Advice for Digital Reputation Management: Own It.

A FiveBlocks Whitepaper

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Introduction

There are several elements that comprise a company's online presence. The most obvious is the company's own website, itself just one of the many sites that make up a company's online brand.

A recent study showed that most people use Google to find a company's website, rather than typing in the site's URL. Research shows that over half of visits to sites come from organic search, while less than a quarter come from direct visits. This means, for example, that a user searching for the Jelly Belly Company will typically search the words "Jelly Belly" on Google rather than typing http://www.Jellybelly.com into their browser.

This has serious implications for a company's digital brand management. Searchers are exposed to many other websites ***about*** a company on a search results page before they see the company's own web page. Often times, a searcher intending to reach the company's website may be driven to other search results, such as news or review sites which may be unfavorable to the company.

In other words, searchers often reach a corporate website having first seen unfavorable coverage or commentary on a brand. This puts brands on the defensive. Rather than presenting their brand, they now need to address possible negative attitudes that the searcher may be starting to form.

Companies looking to manage their brand should understand the so-called ***first impression bias***; people are strongly influenced by the first information they encounter about a subject. Their bias is often so strong that they resist later conflicting information, even if it proves the earlier information wrong. This is a powerful reason why companies should work to influence how their brand appears in search engines.

In order to be proactive with digital brand management, companies must decide what they want the world to know about them. Using this lens, companies should always be tracking and frequently assess the most prominent information searchers find in their results.

This paper presents an overview of one aspect of online branding: **search results ownership.** When managing a company's online presence and its reputation, an important operating principle is "Own It."

Why own more of your online presence?

There are two distinct benefits for a company owning and controlling more of the search results appearing prominently for their brand:

1) This allows a company to assert their brand and core messaging before the searcher arrives at their corporate site.
2) The more results that a company controls, the less vulnerability they have to potentially detrimental content becoming more prominent than the brand's own messaging.

One approach that businesses faced with digital reputation challenges have utilized in recent years was to generate multiple web sites, allowing them to 'crowd out' any unwanted content that was appearing. For example, an online bakery shop might have several domains such as:

- MarleysCookies.com
- MarleysCakes.com
- MarleysMuffins.com
- BakedGiftsByMarley.com

Each of these sites and their respective content were owned and controlled by the business. Regardless of the website, the content was similar (if not identical) for all of them and they would all link to each other in an effort to boost search rankings.

Today, such tactics are less desirable. Google considers this approach 'spammy' as it tends to put off consumers. Google's algorithm has become effective at detecting and penalizing domains with duplicate content - keeping them from ranking at the top of search results. There are a number of additional reasons to avoid this approach.

Our research suggests that companies can be successful at owning and influencing a significant percentage of their search results without resorting to multiple sites with duplicate content. Greater ownership can be effective in helping brands better control their digital reputation if planned and executed strategically.

What does owning your online presence mean?

Search engines are designed to offer relevant results from a variety of different sources. Typical search results for a brand often include a corporate homepage, news articles, blog posts, social media profiles, etc. While search results are meant to satisfy the searcher by providing relevant information and content, this does not always align with the interests of the brand being searched.

When looking at ownership we typically classify company-owned results as either:

1) **Owned Domain**. This refers to a web domain that is fully owned and controlled by the company. They have complete editorial control over the content, as well as the ability to post or remove any content on the domain. This includes the company website as well as other websites maintained by the company.
2) **Owned Page**. This refers to a page on a different domain, such as LinkedIn, Crunchbase, or YouTube, where the specific page is controlled by the company, but the domain itself is not. The company can edit the page or remove it entirely, but their control only goes as far as the specific page or pages that they control.

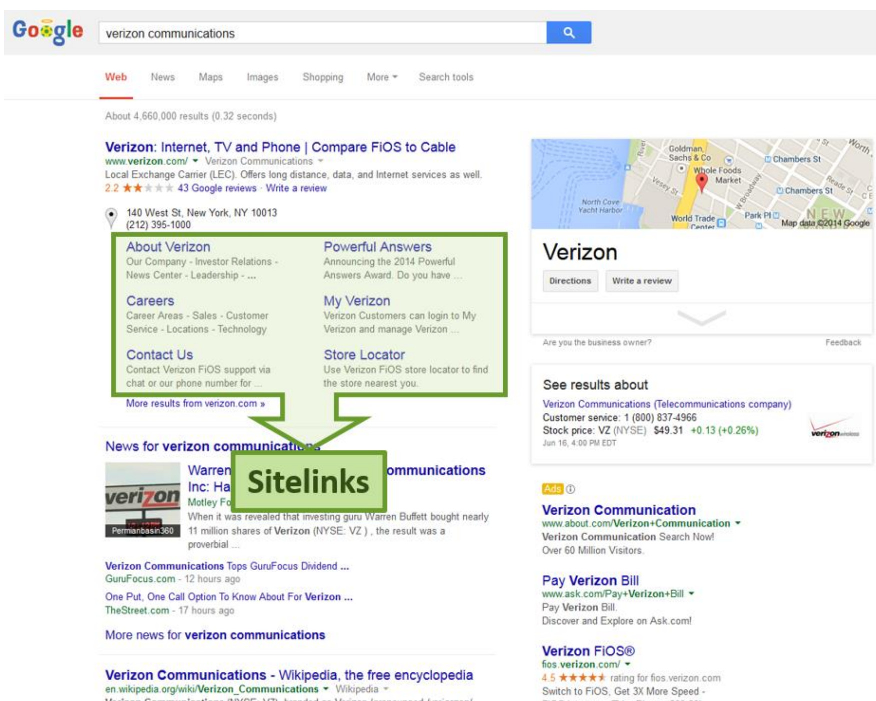
Research Overview
The data presented is from a study of the first page of Google results for the Fortune 500 companies on May 28, 2014. The study examined search results ownership across the Fortune 500 with the analysis split into two sections: domain ownership and page ownership.

Domain Ownership

The most ubiquitous form of domain ownership is a corporate website. Across the Fortune 500, all but one company had a corporate website on their first results page and virtually all of these corporate sites – 96% – ranked in the top position.

Sitelinks

Sitelinks are links to specific internal pages of a website, often shown with a brief description snippet. Sitelinks commonly appear under the top ranked result – usually the corporate homepage, as shown below.



Sitelinks make navigation easier for the searcher by offering direct access to specific pages within the site. Additionally, they occupy valuable real estate on the results page, giving greater visibility to the site for which they appear.

Focusing on reputation management, sitelinks offer a few additional benefits:

- **Fewer search results.** A typical Google search page includes 10 results in addition to extra sections like the news and image boxes. When sitelinks appear, the number of search results on the page drops to seven (not counting the sitelinks). This means fewer results that can potentially be unfavorable or irrelevant.

- **More overall ownership.** In the absence of sitelinks, Google often allots one or more results to additional pages on the corporate domain. However, companies with sitelinks are at a distinct advantage, with 44% overall ownership compared to 38% for companies with no sitelinks.

- **More favorable results profile.** Across the dataset of Fortune 500 companies, companies with sitelinks showed other significant advantages over those without.

The results for companies with sitelinks also had:

- *More social media[1] profiles* (e.g. Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook)
- *More Google boxes[2]* (images, news, and location listings)
- *Fewer third party news/media results[3] [4]* (often a source of unfavorable content)
- *Fewer cases of "resemblers"[5]* (results with a similar name to the searched company).

Google's algorithm controls whether or not to display sitelinks.

Sites can increase the likelihood of attaining sitelinks by utilizing popular content management systems that make it easy to crawl the website. They can also work to drive more traffic to internal pages by using more descriptive titles and descriptions.

Multiple Domain Ownership

Nearly three-quarters (73%) of Fortune 500 companies had multiple owned domains ranking in their first page in search.

Even when the companies without sitelinks are removed from the analysis[6], 70% of the companies with sitelinks still had other owned domains ranking in their results.

The average Fortune 500 Company owned the domains of 30% of their search results.

Multiple Domain Ownership: Bad vs. Good

It's important to note how the multiple domain ownership in this dataset is fundamentally different from the multiple domain ownership typically cautioned against. Across the Fortune

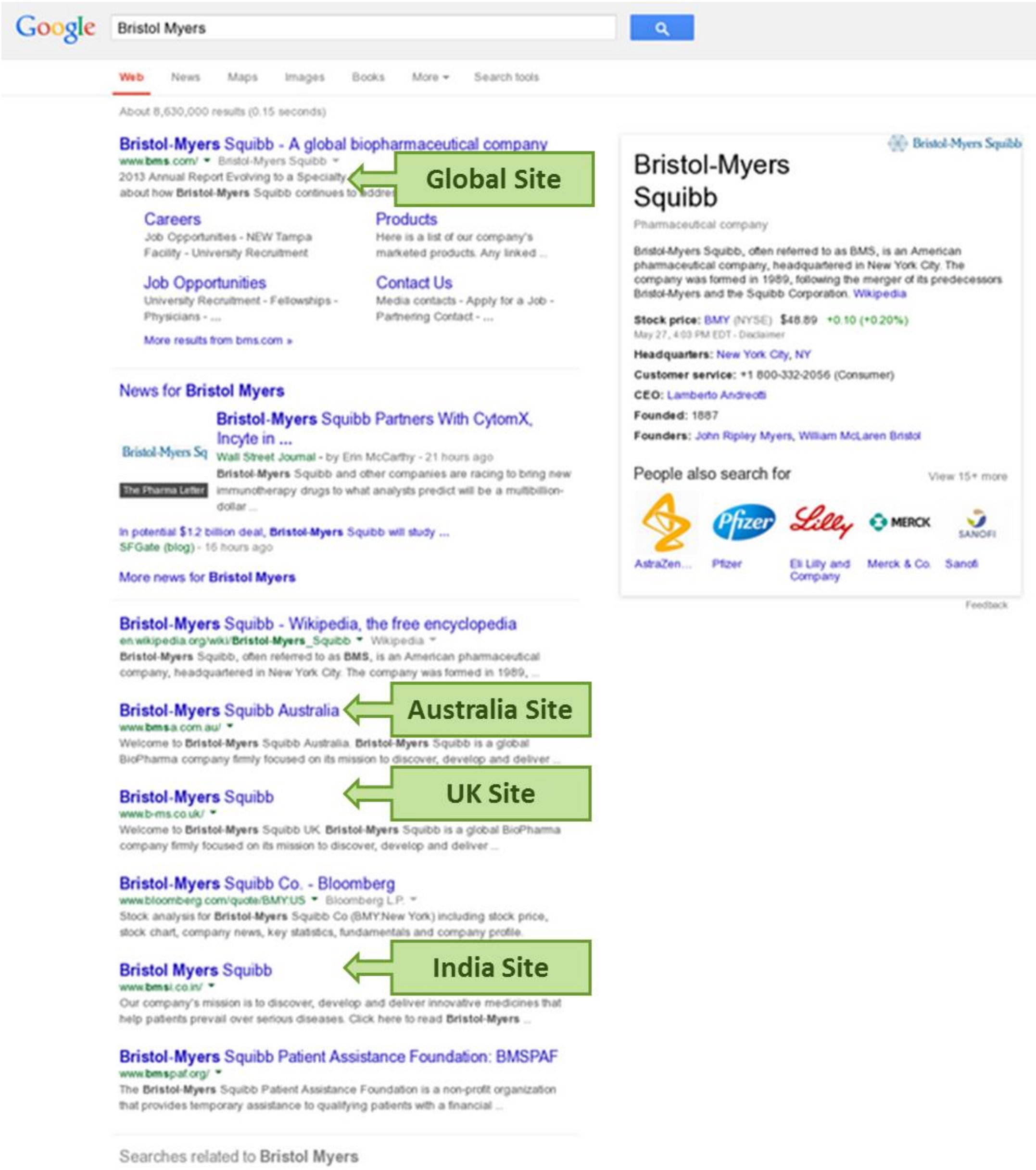
[1] 12% of results on average were own-able social media vs. 7% for companies with no sitelinks; significantly different at p<.05.
[2] 12% of results on average were Google boxes vs. 8% for companies with no sitelinks; significantly different at p<.05.
[3] 17% of results on average were third party news/media vs. 25% for companies with no sitelinks; significantly different at p<.05.
[4] Results categorized as third party news/media results in this research are distinct from those in the Google News Box. The news box is reserved (by Google) for new and recent news items about a company (or person). Content of the news box turns over frequently, from every few hours to every few days, and is not shown if Google doesn't deem there to be recent news. This can be contrasted with third party news/media results, which are always about a company but not necessarily news (could be a company or CEO profile, for example) and certainly not necessarily recent.
[5] 10% of results on average were resemblers vs. 4% for companies with no sitelinks; significantly different at p<.05.
[6] *As indicated earlier, Google often gives those sites another result on their corporate domain almost like "compensation" for not having sitelinks.*

500, what most clearly distinguished the multiple domains of each company from one another was their function and content.

In the earlier example of the baked goods, all of the sites created served a single function. The content was similar across all of the sites because they were all designed to capture a single type of target (e.g. a retail customer) to accomplish a goal (e.g. make a purchase). This is in contrast to the Fortune 500, where owned domains for a single company were focused on different targets with different goals.

One example was companies who had different domains addressing different locations. Some were international (e.g. pharmaceutical companies) and some for locations within North America (e.g. energy companies with utilities operating in multiple states).

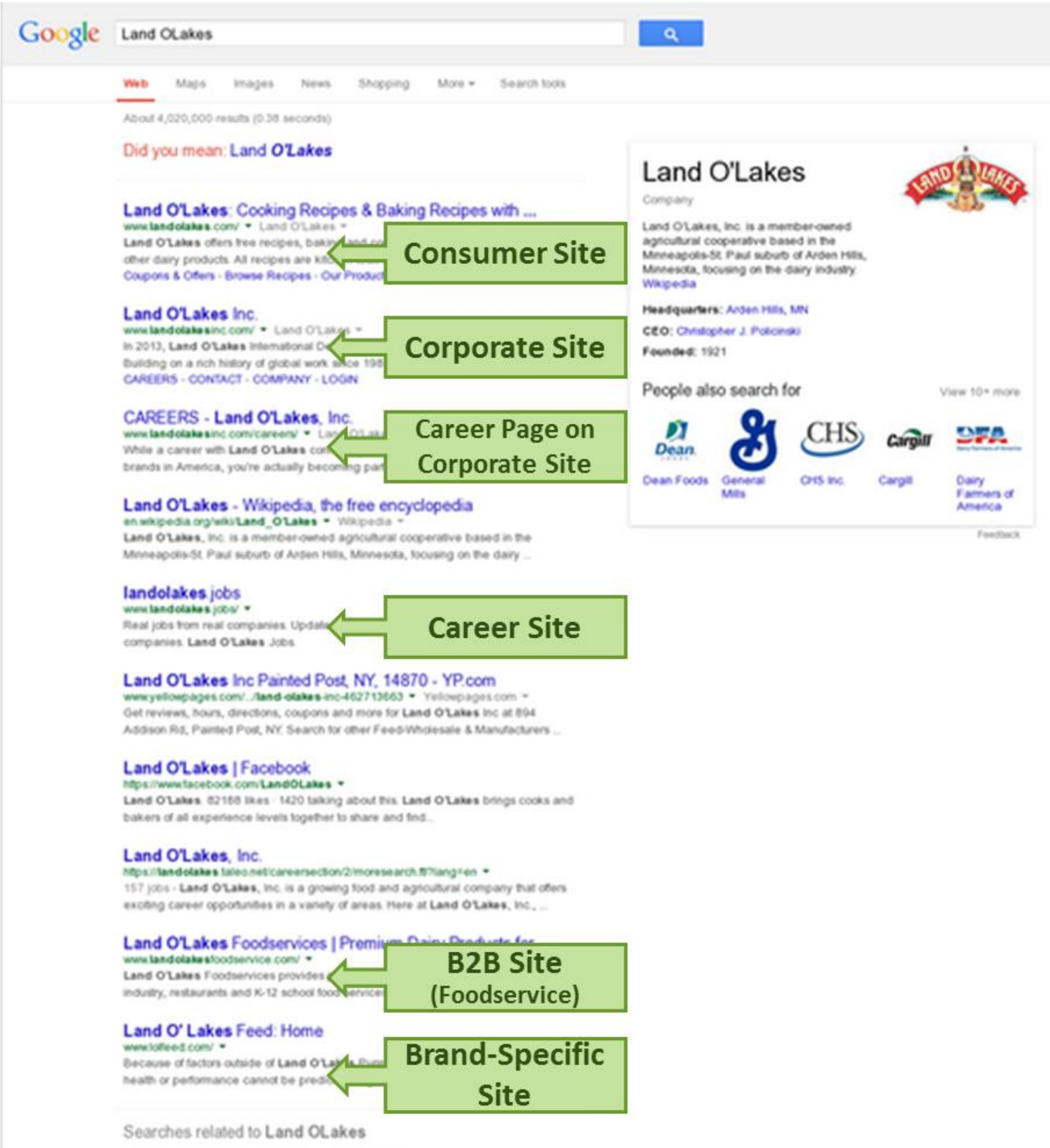
The sites had a similar look and feel, but the content was customized to each specific location and remained under the company's control.



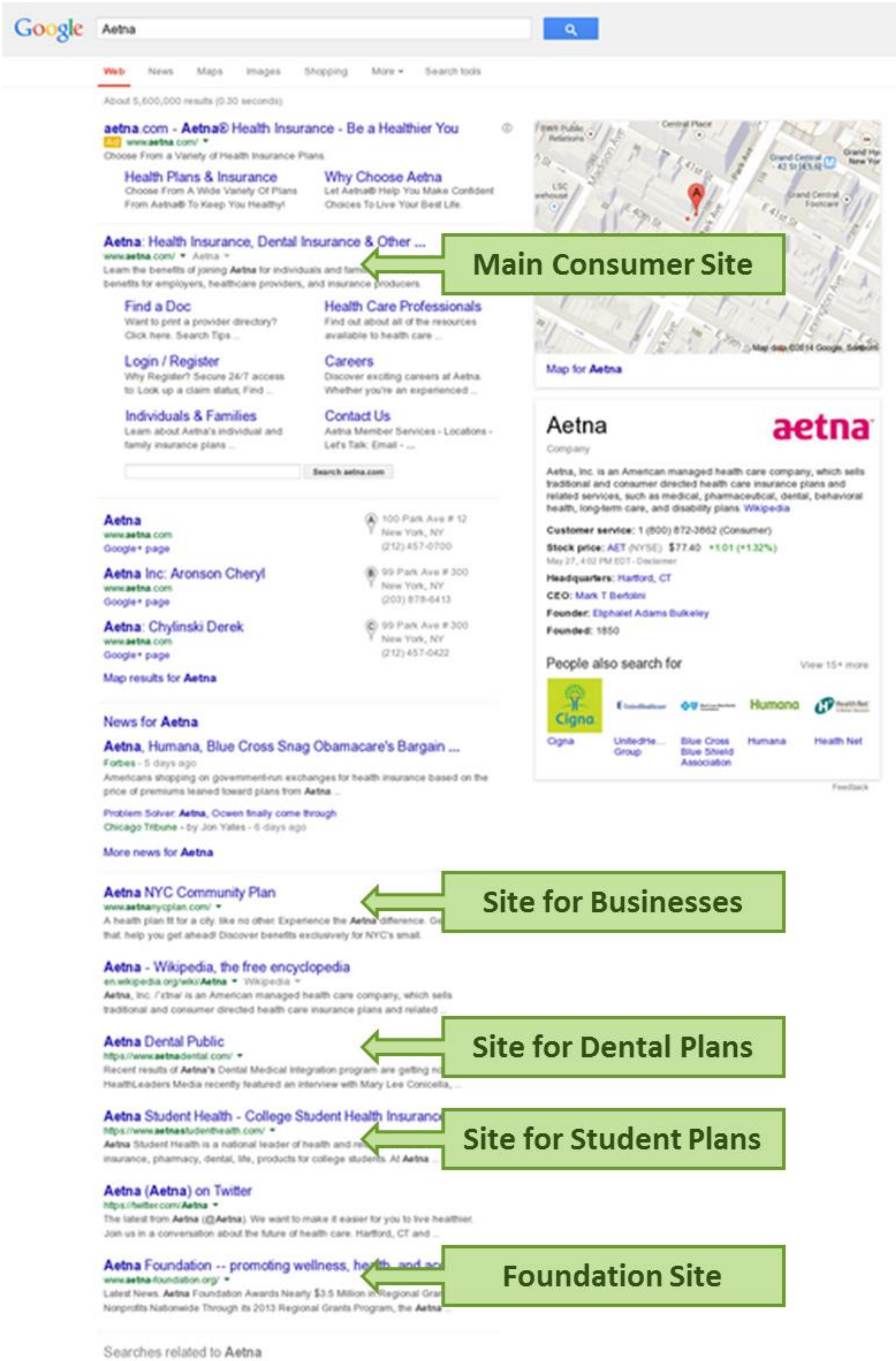
Another form of multiple domain ownership seen in the Fortune 500 was multiple websites targeted at different stakeholders. For example:

- A site primarily for investors
- A consumer-oriented site focusing on one of the company's brands
- A career site for job seekers
- A site for a non-profit foundation

Each of these example sites targeted a different constituent group.

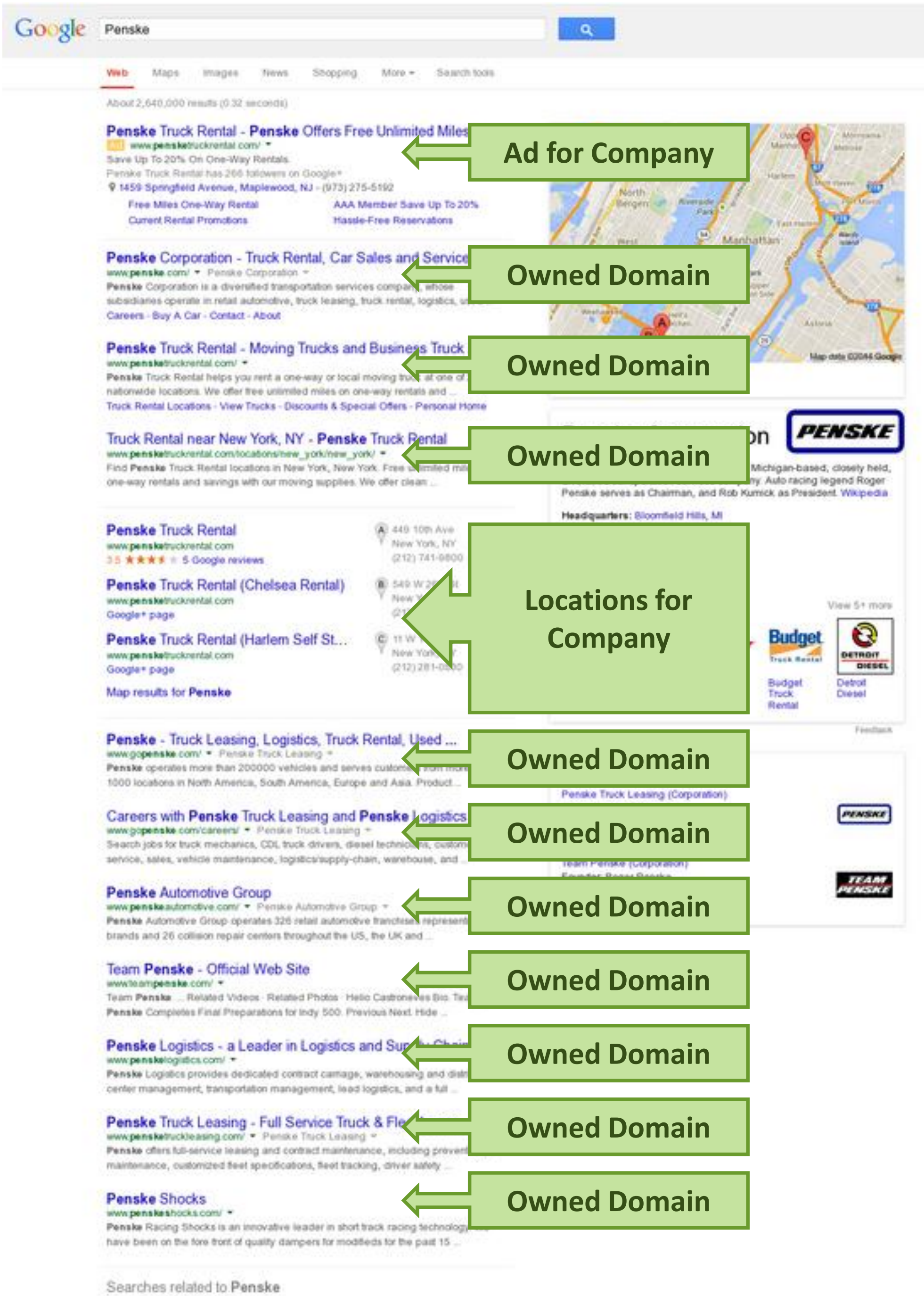


A third version of multiple domain ownership was utilized by companies with segmented consumers and differentiated product offerings. Similar to those sites targeting different stakeholders, the various branded websites (below) occupied spaces that would otherwise have been third-party content.



Clearly, there are benefits to owning a portion of one's search results. But there are limits. It would not be advantageous to own *all* of the search results on the page. While this would offer a company total control, owning all domains in the top 10 can create the perception that the company is trying to drown something out. This often proves unsatisfactory for the searcher and can lessen trust in the company. Additionally, it can crowd out other desirable content. It is also not likely to be achieved: only a few[7] of the companies we studied owned 70% or more of the results on the first page.

In the following example, the company owns all 10 of its results as well as the paid ad.



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[7] Just 6%.

This example only shows the company's first-person perspective, offering no third party information. Even Wikipedia has no presence. These results relegate potentially important results to the second page, including social media and a consumer retail coupon.

Extreme examples notwithstanding, strategically managed owned domains can effectively help a company to take control of its search results. However, this strategy is best suited for companies with geographically large scale operations, distinct constituent groups, or well differentiated product offerings. There is another, more ubiquitous way, to take greater control of search results: owned pages on non-owned domains.

Page Ownership

The most common example of page ownership is social media profiles such as LinkedIn or Twitter, but there are many other sites as well that enable a company or individual to control one or more pages. The primary function of these pages varies, and they are not typically set up for the purpose of greater results ownership. Nevertheless, the secondary benefit of having them is increased control of content on the results page, especially when increasing the number of owned domains is not feasible or desirable.

Social Media

Businesses are increasingly using social media as a way to engage their consumers. Social media offers businesses an opportunity to present themselves to the online world beyond their own website.

Our study showed that over half of Fortune 500 companies have at least one social media result (such as a page on Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook) in the first page of search results and 24% have at least two such results.

Among the Fortune 500:

- Twitter was the most commonly appearing social media result, showing for 149 of the Fortune 500 companies
- Followed by LinkedIn (130)
- Followed by Facebook (113)
- Notably, 35 companies had a YouTube channel appearing on the first page

Content Ownership on Third Party Sites

For the Fortune 500 companies, nearly 20 percent had at least one owned page result that was not social media. This suggests an untapped opportunity for most companies. Content that companies own and control on third-party sites fall into a few different categories:

- **Investor Relations (IR) Pages.** After social media, this was the most commonly appearing type of owned page (shown for 55 companies). A company outsourced the hosting of all its investor relations content and documentation. These pages always linked to the company's corporate domain, but were hosted elsewhere. Among the companies in this study, all of the offsite IR pages were on one of two domains (corporate-ir.net and shareholder.com), suggesting a strength of these domains similar to the strength of Twitter and Facebook in the social media sphere.

- **Career Pages.** While some companies hosted their career listings on their corporate owned domain, 34 utilized externally hosted career pages. Like the IR pages, these linked to the company's corporate domain and had a similar look and feel as the corporate site. In contrast to the IR pages, these sites were spread across a much larger number of domains. However, the four most dominant were taleo.net, brassring.com, successfactors.com, silkroad.com.
- **Other Managed Extensions of Site.** There were a number of other examples of pages that appeared to be part of a company's corporate site, but were actually hosted on a specialty domain. These included media relations/news releases, local store flyers, coupons, customer service, and secure login areas.
- An interesting example of this was Starbucks's idea submission page. Like all the other pages in this category, it linked from their corporate page, but it was actually hosted by a subsidiary of Salesforce.
  - **App Download Sites & Naming Sponsorships**. Several companies had results that included links to iTunes or the Google Play store for apps owned by the company. Others had sponsored events or scholarships that were hosted on their own separate sites. In both cases, these are sites that favorably presented a company and gave it ownership of the results page.

Putting It All Together

Companies interested in managing their online presence must take control of their search results. Whether the aim is to mitigate unfavorable content or to manage a full digital branding strategy, one of the first steps is to take control of the search results page.

This research on the Fortune 500 companies demonstrates that it is possible to approach the search engine results ownership process strategically. Companies with more owned results have greater brand clarity and fewer negative results. Beyond that, a robust ownership presence gains trust among those searching for the company and builds brand strength.

For companies whose resources, brand/product variety, or target differentiation don't quite match those of a multimillion dollar corporation, owned pages can be quite useful. Many companies already use social media to interact with consumers; some companies may still not realize the power of these domains. Twitter and LinkedIn frequently rank on the first results page, making them a strategic way to assert ownership beyond owned domains.

Few companies are taking advantage of the other page ownership opportunities that exist, especially those with externally hosted websites. These include job listings or investor relations documents, but they can also be news/PR releases, coupon hosting, login pages, or idea submission sites. Since they aren't on the same domain as the main website, these pages often rank in an additional results slot even when a company has sitelinks.

Ultimately, strategic ownership of search results is attainable. Companies that choose to own their search results benefit by presenting a cohesive, compelling, and trustworthy brand to people seeking them online.