

Results You Can('t) Trust: The Most Frustrating Aspects of Google Search

A pairLab Public Experiment

September 3, 2022



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Executive Summary

This experiment was run to demonstrate how pairlab.io can be used for product management by finding the aspects of Google search that frustrate users most.

pairLab is a novel and powerful prioritization tool that helps you make decisions by revealing what people care about most and by how passionate they are about their priorities. Studies like this are critical for product managers and business stakeholders who need to prioritize the product features their customers actually want, and who need to understand how satisfied people are with the competition. (See "[How pairLab Works](#)," for details.)

Why study Google search? **Researchers and the media have suggested that Google search quality has declined in recent years.** But is the search results quality really the biggest concern, or is there something else that frustrates users more? The answers to these questions are important to both Google and its competitors considering Google accounts for about 87% of the search engine market in the U.S. To find out, pairLab invited Google search users to participate in this survey. They were asked to judge and weigh the characteristics of Google search that they find frustrating.

This study found that **there is a surprising lack of trust in Google's search results.** Participants said that the **most frustrating aspects** of Google search are "**results that are manipulated by SEO,**" "**Google ranks its own products first,**" and "**results link to sites/videos that are really advertisements**" – all features that erode trust in search results. Other aspects of Google search, such as the presence of ads and a dated design, leave much less of a negative impression on users. (See "[Findings](#)" to see how each idea was ranked.)

pairLab makes priorities comparable, and we can say how much more frustrating one aspect of Google search is over another. The difference between the first- and last-place aspects are considerable. **Users find "results are manipulated by SEO" 7.7 times more frustrating than the last-place aspect,** "I must tell Google what sites to search." (See "[Results by Segment](#)" for more comparisons.)

pairLab also breaks down priorities by customer segments and compares them to find deep insights. This study analyzed Google search customers who self-identified as **enthusiasts, acceptors** and **detractors**. Two of these groups expressed **unique frustrations related to ads:**

- **Enthusiasts** said that they find it **difficult to tell the difference between real results and ads**
- **Detractors** said they find **too many ads** a problem

(See "[Segment Comparisons](#)" for more insight.)

Recommendations

What would we do if we were Google? We'd **inform our product roadmap using pairLab's results**. Where to start? pairLab groups frustrations by high, moderately high, moderate, and low-priority groups:

Priority Group	Ideas
High priority frustrations	Results are manipulated by SEO are inauthentic Google ranks its own products first
Moderately high priority frustrations	Results link to sites/videos that are really advertisements Search results pushed down by 'People also ask' and quick answer boxes My search follows me as ads on other sites Google doesn't understand what I really mean or want Google gives me results for content behind a paywall I can't access
Moderate priority frustrations	Difficult to tell the difference between real results and ads Too many ads
Low priority frustrations	Dated design I must tell Google what sites to search Results after the first page aren't useful

We'd **start with the high and moderately high groups** because users are most passionate about these frustrations and most of them encompass the lead problem: a lack of trust in search results.

But what if we were **Google's competitors**? How would we look at these data? The high and moderately high frustrations are ones we'd work hard to avoid. We'd **create value by being sure our results engender trust** among our customers while worrying less about design.

There's a lot more to this story, the details of which you can find in the pages that follow.

How pairLab Works

[pairLab.io](https://pairlab.io) is a **prioritization tool that ranks ideas** for a group of people **by how passionate they are** about each idea. The results help you make decisions by showing the ideas your customers prefer and by how much they prefer them.

To do this, pairLab runs an "experiment" which asks survey participants to **judge ideas in pairs**. A participant is shown a pair of ideas and asked to weigh the one they feel is more important than the other. Then they are shown another pair of ideas, and so-on, until the participant judges all match-ups.

pairLab **crowdsources ideas from participants and feeds them back into the survey**. This ensures that all possible ideas are evaluated, captures ideas that are unintentionally left out of the survey (which can be as high as 60%¹), and gives participants a sense that their voices are heard.

To generate results, pairLab calculates a score for each idea. This number, called a pair score, **prioritizes ideas by how strongly survey participants judge each idea**. Pair scores make ideas comparable in ways that allow you to describe how much people prefer one idea over another.

pairLab can **show results by subgroups of participants**, called segments. Segments are also comparable and show where two segments agree and where they don't, leading you to deep insight about what's unique about a segment's priorities.

Finally, pairLab **asks participants to reflect on their experience** in order to capture additional issues that they want you to know.

pairLab can be used anywhere you need to **understand how people prioritize competing ideas**. It's a required tool for developing products, competitive analyses, marketing, human resources, brand reputation studies, policy making, and anywhere knowing customer priorities is needed.

¹ Schuman, H., & Presser S. (1979). The Open and Closed Question. American Sociological Review, Vol. 44 (October), 692 - 712.

Methodology

About Ideas, Questions and Segments

pairLab evaluates *ideas* against a single *question*. Ideas are alternative solutions to a problem asked as a question. For example: Let's say your problem is picking ice cream to serve at a party. You want to know what flavor partygoers really want to eat. Ideas in this case are the names of ice cream flavors and the question would be "which ice cream flavor do you prefer?"

Segments are subgroups of your customers, and pairLab can show how people within these subgroups prioritize ideas differently. Using the favorite ice cream flavor example, say you want to know if men and women prefer the same or different favorite ice cream flavors. Why is this important? Because men and women may disagree on their favorite flavor but they may agree on their second favorite flavor. Choosing a flavor they agree on, rather than a flavor that one prefers but the other doesn't, will make both customer segments happy.

Ideas

pairLab searched the internet (using Google) to see how people were criticizing Google search, which were summarized into 11 ideas (here in alphabetical order):

- Dated design
- Difficult to tell the difference between real results and ads
- Google doesn't understand what I really mean or want
- Google gives me results for content behind a paywall I can't access
- Google ranks its own products first
- I must tell Google what sites to search
- My search follows me as ads on other sites
- Results after the first page aren't useful
- Results are manipulated by SEO, are inauthentic
- Results link to sites/videos that are really advertisements
- Search results pushed down by 'People also ask' and quick answer boxes

Survey **participants contributed one idea** that was fed back into the survey for subsequent participants to judge, bringing the **total number of ideas to 12**:

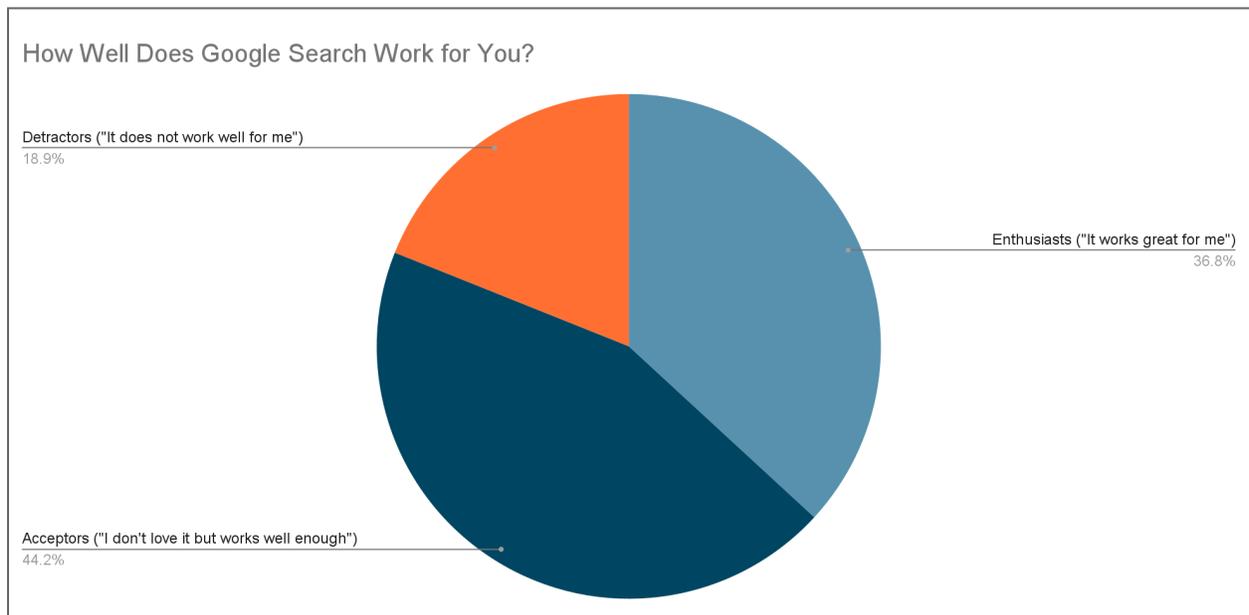
- Too many ads

Question

This pairLab experiment asked survey participants: **“Which aspect of Google search frustrates you more?”**

Segments

This experiment asked a single segment question:



Conducting the Experiment

This experiment was conducted between April 21 and May 4, 2022.

Survey participants were recruited from a paid Facebook ad, postings on Reddit and Twitter, and through personal contacts. The paid Facebook ad targeted:

- People living in the United States
- Age 22 - 59
- Use the internet on mobile and desktop devices

The ad had a click-thru rate of 2.2%.

No incentive was offered to participants.

Seventeen people provided votes within acceptable parameters². They voted on 66 theoretical idea matchups for a total of 412 pair votes, casting an average of 6.2 votes for each pair challenge.

Findings

About Findings

pairLab prioritizes the emotional aspect of choice by measuring the relative magnitude of ideas participants prefer, value or desire. This study focused on a *negative sentiment*, quantifying the relative emotional attitude toward what survey participants dislike about Google search.

Findings are shown below for all participants and by segments. Each section shows priorities in rank order, categorizes ideas into priority groups according to their pair scores, and shows how each idea can be compared and discussed using conversational language.

Results by Segment

All Participants

This chart shows the rank order of ideas when aggregating votes cast by all survey participants.

² pairLab filters out responses that could lead to inaccurate results. The filter criteria used indicate the degree to which survey participants were engaged with the survey, whether they voted on too few pair challenges, and whether they struggled with the question or ideas presented. Responses that fall above the threshold for acceptance are included in this analysis.



Why is this chart important? This chart shows ideas in order of their importance to all participants. Subsequent charts like this will show the same information for each segment response.

Rankings are shown in two dimensions. The first is an ordinal ranking (e.g.: participants ranked “Results are manipulated by SEO, are inauthentic,” as the idea that most frustrates them about Google search). The second dimension reflects emotion and is expressed as a “pair score” (the number assigned to each idea). A pair score is a unitless measure that shows how strongly survey participants find one aspect of Google search more frustrating as compared to any other. Pair scores determine the rank order in this chart.

This table classifies ideas in two ways: as “low,” “medium” and “high” priorities and as four-group tiers:

Idea	Pair Score	Priority	Tier
Results are manipulated by SEO	21.8	High	Tier 1

are inauthentic			
Results link to sites/videos that are really advertisements	11.1	Medium	Tier 2
Google ranks its own products first	8.5		Tier 3
Search results pushed down by 'People also ask' and quick answer boxes	7.9		
Difficult to tell the difference between real results and ads	7.4		
My search follows me as ads on other sites	7.2		
Google doesn't understand what I really mean or want	6.8		
Google gives me results for content behind a paywall I can't access	6.7		
Too many ads	6.7		
Results after the first page aren't useful	4.6	Low	Tier 4

Dated design	3.1		
I must tell Google what sites to search	2.8		

Why is this table important? We can classify ideas according to where pair scores naturally group together. Seeing ideas classified by two different sized groups can reveal ideas that are on the margins, leading to better decisions. Subsequent tables like this will show the same information for each segment response.

The priority grouping largely matches the tier grouping, except for “Results link to sites/videos that are really advertisements,” suggesting it is a marginal medium-priority idea that can be considered a higher priority in decision making.

We can use pair scores to articulate how passionate people are about each idea by dividing the pair scores of two ideas. This table does the math, rounded to one decimal place:

Idea	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
A. Results are manipulated by SEO, are inauthentic		2.0	2.6	2.8	3.0	3.0	3.2	3.2	3.2	4.7	6.9	7.7
B. Results link to sites/videos that are really advertisements			1.3	1.4	1.5	1.5	1.6	1.7	1.7	2.4	3.5	3.9
C. Google ranks its own products first				1.1	1.2	1.2	1.3	1.3	1.3	1.8	2.7	3.0
D. Search results pushed down by 'People also ask' and quick answer boxes					1.1	1.1	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.7	2.5	2.8
E. Difficult to tell the difference between real results and ads						1.0	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.6	2.4	2.6
F. My search follows me as ads on other sites							1.1	1.1	1.1	1.5	2.3	2.5
G. Google doesn't understand what I really mean or want								1.0	1.0	1.5	2.2	2.4

H. Too many ads									1.0	1.5	2.1	2.4
I. Google gives me results for content behind a paywall I can't access										1.4	2.1	2.4
J. Results after the first page aren't useful											1.5	1.6
K. Dated design												1.1
L. I must tell Google what sites to search												

Why is this table important? It's hard to discuss an idea's priority using just numbers. Because pair scores are comparable, we can translate them into plain language.

To use this table, choose the first idea you wish to compare from the Idea column. Move across the row to the letter ID of the second idea you wish to compare it to. The number in that cell is the factor by which participants prefer the first idea over the second.

Here's an example: Say we want to see by how much "A. Results are manipulated by SEO, are inauthentic" is preferred (in the case of this study, is more frustrating) over "I. Google gives me results for content behind a paywall I can't access." The value at the intersection between row A and column I is 3.2. We can now say to someone that survey participants find "Results are manipulated by SEO, are inauthentic" 3.2 times more frustrating than "Google gives me results for content behind a paywall I can't access."

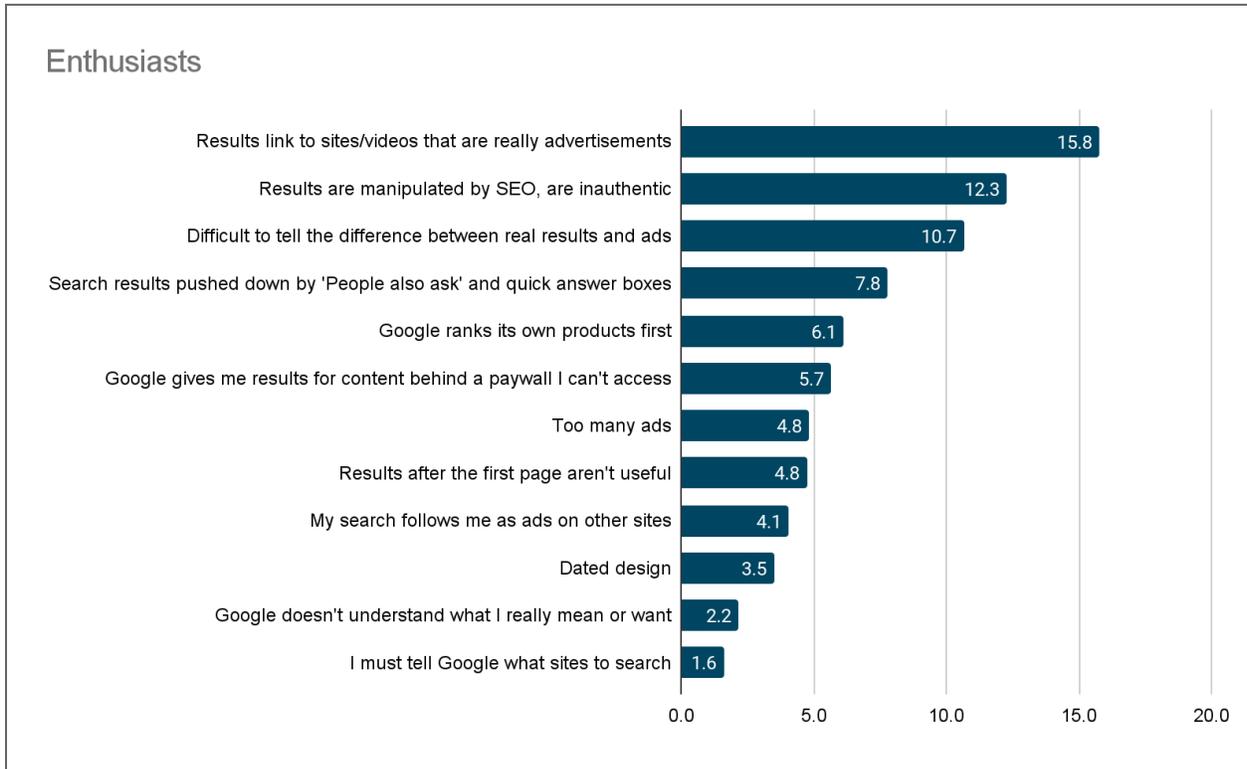
Subsequent tables like this will show the same information for each segment response.

Segment: How Well Does Google Search Work for You?

Enthusiasts

Enthusiasts account for 38.6% of survey participants.

This chart shows the rank order of ideas for this segment response:



This table classifies ideas in two ways: as “low,” “medium” and “high” priorities and as four-group tiers:

Idea	Pair score	Priority	Tier
Results link to sites/videos that are really advertisements	15.8	High	Tier 1
Results are manipulated by SEO are inauthentic	12.3		Tier 2
Difficult to tell the difference between real results and ads	10.7		

Search results pushed down by 'People also ask' and quick answer boxes	7.8	Medium	Tier 3
Google ranks its own products first	6.1		
Google gives me results for content behind a paywall I can't access	5.7		
Too many ads	4.9		
Results after the first page aren't useful	4.8		
My search follows me as ads on other sites	4.1	Low	Tier 4
Dated design	3.5		
Google doesn't understand what I really mean or want	2.2		
I must tell Google what sites to search	1.6		

The tier grouping matches the medium and low priority groupings. However, the high priority group is bifurcated by two tiers. “Results link to sites/videos that are really advertisements” stands in its own tier, suggesting it is of greater significance than the other two ideas which fall into the high-priority group.

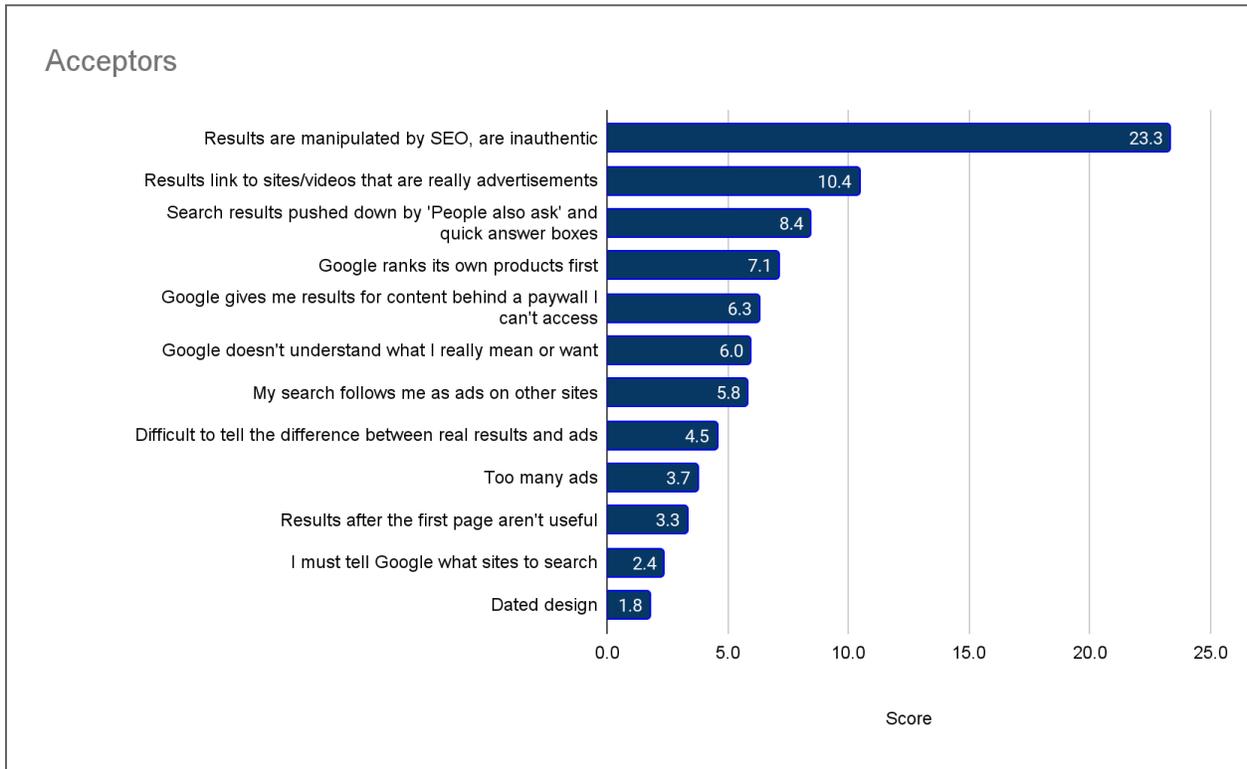
This table shows the magnitudes of preference between each idea, rounded to one decimal place:

Idea	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
A. Results link to sites/videos that are really advertisements		1.3	1.5	2.0	2.6	2.8	3.3	3.3	3.9	4.5	7.3	9.8
B. Results are manipulated by SEO are inauthentic			1.2	1.6	2.0	2.2	2.5	2.6	3.0	3.5	5.7	7.6
C. Difficult to tell the difference between real results and ads				1.4	1.7	1.9	2.2	2.2	2.6	3.0	4.9	6.6
D. Search results pushed down by 'People also ask' and quick answer boxes					1.3	1.4	1.6	1.6	1.9	2.2	3.6	4.8
E. Google ranks its own products first						1.1	1.3	1.3	1.5	1.7	2.8	3.8
F. Google gives me results for content behind a paywall I can't access							1.2	1.2	1.4	1.6	2.6	3.5
G. Too many ads								1.0	1.2	1.4	2.2	3.0
H. Results after the first page aren't useful									1.2	1.4	2.2	3.0
I. My search follows me as ads on other sites										1.2	1.9	2.5
J. Dated design											1.6	2.2
K. Google doesn't understand what I really mean or want												1.3
L. I must tell Google what sites to search												

Acceptors

Acceptors account for 44.2% of survey participants.

This chart shows the rank order of ideas for this segment response:



This table classifies ideas in two ways: as “low,” “medium” and “high” priorities and as four-group tiers:

Idea	Pair score	Priority	Tier
Results are manipulated by SEO are inauthentic	23.3	High	Tier 1
Results link to sites/videos that are really advertisements	10.4	Medium	Tier 2
Search results pushed down by 'People also ask' and	8.4		

quick answer boxes			
Google ranks its own products first	7.1		Tier 3
Google gives me results for content behind a paywall I can't access	6.3		
Google doesn't understand what I really mean or want	6		
My search follows me as ads on other sites	5.8		
Difficult to tell the difference between real results and ads	4.5	Low	
Too many ads	3.7		
Results after the first page aren't useful	3.3		
I must tell Google what sites to search	2.4		
Dated design	1.8		

The tier grouping matches the high and low priority groupings. However, the medium priority group is bifurcated into two tiers. “Results link to sites/videos that are really advertisements” and “Search results pushed down by 'People also ask' and quick answer boxes” stand higher than the other medium priority ideas, but because their pair scores are much lower than the only high-priority idea, this segment may be better grouped into four priority tiers, rather than three.

This table shows the magnitudes of preference between each idea, rounded to one decimal place:

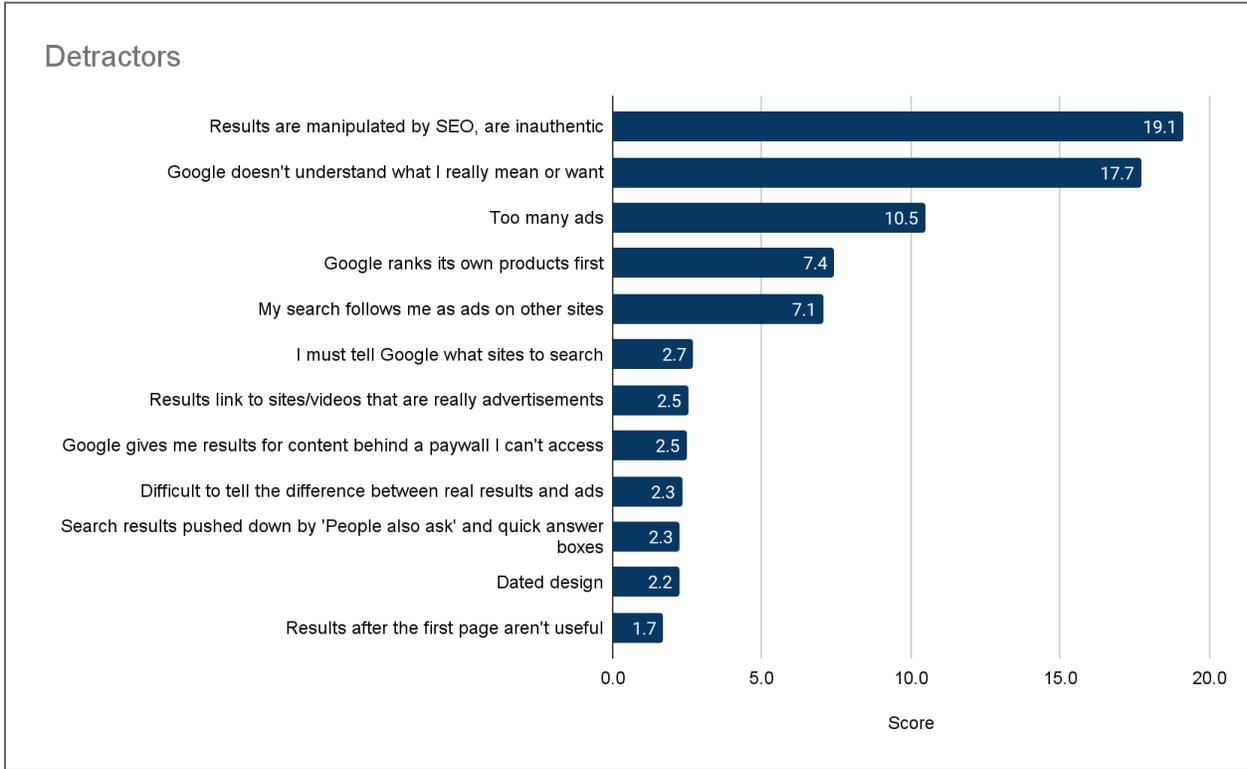
Idea	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
A. Results are manipulated by SEO are inauthentic		2.2	2.8	3.3	3.7	3.9	4.0	5.1	6.2	7.1	9.9	13.2
B. Results link to sites/videos that are really advertisements			1.2	1.5	1.7	1.8	1.8	2.3	2.8	3.2	4.4	5.9
C. Search results pushed down by 'People also ask' and quick answer boxes				1.2	1.3	1.4	1.4	1.9	2.2	2.6	3.6	4.8
D. Google ranks its own products first					1.1	1.2	1.2	1.6	1.9	2.2	3.0	4.0
E. Google gives me results for content behind a paywall I can't access						1.1	1.1	1.4	1.7	1.9	2.7	3.6
F. Google doesn't understand what I really mean or want							1.0	1.3	1.6	1.8	2.5	3.4
G. My search follows me as ads on other sites								1.3	1.5	1.8	2.5	3.3
H. Difficult to tell the difference between real results and ads									1.2	1.4	1.9	2.6
I. Too many ads										1.1	1.6	2.1

J. Results after the first page aren't useful											1.4	1.9
K. I must tell Google what sites to search												1.3
L. Dated design												

Detractors

Detractors account for 18.9% of survey participants.

This chart shows the rank order of ideas for this segment response:



This table classifies ideas in two ways: as “low,” “medium” and “high” priorities and as four-group tiers:

Idea	Pair score	Priority	Tier
------	------------	----------	------

Results are manipulated by SEO are inauthentic	19.1	High	Tier 1
Google doesn't understand what I really mean o...	17.7		
Too many ads	10.5	Medium	Tier 2
Google ranks its own products first	7.4		Tier 3
My search follows me as ads on other sites	7.1		
I must tell Google what sites to search	2.7	Low	Tier 4
Google gives me results for content behind a p...	2.5		
Results link to sites/videos that are really a...	2.5		
Difficult to tell the difference between real ...	2.3		
Search results pushed down by 'People also ask...	2.3		
Dated design	2.2		

Results after the first page aren't useful	1.7		
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The tier grouping matches the low and high priority groupings. “Too many ads” is on the margin between high and medium priority groups, and its pair score suggests it can be considered a higher priority in decision making.

This table shows the magnitudes of preference between each idea, rounded to one decimal place:

Idea	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L
A. Results are manipulated by SEO are inauthentic		1.1	1.8	2.6	2.7	7.1	7.5	7.7	8.2	8.5	8.6	11.3
B. Google doesn't understand what I really mean or want			1.7	2.4	2.5	6.5	7.0	7.2	7.6	7.9	7.9	10.5
C. Too many ads				1.4	1.5	3.9	4.1	4.2	4.5	4.7	4.7	6.2
D. Google ranks its own products first					1.1	2.7	2.9	3.0	3.2	3.3	3.3	4.4
E. My search follows me as ads on other sites						2.6	2.8	2.9	3.0	3.1	3.2	4.2
F. I must tell Google what sites to search							1.1	1.1	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.6
G. Results link to sites/videos that are really advertisements								1.0	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.5
H. Google gives me results for content behind a paywall I can't access									1.1	1.1	1.1	1.5

I. Difficult to tell the difference between real results and ads										1.0	1.0	1.4
J. Search results pushed down by 'People also ask' and quick answer boxes											1.0	1.3
K. Dated design												1.3
L. Results after the first page aren't useful												

Segment Comparisons

Comparing idea rankings between two segment responses leads to deep insights by seeing where participants agree and disagree over priorities. This gives us a sense on how ideas will perform in practice among different groups of people.

Each table in this section shows three rows below the header. The first shows which ideas are important to both segment response groups. The next two rows show which ideas are important to one segment response group but not the other.

Enthusiasts vs. Acceptors

This segment response group Identified these features of Google search as more frustrating than other features
Both segments	<p>Google gives me results for content behind a paywall I can't access</p> <p>Google ranks its own products first</p> <p>Results are manipulated by SEO, are inauthentic</p> <p>Results link to sites/videos that are really advertisements</p>

	Search results pushed down by 'People also ask' and quick answer boxes
Enthusiasts only	Difficult to tell the difference between real results and ads
Acceptors only	Google doesn't understand what I really mean or want My search follows me as ads on other sites

Enthusiasts vs. Detractors

This segment response group Identified these features of Google search as more frustrating than other features
Both segments agree	Google ranks its own products first Results are manipulated by SEO, are inauthentic
Enthusiasts only	Difficult to tell the difference between real results and ads Google gives me results for content behind a paywall I can't access Results link to sites/videos that are really advertisements Search results pushed down by 'People also ask' and quick answer boxes
Detractors only	Google doesn't understand what I really mean or want My search follows me as ads on other sites Too many ads

Acceptors vs. Detractors

This segment response group Identified these features of Google search as more frustrating than other features
Both segments agree	<p>Google doesn't understand what I really mean or want</p> <p>Google ranks its own products first</p> <p>My search follows me as ads on other sites</p> <p>Results are manipulated by SEO, are inauthentic</p>
Acceptors only	<p>Google gives me results for content behind a paywall I can't access</p> <p>Results link to sites/videos that are really advertisements</p> <p>Search results pushed down by 'People also ask' and quick answer boxes</p>
Detractors only	Too many ads