MIND THE GOOGLE!

Understanding the impact of the
Google Knowledge Graph
on your shopping center website.

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The role of Google in generating traffic to your website can't be overstated. With only 19.8% of traffic coming from direct navigation *(figure 1)*, it's clear that most of your site visitors are simply entering your center's name into Google and following the organic search result link to your site. Recently, however, Google has begun to intercept some of this traffic and is supplying information to the shopper directly on the search results page (SERP), eliminating the need for many searchers to click through to your site. This is affecting all brand and publisher sites across all industries. And while this isn't necessarily bad, understanding what is going on and how it affects your digital marketing effort is vital to your future success.
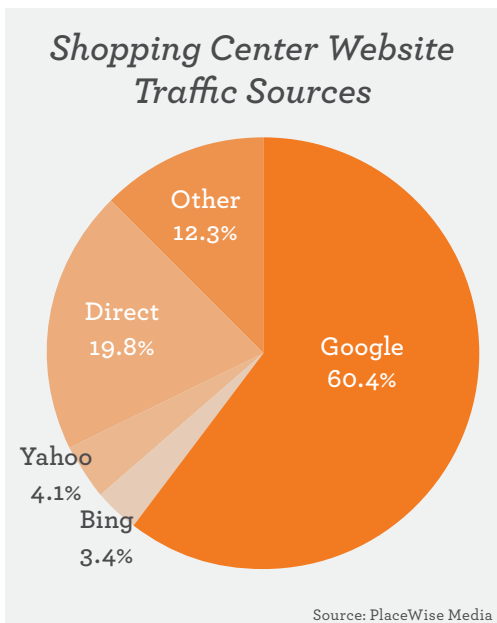
Shopping Center Website Traffic Sources

Other 12.3%

Direct 19.8%

Google 60.4%

Yahoo 4.1%

Bing 3.4%

Source: PlaceWise Media

Figure 1 - Organic Traffic Sources

Since 2012, we have seen the rise of the ***Google Knowledge Graph*** – an artificial intelligence system that seeks to understand entities (people, places and things) and to provide answers to questions about those entities. Google wants to deliver more than a simple link to a website. It's a fascinating and bold vision that probably has some fairly substantial social impacts as it grows stronger.   The Google Knowledge Graph is based on what is called the "semantic web," where disparate data is connected, enabling things like search results coming from plain language questions. "What time does Short Pump Town Center close today?" is the type of question that is answered directly on the SERP. Services like Apple's Siri are generating searches like this. This is Google's way of getting a better response to the user and to keep the user within the Googlesphere as long as possible. The longer users stay on Google, the more ad revenue they generate for Google.

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We've all seen this – the *"answer box"* (figure 2) at the top of the page that gives you that quick answer you're seeking. Very nice. Thank you, Google.

Figure 2 - Google's Answer Box for Knowledge Graph Search

Then there's the *"info panel"* (figure 3) – this is an example of how Google is mining the web to present searchers with the answers they seek. Basic queries are answered directly on the SERP, and users can go about their business with no further interaction.

For example, a search for Short Pump Town Center in Richmond, VA presents the info panel seen in Figure 3.

Here we can clearly see the hours and location of the center, which has been pulled from its website and presented to the searcher right on the Google SERP. We have seen layouts of much more extensive Info Panel returns, including directories and movie times. Regardless, for someone looking for today's hours, there is no need to click through to the center website. Which means there's no chance to let the user know about a new store opening, a mall-wide sale or a great event this week. Just the hours. Brands and SEO pundits have legitimate concerns over this, but there is little that can be done to stop it. Instead, as marketers, we need to embrace it and understand how we can work more effectively with the Knowledge Graph, supplying it with content and information while we build alternate channels of audience development outside of Google.
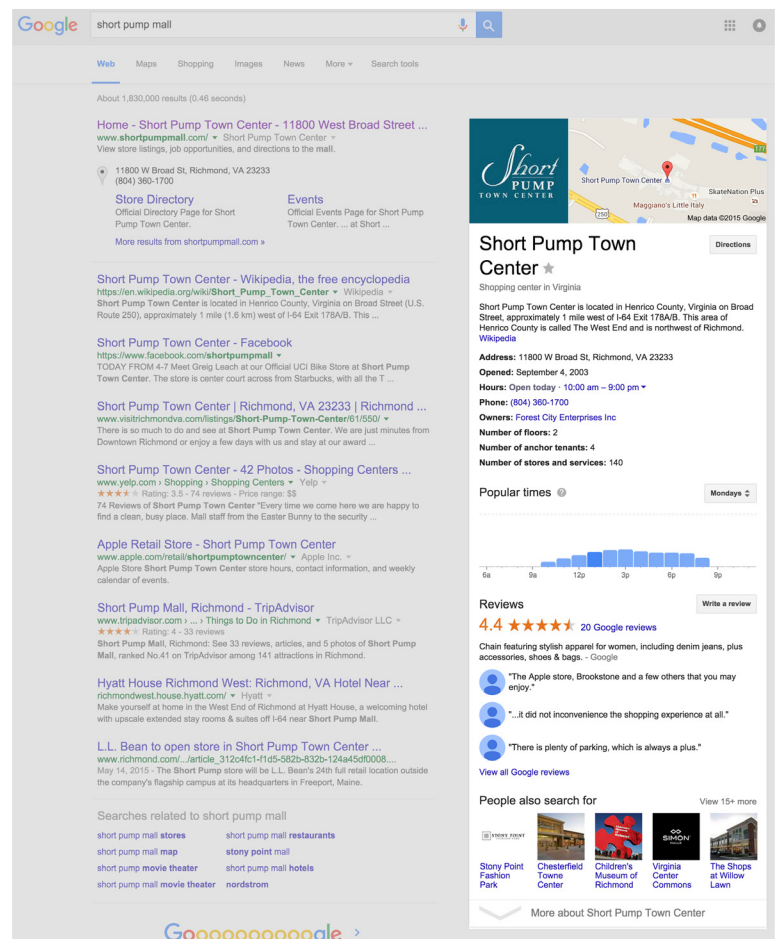

Figure 3 - Google's Info Panel for Short Pump Town Center Search

So what is the impact of the Google Knowledge Graph on brand websites?

There have been reports that Wikipedia has seen traffic decreases up to 20% as a result of Knowledge Graph presenting Wikipedia content in the search results page. Just ask Google "Who acted in Gone with the Wind?," and see if you have any need to click through to Wikipedia or IMDb. The same thing is happening to your shopping center traffic.

Year Over Year Traffic Comparisons
August 2011-2015
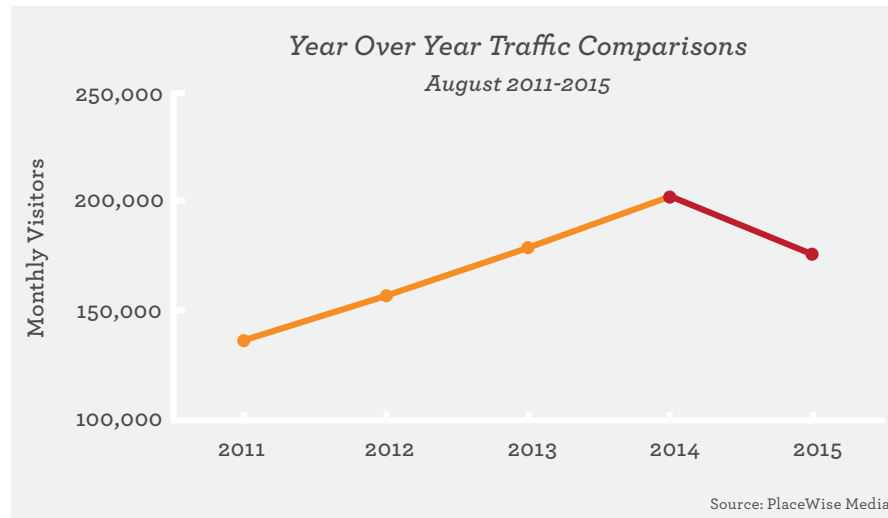
Source: PlaceWise Media

Figure 4a

To understand this impact, we looked at traffic from 2011 to 2015 for 125 shopping centers. We normalized the study group to include only traditional malls – no power centers, no tourist centers and no outlets. In Figure 4a, the time period covers the most dramatic rise in the presence of the Info Panel. In Figure 4b, we took the last year (2014-15) and looked at the year over year comparison by month.
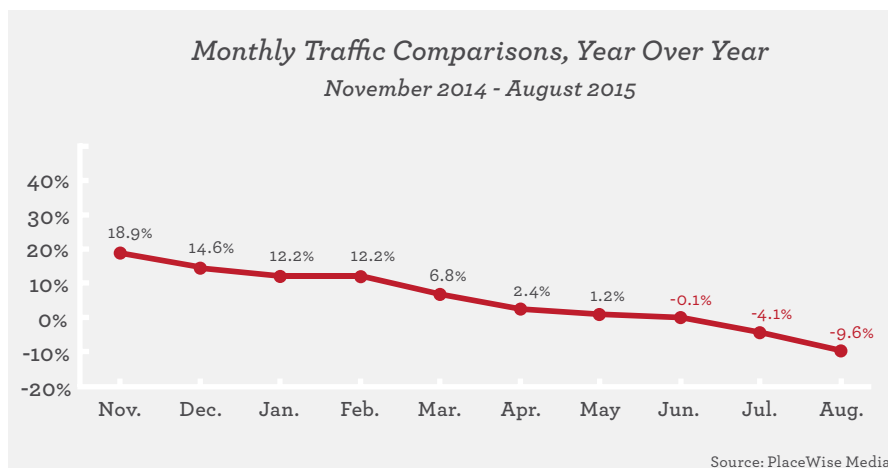
Monthly Traffic Comparisons, Year Over Year
November 2014 - August 2015

18.9% 14.6% 12.2% 12.2% 6.8% 2.4% 1.2% -0.1% -4.1% -9.6%

Source: PlaceWise Media

Figure 4b

While Google does not make historical traffic for Info Panel results available, we looked at the results of a single center in a suburban metro area and found some interesting results *(see Figure 5)*.
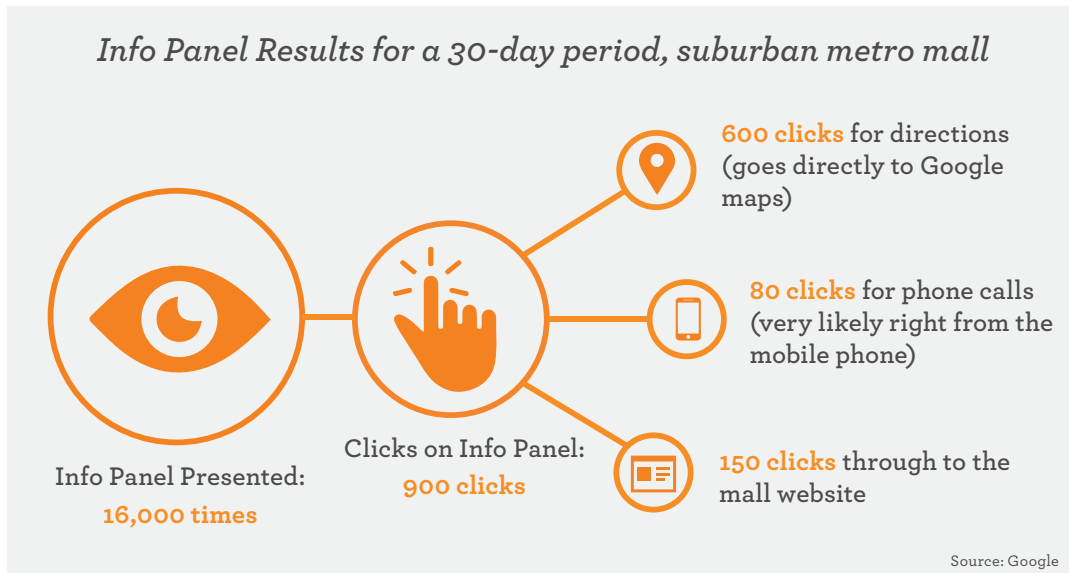

Info Panel Results for a 30-day period, suburban metro mall

Info Panel Presented: **16,000 times**

Clicks on Info Panel: **900 clicks**

600 clicks for directions (goes directly to Google maps)

80 clicks for phone calls (very likely right from the mobile phone)

150 clicks through to the mall website

Source: Google

Figure 5 - Info Panel Results

What does this mean?

Of course, as the brand or the shopping center operator, we want to engage the shopper as deeply as possible, and bringing them to our website is a great way to do that. When a shopper seeking today's hours lands on the home page, they are exposed to other content that may interest them, which leads to greater engagement and hopefully more sales. However, with the Info Panel meeting the immediate needs of the shopper, the chance to upsell or cross sell is lost. We will see a decrease in this kind of traffic, and there is little that can be done to regain it. Indeed, the entire SEO industry is currently scratching its head on how to respond to this new reality. If Knowledge Graph becomes the default information database, will optimizing for search even be necessary?

For some businesses this will be catastrophic, but for shopping centers, if the objective of shopper marketing, including digital, remains the same – drive the shopper to the center to make a purchase – then we have opportunity to engage an even larger audience than before. This engagement is already coming from multiple sources – web, email, mobile, apps, social and even Google. Understanding this playing field is key to developing a strategy to take advantage of it.

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Across our portfolio of shopping centers, we see roughly 5-10% of the foot traffic of any given center interact with the website in any given month. But as more channels of media evolve, the 90% we don't interact with will be joining the fray. Going forward, **more people will be interacting with your center digitally, not fewer**. And this is driven by broad market forces of consumer adoption which are even bigger than Google.

This new digital audience will come through a growing array of mobile and social channels that blend digital applications and real world interaction. We are still in the early days of development, and much more innovation awaits us all.

> *More people will be interacting with your center digitally, not fewer.*

PlaceWise will introduce a number of new services in the coming months, centered on managed digital presence for shopping centers that reaches beyond the traditional web.

As for the Google Knowledge Graph, there is no handbook on how to influence it. It's smarter than Google's old search algorithms that were susceptible to undue influence by search marketing experts. We believe that trying to outguess the Knowledge Graph and treat it like an SEO issue is currently not worth the effort. We are better served by conforming to its direction and optimizing our content for its consumption. If this feels like we are yielding to the Borg, we are in a way. Google is not going to change the Knowledge Graph, and it will continue to relate the content we publish with everything else in the world and serve the answers it thinks best match the user's intent.

We are implementing an approach that optimizes the center's digital content in a way that establishes the center as an authoritative source to feed Google's results. To achieve this, we are doing the following:

1. Taking active control of our centers' Google Plus accounts and updating content with accurate information.
2. Optimizing the data schema on our clients' sites. With the growth of Knowledge Graph, new standards of data schemas that identify information in a way that the Google bot really understands makes content easier to consume and establishes authority over the entity.
3. Updating Wikipedia entries with accurate information.
4. Managing entries in online databases that feed the Knowledge Graph. Beyond Wikipedia are other sources of data that provide unbiased data about entities across the world. Google relies on these databases, and assuring data integrity will help feed Google with the right information.

Each of these requires implementation and ongoing management. At PlaceWise, our team of digital media experts is already working to ensure that the information that Google is publishing is accurate and up to date. If Google is going to tell people what time the center opens on Black Friday, we want them to have the most up to date hours. The steps outlined above can make sure that this happens.

Beyond the Google

No one is escaping Google in the near term, nor is this necessary. There are many existing and emerging channels of shopper communication outside of Google. And while business models and technologies evolve to meet the needs of the shopper, these new channels are looking to deliver your content to engage their audience. Creating and curating good content and publishing across an ever-evolving landscape of social and technical platforms is how we expand beyond Google. On-premise and proximity marketing are excellent ways to reach and connect with mobile users who are currently at your center. Keep in mind there are still 90% of the people who come to your center with whom we can engage digitally. That's a lot of upside opportunity.

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John Dee is Chief Operating Officer of PlaceWise Media, the nation's leading provider of digital marketing solutions for the shopping center industry. For more information on PlaceWise Media, visit www.placewise.com.