

ACCC Digital Platform Services Inquiry – September 2024 report revisiting general search services.

Background: My wife and I run a micro business, Barka Parka, manufacturing and direct selling pet beds. These beds were designed in Melbourne and manufactured there from 1974 until my mother moved back to the UK in 1987. There she continued the business, sold them across the country and in Harrods, and when I travelled to the UK to meet my (birth) mother I became involved. On returning to Melbourne I restarted the business here. We are a family owned company dedicated to making a quality product which will last longer than the dogs who use them. We operate a pretty standard small business, doing everything from manufacture and sales to accounting and advertising ourselves. We buy raw materials (fabric) from the UK, manufacturing the beds from scratch from a home workshop and sell the beds on the internet.

Starting in 2004 with assistance from the NEIS scheme, we built our business to the point, around 2014/15, we were turning over around \$100,000 and finally making some sort of living.

For most of the first 10 or so years of our business we were making page one of Google listings for "dog beds", "pet beds" and "bean beds" based on the content of our site.

This was because our site was information dense and specifically aimed at people who wanted to buy a pet bed. At this time Google's algorithm favoured information over flummery and so we prospered. In fact the activity that we were generating from Google searches prompted us to stop advertising in commercial magazines which were very expensive and not overly productive, certainly not compared to Google.

Then Google made two fundamental changes.

First they changed the search criteria, moving away from information rich sites towards ones that promoted and integrated "social" media interactions. This was something we were not interested in doing because, firstly, I believed, and history has confirmed, that "social" media is a cancer on society and I certainly did not want to push my customers towards it. I actually have morals!

Secondly, and more fundamentally, because, as we make a quality product, which has not changed since 1974 when it was first manufactured, and which we had no intention of or desire to change, the constant need of "social" media for updates and new things and general chatter, was not something we could provide or wanted to provide.

At around the same time they began inserting paid/sponsored listings above and below the genuine search listings. They did not do this in a way that the average punter would notice, making the paid content appear much like (but not identical too) the genuine search results. This is not something most people turn their mind to and why should they have too? Google "disguised" their advertising as content and most people fell for it. Hell I've fallen for it and I am both aware of it and hate it, but I fall for it (occasionally). So what chance has the average customer?

This combination clearly led people away from information rich sites like ours towards commercial sites like Bunnings or KMart, who can afford to pay what ever it takes for priority listings.

These listings are not even sold but rather auctioned off in an entirely non transparent way, so that the commercial risk I run, the price I might have to pay in participating, is unquantifiable in advance. I can limit it but not predict it.

Regrettably for customers, organisations such as Bunnings or KMart know little to nothing about quality pet beds, or pet beds at all, and care less. They sell cheap tat, purchased in bulk from China, and compete entirely on price.

Equally the move away from promoting information rich sites towards social media friendly sites meant that, even if our potential customers were interested in quality, we had plummeted so far down the listings that we failed to make it onto the top twenty pages.

It is pretty widely acknowledged that people rarely go beyond the first few pages (more than half of which pages are now covered in paid sites) so we had become both un-noticeable and irrelevant.

For this reason our turnover plummeted.

The above narrative is a classic example of why, in my opinion, Google and the way they now do business is a blot on society. Preventing potential customers from finding the products they actually want on favour of the cheap tat that Google and their commercial advertisers want to sell, at maximum profit to themselves and to the detriment of customers and society.

This is direct contradiction to the way Google was established and operated for the first years of its existence. Then it was a genuine search engine dedicated to getting people the information they wanted and needed. Once they became an effective monopoly, to the point that people no longer search for something, they "Google" it, all this changed! They went commercial and the quality of their searches disintegrated.

As to a solution, well your guess is as good as mine. Short of the government setting up a taxpayer funded search engine, enabling people to travel the information super highway to find what they need, at vast expense, billions of dollars, I see no viable solution.

I hope you find this submission both relevant and helpful to you.

Yours Truly

Simon Duncan

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