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Trend Watch: Local Search to Boost Online Sales?

By [David Needle](#)

August 22, 2008

SAN JOSE, Calif. — There's no such thing as a Google killer and companies (from startups to mighty Microsoft) are crazy to think they can dethrone the search king.

Second, Internet startups should be scrambling to mine the next big opportunity in search: providing local services enabled by the new generation of GPS-enabled phones and Web services like Twitter that track where you are and what you're doing.

These are some insights and nuggets of advice search experts brought to the Search Engine Strategies conference held here this week. "Local is the motherlode," said Tim Westergren, founder of Internet radio service Pandora. Speaking at a panel discussion Tuesday, Westergren said the challenge for search engines is to figure out how to give more exposure to sites that don't appear in top results page. "The search war today is a great popularity contest," he said.

Another local advocate, Kirsten Mangers, co-founder and CEO of WebVisible, admitted she started touting location-based services nine years ago as being "six months away" but now she thinks the time has finally arrived. "To most of the world, local is absolutely mission critical," said Mangers whose company is a marketing agency for online small businesses.

"Local is about 18 to 24 months behind national marketers so we learn from their mistakes," Mangers added. There's also flat out innovation. She lauded Urbanspoon for example, a Web site for finding local restaurants. In its Apple iPhone incarnation, Urbanspoon takes advantage of the device's built in accelerometer to make the experience more fun.

First, Urbanspoon gives you a local restaurant result using the device's GPS. But if you're not happy with that result and want to try something else, you can literally shake the iPhone in order to get another nearby restaurant result.

Richard LeFurgy, a general partner with Archer Advisors and founding chairman of the Interactive Advertising Bureau, said location aware applications are "an incredible opportunity." LeFurgy is on the board of Placecast, an online ad network that combines positioning data — where someone is — with what it calls "place" data, which is other information about where people are that helps further qualify them for advertisers.

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"We've introduced local services on wireless and seen a 20 times increase in click through rate on content," he said. "How do you create relevance at scale? That's what it's all about."

### Going for Google

Session moderator Kevin Ryan tried mightily to generate controversy on the question of who would be the next Google killer, but for the most part the panelists would have none of it. But there were plenty of pointed comments.

"Why does there have to be Google killer?" asked Mike Grehan, Global KDM (Keyword Driven Marketing) officer, at Acronym Media. "In any other industry someone else comes in and it's competition and it's great. Why do you have to be a Google killer?"

Grehan criticized the latest Google challenger, the recently launched Cuil, started by ex-Google's.

"They (Cuil) say they have the biggest database, but does the user care?" Grehan asked rhetorically.

Of course panelist Matt Cutts, software engineer guru at Google, was hardly expected to either diss his employer or predict its greatest threat. Instead, he promoted how easy it is for anyone to launch a software company with the advent of cloud-based tools that free users from relying on a single PC or workstation or having to deal with viruses and elaborate security protection.

"If I'm cloud-based, if I break my laptop I wouldn't lose any data with Google apps or Zoho. It's cheaper than ever to do a startup," he said. "Eighteen-year-olds can do it on weekends. There are so many different opportunities for Web startups, we haven't scratched the surface."

Danny Sullivan, editor-in-chief of Search Engine Land warned that while it may be cheap to get in the game, there are still many ways a Web startup can screw up or get in over its head.

"There's a lot of eye candy things out there to get excited about without understanding if it's a good marketing channel," said Sullivan. "Like, you can spend a lot of money building a kiosk in Second Life and only have three people show up."

As for going after Google, Sullivan said it's going to be a fool's errand for quite some time.

"Google has so much information across the Web and the analytics and the ad data. There is a good degree of information that's hard for any company to match. Even Microsoft," said Sullivan. And they've been trying for five years. At best, you're going to see incremental challenges."

*This article by David Needle originally appeared on Aug. 20, 2008 on [InternetNews.com](http://InternetNews.com).*

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