





# SEARCH: THE ANSWERS YOU NEED

Nobody questions the prevalence of online search as a central path to everyday information. This PRWeek/Five Blocks survey reveals a broad appreciation for search's potential to manage reputation. Yet many brands do not factor it heavily into their earned media strategies. By combating common misperceptions and offering tactical advice, this eBook will help comms pros take advantage of this heretofore missed opportunity.

# Who cares about search?



Sam Michelson Founder and CEO

Five Blocks

earch is the first place people go to find out about people and brands, even when they know the URL of the corporate site or already follow someone on social media. Google paints a fuller picture — and this picture is typically the main summary of digital reputation accessed by stakeholders of all kinds.

In the PR and communications fields, we are used to thinking about digital reputation challenges as deriving from a particular problem: What kind of content appears at the top of Google — and why is that outdated result there? When the IPO is announced next week, will that three-year-old mini-scandal float back up to page one?

We often think situationally or tactically, in terms of crisis management, brand building, or monitoring.

But zooming out a bit to what we *do* want searchers to know — and not only what we don't want them to see — is essential. In addition, the "who" and the "why" are very important if we want to take a truly holistic approach to digital-reputation management. More specifically, who is asking Google and why do they want to know — and who in your company needs to worry about that?

Does my company properly leverage its many efforts to be an ESG (environmental, social and corporate governance) superstar? What is our employer brand, particularly among current employees? Prospective employees and investors care about that and, therefore, HR should be thinking about it, too. Concern about C-suite executive reputations is a frequent communications headache and client/customer-driven content is the province of marketing.

All of these "search lenses" and "reasons to care" should drive digital reputation strategy.

We learned a lot from your survey answers - and we hope you glean insights from the content on the subsequent pages.

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# **SEARCH:**



# Untapped potential

On a macro level, comms pros understand that search can be a reputation-driving vehicle, finds a recent survey conducted by Five Blocks in partnership with PRWeek. On these pages, opportunities are revealed and tactics are shared to help brands overcome the obstacles keeping them from taking advantage of this powerful tool.

Words Chris Daniels

very second, tens of thousands of people search online. More than 90% of the time, the search is done on Google. It is by far the world's dominant search engine and the algorithm behind Google has one aim:

"It wants to provide results to satisfy different searchers," says Sam Michelson, founder and CEO of Five Blocks, a tech-driven digital reputation management company.

Search is a primary means by which most people get information about entities. As such, it is a crucial area for communicators to understand because a brand's reputation is predicated in no small part on search.

How well do PR pros understand search? How much of their efforts are devoted to it? What role does search play in communicators' brand reputation efforts? Five Blocks, in partnership with PRWeek, surveyed 219 senior-level communicators (in-house and agency) to uncover the answers to these questions and more.

## Finding the proper match

Respondents seem to understand that search is about providing the end user with "a match between content and query," which ranked as the factor they think has the biggest impact in the make-up of a Google search.

However, when asked to identify the one issue they found most challenging in terms of how their brands are presented in search, the prevalence of outdated and/or inaccurate information was by far the most common response.



Many factors go into what results Google determines are most relevant for any individual searcher. We asked respondents to rank the following factors in the order they believe them to have the strongest impact on the makeup of search results. (Scores below are on a scale of 1-6, with 6 being the highest possible response.)

Match between content and your query: 4.8

Authority of the website: 4.1 Recency of content: 3.6

Technical optimization of content: 3.3

Your search history: 2.7

Your location: 2.5

"Brands know they need to be mindful of matching between their content and searcher query," says Michelson. "They just don't know all the ingredients that go into helping the algorithm make a better

match." Such ingredients include brand websites, earned media, video, Wikipedia and Google's Knowledge Panel.

"Or if they do know the ingredients," he continues, "they don't know the right proportions and how they best fit together."

## More than just a crisis tool

An overwhelming majority of comms pros seem to grasp how important it is to their earned media strategy to have a good understanding of how Google chooses what to display.

In practice, though, says Michelson, "nobody really understands just how important search is until the moment it becomes extremely important, such as in a crisis. That is when we often hear from prospective clients for the very first time."



Do you feel it is key to your earned media strategy to have a good understanding of how Google chooses what to display?

Very much so: 59% Somewhat: 33%

Minimally: 6%

Not at all, it's impossible to: 1%

No, it's not my job: 1%

The importance of search also becomes more apparent, he adds, when a company or executive realizes it has a market opportunity but its profile in search doesn't play into that opportunity.

For example, think of an executive in the running for a prestigious honor, but a search of their name brings up links that largely feed into a false narrative of their work and impact. Once brands use search to address a reputational challenge or opportunity, they start to see the benefits of an ongoing year-round search strategy, counsels Michelson.

"They realize it can be used proactively to manage risks and seize opportunities," he emphasizes.



## **Getting tactical**

The survey establishes that most senior-level comms pros believe an understanding of Google's algorithm is important to their earned media strategy. Yet, a lot of pros are missing out on the tactical value that search can yield on their success.

When pitching media, fewer than a quarter of pros say the potential search ranking of specific outlets/publications figures prominently into their strategy.



When you (or your PR firm, where applicable) pitch a story to a journalist, how much does the potential search ranking of specific outlets/publications figure into the strategy?

Very much so: 22% Somewhat: 44% Minimally: 28% Not at all: 6%

Yet, "certain outlets are never going to take up permanent residence on the first page of a search," says Michelson. "The same can be said for certain kinds of articles. Round-up pieces, for instance, that mention a number of brands don't tend to place high." Granted, that might not matter given their objective, but it should certainly be considered.

If an article is designed to help build a narrative around a brand or CEO, the media choice absolutely matters, because it can live on long after its publish date by remaining prominent in search results. Likewise, the format of the story you are pitching. Media exclusives, for instance, tend to rank well.

Here again, though, Michelson explains that it depends on the industry a brand or executive is in and the media who gains the exclusive, as outlets tend not to rank as well if they are paywalled.

"For instance, if you're going to give an exclusive to either Bloomberg, *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal*, Bloomberg is going to do better in almost every case in your search result," he points out. "You have to keep in mind that the results in a search are always going to be a reflection of what would give people a good experience" — which, it's worth adding, is why a press release rarely, if ever, ranks high.

And if a press release does? "That is a sure-fire indication that they need to hire a PR firm for their earned media strategy," shares Michelson.

### Comms should always be at the table

Earned media is an important component of digital-reputation management, and there are many potential audiences, such as prospective employees. Yet more in-house respondents say their marketing function is responsible for it rather than communications.

"That probably reflects the fact that the marketing function often owns the website and the social media properties," says Michelson. But when it comes to search, he feels that comms should assume a larger role — given its wide-angle messaging lens — with a dotted line into marketing.

"Often, our work for clients is driven by their financial needs or deal-making, and that does come from other parts of the C-suite," he explains. "However, it is usually led by the comms person or the PR firm.



Who has the primary responsibility for digital reputation management at your organization?

Marketing: 46%
Comms: 37%
Digital: 8%
Nobody: 6%

Investor Relations: 1%

Operations: 0%

Other: 2%

That's because the work isn't about making more sales or competing with others. It's about helping our clients define who they are and ensure that they don't get swept away by bad press.

## Wikipedia: The pitfalls

Google is a platform of platforms, from Glass-door and LinkedIn to Crunchbase. These platforms, in turn, also curate content from reviews, profiles, news articles and more about companies and individuals.

Two of the biggest platforms that often come up in a search are Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia written and managed by a volunteer community, and Google's Knowledge Panel, an information box with quick hits of details pulled from a variety of sources.

To brands, Wikipedia could be a great friend or a difficult foe. Based on our survey respondents, it appears to be slightly more of the latter as only 25% are satisfied with the way they presently work with Wikipedia. Meanwhile, 26% are not satisfied with the relationship, while nearly half of respondents (49%) claimed indifference.

"People are not looking at Wikipedia as a platform they can help influence," observes Michelson.



When suggesting edits in Wikipedia, certain sources are much more likely to be acceptable to editors than others. When pitching stories, do you consider which publications are regarded as "good" sources by Wikipedia?

Yes: 22% No: 49% N/A: 29%

Since there are many who try to manipulate Wikipedia, editors have taken a tougher line and it is now harder to advocate for your brand.

"There is a lot of monkey business going on," notes Michelson.



## Wikipedia: The potential

While transparency is crucial to every aspect of comms, it must be particularly prioritized when reaching out to Wikipedia for edits. After all, that is what the platform itself aims to provide to searchers in the first place.

"These platforms have rules of engagement," explains Michelson. "There are specific ways in which companies can interact with Wikipedia. And there are ways they never should interact with it. Best practice is to identify who you are, what you are doing and explain why something should be edited. It may be a CEO who is pictured with his ex-wife rather than his current wife."

"And someone on your internal or external team should know these platforms, understand how they work together and leverage them in a legitimate, transparent way for the brand," he adds. Brands that do so are far more likely to have their big announcement, such as a massive reduction in their carbon footprint, show up in their Wikipedia profile.

## Fixing your lack of knowledge

Some of the most prime real estate in Google belongs to the Knowledge Panel, which appears on the upper right when you search. (*Example shown at right*.) It is a key — and often the very first — source of information when a notable person or company is searched for on Google. It can include an image and salient facts about the person or company.

It is also another platform that communicators can leverage for both their company and executives — and it's fairly simple to do.

The panel features a "Claim this knowledge panel" option if you are the company, brand or executive addressed in it. Once you have claimed it, you can ask for edits of your listing. (Note: You have to be signed into your Google account to do this.)



Who/what do you think affects the information displayed in the Knowledge Panel? (Choose all that apply, but you must choose at least one)

Google algorithm: 83%

The brand/individual can suggest

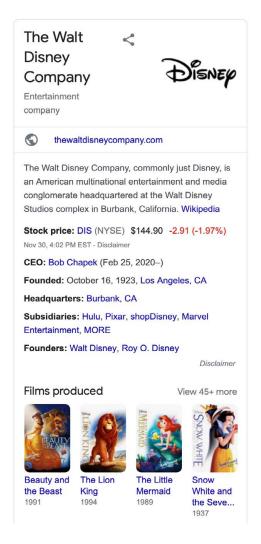
edits/corrections: 39% Searcher feedback: 19%

"You would be surprised by how many companies and individuals don't know that they can claim this," explains Michelson. Many of those entities are likely among the myriad survey respondents who indicate that a Google algorithm impacts the information displayed in the Knowledge Panel. That overwhelming majority indicates a broad resignation to the fact that brands can't do much on this platform. But we now know that's not the case.

Michelson offers this example: "The panel could have an old version of your logo. You can correct that by claiming the panel."

#### Level of investment

The prevalence of online search in all of our lives, and thus to brands, is unquestioned. So, perhaps surprisingly, of those respondents who gave a definitive reply when asked how much of their overall comms budget is allocated to search/digital reputation management, five out of six (84%) say less than a fifth of it.



However, as Michelson points out, they are still investing in search.

"It is accurate to say that every company — whether it realizes it or not — is investing in it by building a website, having a LinkedIn page and engaging with the media," he explains. "It's just that they are not deliberately spending on it." And that is where brands could be putting a lot more focus.



How much of your overall PR/comms budget do you allocate to search/ digital reputation management?

0%: 16%

1%-9.9%: 38%

10%-19.9%: **30**% 20%-29.9%: **10**%

30%-plus: 6%

"Everyone knows you can shape every pixel on your own website and that you can launch your own channels on social media," continues Michelson, "but not a lot of people realize they can help shape their Google or Bing results with their earned media."

He likens it to a lawn that every season is planted with more trees and flowers, but is never landscaped. There is no organization or coherence to it.

"Brands already have many of the things they need for search reputation," concludes Michelson. "They just don't have someone who is helping to landscape it. They are failing to develop it into a thriving reputational ecosystem."

#### What lies ahead

Google is quickly bringing the future of search to the present. Voice search has become exponentially more popular in the last few years. Google Lens allows users to take their smartphone cameras and "visual search" what they see.

"There will be more platforms and more people searching in different ways," predicts Michelson. The advancement most important to companies, brands and executives, however, will be Google's continued transformation from a search engine to an answer engine.

The future will not see search results dominated by the most popular websites, articles, videos and so on related to the query terms. Results will instead provide very specific information the algorithm determines the searcher wants answered. This is being ac-

celerated by consumer trust in search and the fact that people are getting far more specific in their searches.

"When someone searches Google, it used to be that 10,000 other people had made that exact same search already that day," explains Michelson. "More and more searches are unique now. People are searching more specifically."

Often, the searcher is seeking an answer to a specific curiosity, concern or question, even if they don't form their search as a question. It could be the net worth of a CEO. Why one company outperforms another. Or a brand's position on a societal or political issue.

## Brand benefits: push and pull

What does that mean for a brand's search strategies, content development and digital reputation management? A lot!

"It starts with thinking about Google as an answer engine," says Michelson. "What are the questions that people have about brands? What does your brand do? Who is your CEO? And then companies should aim to answer those questions more specifically with their

content. Every piece of content, from the brand's website to earned media articles, should aim to address questions that people want answered."

Most brands don't do this with their content right now. Instead, they think about what they want to tell people rather than about what people want to know.

"Marketers are stuck in that 'push' marketing mentality — what they can pitch — rather than 'pull' — what information people actually want to know," explains Michelson. The future of search will require thinking primarily about satisfying stakeholder curiosity, rather than just creating more buzz. A content mix of both short- and long-form articles will also be useful to effectively serve searcher needs, provided that they answer the correct questions.

"Sometimes a searcher will want the whole story on something," he says, "but on many occasions, they just want to find out about a specific piece of information."

An understanding of how search continues to evolve will enable brands to provide that in the manner the audience wants and needs. •

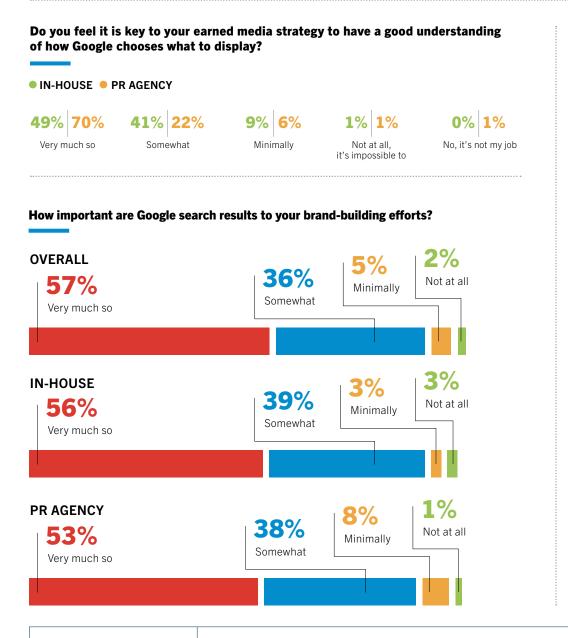




# **Getting Google**

The data on this page establishes how well our respondents understand the way Google works and how important the platform is to their overall earned media strategy.

A good understanding of how Google chooses what to display is key to earned media strategy. Below we reveal how much in-house and agency professionals agree with that statement.



According to our in-house and agency respondents, the following factors have the greatest impact on the makeup of search results on Google. (Scores below are on a scale of 1-6, with 6 being the highest possible response.)

## **IN-HOUSE**

- Match between content and your query: 4.8
- Authority of the website: 4
- Recency of content:3.5
- Technical optimization of content: 3.4
- Your search history:2.8
- Your location: 2.5

## **PR AGENCY**

- Match between content and your query: 4.8
- Authority of the website: 4.5
- Recency of content: 3.6
- Technical optimization of content: 3.3
- Your search history:2.6
- Your location: 2.3

**SAM'S OBSERVATIONS** 

It is worth noting that while professionals seem to feel search is quite important to reputation, the resources allocated to it (see previous page) do not necessarily reflect this sense of urgency, with 84% of respondents estimating that under 20% of the PR and comms budget is devoted to search. Perhaps this is because many professionals are not even sure where to begin.



# More options

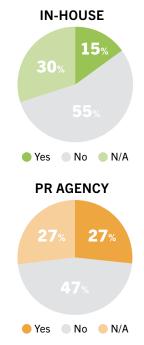
Wikipedia and Google's Knowledge Panel are two powerful sources of information for web searchers. Below we establish communicators' current relationship with both.

Wikipedia is a prevalent source of information for Google search results and, thus, is a key component to your digital reputation. Choose the one option from those below that best represents how your organization handles Wikipedia page creation and/or edits.



## Where do you believe the information in a Knowledge Panel is sourced? (Respondents were asked to choose all that apply, but had to select at least one) **OVERALL** The person's/company's own site 67% Wikipedia **59%** 32% Other databases News sites 30% 22% Wikidata LinkedIn profiles **IN-HOUSE** The person's/company's own si 36% Other databases 28% Wikidata PR AGENCY The person's/company's own site 62% 31% Other databases

When suggesting edits in Wikipedia, certain sources are much more likely to be acceptable to editors than others. When pitching stories, do you consider which publications are regarded as "good" sources by Wikipedia?



**SAM'S OBSERVATIONS** 

Companies should not cede control of Wikipedia just because they are afraid. There are smart, compliant ways of working with Wikipedia to ensure the page accurately represents companies and executives.

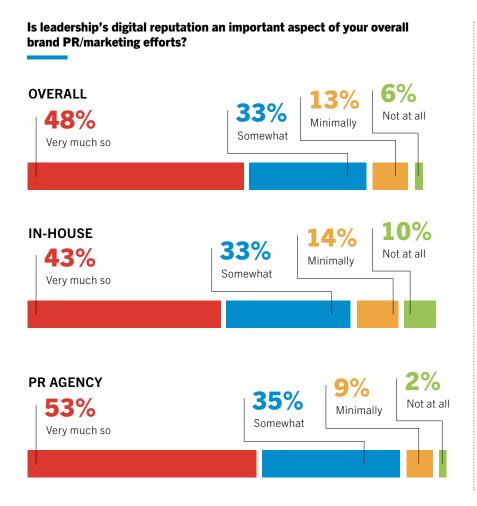


# Leadership perspective

Below we gauge how important our respondents feel the reputation of their leaders is for their brand and the subsequent efforts they devote to managing it.

Indicate how much you agree with the following statement: "A brand's reputation is linked to that of its leadership."





## What components of leaders' reputation do you actively manage?

(Respondents were asked to choose all that apply, but had to select at least one)

#### **OVERALL**

- Bios on the corporate website: 75%
- Social profiles (e.g., LinkedIn, YouTube): 69%
- Earned media (e.g., PR): 64%
- Business profiles (e.g., Bloomberg): 41%
- Search results: 25%
- Other: 7%
- None: 6%

## **IN-HOUSE**

- Bios on the corporate website: 78%
- Social profiles (e.g., LinkedIn, YouTube): 63%
- Earned media (e.g., PR): 61%
- Business profiles (e.g., Bloomberg): 47%
- Search results: 24%
- None: 6%
- Other: 5%

## **PR AGENCY**

- Earned media (e.g., PR): 74%
- Bios on the corporate website: 72%
- Social profiles (e.g., LinkedIn, YouTube): 70%
- Business profiles (e.g., Bloomberg): 40%
- Search results: 24%
- Other: 9%
- None: 8%

**SAM'S OBSERVATIONS** 

Employer brand is of special importance as an increasing number of employees opt out of traditional organizations. Who leads a company and what kind of culture they encourage at their organization is a narrative that should matter very much, not only to communications, but also to HR.



## Search: What to look for

Following up on earlier thoughts shared by Five Blocks founder and CEO Sam Michelson, a quartet of industry leaders provides their perspectives here on the future of search, how it specifically impacts the comms function, and how PR pros need to adjust strategies accordingly.



**Armando Azarloza** CEO

AXIS

uring the last decade, technology has shaped our world dramatically. We've also seen profound demographic changes form a new society. Marketers today must find new ways to connect with this audience. The technological advancements we've seen have opened the door to on-demand access to precise and culturally relevant information.

So, what does that mean for the future of search? For starters, these on-demand requests for precise information will help us get smarter about specific niche audiences. We also see the development of more interactive forms of search closely tied to culture, language, and lifestyle.

The power of this information will help marketers anchor their approach to diverse communities and roll out campaigns more strategically. It will also support their efforts to reach diverse audiences with cultural insights derived from search to both inform creative development and drive business decisions. These new insights, made possible in part from better search technology, will allow brands to connect with their diverse audiences seamlessly and authentically.



Rich Ferraro CCO

GI AAD

earch is our largest opportunity to bring new members into our organization, just as it is key for attracting new consumers to brands.

The opportunity is exponentially larger than traditional acquisition models where potential members meet our organization via direct mail or in-person events. In order to seize the opportunity, though, all staff members who post content on our site are becoming familiar with best practices to optimize content for search. We have had to redirect funds to enlist consultants to teach those best practices and continuously optimize high-performing content on our site.

It is no longer enough to post an eloquent or enlightening article. We must ensure those articles can be easily found via search. Creating impactful content that will bring in visitors from search is as important as traditional content for our regular site visitors and this requires new expenses for writers and consultants to create optimized content.

## Search: What to look for

(continued)



**Randi Liodice**President, chief strategy officer

Kaplow

e have become accustomed to instant gratification — and we expect no less from our search results. The trick is understanding how to satisfy queries that haven't even been typed yet.

With the growth of AI and other digital learning tools, we not only expect but demand deeper expertise, genuine thought leadership and speedy solutions from brands that desire our long-term affection and loyalty.

At Kaplow, our communications strategies have long been based on this human truth. We couple trending data and influential social conversations with industry insights and predictive analytics to arrive one step ahead of the intelligence that's already formulating inside the consumer's head. The end result is the endorsement we all want to hear — "they just get me."

It's no longer enough to anticipate what a consumer could ask. Instead, we must go one step further with our content, so questions don't have to be posed at all.



Rosalie Morton VP, channels

Padilla

s Google becomes an "answer" engine, the consequence could be that fewer and fewer people get past the first page. They'll find their answers on that first page in the Knowledge Panel, through product ads, through on-page videos that Google may even pre-edit to include the most salient parts.

This means it's critical to create all content with Google top of mind.

When you create a video, are you ensuring it's not just great content, but that it's also optimized to hit the first page? Are you executing a complementary paid strategy?

This drives home the need to holistically look at your communications from all angles and using all channels — with, of course, Google being an important one.



#### **METHODOLOGY**

PRWeek partnered with Five Blocks on this survey, which was sent via email to U.S.-based senior-level communications leaders (director and above).

A total of 219 senior-level professionals, from both agencies and in-house, completed the online survey, conducted by PRWeek, between August 25 and September 29, 2021. Results are not weighted and are statistically tested at confidence levels of 90% and 95%.



#### **ABOUT FIVE BLOCKS**

Five Blocks is a digital reputation pioneer. We help shape perceptions of companies and individuals, using technology that guides thoughtful planning of their digital footprint — as seen in search.

A full-service digital reputation management firm, we work with clients to plan a deliberate search presence that best reflects them, helping them to control what they can. Our analysis uses big data and proprietary technology, tools and skills that suggest holistic, customized strategies, rather than just quick fixes.

We are a team of 45 results-oriented professionals from diverse disciplines including technology, communications, marketing, psychology, education and intelligence. With search industry veterans as key staff members, we help teams navigate the evolving opportunities in Google, Wikipedia and other digital platforms — as we have been doing since 2007.

Our partners are top PR and law firms, wealth managers and corporate communications teams. Together, we analyze online vulnerabilities and opportunities for clients, working to ensure overall strategies are well-integrated — and take the digital reputation angle into account. Our clients are Fortune 500 corporations and fast-growing brands, multinational organizations, and high-profile individuals and executives.

## **PRWeek**

## **ABOUT PRWEEK**

PRWeek epitomizes the modern business publishing brand, spanning online, print, events and social media, incorporating a paid-for content strategy and gated website. Launched in November 1998, it is the essential title for PR pros.

PRWeek reflects an industry playing a more pivotal role than ever, not only in the marketing strategies of companies, brands, and organizations, but also within boardrooms and in the C-suite.

In the transparent world epitomized by social media, corporate reputation is crucial. Executives need timely, authoritative, insightful content to navigate this landscape — that's where PRWeek comes in.

## **ABOUT THE RESPONDENTS**

Among the leadership pool who took the survey, 26% are PR agency CEO/president/managing partner; 19% are director; 11% are VP. The remainder comprise CCO, CMO, EVP, SVP, executive director, head and senior director.

41% of respondents are from PR firms; 36% from corporations; 12% from nonprofits; 11% from other types of organizations.

Among the sectors most represented in the respondent pool are: Tech/internet (24%); Healthcare/pharma (15%); Arts/entertainment/media and Industrial manufacturing (8% each); and CPG (6%)



When various stakeholders search your brand, where will their journey lead?

SEARCH CAN BE UNFORGIVING. CONTROL WHAT YOU CAN.

