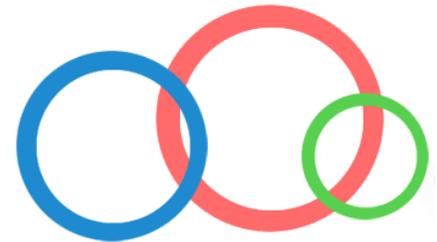


(not provided)

Google On the Rise

THE IMPACT OF GOOGLE'S SSL ENHANCEMENT ON SEO DATA



Introduction

On October 21, 2011 [Google announced](#) that it would be “enhancing [the] default search experience for signed-in users” by making SSL search the default search for signed-in users.

This change encrypts your search queries and Google’s results page and means that visits from organic search listings no longer include the information about each individual query. Instead, Google started passing the term “**(not provided)**” as the referring keyword for those organic search visits.

Google mitigated the issue of lack of search referral data by offering publishers to “...receive an aggregated list of the top 1,000 search queries that drove traffic to their site for each of the past 30 days through Google Webmaster Tools.”

Google did not block paid search visit data “to enable advertisers to measure the effectiveness of their campaigns and to improve the ads and offers they present to you.”

Following the announcement, in an interview with Danny Sullivan of Search Engine Land, Google software engineer Matt Cutts, who’s been involved with the privacy changes predicted that for searches on Google.com, data would be withheld in the “single digits.”

In March, 2012, [Conductor study](#) showed 16% of Google organic traffic is “(not provided)” and in April of this year, Poynter — a major site about journalism — found that 29% of its search term data had gone dark and that “(not provided)” was its top search term. ([Read the study](#))

This study is set to explore the impact of the SSL enhancement, also known as the “(not provided)” issue, on the organic visit referral data collected by publishers and website tracking solutions.

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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 you search over SSL, your search queries and search traffic are encrypted so that intermediary parties that might have access to your network can't easily see your results and search terms.

What has changed

- Search terms are encrypted and are excluded from the referrer headers that are part of the request sent to the result site you visit.
- The landing site still receives information that you are coming from Google, but not the query that was issued.
- If you click on an ad on the results page, your browser will send an unencrypted referrer that includes your query to the advertiser's site.
- Google logs the same information about your search when you're using SSL search as we do for unencrypted search. SSL search does not reduce the data that Google receives and logs when you search, or change the listing of the items in your Web History.



- Search terms are unencrypted and are sent to the result site
- Landing site receives information that the visit is from Google, Organic Search and can see the search term



- Search terms are encrypted and are not part of the information sent to the result site
- Landing site receives information that the visit is from Google, Organic Search, but the search term will be "(not provided)"

“To help you better identify the signed in user organic search visits, we created the token “(not provided)” within Organic Search Traffic Keyword reporting.”

“Making search more secure:
Accessing search query data in
Google Analytics”

[Google Analytics Blog](#)

“Not Provided” Study

Study question

What is the percentage of visits from Organic Search that show as “(not provided)”?

Methodology

We analyzed the organic traffic to 424 business-to-business (B2B) websites between November 1, 2011 to October 1, 2012. A total of **17,143,603** visits from organic search were analyzed; an average 1,428,634 visits per month. In that time, we captured a total of **7,241,093** referring keywords.

Study parameters

We analyzed visits from Google US only, and included only “.com” websites with 100 to 100,000 monthly visits.

“(not provided)” rate =
“(not provided)” Google US keyword visits / total Google US visits



Data Collected

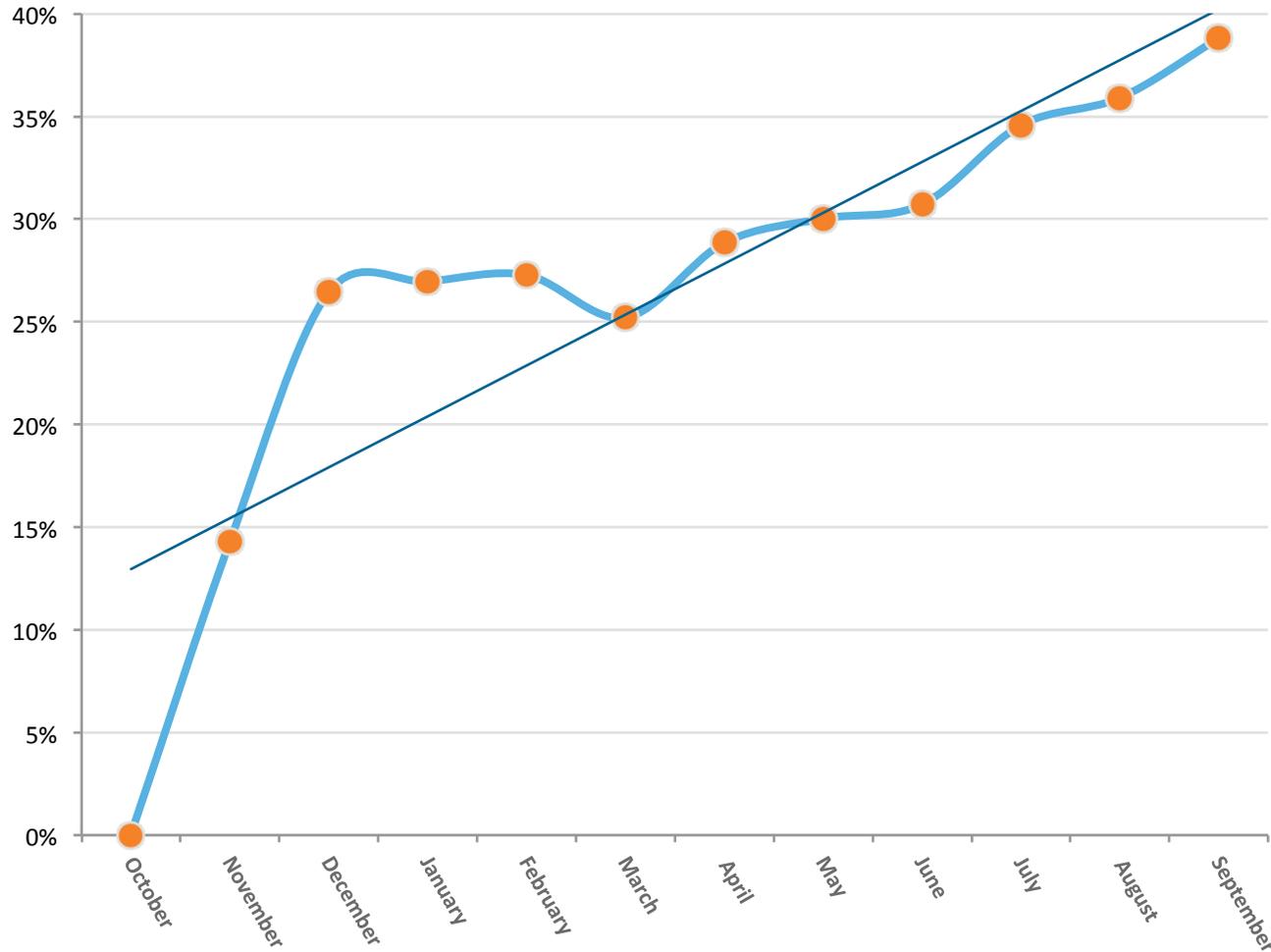
Month	Organic Search Visits	“Not Provided” Rate	Recognized Keywords Index
November	1,411,262	14%	1.00
December	1,594,103	26%	0.85
January	1,615,468	27%	0.78
February	1,474,839	27%	0.73
March	1,250,450	25%	0.76
April	1,609,780	29%	0.75
May	1,479,175	30%	0.72
June	1,369,198	31%	0.66
July	1,493,051	35%	0.66
August	1,429,473	36%	0.54
September	1,130,679	39%	0.51

Key findings

1. “(not provided)” now accounts for almost 40% of referring traffic data from organic search, an increase of 171% since originally introduced a year ago
2. 64% of companies analyzed in the study see 30%-50% of their traffic from Google as “(not provided)”
3. 81% of the companies analyzed in the study see over 30% of their traffic from Google as “(not provided)”
4. Recognized referring keywords from organic search declined by 49%

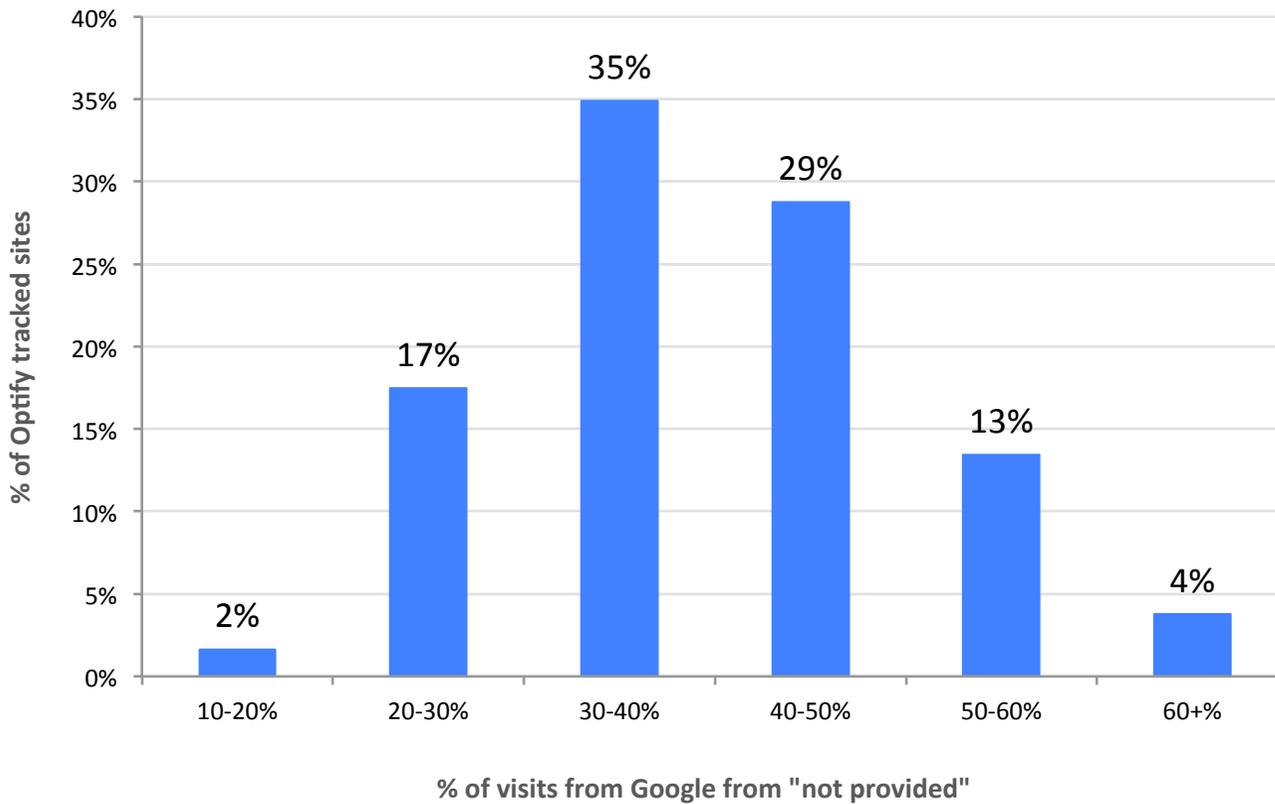


1. “(not provided)” rate up to 39% of organic visits



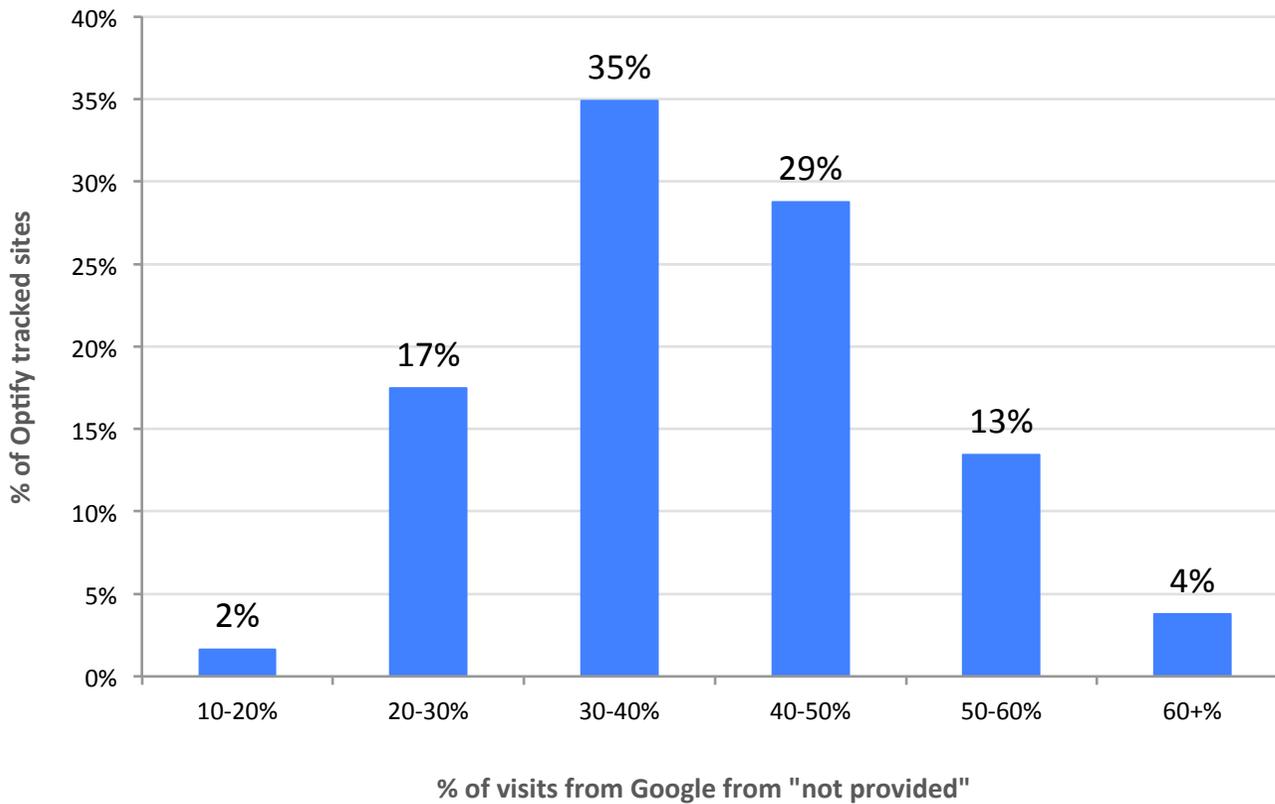
“(not provided)” rate is up 171% since its introduction. One of every 2.5 visits from organic search now show up as “not provided”.

2. 64% of companies see 30%-50% of their traffic from Google as “(not provided)”



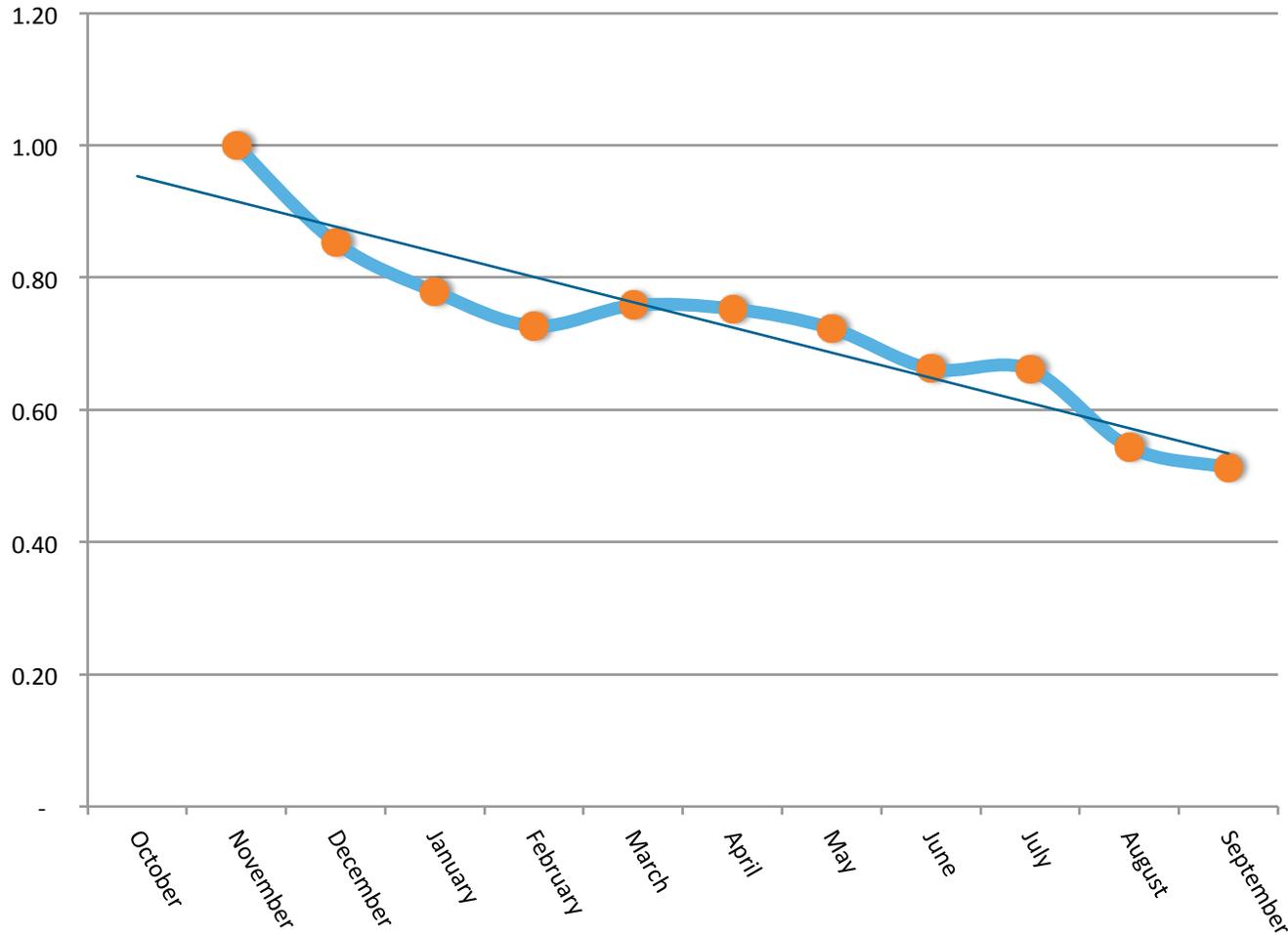
"not provided" rate	Company count	% of companies
10-20%	7	2%
20-30%	74	17%
30-40%	148	35%
40-50%	122	29%
50-60%	57	13%
60+%	16	4%
Total	424	100%

3. 81% of companies see over 30% of their traffic from Google as “(not provided)”



"not provided" rate	Company count	% of companies
10-20%	7	2%
20-30%	74	17%
30-40%	148	35%
40-50%	122	29%
50-60%	57	13%
60+%	16	4%
Total	424	100%

4. Recognized keywords from organic search declined by 49%



Almost 50% of the keywords previously tracked are no longer available through analytics systems due to SSL search.

Organic referrer data is going away; what does that mean?

Our study shows that the trend of “(not provided)” is only going to continue trending up until the majority of organic referrer data (search terms) will completely disappear. But what does this mean for you, the marketer?

- You will no longer be able to truly measure the performance of your SEO efforts by connecting a search term with website metrics such as traffic, conversion rate, leads, engagement (page views and time on site) and revenue.
- You will still be able to measure your overall SEO performance and report on ROI since the visit source will still be Organic Search, but you will not be able to analyze what keywords contributed to that performance nor will you be able to report ROI on specific SEO initiative.
- You will no longer be able to use referrer data to customize/personalize your user experience. For example, if you used to offer related content based on referring keyword, or used referring keywords in your lead nurturing rules, you will no longer be able to do that.
- You will no longer be able to score visitors and leads based on their referring keyword. If you use a lead scoring system that uses referring keyword as one of the rules, this option will no longer be available to you.
- You will still be able to practice SEO and work on getting more traffic from organic search. This change does not prevent you from practicing any SEO best practices, it just means that it will be harder to measure their effectiveness.

“When you search from <https://www.google.com>, websites you visit from our organic search listings will still know that you came from Google, but won't receive information about each individual query. They can also receive an aggregated list of the top 1,000 search queries that drove traffic to their site for each of the past 30 days through Google Webmaster Tools.”

“Making search more secure”
[Google Official Blog](#)

5 tips for handling “(not provided)” data

- 1. Make the most out of the data you have.** With “(not provided)” rate approaching 40% it means that you still have over 60% of organic visits with referring keywords data. Make the most out of that data since it’s not going to be there for much longer.
- 2. Use Webmaster Tools.** Google offers a lot of data about your website in their Webmaster Tools. This includes the top 1,000 daily search queries and top 1,000 daily landing pages for the past 30 days, in addition to the impressions, clicks, click through rate (CTR), and average position in search results for each query. You can compare this to the previous 30 day period as well as export to a csv file to import to a different system or analyze it using excel. For most small to mid-size B2B sites, this should be more than enough data to analyze in aggregate.
- 3. For personalization, use other data.** If you are using keyword data to personalize the user experience you offer on your website (related content, targeted landing pages) and off your website (follow up emails, lead nurturing), you will need to start using other data instead. Form submissions, page viewed and campaign tagging could be used to replace keyword data in your personalization efforts.



5 tips for handling “not provided” data

- 4. For SEO work, use proxies.** The problem with the aggregate data is that it gives you no ability to tie a referring keyword with the subsequent website behavior like page views and time on page. More importantly, actions like form submission (B2B) and clicks on page (B2C, e.g. shopping cart actions) can not be associated with a keyword making it impossible to report on ROI for specific keywords. This means that you will have to start using proxies such as keyword rank and ranked page to estimate single keyword performance.
- 5. Use PPC data to estimate keyword performance.** Since Google is still passing referrer data to advertisers for clicks on their sponsored results, you can use PPC to estimate the performance of keywords you are targeting or considering.

How to use SEO proxies:

You can “reverse engineer” referrer data to allow you to analyze keyword level performance.

- 1. Look at all your leads from Organic Search and sort them by their entry page (the page they first visited from Google).*
- 2. For each page, pull the keywords that drive traffic to that page (you can get that information from Google’s Webmaster Tools).*
- 3. Using rank and known click through rate for each keyword, you can now estimate the traffic driven to each page by each keyword.*
- 4. Using estimated traffic per keyword, known leads per page, you can estimate your conversion rate per keyword and tie other performance data to the keyword level.*

Resources

- Google | Inside Search, [SSL Search](#)
- Search Engine Land, [Google To Begin Encrypting Searches & Outbound Clicks By Default With SSL Search](#), Danny Sullivan, Oct 18, 2011
- Google Webmaster Central Blog, [Linking Google Analytics to Webmaster Tools](#), Feb 7, 2011
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- Matt Cutts: Gadgets, Google, and SEO, [A few thoughts on SSL Search](#), Matt Cutts, May 23, 2010
- Poynter, [News sites increasingly kept in the dark as Google hides incoming search terms](#), Steve Myers, May 3, 2012
- Conductor blog, [51 Million Visits Analyzed: \[Not Provided\] 16% of Google Organic Traffic](#), Nathan Safran, Mar 7, 2012

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