

Geotargeting: A Must-Know Concept for Those Marketing Outside Canada

Steve Matthews | April 2010

As noted in my last Web Law Connected column, the topic I want to address this month is geotargeting [<http://www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/answer.py?answer=62399&hl=en>] within Google's search results. While I expect some of you would prefer to watch paint dry over reading further, I'm asking you – as a Canadian – to explore this subject. The reason? If you publish a website (or expect to the future) and want that website to be visible within the search results to US audiences – then you are facing a substantial and little understood obstacle. This is an important topic.

What is geotargeting?

Geotargeting is Google's way of assigning a geographic location to a particular website in order to show searchers more relevant local information. Google knows the IP address location of every search conducted, and filters the search results to raise the prominence of locally published websites.

To see geotargeting in action, compare the results for the one word term "slaw" in google.ca vs. google.com.

In a google.ca search, slaw.ca [4] is the #1 result:

<http://www.google.ca/search?q=slaw>

However, in a google.com search (with **&gl=us** appended to the URL to force Google to show us what search results would look like from inside the US), slaw.ca doesn't show up on the first page, and until recently was positioned down on page 5:

http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=slaw&sourceid=navclient-ff&rlz=1B3GGGL_enCA327CA327&ie=UTF-8=&gl=us

Why are these results so different? A few things are going on here. First, Slaw has a .ca domain extension – which in Google's eyes explicitly defines the content of our website as Canadian. For searches conducted within Canada's borders, our .ca domain even gives us a mild boost in that regard. Down south, however, having a .ca domain works against us. It wasn't until about a year ago that Slaw had gathered enough trust factors (link popularity, link diversity, inbound links from internationally located websites) that our searches started ranking well in the US.

(Continued on page 2)

Steve Matthews is the Founder and Principal of Stem Legal, a company dedicated to bringing web visibility to the legal industry. A prolific blogger, Steve co-founded the Canadian legal blogging cooperative Slaw (www.slaw.ca), and maintains his own blogs: Law Firm Web Strategy (www.stemlegal.com/strategyblog) and Vancouver Law Librarian Blog (www.vancouverlawlib.blogspot.com). Steve can be reached at steve@stemlegal.com.



The second part of Slaw's geotargeting issue comes from the other known factors about our site that define it as Canadian:

- We link to Canadian news outlets, and other Canadian blogs.
- Our inbound links are also vastly aligned with other Canadian websites.
- We make references to Canadian cities and addresses.
- The mailing address on Slaw's DNS record.
- Our web hosting is located inside Canada.

There are all sorts of clues that this website is written by and for a Canadian audience. **But there's a problem here!** Not only has Slaw's audience grown far beyond Canadian borders, but we want to be a valuable source to those wider audiences – including readers within the US.

Hopefully Simon Fodden will excuse the use of Slaw as my example, but we are an excellent illustration of the potential disconnect between a website's marketing wants and the outward-facing characteristics that influence Google geotargeting.

Lesson learned: Websites with a country-coded TLD (such as .ca or .co.uk) are automatically considered most relevant to that country's searches. Only choose them if your audience is exclusively within that defined location. Using a .com domain also has its challenges, but isn't the non-starter a country-coded TLD is.

Why is geotargeting important to Canadian law firms?

Admittedly, not every law firm will have an issue with geotargeting. Regional firms often have regional clientele. Problems arise more when a firm is looking to attract a work from outside the country – a boutique practice, cross-border work, or firms looking to connect with international businesses seeking Canadian representation.

The good news is if you want to market your services to the US, there are some tactics that can help your cause. The following suggestions are *not required changes*, but each a separate factor and consideration that firms may entertain changing:

Verify your domain in Google Webmaster Tools (GW Tools) and specify your preferred geographic location [<http://www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/answer.py?answer=62399>] within the Site Configuration area. You'll only be able to choose one preferred location, so choose wisely. Don't be tempted to leave it as "unlisted" – which only seems to force Google to look at other attributes. Two further points on GW Tools:

Don't expect miracles. Changing this variable seems to have an effect long-term, but it's not fast – think months rather than weeks. Still, as the only place Google gives us to influence their geotargeting decision ... it's a simple change and worth trying.

To date, I have seen no harm in marking a Canadian authored website with a US preferred location target. The Canadian results don't seem to be affected, but there is a potential upside for US searches.

(Continued on page 3)

Remove Canadian mailing addresses from your domain name record – Consider turning on the privacy settings for your domain with your domain registrar.

Consider hosting in the US – Unpatriotic or not, this does align the IP address range of your website within the US borders.

Increase inbound links to your website from US-based websites – Align the link network behind your website with the geographic region you want to market to. Building incoming links to your website from US-based web properties helps in the US search results. Want an international presence? Make sure websites from around the world are linking to you. Want to dominate within a small community? Build your link network around local groups and associations. The point being, the network of links behind your website tells a story – use it!

Overcoming geotargeting bias?

What if your law firm’s website already has a country-coded domain? Is it possible to overcome the “Canadian bias” of a .ca domain? What about a .com with extremely Canadian characteristics? The answer to both questions is ‘yes’, technically, but it can be a huge uphill battle. It took **years** and thousands of incoming links for Slaw to break through and be found – for more than a bunch of coleslaw recipes, anyway.

The factors mentioned above can help to expose your website to the US search market, but are far more influential out of the gate – *start during the domain registration process*, and then move forward. Altering the course of an existing website domain can be very challenging.

On the bright side, we no longer live in a one-website world for any company – including law firms. A targeted sub-domain, micro-site, or blog could easily apply the steps required to free it of ‘Canadian’ characteristics. In most cases, creating a dedicated website also helps segment the target audience and focus the firm’s message.

Conclusion

In the end, it’s easier to make a .com website rank well in Canada than it is to make a .ca website rank well in the US. So if possible, select your domain accordingly at the outset. If the decision to use a .ca TLD has already been made – or the work required to change your ‘Canadian’ characteristics unfathomable – cut your losses, and go the route of a dedicated website. Define the geographic region where your audience resides, and make it your focus. And be sure to change your Google Webmaster Tools settings.

Geotargeting isn’t going away any time soon, and it’s always possible Google will ‘crank up the dial’.

This article originally appeared on Slaw.ca.

Geotargeting: A Must-Know Concept for Those Marketing Outside Canada

Steve Matthews | April 2010

As noted in my last Web Law Connected column, the topic I want to address this month is geotargeting [<http://www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/answer.py?answer=62399&hl=en>] within Google's search results. While I expect some of you would prefer to watch paint dry over reading further, I'm asking you – as a Canadian – to explore this subject. The reason? If you publish a website (or expect to the future) and want that website to be visible within the search results to US audiences – then you are facing a substantial and little understood obstacle. This is an important topic.

What is geotargeting?

Geotargeting is Google's way of assigning a geographic location to a particular website in order to show searchers more relevant local information. Google knows the IP address location of every search conducted, and filters the search results to raise the prominence of locally published websites.

To see geotargeting in action, compare the results for the one word term "slaw" in google.ca vs. google.com.

In a google.ca search, slaw.ca is the #1 result:

<http://www.google.ca/search?q=slaw>

However, in a google.com search (with **&gl=us** appended to the URL to force Google to show us what search results would look like from inside the US), slaw.ca doesn't show up on the first page, and until recently was positioned down on page 5:

http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=slaw&sourceid=navclient-ff&rlz=1B3GGGL_enCA327CA327&ie=UTF-8=&gl=us

Why are these results so different? A few things are going on here. First, Slaw has a .ca domain extension – which in Google's eyes explicitly defines the content of our website as Canadian. For searches conducted within Canada's borders, our .ca domain even gives us a mild boost in that regard. Down south, however, having a .ca domain works against us. It wasn't until about a year ago that Slaw had gathered enough trust factors (link popularity, link diversity, inbound links from internationally located websites) that our searches started ranking well in the US.

(Continued on page 2)

Steve Matthews is the Founder and Principal of Stem Legal, a company dedicated to bringing web visibility to the legal industry. A prolific blogger, Steve co-founded the Canadian legal blogging cooperative Slaw (www.slaw.ca), and maintains his own blogs: Law Firm Web Strategy (www.stemlegal.com/strategyblog) and Vancouver Law Librarian Blog (www.vancouverlawlib.blogspot.com). Steve can be reached at steve@stemlegal.com.



The second part of Slaw's geotargeting issue comes from the other known factors about our site that define it as Canadian:

- We link to Canadian news outlets, and other Canadian blogs.
- Our inbound links are also vastly aligned with other Canadian websites.
- We make references to Canadian cities and addresses.
- The mailing address on Slaw's DNS record.
- Our web hosting is located inside Canada.

There are all sorts of clues that this website is written by and for a Canadian audience. **But there's a problem here!** Not only has Slaw's audience grown far beyond Canadian borders, but we want to be a valuable source to those wider audiences – including readers within the US.

Hopefully Simon Fodden will excuse the use of Slaw as my example, but we are an excellent illustration of the potential disconnect between a website's marketing wants and the outward-facing characteristics that influence Google geotargeting.

Lesson learned: Websites with a country-coded TLD (such as .ca or .co.uk) are automatically considered most relevant to that country's searches. Only choose them if your audience is exclusively within that defined location. Using a .com domain also has its challenges, but isn't the non-starter a country-coded TLD is.

Why is geotargeting important to Canadian law firms?

Admittedly, not every law firm will have an issue with geotargeting. Regional firms often have regional clientele. Problems arise more when a firm is looking to attract a work from outside the country – a boutique practice, cross-border work, or firms looking to connect with international businesses seeking Canadian representation.

The good news is if you want to market your services to the US, there are some tactics that can help your cause. The following suggestions are *not required changes*, but each a separate factor and consideration that firms may entertain changing:

Verify your domain in Google Webmaster Tools (GW Tools) and specify your preferred geographic location [<http://www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/answer.py?answer=62399>] within the Site Configuration area. You'll only be able to choose one preferred location, so choose wisely. Don't be tempted to leave it as "unlisted" – which only seems to force Google to look at other attributes. Two further points on GW Tools:

Don't expect miracles. Changing this variable seems to have an effect long-term, but it's not fast – think months rather than weeks. Still, as the only place Google gives us to influence their geotargeting decision ... it's a simple change and worth trying.

To date, I have seen no harm in marking a Canadian authored website with a US preferred location target. The Canadian results don't seem to be affected, but there is a potential upside for US searches.

(Continued on page 3)

Remove Canadian mailing addresses from your domain name record – Consider turning on the privacy settings for your domain with your domain registrar.

Consider hosting in the US – Unpatriotic or not, this does align the IP address range of your website within the US borders.

Increase inbound links to your website from US-based websites – Align the link network behind your website with the geographic region you want to market to. Building incoming links to your website from US-based web properties helps in the US search results. Want an international presence? Make sure websites from around the world are linking to you. Want to dominate within a small community? Build your link network around local groups and associations. The point being, the network of links behind your website tells a story – use it!

Overcoming geotargeting bias?

What if your law firm’s website already has a country-coded domain? Is it possible to overcome the “Canadian bias” of a .ca domain? What about a .com with extremely Canadian characteristics? The answer to both questions is ‘yes’, technically, but it can be a huge uphill battle. It took **years** and thousands of incoming links for Slaw to break through and be found – for more than a bunch of coleslaw recipes, anyway.

The factors mentioned above can help to expose your website to the US search market, but are far more influential out of the gate – *start during the domain registration process*, and then move forward. Altering the course of an existing website domain can be very challenging.

On the bright side, we no longer live in a one-website world for any company – including law firms. A targeted sub-domain, micro-site, or blog could easily apply the steps required to free it of ‘Canadian’ characteristics. In most cases, creating a dedicated website also helps segment the target audience and focus the firm’s message.

Conclusion

In the end, it’s easier to make a .com website rank well in Canada than it is to make a .ca website rank well in the US. So if possible, select your domain accordingly at the outset. If the decision to use a .ca TLD has already been made – or the work required to change your ‘Canadian’ characteristics unfathomable – cut your losses, and go the route of a dedicated website. Define the geographic region where your audience resides, and make it your focus. And be sure to change your Google Webmaster Tools settings.

Geotargeting isn’t going away any time soon, and it’s always possible Google will ‘crank up the dial’.

This article originally appeared on Slaw.ca.

Geotargeting: A Must-Know Concept for Those Marketing Outside Canada

Steve Matthews | April 2010

As noted in my last Web Law Connected column, the topic I want to address this month is geotargeting [<http://www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/answer.py?answer=62399&hl=en>] within Google's search results. While I expect some of you would prefer to watch paint dry over reading further, I'm asking you – as a Canadian – to explore this subject. The reason? If you publish a website (or expect to the future) and want that website to be visible within the search results to US audiences – then you are facing a substantial and little understood obstacle. This is an important topic.

What is geotargeting?

Geotargeting is Google's way of assigning a geographic location to a particular website in order to show searchers more relevant local information. Google knows the IP address location of every search conducted, and filters the search results to raise the prominence of locally published websites.

To see geotargeting in action, compare the results for the one word term "slaw" in google.ca vs. google.com.

In a google.ca search, slaw.ca is the #1 result:

<http://www.google.ca/search?q=slaw>

However, in a google.com search (with **&gl=us** appended to the URL to force Google to show us what search results would look like from inside the US), slaw.ca doesn't show up on the first page, and until recently was positioned down on page 5:

http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=slaw&sourceid=navclient-ff&rlz=1B3GGGL_enCA327CA327&ie=UTF-8=&gl=us

Why are these results so different? A few things are going on here. First, Slaw has a .ca domain extension – which in Google's eyes explicitly defines the content of our website as Canadian. For searches conducted within Canada's borders, our .ca domain even gives us a mild boost in that regard. Down south, however, having a .ca domain works against us. It wasn't until about a year ago that Slaw had gathered enough trust factors (link popularity, link diversity, inbound links from internationally located websites) that our searches started ranking well in the US.

(Continued on page 2)

Steve Matthews is the Founder and Principal of Stem Legal, a company dedicated to bringing web visibility to the legal industry. A prolific blogger, Steve co-founded the Canadian legal blogging cooperative Slaw (www.slaw.ca), and maintains his own blogs: Law Firm Web Strategy (www.stemlegal.com/strategyblog) and Vancouver Law Librarian Blog (www.vancouverlawlib.blogspot.com). Steve can be reached at steve@stemlegal.com.



The second part of Slaw's geotargeting issue comes from the other known factors about our site that define it as Canadian:

- We link to Canadian news outlets, and other Canadian blogs.
- Our inbound links are also vastly aligned with other Canadian websites.
- We make references to Canadian cities and addresses.
- The mailing address on Slaw's DNS record.
- Our web hosting is located inside Canada.

There are all sorts of clues that this website is written by and for a Canadian audience. **But there's a problem here!** Not only has Slaw's audience grown far beyond Canadian borders, but we want to be a valuable source to those wider audiences – including readers within the US.

Hopefully Simon Fodden will excuse the use of Slaw as my example, but we are an excellent illustration of the potential disconnect between a website's marketing wants and the outward-facing characteristics that influence Google geotargeting.

Lesson learned: Websites with a country-coded TLD (such as .ca or .co.uk) are automatically considered most relevant to that country's searches. Only choose them if your audience is exclusively within that defined location. Using a .com domain also has its challenges, but isn't the non-starter a country-coded TLD is.

Why is geotargeting important to Canadian law firms?

Admittedly, not every law firm will have an issue with geotargeting. Regional firms often have regional clientele. Problems arise more when a firm is looking to attract a work from outside the country – a boutique practice, cross-border work, or firms looking to connect with international businesses seeking Canadian representation.

The good news is if you want to market your services to the US, there are some tactics that can help your cause. The following suggestions are *not required changes*, but each a separate factor and consideration that firms may entertain changing:

Verify your domain in Google Webmaster Tools (GW Tools) and specify your preferred geographic location [<http://www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/answer.py?answer=62399>] within the Site Configuration area. You'll only be able to choose one preferred location, so choose wisely. Don't be tempted to leave it as "unlisted" – which only seems to force Google to look at other attributes. Two further points on GW Tools:

Don't expect miracles. Changing this variable seems to have an effect long-term, but it's not fast – think months rather than weeks. Still, as the only place Google gives us to influence their geotargeting decision ... it's a simple change and worth trying.

To date, I have seen no harm in marking a Canadian authored website with a US preferred location target. The Canadian results don't seem to be affected, but there is a potential upside for US searches.

(Continued on page 3)

Remove Canadian mailing addresses from your domain name record – Consider turning on the privacy settings for your domain with your domain registrar.

Consider hosting in the US – Unpatriotic or not, this does align the IP address range of your website within the US borders.

Increase inbound links to your website from US-based websites – Align the link network behind your website with the geographic region you want to market to. Building incoming links to your website from US-based web properties helps in the US search results. Want an international presence? Make sure websites from around the world are linking to you. Want to dominate within a small community? Build your link network around local groups and associations. The point being, the network of links behind your website tells a story – use it!

Overcoming geotargeting bias?

What if your law firm’s website already has a country-coded domain? Is it possible to overcome the “Canadian bias” of a .ca domain? What about a .com with extremely Canadian characteristics? The answer to both questions is ‘yes’, technically, but it can be a huge uphill battle. It took **years** and thousands of incoming links for Slaw to break through and be found – for more than a bunch of coleslaw recipes, anyway.

The factors mentioned above can help to expose your website to the US search market, but are far more influential out of the gate – *start during the domain registration process*, and then move forward. Altering the course of an existing website domain can be very challenging.

On the bright side, we no longer live in a one-website world for any company – including law firms. A targeted sub-domain, micro-site, or blog could easily apply the steps required to free it of ‘Canadian’ characteristics. In most cases, creating a dedicated website also helps segment the target audience and focus the firm’s message.

Conclusion

In the end, it’s easier to make a .com website rank well in Canada than it is to make a .ca website rank well in the US. So if possible, select your domain accordingly at the outset. If the decision to use a .ca TLD has already been made – or the work required to change your ‘Canadian’ characteristics unfathomable – cut your losses, and go the route of a dedicated website. Define the geographic region where your audience resides, and make it your focus. And be sure to change your Google Webmaster Tools settings.

Geotargeting isn’t going away any time soon, and it’s always possible Google will ‘crank up the dial’.

This article originally appeared on Slaw.ca.