

## Firefox's Secure Search Will Alter Search Analytics

Recently, Firefox announced that a major change is underway for Google searches performed in the browser. The change is intended to safeguard user privacy, but will ultimately impact the natural search keyword data available for Search and Web analysis. We want to make you aware of this up-coming change not only because of the impact it will have on keyword reporting, but also because of its significance as a single move within a larger trend of industry-wide efforts to protect the security of search.

### WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

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#### **Background**

Historically, Web analytics tools (Omniture, Google Analytics, Web Trends, etc.) have been able to capture, aggregate, and report the majority of keywords used to reach a given site via natural search.

After offering a series of opt-in options for users to maintain privacy around their search keywords, in October 2011, Google announced Google SSL Search, and made SSL Search the default for all authenticated users (users who are logged-in to Google +, to Gmail, etc.). With SSL Search, the secure connection blocks keyword information for non-paid listings, but it does not block keyword information associated with paid listings.

#### **What Changed?**

Firefox has begun testing Google SSL as the default for all Google searches. According to Firefox, if tests are successful, a phased release will take place, and eventually all Firefox users will automatically experience secure search.

### **What's the Impact?**

When a Web site receives traffic via secure search, the visit records normally, but the keyword associated with the search is blocked. In its place, Web analytics tools typically show a generic output, such as "keyword unavailable" or "not provided." This output allows us to aggregate the number of keywords blocked. Since October 2011, when Google SSL became the default for authenticated Google users, an average of about 8% of Intouch clients' keywords became unavailable.

On average, Firefox accounts for about 15% of the traffic to our clients' sites, so once Firefox rolls out secure search to all its users, a total of 20-25% of natural search keywords may no longer be available. Firefox has not provided exact timing for the change, but we estimate it will occur within the next several months.

Despite the increasing number of keywords unavailable for reporting, we are still confident that the keyword data derived from our analytics tools are representative and useful. There is no reason to believe that the keywords being blocked systematically differ from the keywords still available. In other words, it's very unlikely that there's a top keyword being used for secure search that's not also a top keyword for all other searches.

### **What's Next?**

We will continue to monitor these trends, as we expect the number of blocked search keywords from Google to grow. Firefox has a growing user base, and we expect that other browsers (particularly Chrome, Google's own browser) may soon follow suit. Bing and Yahoo, the two largest search rivals to Google, do not currently offer any form of secure search.

The privacy of Internet search is a hot topic right now, and we don't expect it to go away. We are committed to keeping up with the latest news and trends so that we can continue to provide the best possible analytics data to our clients.

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