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Domain: A questions and answers / opinions site
Topic: A competitive analysis of the website 'Quora' (www.quora.com)

Quora is a questions and answers site where users can ask questions related to various topics and domains which are answered by the large community of users that are registered to Quora. Single answers in Quora can be view without registration, but the full access of the features of the site requires registration.

The main home page of Quora has a list of pages which each consists of a question and the top ranked answer for each of the question. This list of pages is ranked based on factors which will be discussed later in detail. On the left side of the home page, a list of topics (feeds) appear, which are customizable by the user according to their preference. A click on one of the feeds, filters the main list of pages based on the selected feed. A click on one of the questions takes the user to the article page, which gives the question in full and the list of all answers given by the community which is ranked based on the number of upvotes, previous answers written by the author, content of the answers and whether the answer contains photos and links

Quora, uses both personalization and recommendations in its website. On registration, it lets the user select a minimum of 10 topics and domains that he/she is interested. It also optionally asks the user to compile a list of topics that the user is an expert in so that user may be able to contribute his/her own answers on those topics. This list is editable from the website's main home page. The articles listed on the home page are generally related to one of these topics. Quora also remembers the topics of the questions that the user usually reads despite them not being among his selected favorite topics. Therefore, the recommended list of questions is ranked on based on the user selected topics as well as the user revealed preferences. Once in a while, the recommended list also contains questions on certain topics which are neither users stated or revealed preferences.

In the article page Quora uses recommendation to suggest a list of questions related to the page that the user is currently in. This list is not personalized to the user and is same for all the user despite differences in their tastes.

My assessment is that Quora does a fairly good job in both personalization and recommendation. Sometimes, the list of questions on the home page are irrelevant and the user has to scroll down a lot to find the question article that he/she is interested in. Also, in the article page, though the "Related Questions" section may help a serious reader of Quora find questions and answers related to the page he/she is currently reading, the absence of a personalized list of related questions makes the entire section irrelevant to a casual user of Quora, who perhaps would want a list of questions related to both the topic and his interests.

In my opinion, Quora has tackled the user facing and engineering concerns quite well. It saves the history of the questions visited and articles that the user has read and finds out user's preferred topics that he/she has not mentioned in the list topics he/she is interested in. So, Quora maintains a good balance between the stated preference (topics selected by the user) and the new revealed preferences while recommending the questions in the home page.

Moreover, its rule of selecting a minimum of 10 topics of interest and topics of expertise does a fantastic job at removing the cold-start engineering concern and helps the website suggest some questions and articles despite having no historical information about the user. Also, with respect to the interpretability concern, the list of questions suggested on the home page mention the topic that it is related to, so that the user understands why a particular question has been recommended by Quora

But sometimes, Quora suggests questions on home page with a topic that is neither a stated preference, nor a revealed preference. These questions are tagged "Topic you might like". This are serendipitous kind topics which the user has no relation to. This is to introduce the user to new topics and generate user interest in topic that were unknown to him before. With respect to the flexibility problem, Quora has done an incredible job by keeping itself updated. It has kept its ranking algorithm updated and has now redeveloped it to include many factors.

Though there are a lot of good practices and features in Quora with respect to personalization, adding a few changes may increase the user experience of the site. First, the recommendation algorithm needs to be improved according to the mood of the person or his interests on that particular day. Quora suggestion on home page mainly depend on the past history and preferences of the user. For example, if the user's past history show that he/she is mainly interest in questions related to soccer, tv shows and food (in that order), it is noticed that the recommendation algorithm shows questions on soccer topics at the top, and others a bit low in the recommendation list. Let us assume that the user wants to read about food today. Though he/she has read 5-10 question articles on food today on Quora, the recommendation retains the same order of topics. My opinion is that the recommendation should prioritize the questions on topics of interest of the recent past than the topics that he has read in far past.

One other thing that can be improved was mentioned before. In the articles page, the list of "Related Questions" need to be personalized according to the user. I feel that though the questions need to be related to the question, but the complexity of the questions and the depth in the questions must depend on the experience and interest of the user. If the user is new to the topic or if he infrequently visits the topic, then the related questions that are suggested must be of a lower complexity than those for a user who is frequently engaged in the topic or has answered many questions in the that particular topic. This makes the topic interesting for a newbie and encourages him to explore the topic.

Finally, I feel that the most innovative aspect of personalization in Quora as well as the most important thing that a competing company like ours needs to implement is the learning mechanism of the service with respect to the revealed preferences of the user. It is incredible that the service tracks the likes of the users through various sources. I believe that it also keeps track of the questions and topics that the user has discovered not just directly from Quora, but also from 3rd party search engines that provide Quora links to their querries, which makes an excellent case for learning the user's mindset.

I would like to complete my report saying that while building a question and answers site, it is highly important to keep the user in mind. A good personalized system for such a site must keep the user's level of knowledge and expertise of a particular subject in mind before making any question recommendation. I believe that that if the service we build puts this fact at the core of its mechanism, we may be able to build a better service than Quora and give it a tough fight in this space.