

Recent changes to the Google desktop search engine results page (SERP) layout have left many digital marketers like you feeling unsettled. Many are wondering what the impact will be to organic and paid search programs and how best to navigate search marketing going forward. It's like driving down a well-known road only to find that sign posts and exits have been changed. Might make you wonder how you'll reach your destination.

Fortunately, new BrightEdge research uncovers what these changes mean—and how to modify your search strategy and tactics to drive online customer engagement that delivers results.

Before we delve into the research, let's first look at what the changes are.

Google Aligns Its SERP Layout to I-Want-to-Buy Micro-Moments

Google has been piloting changes to its search results page layout for quite some time. But in February 2016, Google made the changes official:

- Ads and content were removed from the right side of the page, with the exception of product listing ads (PLAs) and the Knowledge Panel for certain search results
- Maximum number of text ads at the top of the page increased from three to four listings
- Up to three text ads will be displayed at the bottom of the page
- Maximum number of ads per page decreased from 11 to 7

The image below provides an example of the new search result layout with four ads at the top of the page.

The screenshot shows a Google search for "hotels in new york city". The search bar is at the top, with the Google logo on the left and a search button on the right. Below the search bar, there are navigation tabs for "All", "Maps", "Shopping", "Images", "Apps", and "More", along with a "Search tools" link. The search results are displayed below, starting with "About 430,000,000 results (0.83 seconds)".

The first four results are text ads:

- Hotels In New York City - Hilton.com**
Ad www.hilton.com/New_York
5.0 ★★★★★ rating for hilton.com
Guaranteed Lowest Rates For Your New York, NY Stay. Book Now.
- New York City Hotels - Official Site - Starwood Hotels**
Ad www.starwoodhotels.com/NYC
5.0 ★★★★★ rating for starwoodhotels.com
Our Best Rates Guaranteed. Book Now
Great Weekend Rates · Exclusive Offers · Exclusive Rewards For SPG
Book Now · Best Rate Guarantee · Special Offers · Compare Rates
- Hotels In New York City - Find Deals & Read Real Reviews**
Ad www.tripadvisor.com/New_York_City
New York City deals on TripAdvisor!
Millions of hotel reviews · Easy price comparison · Candid traveler photos
Types: Hotels, Things to Do, Restaurants
Winner, 2015 People's Voice Award for Travel – Webby Awards
- 740 Hotels in New York NY - Half-Price Hotels**
Ad www.booking.com/New-York-Hotels
Book your Hotel in New York NY
Types: Hotels, Apartments, Villas, Hostels, Resorts, B&Bs

Below the ads is a map of New York City showing hotel locations. The map includes labels for Weehawken, New York, Hoboken, Jersey City, and various neighborhoods like Hell Kitchen, East Village, and Gramercy Park. A legend at the bottom of the map shows "Map data ©2016 Google".

Below the map are filters for dates: "Sun, May 15" and "Mon, May 16". There are also filters for "Price", "Rating", "Hotel class", and "Amenities", and a "Sort by" dropdown menu.

The first hotel listing is "New York Marriott Marquis" with a price of "\$341". It has a 4.2 ★★★★★ rating and is described as a "4-star hotel" and "Tower hotel with a revolving restaurant". A small image of the hotel is shown to the right of the listing.

According to Google, the appearance of this 4-pack of ads at the top of the page corresponds to “highly commercial queries”. Examples of “commercial queries” include topics such as “hotels in New York City” and “car insurance”. Other examples are “CRM software” and “energy management systems”.

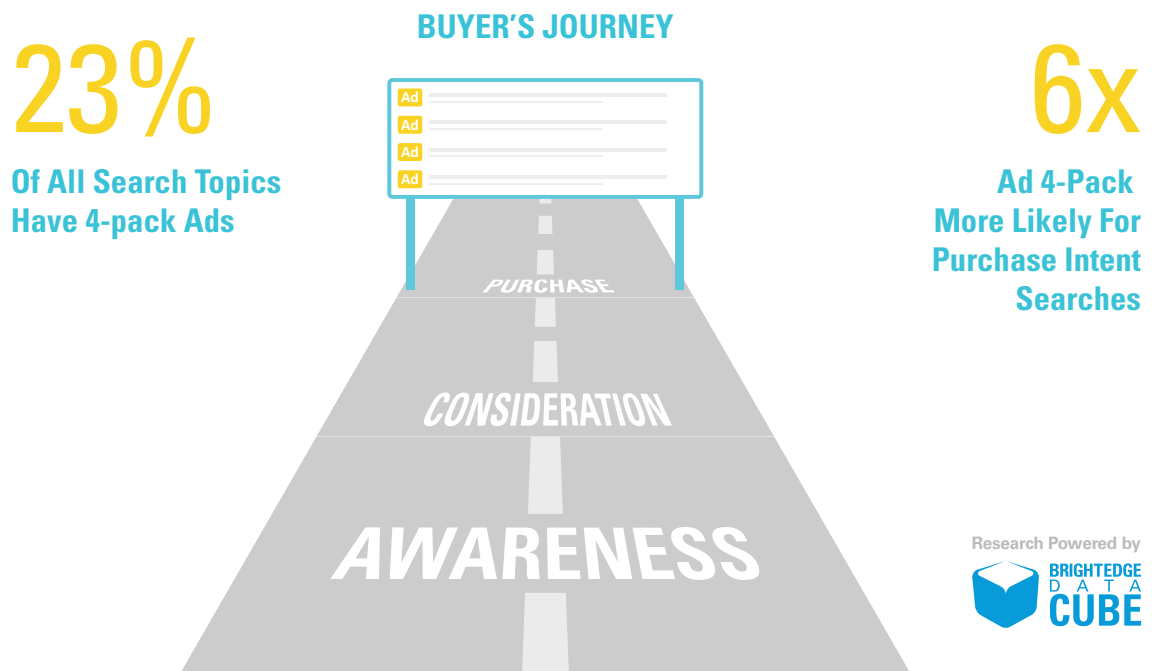
The goal here is to align an increased number of ads with consideration or purchase intent so that the search result experience is better for people searching and ad performance is better for advertisers.

With this new layout, it appears that Google is aligning its content to the customer journey. And in this scenario where the 4-pack of ads appears at the top of the page, the content is mapped to the “I-want-to-buy micro-moment”.

So, What Do These Layout Changes Mean for Marketers?

To understand the impact of this new page layout on organic and paid search, BrightEdge analyzed over 7,000 keywords covering the broad spectrum of the customer journey. The findings below provide useful insight to guide our thinking in how we develop our organic, paid search and content strategies going forward:

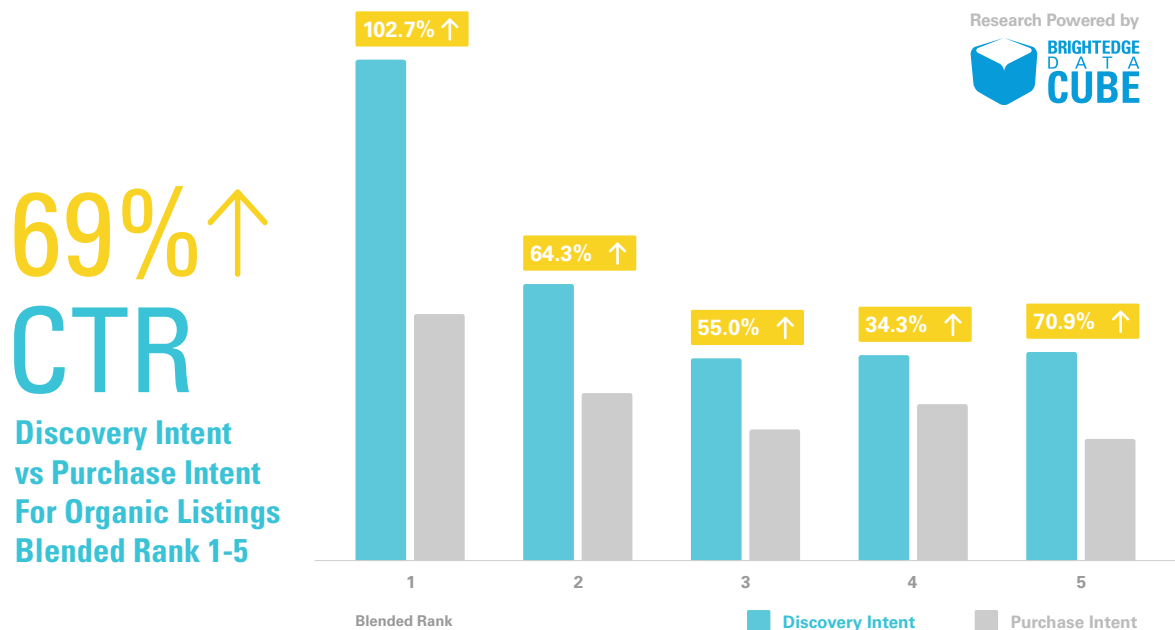
- 23% of all online search topics on the Google US search engine now feature the new search page layout with four ads at the top of the page
- Searches indicating purchase intent are six times more likely than all other searches to display this four-pack of ads



What this means is that although nearly 1 in 4 searches display the 4-pack of ads, *organic listings for searches with discovery intent will typically appear higher on the page than those for searches with purchase intent*. Or more simply stated, searches with discovery intent should be more favorable to organic listings than searches with purchase intent.

To test this hypothesis, we also analyzed click-through-rates (CTRs) to see what the performance differences might be for early customer journey searches as compared to those later in the journey. The findings held true: *searches with discovery intent have a 69% higher click-through-rate for the top five organic listings, as compared to the top five organic listings for those searches with purchase-intent*.

In addition, when we look at CTRs by blended rank position (see illustration below), we find that the first position has the biggest performance difference, nearly 103% higher CTR for organic listings with discovery intent as compared to those with purchase intent. The differences are much less dramatic for positions two through five, but still significant. The illustration below highlights the key findings.



What's important to note here is that although ranking in the top positions drives more traffic for searches with discovery intent, searches with purchase intent still deliver meaningful CTRs for organic listings. For example, the first position CTR for purchase-intent searches is nearly 16%.

Aligning Search and Content Strategy to Micro-Moments and Customer Intent

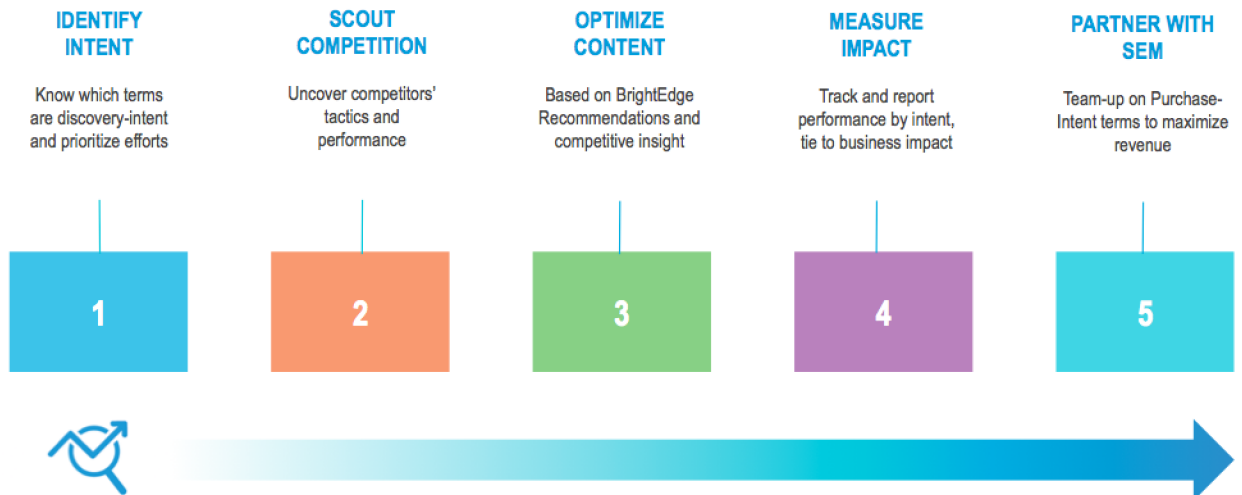
These findings provide essential insights to help digital marketers align organic search efforts to customer intent, and indicate that organic search and paid search marketers should team up to target terms where searchers demonstrate commercial intent, or buying behavior.

Research from Sirius Decisions indicates that at least [67 percent of the buyer's journey](#) is now done online. The key to search and digital marketing success lies in understanding the online customer journey and delivering trustworthy content relevant to what customers are looking for at each moment.

Since searches with commercial intent on average display a higher number of ads at the top of the page than other searches, click-through-rates are lower for organic search results as compared to those with fewer top-of-the-page. Knowing which terms have organic search results above the fold is critical to prioritizing efforts. For these topics, organic and paid search teams should work together in targeting these terms to boost ROI for both paid and organic efforts. It's also important for these teams to understand what content is currently ranking for these buying terms and to align their content strategy and planning to create web pages and assets that map to what searchers are looking for.

Conversely, for discovery topics where search results have fewer ads, organic search teams should take the lead in identifying content needs and developing high-performing online experiences that attract and convert more customers.

The illustration below summarizes the five-step approach we recommend to capitalize on these SERP layout changes.



Taking a leadership position in helping your marketing organization navigate these changes and develop a cohesive search marketing strategy will set you up to deliver engaging customer experiences that deliver real business impact at every micro-moment.

We Can Help You Get Started

To learn more about this research, navigating these SERP layout changes or how BrightEdge can help you attract and convert more customers across every micro-moment, [please contact us](#).

We look forward to hearing from you!

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