

Psychology of the Searcher

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Psychology of the Searcher: Patterns in How Searchers Formulate Queries

Executive Summary:

Marketers see visitors from a wide variety of search queries coming to their site. This data is valuable in guiding a search strategy, but it has existed in a vacuum, with little known about how searchers make decisions about how to phrase their search that lead up to the visit. New research from Blue Nile Research surveys searchers about how they choose to form their searches in a variety of different scenarios, and helps Marketers see the patterns in how searchers formulate their queries.

Blue Nile's research shows an exact 50-50 split between users who search in fragments (e.g. 'swollen ankle') and those who search in more fully formed terms (e.g. 'causes of swollen ankle during sleep'). When it came to questions vs. statements, 27% of respondents phrased their query in the form of a question, with 'How' being the most commonly used prefix.

With the research showing no clear clustering in how users phrase their searches, Marketers who wish to be well prepared to reach their target audience must be thorough in first understanding how their audience chooses to search before developing a strategy and by crafting content that closely maps to their pain points.

Humans are Distinct Individuals

The possible human DNA combinations are as varied as the snowflakes that fall in winter. Scientists estimate that there are trillions of distinct DNA combinations. These wide and varied combinations of DNA strands that make up the human means how people react when faced with uncertainty is unpredictable. Nowhere is this more relevant than in search.

Research shows the average person performs 129 searches per month. Little research exists that shows how searchers choices differ when it comes to the way they form and phrase their queries.

When faced with the same information retrieval scenarios, how if at all, do searchers' queries differ? What patterns can be gleaned from analysis of the responses? What can be learned and applied to the practice of search marketing from this analysis?

Real Implication for Marketers

While searchers' phrasing choices are an interesting question on their own, this research has very real implications for search marketers. Normally search marketers use keyword research tools such as Google's Keyword Planner to discover keywords relevant to their industry they want to optimize for. While this approach can be fruitful in the discovery of new keywords, the flaw with this sole approach is that keyword tools generally suggest phrases similar to the one(s) started with. This means initial assumptions about how the user might search for your product/service are perpetuated throughout the keyword research process.

Further perpetuating the problem is that keyword tools generally do a poor job of offering suggestions for more specific (long tail) queries. In an example taken from our research, entering 'coffee maker won't turn on' into the Google Keyword Tool returns generic 'coffee maker' terms.

coffee maker wont turn on

coffee maker wont turn on

Ad group ideas	Keyword ideas		
Search terms	Avg. monthly searches [?]	Competition [?]	Suggested bid [?]

1 - 1 of

Keyword (by relevance)	Avg. monthly searches [?]	Competition [?]	Suggested bid [?]
coffee makers	49,500	High	\$1.12
best coffee makers	5,400	High	\$0.51
coffee maker reviews	8,100	High	\$0.62
best coffee maker	27,100	High	\$0.44
coffee makers reviews	1,900	High	\$0.59
coffee maker	27,100	High	\$1.02
thermal coffee maker	1,000	High	\$0.88
the best coffee maker	880	High	\$0.55

None of the variations other respondents used in our survey were suggested:

Coffee Maker Examples
Why will my coffee maker not turn on?
Why does my coffee maker not turn on
Why coffee machine won't turn on?
Coffee maker not working
Why does my coffee maker not turn on

This is why a market research based approach that first seeks to discover how a user might search—the phrasing, language, etc. that distinct audience segments use—will ensure that whatever keyword research path is subsequently followed is based on empirically grounded insight rather than guesswork.

Methodology

Our approach to identify distinct ways in which searchers approach the same searcher scenarios was to ask respondents to imagine several distinct scenarios that create an information gap. Respondents were then asked to input their online search they felt would best resolve the scenario.

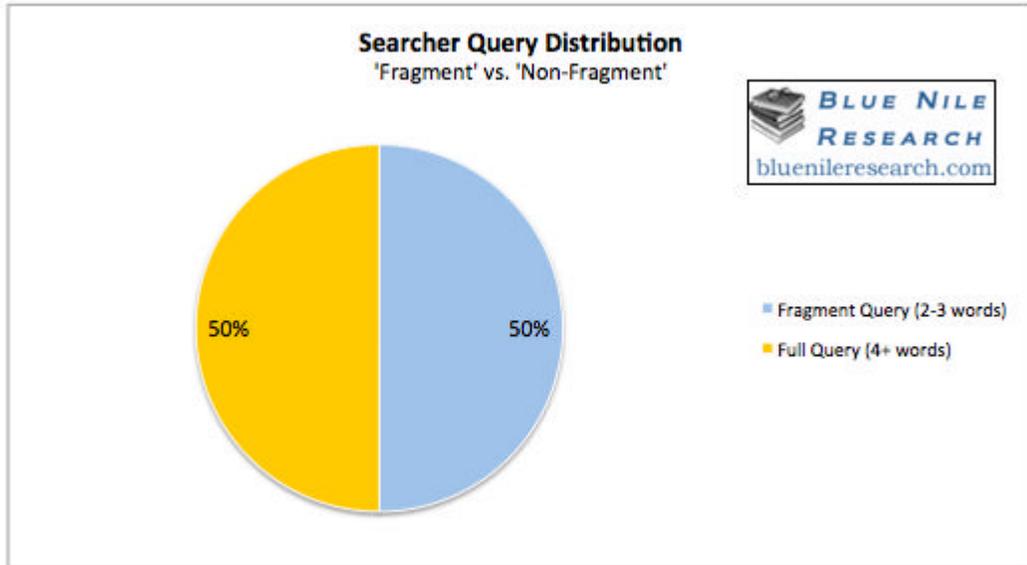
The scenarios we tested were:

- **Technology Problem:** Coffee maker does not turn on
- **Health Problem:** Swollen ankle
- **E-commerce:** In the market for a new laptop

This approach gives us multiple distinct scenarios for analysis and sets us up with a rich data set to identify how a base of respondents phrase their query when faced with the same situations. We collected 183 responses, randomly selected from a group of online users.

People Really are Different

The starting point for this paper, that online search is an expression of the human it emanates from and human makeup varies widely, comes into sharp focus when we analyze responses by length of query. There is an exact even split between queries we are calling 'fragment queries' (2-3 words) vs. 'full queries' (4+ words).



This split, and the follow up analysis of the individual responses across all searcher scenarios, reveals two distinct approaches searchers take in resolving an information gap:

- 1. Throw it Against the Wall and See What Sticks (fragment query):**
This searcher is focused on 'speed of search' and inputs the minimum amount of information into the search box. They are willing to peruse the search results, click into multiple links to discover the information they are looking for, and follow up with a more specific search if necessary.
- 2. Be Specific out of the Gate (full query):** This searcher is focused on 'depth of search' and takes an extra moment to best phrase their query, with the hopes they will find what they are looking for in one click, towards the top of the search results.

A respondent said it best in a post-survey interview:

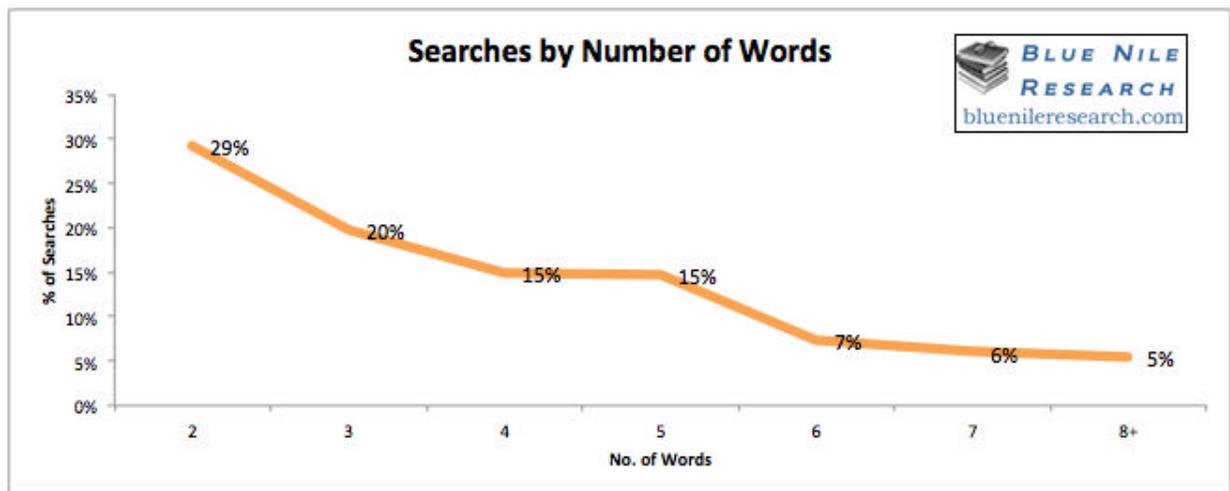
Different people search in different ways. Some people are very short with their search and like to click around. Me, I like to figure out the best way to phrase my search and find my answer right away rather than click around.

Fragment Query Examples	Full Query Examples
fix coffee maker	Why doesn't my coffee maker turn on?
Broken coffee maker	Cuisinart coffee maker model <u>xxxxx</u> trouble shooting
Swollen ankle	causes of swollen ankle during sleep
best laptop	Which laptop is best for home use?

Searchers Phrasing Varies Widely

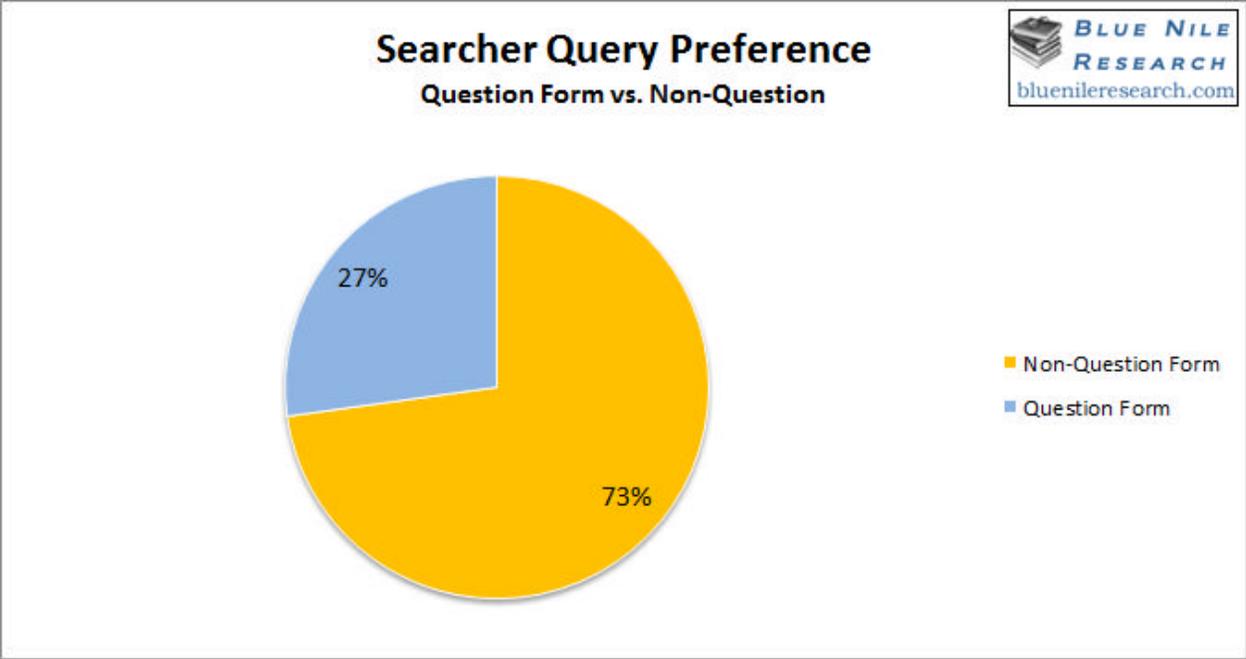
Looking at how respondents search by number of words from a slightly different angle than above, we can see that the highest percentage of participants use two words in their query. Interestingly, the spread of responses was broad, no single query length had as much as a third of respondents. This finding again reinforces our contention that individuals search differently, phrasing their query in distinct ways when faced with an uncertainty gap.

This means Marketers must be prepared with a strategy to be visible in the search results for the varied and distinct ways in which their audience might choose to search for their product or service. Marketers must avoid 'searcher bias' by not tunnel-visioning on how *they* might choose to phrase a query, recognizing it varies, often widely, from one searcher to the next.



People Search in 'Fragments'

When we dug deeper into the makeup of the search queries, we found that 27% of searchers phrased their query in the form of a question ('how', 'why', 'where', 'what', 'which') as opposed to a 'statement query'. This is another way in which the distinct ways in which searchers choose to approach their information gap is highlighted; some choose to ask a question of the search engine while others choose to make a statement, each believing that their own approach will best serve to resolve their information gap.

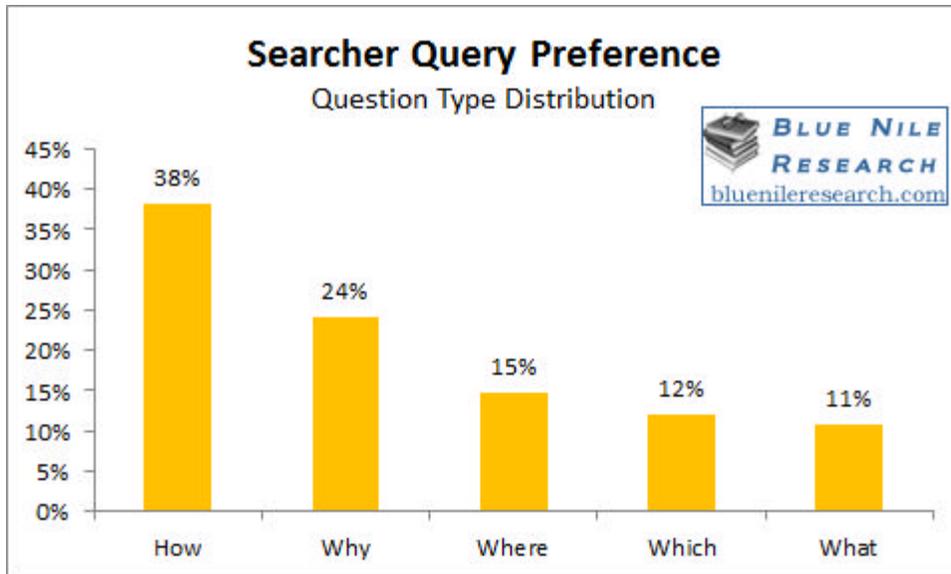


- 'Question' Queries**
- Which is the best laptop?
 - What are good laptops?
 - Why is my ankle swollen to twice normal size?
 - What makes an ankle swell?
 - How to fix broken coffee maker ?
 - How to get [brand] coffee maker to turn on

With 'How' Searchers Seek a Cure, not a 'Why'

Of the responses that were questions, searchers most often used 'How' (44%) while 'What' was used least (12%). This revealed a desire by searchers for immediate resolution ('How do I fix my coffee maker?') rather than an investigation as to why the issue might be occurring ('Why is my coffee maker not working?').

This finding should encourage Marketers to think like their audience and consider where the individual might be in the buyer's journey. In the research phase, buyers want information—and they want it to be specific. They want resolution rather than a detailed explanation or to be sold on a product. This creates an opening for opportunistic marketers to create content that educates and informs, and accurately caters to the place in the buyers journey that the buyer is in.



Conclusion: Develop Distinct Approaches for the Individual Ways People Search

Although some may have begun this journey believing the data would show large groupings of respondents searching in similar ways, in reality human identity is alive and well. Marketers that wish to be well prepared to appeal to a wide and varied audience will be thorough with their research process and craft content that maps to the answers their audience is looking for.



About *the* Author:

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