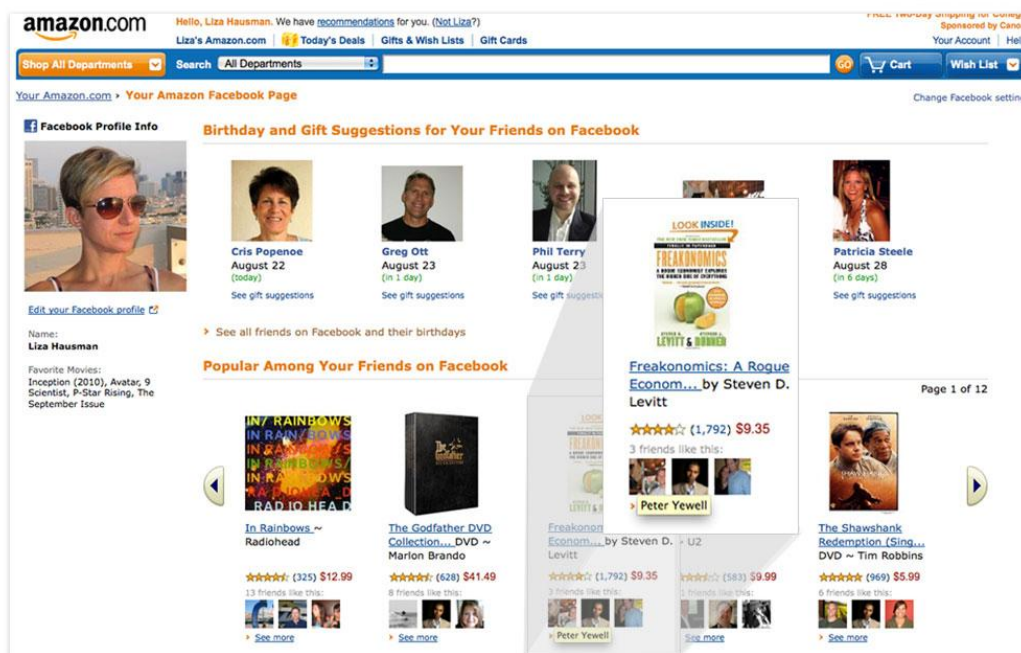
- *Simple social network plug-ins*. Facebook and Twitter also provide simple activity feed plug-ins for third party websites that present what a user's friends have liked or shared on that site, incorporating both social graph and semantic data. The plugins are simple to add. However, Like data cannot be accessed and applied by the website, the plugins are currently only available for users of Facebook or Twitter, multiple plugins need to be implemented to serve users of both networks, and the plugins cannot be customized.

Applying social information to improve the way people discover information is the future; both the search engines and social networks see that future, and their products now reflect it. For online businesses, the landscape has become more complex, but it also means greater opportunity as power shifts back towards websites who are able to successfully optimize for these new channels of social discovery.

Gigya: Make Your Site Social

Gigya is a software-as-a-service technology that unifies the most popular identity and social providers including Facebook, Twitter, PayPal and LinkedIn and brings the features and benefits to corporate websites. Gigya enables businesses to deepen customer relationships and tap existing friend networks, driving social registrations, word of mouth at scale, and social interaction for websites and applications. In addition, Gigya provides analytics, best practices, consulting and support to optimize every implementation. Supporting more than 280 million users each month across more than 500,000 sites, Gigya's technology is the choice of global leaders in publishing and commerce including CBS, Fox Sports, Intuit, The Coca-Cola Company, The Home Depot, and Turner Networks. Gigya is a leading company in the Social CRM market, which Gartner forecasts to reach $600 million this year.

For more information visit our website at www.gigya.com or give us a call: 650.353.7230.