

Google Secure Search Analysis

Evaluating the Impact of SSL Search on Google.com Organic Traffic

January 3, 2012

BACKGROUND

On Tuesday October 18, 2011, Google [announced](#) that users logged into Google would see their organic queries default to HTTPS (Secure HTTP) instead of HTTP. This is described by Google as an enhancement to protect the privacy of users. Paid search is not impacted at this time.

Ultimately, this change will reduce visibility into why visitors are coming to your site. This is because, contrary to HTTP, HTTPS does not pass the referring query to the destination site. In other words, this means that Google has stopped passing the organic keywords that referred traffic to websites whenever users are logged into their Google accounts and conducting searches.

This referring information will be displayed differently within all solutions that track usage across websites, including Google Analytics and all the web analytics vendors (Omniture, Webtrends, Coremetrics, etc.).

WHAT IS SSL?

SSL (Secure Sockets Layer) is a protocol that helps provide secure Internet communications for services like web browsing, e-mail, instant messaging, and other data transfers. When a search is completed over SSL, the search query and search traffic is encrypted so that intermediary parties that might have access to the network can't easily see the user's queries.

GOOGLE SECURE SEARCH ANALYSIS

Razorfish conducted research across a broad range of over 30 client websites to assess the impact of Google Secure Search on "not provided" organic traffic as a percentage of Google organic traffic. Our site selections varied by size and industry, and represented an aggregate search volume of over 9,500,000 visits.

Background:

Google recently announced the use of SSL Search for those users signed into their Google accounts. This means that Google has stopped passing the organic keywords that referred traffic to websites whenever users are logged into their Google accounts and conducting searches on Google.com.

Research:

Despite an early prediction from Google of single-digit percentages of impacted traffic, based on Razorfish's analysis, this change is currently impacting an average of 12% of the organic referrals originating from Google.com.

Mitigation:

Ultimately, there is not a single solution for the impacted traffic. Rather, a consolidated effort of leveraging Google Webmaster Tools, evaluating past performance and building out an integrated SEO and PPC campaign will aid in closing the gap of any impacted data.

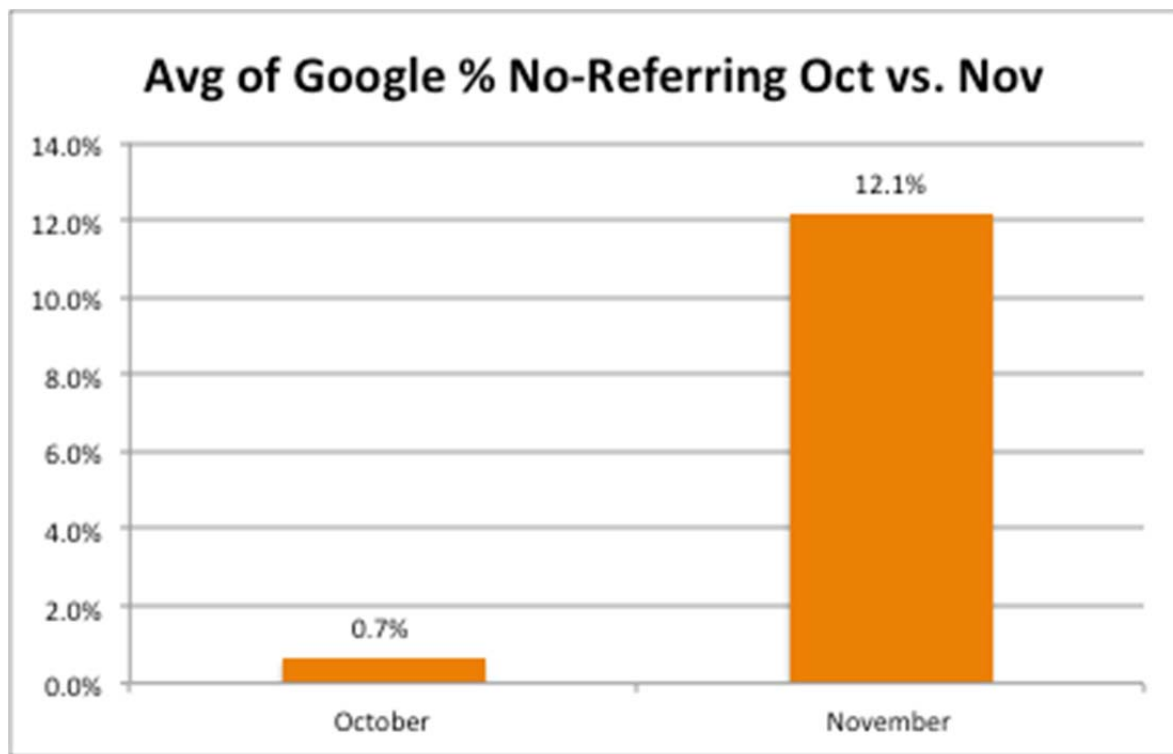
In order to evaluate the impact of this change, we pulled total vs. Google organic search traffic for both October and November. We then pulled “not provided” organic traffic for those same two months and evaluated the change month over month as a percentage of “not provided” organic traffic vs. total Google organic traffic.

OVERALL IMPACT

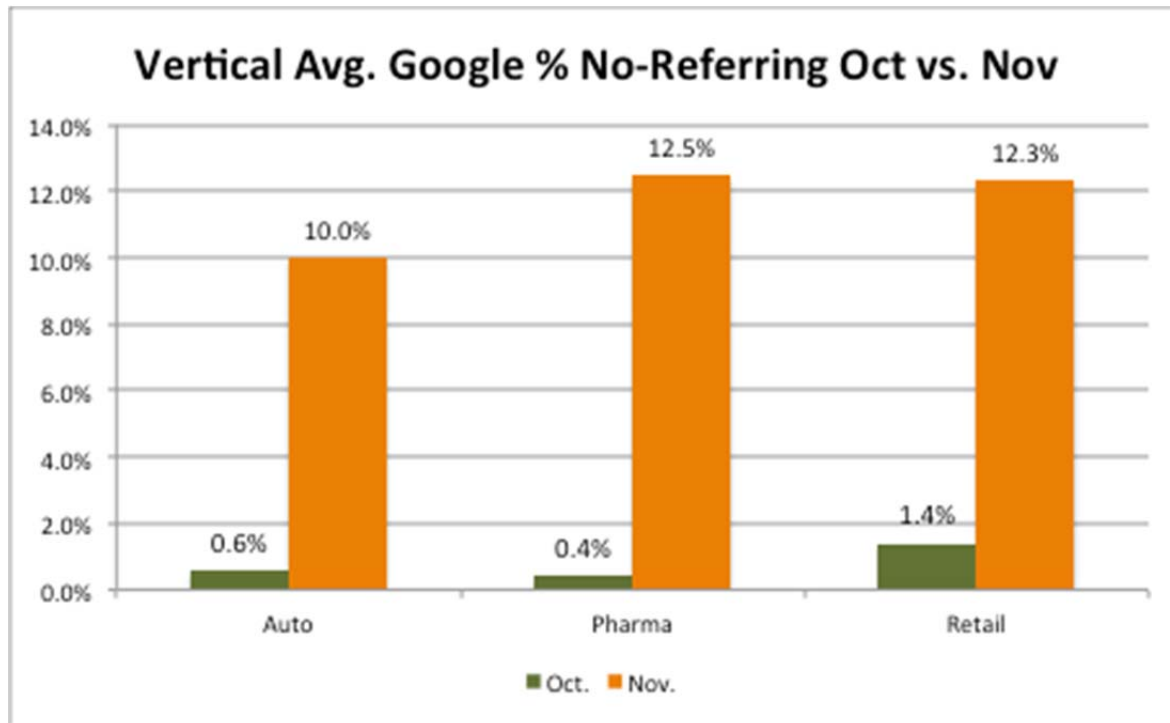
When [questioned](#) by Danny Sullivan of SearchEngineLand, Google provided the following estimate on the impact to search referral data:

Google software engineer Matt Cutts, who’s been involved with the privacy changes, wouldn’t give an exact figure but told me he estimated even at full roll-out, this would still be in the **single-digit percentages** of all Google searchers on Google.com.

Based on Razorfish’s analysis, this change is currently impacting just over 12% of the organic referrals originating from Google.com. This is slightly above the early estimates aforementioned by Google.



It also appears the impact is not limited to individual verticals. Through this analysis, we evaluated the impact on three primary verticals: Automotive, Pharma and Retail. Based on the chart below, all three verticals realized a significant spike in impacted traffic in November ranging from 10% - 12.5%, with Pharma being the most significantly impacted.



The reason these percentages are not higher is because:

- 1) Google requires users to be logged in to Google
- 2) Users have to perform their queries on Google.com and not through another site or toolbar
- 3) Google is progressively rolling out this change for all signed-in queries

ALTERNATIVES TO MITIGATE THE LONG TERM IMPACT OF SSL SEARCH

Below are a few alternatives to help supplement your analytics data in an attempt to help mitigate the impact of lost organic keyword visibility. It is important to note, however, these suggestions will not replace all missing data from your Analytics program.

1. Creating Custom Analytic Reports

These examples will focus on Google Analytics, however, the segmentation and custom reports can be applied to any analytics provider settings.

- Establish a Baseline:

The most important thing moving forward is to establish a baseline and consistently report to measure the impact of SSL Search moving forward. This custom report is essentially a view of the highest-level data for “not provided” traffic: Visits, Unique Visitors, Bounce Rates and Goal Completions.

Keyword	Visits	↓ Unique Visitors	Bounce Rate	Goal Completions
1. (not provided)	12,000	11,000	91.67%	1,000

With this data, you can quickly establish “not provided” traffic as a percentage of both total organic traffic and Google organic traffic. You can download a sample report into your GA account by clicking on this link after you are logged into GA: [Google https Change Impact](#) (compliments of [Avinash Kaushik](#)).

- **Landing Page Keyword Referral Analysis**

By analyzing (not provided) traffic landing page entry points, it is possible to do a pre/post analysis on referring keywords for those landing pages with high “not provided” traffic. First, create an advanced segment for the (not provided) traffic.

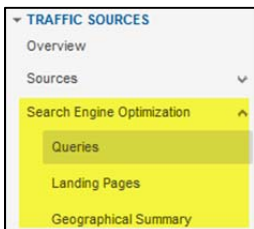
Name:

Include **Keyword** Exactly matching

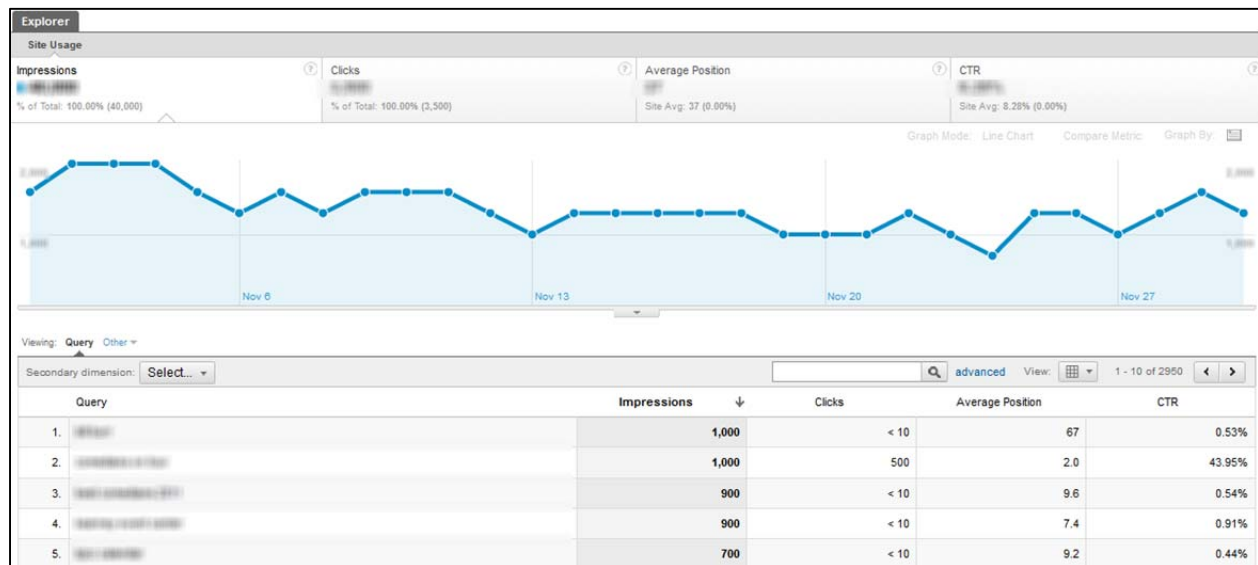
Next, apply it to your standard Landing Pages report in Google Analytics (or SiteCatalyst, WebTrends, etc.). Then identify any pages where (not provided) traffic enters the site at a higher rate than overall Google traffic. From there, attempt to identify which keywords might be contributing traffic to (not provided) by analyzing the referring keywords to those pages prior to the change and after the https change.

Analytics expert, Avinash Kaushik, dives a bit deeper into (not provided) traffic analysis on his blog and the two ideas above are part of his [analysis strategy](#).

2. Google Webmaster Tools and Google Analytics Integration



According to Google, you will still be able to get to some of this information in Google Webmaster Tools. With that in mind, ensure the Webmaster Tools account is verified and synced with the corresponding Google Analytics account. Once synced, you will be able to access query, impression, average position and CTR data for your organic traffic within Google Analytics by navigating to the ‘Search Engine Optimization’ section within ‘Traffic Sources’. This information will also be available within your Google Webmaster Tools dashboard.



Note* Available referring queries will exclude site interaction such as page views and on-site activities

3. Search Engine Optimization: Leveraging Paid Search Data

Despite the change in organic keyword traffic measurement for those signed into their Google accounts, it is important to note that best practices for optimizing your site – on-page, backlinks, social, internal linking - remain unchanged. However, you might see a decrease over time in visits and conversions associated to specific keywords. As a result, your SEO efforts should now leverage paid search insights at an ever-deeper level given the increasing cloudiness of organic keyword-by-keyword analytics.

- Quickly Evaluate Keywords

With paid search, you can quickly test keywords and, depending on the search volume, a good sample size of impressions/clicks/leads can be acquired within a week or so. With the limited visibility coming from organic traffic, the paid search data will help determine whether the time and energy to try and achieve an organic ranking for those keywords and keyword phrases is justified.

- Quickly Evaluate Keyword-to-Page Alignment

A significant challenge with enterprise SEO engagements is determining the proper alignment between keyword and landing page. This is now even more difficult as SSL impacted organic traffic will provide little insight into individual keyword-to-landing page performance.

In lieu of organic keyword data, similar data can be captured using a paid search landing page test that closely evaluates paid keyword+landing page performance. By weighing key performance metrics from the test, a more educated decision can be made for any changes to the SEO keyword alignment.

Some of these key metrics include bounce rates, time on site, average page views and lead/conversion performance.

- Improve Organic Click Through Rates

Organic title tags essentially serve two purposes:

- Tell a bot about a page's content
- Serve as a click-through generating headline on search result pages

A similar relationship exists for a PPC headline. The primary goal is to draw attention to itself, and also to ultimately get the click when there is a good match between the search intent and the website.

Recent changes to the way [Adwords headlines are displayed](#) have opened the door to much stronger testing of calls-to-action that can significantly impact organic click through rates. Most search engine organic headlines are 55 – 65 characters. A paid search headline can be 60 characters when it is displayed above the organic results and the description line 1 ends in a punctuation mark.

The image shows a screenshot of search results for 'Dallas Hotels'. Four search results are visible, each with a title and a character count overlay:

- Result 1: **Dallas Hotels - Official Site - Our Best Rates | StarwoodHotels.com** (57 characters)
- Result 2: **Dallas Hyatt Hotels | Dallas Hyatt.com** (59 characters)
- Result 3: **Dallas Hotels - Over 400 Hotels Around Dallas-** (57 characters)
- Result 4: **Dallas Hotels - Compare Hotels in Dallas and Bo** (59 characters)
- Result 5: **Dallas Hotels: Read Dallas Hotel Reviews and C** (62 characters)

(photo credit: [Brad Geddes](#))

There can be a lot of resistance to changing Title tags once a ranking is achieved for certain keywords because it can affect organic rankings. However, if the headline is not very compelling, searchers will not be compelled to click on the listing. By using paid search performance as a proxy, the impacts on CTR can now be tested in order to justify whether a Title change is warranted.

Learn more about [leveraging paid and organic search together](#).

4. Creating Secure Site Versions

The general rule: browsers do not transmit referrer information when navigating from an https page to an http page.

If you click a link in the search results at <https://encrypted.google.com>, your browser navigates directly to the site. If the site is on [http](http://), your browser does not pass the referrer information to the Google Analytics tracking script, [ga.js](#); it appears to be a 'direct' navigation. However, if the site you click on is [https](https://), your browser will pass the referrer information and [ga.js](#) will detect a Google/organic search *including* keywords.

For <https://www.google.com>, which will now be automatically used for logged in users, the behavior is different. When you click on a result page, your request is first redirected through an [http](http://)-hosted redirect page. As a result, the referrer is always provided to the site, but this new referrer only indicates that a Google organic search occurred and does not include the actual keywords. This is the case that results in Google/organic traffic with the keywords set to "not provided".

As a result, creating a secure [https](https://) version of your site is **NOT** an option to retain organic keyword data. This has been confirmed by Razorfish contacts within the Google Analytics team at Google.

CONCLUSION

While the immediate impact is tipping past 12% of Google organic traffic, at this time SSL search is only available for [Google.com](http://google.com) searches. As Google works to bring this functionality to all Google domains, Razorfish expects the impact to increase in the coming months.

Additionally, with the growth of Google products requiring sign-in such as Gmail and Google+, it is likely the user base that remains signed in will increase over time – further impacting the total percentage of "not provided" search traffic.

With the above in mind, it will be vitally important to incorporate these three steps in order to make educated and strategic decisions in the coming months:

- 1) Create custom reports and segments in order to establish baselines for impacted traffic and leverage historic data for keyword clues that might be contributing to (not provided) traffic
- 2) Set up a Google Webmaster Tools account to maintain visibility on organic impression and keyword data
- 3) Put more emphasis on evaluating your paid search and SEO efforts as a holistic marketing program in order to take advantage of mutual insights

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jon Clark, Associate Search Director



Jon joined Razorfish in 2010 where he is responsible for planning and executing integrated SEO and SEM strategies and is heavily focused on ROI metrics and cross channel integration. He has a deep Search Engine Marketing background with over 7 years of experience in both paid search and SEO.

Jon's diverse work history includes working on the client-side, agency-side and publisher-side which helps gives him a unique view of the industry and potential opportunities.

You can follow him on Twitter [@ionleeclark](https://twitter.com/ionleeclark)

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