

# INSIGHTS TO ACTION

## The Travel Industry Meets Semantic Search

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This White Paper will help you get your head around the full implications of semantic search. We will show you why the search changes made by Google have far reaching implications for your own travel company. We will show you how to successfully apply these insights to your marketing strategy and tactical campaigns in a practical way.

**T**oward the end of 2013, Google changed its search algorithm by introducing Google Semantic Search (which Google calls “Hummingbird”). This is not an algorithm update as we have seen in the past, but an entire search engine overhaul.

*Internet search is the one constant tool people turn to for inspiration and travel planning at every point across the path to purchase—from thinking about where to go, to finding a cafe when they get there. Google has changed the way our potential customers find us and what information they will receive, and in doing so, has profoundly changed how we need to market our businesses and manage our online presence.*


 **There is no longer the single Holy Grail metric of Page 1 based on a keyword search.**

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Google’s old search algorithm could be ‘gamed’ by tactics such as building artificial links and stuffing poor content with keywords, but today’s search engine relies on “semantics,” that is, the meanings, relevance and context of each user search. As a result, search results are now more in tune with the individual searcher, drawing on historical information and data that Google has collected about them, such as geographical location, search history, social media sharing and online behaviour.

Google’s overall goal has always been centred on the user experience, matching search queries to the most relevant web pages, and this is still what Google does. But the way we perform searches has evolved from the days of sitting at a desks and typing a few keywords, into a dynamic, mobile system that is always with us. We may ask our phone a question as we would a friend—Apple’s Siri application is an example of this.

Hummingbird parallels this shift in the way we search, and Google released it for two reasons: to improve the search experience by providing intelligent answers, and to increase its dominance as a search engine. Note that other search engines such as Bing and Yahoo are also involved with semantic search processes. However, we focus on Google in this discussion because of their market share at around 67% (commScore Dec 2013) and leadership role in the search engine world.

 **Google no longer uses them exclusively to determine your rank in a search.**

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One of the most important implications of Google’s semantic search is that what appears on Page 1 of a Google search result is different for every search query, every mobile device and every desktop. There is no longer the single Holy Grail metric of Page 1 based on a keyword search.

For customers to discover your business or destination online today, it’s no longer sufficient to rely on search engine optimisation (SEO) methods you may have used in the past. Keywords and inbound links will continue to occur naturally in your content and are still important in creating context, but Google no longer uses them exclusively to determine your rank in a search. Make no mistake: if you want to be successful in the future, you must adapt your marketing strategy and tactics now to this new environment. Fortunately, Google and the travel and tourism industry can be a great combination, provided that your marketing focuses on two interrelated things: content and web presence.

This White Paper reviews what semantic search is, with a focus on Google, examines the specific opportunities it offers for travel-related businesses and destinations, and considers how to apply these insights to your marketing strategy and tactical executions.



## HOW GOOGLE SEMANTIC SEARCH WORKS

At the heart of Hummingbird is a complex nexus of information and relationships that might be invoked by a user search. Figure 1 shows a hypothetical search for “Las Vegas.” On the right hand side, a search for Las Vegas turns up what is called a “knowledge graph,” which contains general facts about Las Vegas. A set of information directly related to things about Las Vegas, such as events and points of interest, are depicted in small images underneath the factual information.

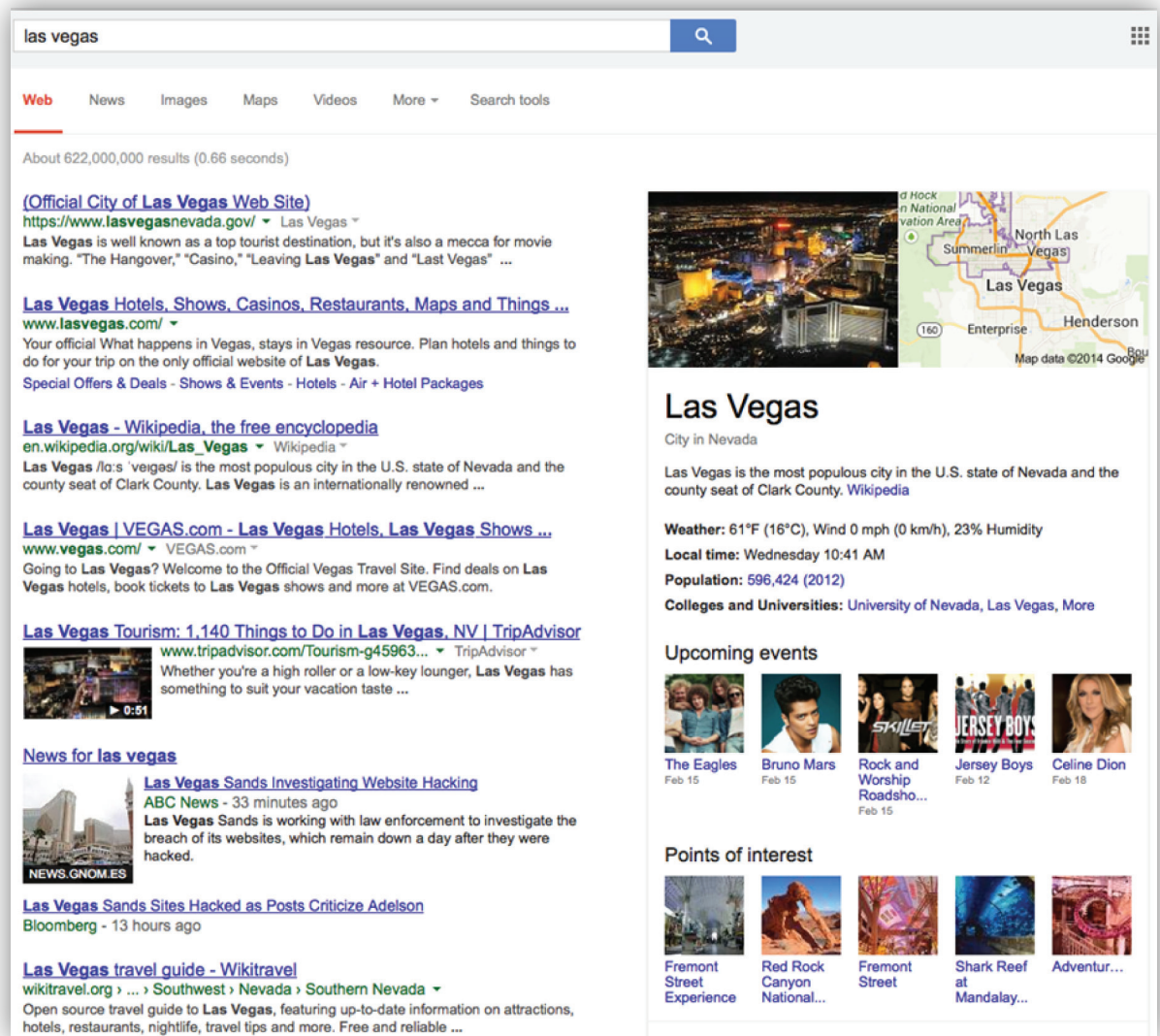


Figure 1: Google Knowledge Graph

Let’s say you click on a picture of Celine Dion in the knowledge graph. You are then taken to a Google “knowledge carousel,” shown in Figure 2, that provides more information and images on Celine Dion, plus some information Google has compiled on other shows in



Las Vegas. This allows you to delve deeper into topics related to Las Vegas and Celine Dion. If you instead clicked on the Red Rock Canyon image in the knowledge graph in Figure 1, you might be led to different topics related to Las Vegas, such as tour operators or other attractions. Users are able to discover and explore a variety of options they didn't include in their original search, thus preserving the feeling of serendipity and surprise.

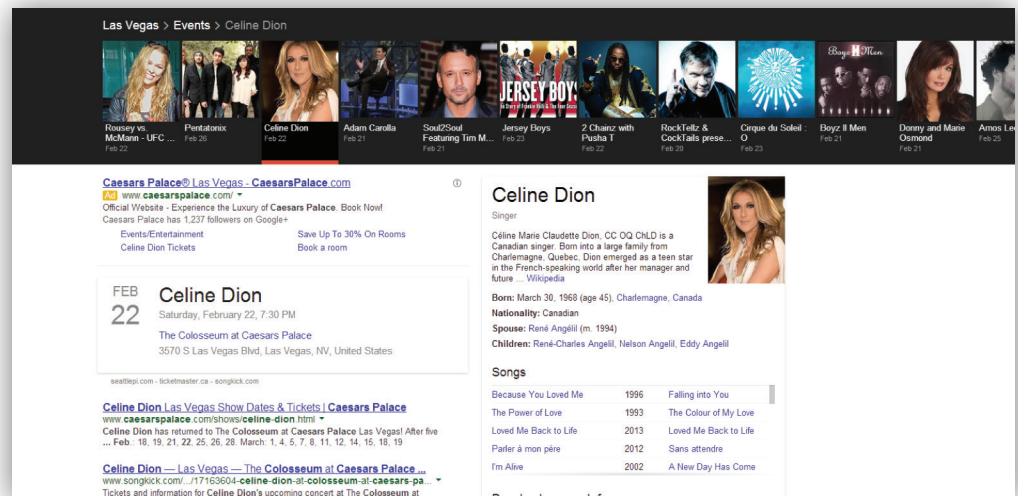


Figure 2: Google Knowledge Carousel


Hypothetically, for every search, a new collection of subjects and relationships are brought together in proportion to their relevance to both the search topic and to the user who is performing the search. For example, if you select the subject “Fremont Street” from the Las Vegas search, the diagram might include other Las Vegas casinos, gambling tips or off-strip show times. This is because Google search results now take into consideration what the user has searched for before, where they are located now, and perhaps some of the things they have discussed, liked or commented about on social media.

- ▶ For example, a search result for someone at the MyTravelResearch.com office in Sydney will be different from someone at your location in London, Ottawa, Shanghai or New York.
- ▶ Geographic location change is also important in this instance. Suppose you left your office in London and flew to Las Vegas. You would be the same searcher, doing the same search, but you would receive different information when you got there than you did whilst planning and anticipating the trip beforehand.
- ▶ A search on Friday morning will yield different results from an identical search the next Tuesday. Why? Because the Internet is fluid and constantly changing; between Friday and Tuesday, businesses and users were active, adding information, posting reviews, blogging, and interacting with others on social media. Google will have harvested much of this information, including adding to its profiles of businesses and users alike.



## SEMANTIC SEARCH CREATES OPPORTUNITIES FOR TOURISM


Potential benefits for the travel and tourism industry are highlighted below for five of the key features of Google semantic search.

 Google is transitioning from being a search engine to being a personal assistant.

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- 1. Google is Intelligent:** As we have discussed, Google Semantic search is exponentially more capable than historical search algorithms of delivering fast, meaningful results, tailored to the search user and the specific query. Business writer Asher Elran<sup>1</sup> puts it like this, “We have always asked questions and up until now, Google has not answered any of them. It merely showed us where we might get the answers based on some of the words we used. Now, Google wants to answer the questions by comprehending them and giving us the right answers the first time out.”


*This is a potential boon to travel and tourism destinations and businesses because it helps you connect with your customers in a truly targeted manner. Your product, service or destination is likely to be presented in search results in a match tailored to its expectations of the user’s intent in the search query. When a person goes online, Google takes into account things like their geographical location at the time of the search, previous search history and interests as reflected by social media interactions. This means you need to create content that is relevant to the user and your target markets by answering specific user questions, solving problems and providing useful information in a variety of formats.*

 The more you love Google, the more it will loves you back.

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- 2. Google Suite of Tools:** For users, it may seem that Google is transitioning from being a search engine to being a personal assistant. Amit Singhal,<sup>2</sup> a Google senior VP, confirms that they want to be like the computer on the Star Trek television series: able to give direct answers to users, no matter what they ask. To accomplish this, Google’s search algorithms are embedded in a suite of products, apps and tools intended to be easy to use, free, and to fully integrated. For both individuals and businesses, the suite now includes Google Plus, Google Places, Google Now, Google Calendars, YouTube—and the list goes on.

*The travel industry and destinations can use these tools to keep their marketing programs on track and their content linked together, and the more you love Google, the more it will loves you back.*

 The marriage of geographic location and search history data opens many possibilities for tourism businesses and destinations.

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- 3. Google is Mobile and Conversational.** Users continue to shift their search activities away from desktop computers and laptops to mobile devices such as Smartphones and tablets. To leverage this, Google continues its focus on mobile applications. Google Now is an example of a recently created product designed for mobile searchers. Users simply ask their questions, and Google delivers answers relevant to that geographical location. Questions can also be verbal, allowing searches to be conducted easily while the user is driving or walking. In addition, users can pre-set what types of information are always of interest to them, such as nearby photo shots, weather, local hotels and restaurants. These subjects will then follow the users as they move about.



➔ **Semantic search then uses what it calls “the social signals” to help understand the users’ intent in future searches.**

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Recently, one of us at MyTravelResearch.com was experimenting with Google Now during a visit to Yarra Valley, a food and wine region near Melbourne, Australia. A search for “the best all day breakfast” made from the car near Healesville returned some nice information on cafes nearby and a blog piece on the best breakfasts in the Valley, even though no mention was made of Healesville in the search.

*The marriage of geographic location and search history data opens many possibilities for tourism businesses and destinations, because it means people can find you from wherever they are, on whatever device they are currently using. Google probably knows where they live, where they have been (in the case of touring), previous searches, what they have been tweeting and what their various social profiles show about them. From their mobile devices, it knows where they are at the moment and can retrieve data about that location on the fly to put options in front of them that are relevant to their needs and tastes.*

- 4. Google picks up Social Signals:** Google collects information when users communicate using social media. So each time someone tweets, posts, likes, pins, comments or +1’s, Google’s algorithms capture the meaning (the semantics) behind what the user is doing and saying. Semantic search then uses what it calls “the social signals” to help understand the users’ intent in future searches.

➔ **If your content doesn’t appear on social media sites and people do not engage in your content, Google may consider it to be of low value.**

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Travel businesses have adapted quickly to making basic use of social platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Now your presence and original content, posted in a wide variety of social media outlets online, is crucial to your Google rankings. If your content doesn’t appear on social media sites and people do not engage in your content, Google may consider it to be of low value.

*There are many benefits to having your website and online presence in favour with Google. Simply stated, if your website and presence are good for business, Google will reward you in its rankings. If your content is regularly shared and commented on, Google will consider you an authority and reward you with fast indexing and higher ranking when someone is looking for a product, service or destination with your location or characteristics.*

- 5. Google Helps When Users Don’t Know What They Don’t Know.** Some observers have worried that, if Google filters and narrows search results in such complex ways, search users will lose the advantage of serendipity in finding businesses and destinations they didn’t know to search for. Google points to its knowledge graph and carousels as entry points to related searches which users may not have identified on their own.

➔ **Google will consider you an authority and reward you with fast indexing and higher ranking.**

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In the Yarra Valley search example earlier, Google presented a few wineries and other attractions in the area we were driving through, in case we might be interested in them as well. Because we had often looked for things to do with children in the past, it also presented attractions that were family-based activities like the Healesville Sanctuary.

*The implication for the travel industry and destinations is that content is still king, and the more varied and useful your information is, the more chance you will have of being found in related searches. More than ever, you have opportunities to tell your prospective customers what you have to offer, even if it isn’t in the original search terms.*



## INSIGHTS TO ACTIONS FOR MANAGING YOUR CONTENT

➔ Mounting research evidence suggests that for most businesses, online content is more effective than printing brochures. In fact, an estimated 58% of all leisure travel begins with people searching online for holiday ideas and inspiration.<sup>3</sup> You may still want printed literature to hand out in person, but if you have not already done so it is probably time to consider redirecting your marketing dollars toward online content.

In the world of semantic search, a content marketing plan is an efficient way of getting to your potential customers. Mounting research evidence suggests that for most businesses, online content is more effective than printing brochures. In fact, an estimated 58% of all leisure travel begins with people searching online for holiday ideas and inspiration.<sup>3</sup> You may still want printed literature to hand out in person, but if you have not already done so it is probably time to consider redirecting your marketing dollars toward online content.

Creating relevant, engaging content that would be of interest to your target market means you are creating a connection to your potential customer. In today's world, that content can come in many forms, so a diverse content plan should form the basis of your overall marketing strategy.

Content now has multiple roles. It not only provides information to your potential customer, it allows them to find you when they are searching, by getting you included in search results and knowledge graphs. Logically, if you don't have content on the Internet, how are they going to find you? And the more you create compelling content that is shared and liked, the stronger those all-important social signals are in attracting attention to you.

Joe Pulizzi<sup>4</sup> from the Content Marketing Institute advises marketers in today's connected world **to shift their identity from being marketers to publishers of content**. We need to start building our own online assets and real estate through engaging, compelling content and tell the stories that will create an emotional connection with our customers.

It is time for the tourism industry to start thinking about redirecting marketing funds from massive brochure prints (to smaller print runs), consumer and trade shows to creating content like videos, blogs, and images. It is time for the travel industry and destinations to meet our travelers and customers where they are—on the Internet.

Some of the key things we recommend below will sound familiar to any marketing manager. The trick is to optimise your content marketing strategies to make sure they are applicable to the new world of semantic search.

**1. Know Your Target Markets.** The first thing to consider is who your target customer is and how are they going to find you. If you have multiple target markets, you need to know as much as possible about each one. All marketing plans should start with this process.

In content marketing, it is important that your potential customers be able to visualize themselves at your destination, hotel or tour. They need to be able to relate to what you have to offer, so it is more important than ever you know as much as possible about them. This includes demographics, attitudes and life stages, right through to how they search for travel. The more specific you can be the better.

**2. Know your Unique Selling Points (USPs) and Play to Your Strengths.** Identify solutions you can offer to some of your customers' problems or needs. For example, if they are overstressed, what do you have that will help them? A day spa, nature walks, a swim-up bar, yoga classes, no mobile phone coverage or Wi-Fi?

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➔ Your customers want to be able to place themselves in the location, at the beach or the event or the hotel bar.

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It's also important create content around other businesses, services and attractions that are related to yours in some way. When you include information about other things, not only does everyone benefit, but also you get more attention from Google because you are helping Google build their picture and place context around your product.

For example, if you sell accommodation in a regional town, you may want to have content that covers nearby restaurants and their specials and menus, tour operations, things to do in wet weather, what's in the next town, the five top festival events in your area, and so on. For example, a regional hotel might want to promote a local agriculture show coming up. City folks might want to show their kids where milk comes from, or those interested in the "farm-to-table" or "paddock-to-plate" movements might enjoy it while they are staying with you. Or a list of recommended restaurants open on a Sunday or Monday might encourage them to stay an extra night.

It is a good idea to get everyone in your business involved in identifying what content you are going to deliver. For each idea, give first priority to how it will be helpful to your customers. One way to approach this exercise is to first develop a list of frequently asked questions, and then make answering them the basis of your content. Marketing managers of larger travel and tourism organizations can also hold workshops for their employees and put content on the agenda for every planning meeting.

3. **Write a Content Mission Statement.** Now you have determined what content you are going to deliver, generalize it into a "mission statement" that addresses how your content will focus on helping in the path to purchase. This will become your guideline to making future decisions about content.
4. **Consider All Types of Content.** When you know what your content ideas are and how they will help you, the next step is to consider the output. It is good to have a mix of evergreen content (information that stays the same) and more frequently updated content (i.e., seasonal content). Next, select the type of content appropriate to the message. There's a large range of possibilities, including but not limited to the following:
  - ▶ **Articles.** The most common online articles are blog posts, which showcase and describe your product or service with words and images. Blogs are cost effective—even if you hire a writer, the cost is akin to a press run of brochures. You can post articles easily on your own blog, and on Google+, which we discuss later, and even on other people's blogs as a commenter or invited guest contributor.
  - ▶ **Photos.** Visualization is where it all starts. On average, humans process about 70% of their information visually. Great photos engage and create desire, and often lead to purchase much more quickly than any other form of information. This is especially true for the travel industry, because your customers want to be able to place themselves in the location, at the beach or the event or the hotel bar. Chances are you probably have a large stock of photos already that you can use on your website, in your blog, and on social media. Wherever you place them, plan to add short captions and links with your photos that lead back to you.



- ▶ **Videos.** If you are not going to commission your own production team, you can create useful videos using your Smartphone or digital camera. Don't be deterred from trying this out if you haven't done it before. A short and simple video clip that pans across your hotel room and out the windows to your great view will be much more informative and engaging than a static photo of a queen-sized bed. Such a video can lead users to the things you want to emphasize, while giving them realistic expectations about what you have to offer. Or start even smaller, with a breathtaking sunrise or sunset, or a view through the entrance to an attraction. Software resources like Stupeflix can help you turn your existing images and photos into attractive videos.
- ▶ **Surveys.** Online surveys are an easy way to engage your customers, either for market research or to capture testimonials and reviews. If you are a member of MyTravelResearch.com, check out the survey templates you can start using immediately.
- ▶ **E-Brochures.** If you already have a printed brochure, most of the work of an electronic version is done. The electronic version will be much more flexible and accessible, however, and can be linked to from multiple places online.
- ▶ **Infographics.** Infographics are a great way to compress and display a great deal of information in ways that can be grasped at a glance. They supplement photo image data as visual ways to draw people in so they will want to explore more about you.

A word on creating content: consider outsourcing. Your marketing plan should take into account the resources you can realistically invest in content marketing. If you are a large organization or destination, you may have existing resources in place to help with content creation. However, if you are a sole owner-operator, the thought of all this content creation may seem overwhelming. MyTravelResearch.com, recommends outsourcing using local or online contractors for writing, editing, design, optimisation, and other tasks that are outside your current resources.

We also recommend that you create and use a content calendar. Enter all the content elements you have decided is most useful for your customers. Be specific, including details about the purpose of each item, the format, where it will be placed, who will create it, and other details. As a tourism business, you have the opportunity to plan around specific activities, seasons and events, so use these to populate your calendar. This will also help you space out the work, ensuring a steady sense of presence online and encouraging your customers to count on you for new ideas.

Don't forget to include your desired outcome or call to action for all content. Do you want them to visit your website? Sign up to your mailing list for e-newsletters? Make it clear what it is you would like them to do.





## PRACTICAL TIPS TO STRENGTHEN YOUR ONLINE PRESENCE

With an up-to-date content marketing strategy in hand, and a content calendar to implement your strategy, you are ready to start creating compelling content. One last check-point before you post and share, is to make sure your basic online presence fundamentals are in place. Otherwise, your big content marketing efforts may be in vain. Here is a recap of these fundamentals.

- 1. Check Your Website.** Google cannot help you if you don't have a robust and easily navigated website. This means it is important for the structure to be right. It needs headings, titles and descriptions that Google can index. In addition, your site must be optimised for mobile operating systems. Remember Google semantic search is designed with mobile users at the forefront. You may want to bring in an outside web expert if you aren't sure your website fulfills these criteria.
- 2. Check Your Business NAP.** Check that your business name, address, and phone numbers (NAP) are consistent in business listings across the Internet, including spelling and format as well as the information. You cannot be too vigilant. Consistent listings tell Google you are a legitimate business, and inconsistent listings definitely harm your standing.
- 3. For Tourism Businesses, Sign Up for Google Places** for business. As a first step, claim and list your business on Google Places, and populate it with relevant information. Local Google listings always feature prominently on mobile search queries, especially voice queries. Be sure to include all five videos and all ten photos it allows you. And start asking your customers to review you on Google Places—this will help you immensely.
- 3. Create Google Plus Profiles.** Next, create your Google+ Page for your business and your Google+ profile for yourself. You can then link your business website and all your online activity via Google Authorship tools. This is another area where some expert help from a web developer can get you started.
- 4. Post on Google+.** Google indexes these posts exactly like blog posts (make sure yours are shared publically). So contribute your own text, compelling images, videos, events and customer testimonials, and don't forget to include supplementary information to guide users to your business or destination. This is a good way to build your authority and gain entrée to Google's knowledge graph carousels.
- 5. Include Other Social Media.** It is also important you create profiles with accurate information and make use of other social media accounts you use.
- 6. Get a YouTube Account.** YouTube is part of Google, and is the second largest search engine in the world. Videos are a great source of inspiration a great way for potential travelers to visualize themselves at your destination or hotel. You can then embed the video on your own website and blog, and include the link in your social media posts.



At a minimum, plan to post something to your Google+ and other social media accounts daily. Google notices your level of activity and social signals, especially if they are being shared and talked about in social media communities. By the way, this doesn't mean that your static content needs constant reworking, but that new content and new links are being added frequently and regularly. From Google's perspective, these activity patterns show that you are expanding and increase the probability that you have interesting content to offer.

## FASTEN YOUR SEATBELTS

David Amerland,<sup>5</sup> a noted leader in the area of semantic search and author of *Google Semantic Search*, sums the situation we find ourselves in this way: today's businesses must adopt a set of strategies that individuals find simple and intuitive, but that companies and brands may find more challenging. To overcome this gap, he recommends these priorities:

- ▶ Develop a clear, distinctive brand voice.
- ▶ Project a clear set of values that form a bond between you and your prospects.
- ▶ Deliver content in multiple channels in a personable, accessible way.
- ▶ Maintain a strong social media presence.
- ▶ Deliver content that has real value for the end user.
- ▶ Make Google+ central to your marketing and social media strategy

David also advises us that if we want to show up on Google knowledge graphs, we should learn to connect to *everything* related to our businesses. He provides checklists and guidelines that are both practical and detailed, from how to prepare your business to how to prepare your content. We highly recommend this book for travel industry professionals.<sup>6</sup>

For tourism businesses, these kinds of strategies have always been at the core of our success. These values build emotional connections to brands. They are by no means easily achievable, *but a clear strategy will assist destinations and businesses in creating a path to success.*

**To find out more about how you can optimise your destination or business in the world of semantic search, please visit us at [www.MyTravelResearch.com](http://www.MyTravelResearch.com) or email [bronwyn@mytravelresearch.com](mailto:bronwyn@mytravelresearch.com).**

### (Endnotes)

- 1 Asher Elran, Kissmetrics, November 15, 2013.
- 2 <http://googleblog.blogspot.com.au/2012/08/building-search-engine-of-future-one.html>
- 3 Google: The 2013 Traveler <http://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/research-studies/2013-traveler.html>
- 4 Joe Puluzzi, Content Marketing Institute, <http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/author/joepuluzzi/>
- 5 "Semantic Search and What It Means to Business." [www.davidamerland.com](http://www.davidamerland.com).
- 6 "Google Semantic Search: Search Engine Optimization (SEO) techniques that get your company more traffic, increase brand impact, and amplify your online presence. David Amerland, 2013 Que Publishing.



## ABOUT MYTRAVELRESEARCH.COM

MyTravelResearch.com is a market research and marketing firm specializing in the travel, tourism and aviation industries. Our specialty is providing insight that is actionable.

Founded by principals with a lifetime's experience in travel, tourism and aviation, we exist to build the visitor economy and successful tourism businesses.

We do so by putting the voice of the customer and best practice business thinking into an easy to implement, hands on approach via an innovative membership model. We can help:

- ▶ National Tourism Organizations (NTO's) meet the expectations of their industry acting as an extension of their research resources
- ▶ Businesses make more informed decisions. It is like having your own research and/or marketing team

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