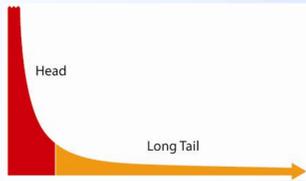# Heads or tails - the **Thick Head** vs the **L o n g   T a i l**   of search

Background

• Single word queries yield large numbers of results
• Leading terms generate a "thick head" of search results
• Longer, more specific searches generate fewer but more targeted results
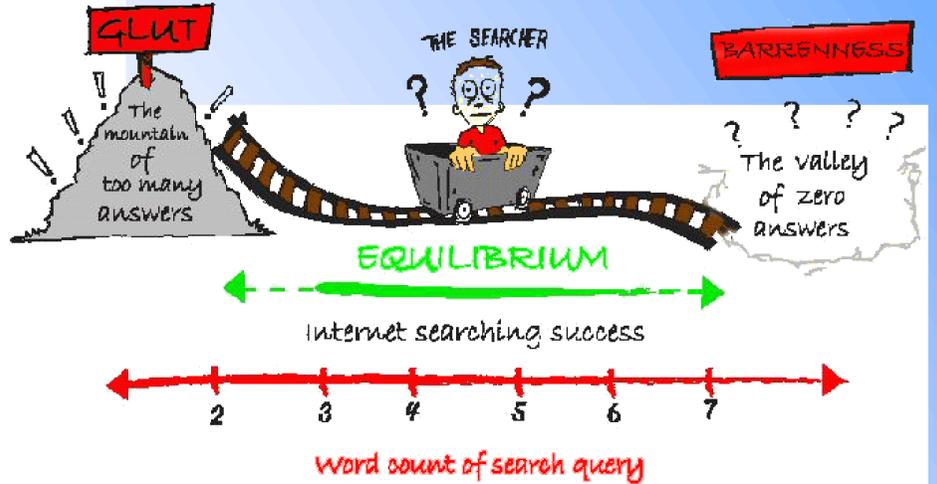• These queries, although more dispersed, form search's long tail

Research Problem

• Search marketers have a limited budget to spread over many marketing campaigns
• Many opportunities for ROI could be lost due to overspending on few, over-used search terms

Methodology

• Targeted Literature survey
• User experiments on search query length

High cost & competition

"shoes" > many results > low conversion rate

"running shoes" > fewer results > better conversion

"red Nike running shoes" > few results > focussed search > high conversion

 # Visits

Low cost & risk

Low probability of conversion

 # Keywords

High probability of conversion

But how big is this "long tail" treasure?

How does it compare to brand searches?

Results

R1 - Resources should be allocated to draw popular, short searches. More = better (if only a small percentage of these clicks are converted to sales, it would be financially viable)
R2 - Longer queries are used by more savvy searchers, implying a higher chance of conversion and thus income
R3 - Monthly searches done for unbranded terms exceed those for branded terms by up to 38 times
R4 – Using longer search terms lead to more focussed results
R5 – Marketers should spread budgets more evenly over both the thick head and the long tail of search

Conclusion

• Pay per click should be used for non-branded and generic searches
• SEO resources should be focussed on optimising a webpage for branded searches

References

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All commercial and many other websites have a strong motivation to ensure high rankings on search engine result pages. Much research has been done on the factors influencing website visibility, to both achieve these high rankings and prevent a website being banned from search engines' indices. One of the positive factors is the judicious choice of keywords to be used in the body of a webpage, as well as in ALT tags, hyperlinks and even filenames and URLs.

The algorithms of search engines match searchers' queries with keywords considered to be indicative of the content of a webpage. It follows that research should focus on the search traffic generated by the use of certain keywords. Popular keyphrases (often short, even single words) generate the "head" of search results - large numbers of clicks producing supposedly large income from sales. Less popular, often much longer keyphrases generate fewer clicks, but are much more focussed and could produce better results - the "tail" of search. The objective of this project is to determine the current status quo of the choice marketers have to make - concentrate on the thick head or the long tail of search.

A literature survey has proven that both search engine optimisation practitioners and academics are strongly divided on this issue. One school of thought is that resources should be allocated to draw the popular, short searches, arguing that "more is better" and that if only a small percentage of these clicks are converted to sales, it would be financially viable. The opposing argument states that longer queries are used by more savvy searchers, implying a higher chance of conversion and thus income. Research has proven that monthly searches done for unbranded terms exceed those for branded terms by up to 38 times.

In conclusion, it is proposed that pay per click should be used for non-branded and generic searches, while SEO resources should be focussed on optimising a webpage for branded searches.