Introduction to Search Engines

What is a search engine?

Search engines are websites or software that enables a person to find documents or other media on the internet. Most famous are, Google (originally called 'BackRub' and now a subsidiary of Alphabet) and Bing (formerly known as MSN search). There are thousands of smaller search engines on the internet, but few are used by more than a handful of real world people. Here's the UK search engine market share from Jan 2014 to Jan 2015:
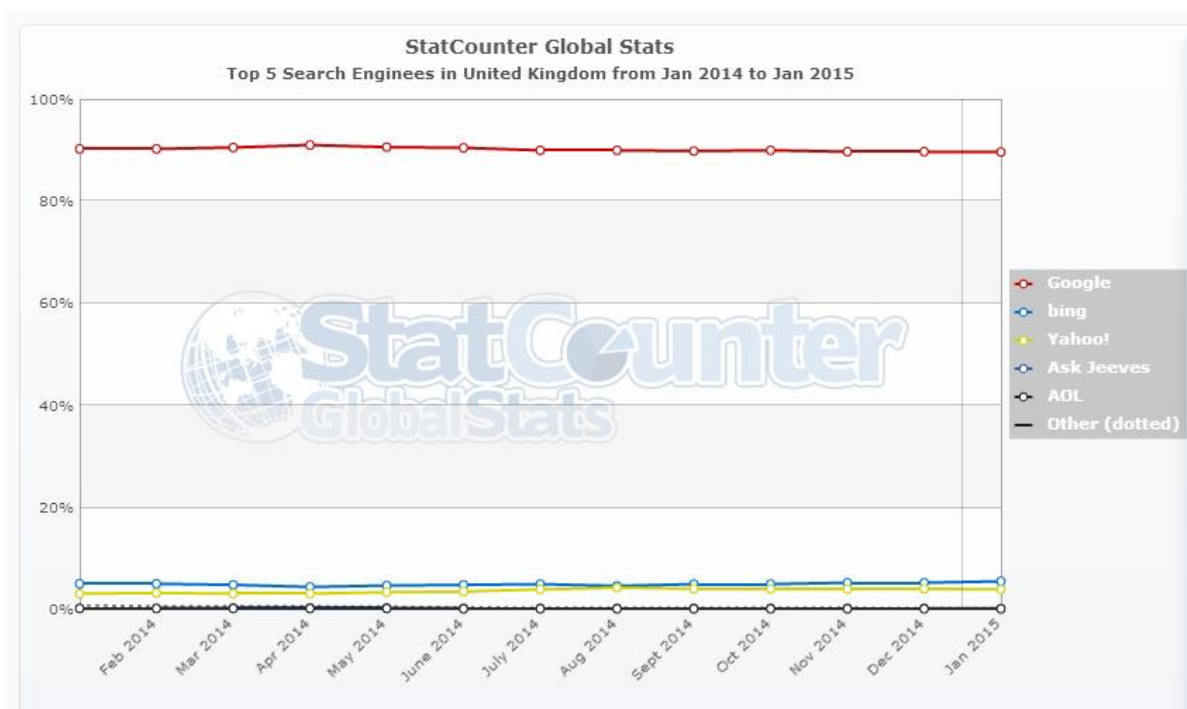

Fig 2: Top 5 search engines in UK Jan 2014 to Jan 2015 - source: statcounter.com

As you can see, Google pretty much has a steady 90% share. In the last few months that's gone down very slightly but not really worth the headlines that it has been getting ("Google loses market share following Mozilla's Yahoo switch", "January UK search market share: Bing continues increase" etc.). Make no mistake, Google is not completely safe, but if you are thinking of spending any time promoting your website to a UK audience. Google is the only search engine you need to consider. In the United States, the situation is pretty similar:
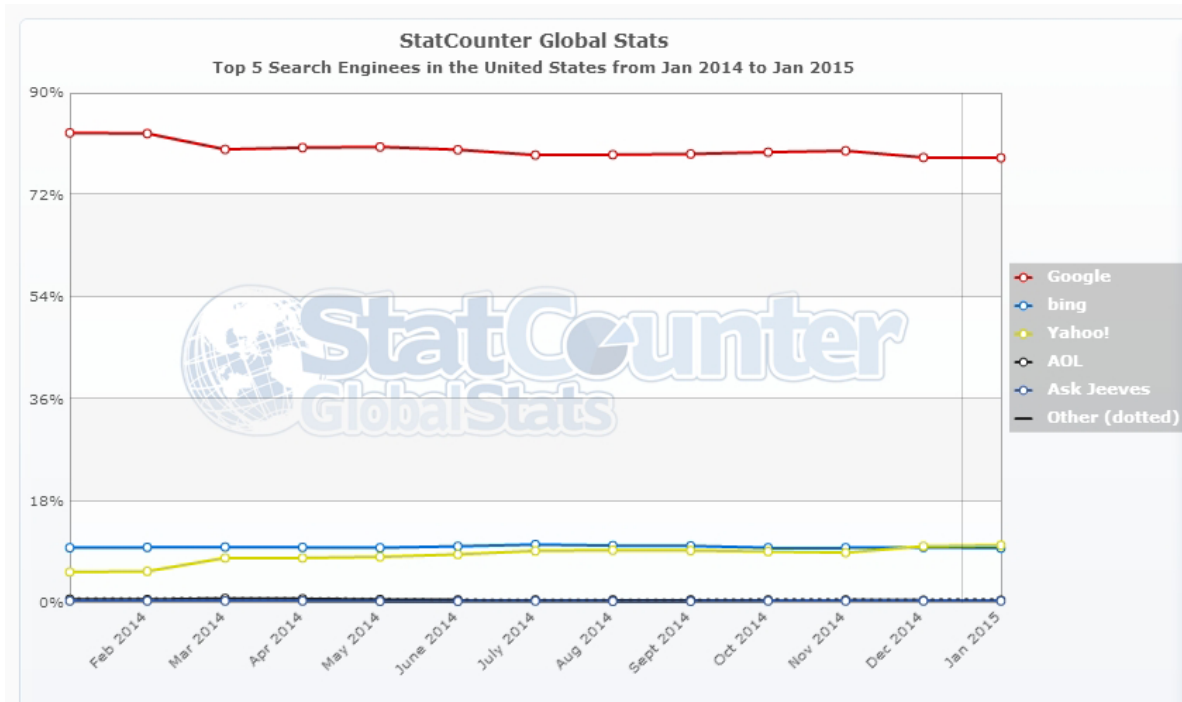
Fig 3 Top 5 search engines in the US Jan 2014 to Jan 2015 - source: statcounter.com

Google still holds the majority share at 78%, but about 22% of search engine usage is for the other 'major' search engines. And that trend does not seem to be changing an awful lot. There was a brief period recently when the Firefox browser changed its default search engine from Google to Yahoo, and Google market share wavered, but the evidence is that those users are gradually reverting back to Google (once they've finally figured out where the setting is in Firefox to do this). A similar effect was seen following the roll out of Windows 10 which uses Bing as the default search provider in the new Edge browser.

So when we talk about search engines today, we can almost use the words 'Google' and 'search engine' interchangeably. In fact, the word 'search' in common language has been replaced with 'Google' – "I'll just Google the phone number for the restaurant" or "I just Googled myself, and immediately regretted it".

Once your brand replaces a verb or noun you know you've made it. Pre-internet examples of genericised trademarks include Hoover, Coke, Selotape and Heroin (trademarked by Friedrich Bayer & Co, 1898). These have now been joined in the digital age by Facebook, eBay and twitter (as in 'tweet').