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Bots Helped To Boost Microsoft Live Search Gains

The good news for Microsoft is that more people are using Live Search. The bad news is that more bots are using it also.

By Thomas Claburn, [InformationWeek](#)

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Earlier this week, *InformationWeek* [reported](#) that MSN and Microsoft Live's U.S. [search query](#) volume increased significantly from May to June of this year, rising from 8.4% to 13.2%, based on a report from Internet metrics firm Compete, Inc.

In a [blog post](#), Compete analyst Steve Willis attributed Microsoft's search gains to prizes awarded to users participating in [Live Search Club](#), which features games that post queries to Microsoft's search engine.

Questions immediately arose about the atypical magnitude of Microsoft's search share gain. And it turns out those questions were well-founded.

Some of Microsoft's statistical spike can be attributed to bots, though the exact percentage isn't clear. Live Search Club users believe that automated searches account for a significant portion of Microsoft's search share gain.

"The reason their [search engine](#) is being hit so frequently is that people are running automated 'bot' programs to play the Live Search games for them," said Live Search Club user Jack Krause in an e-mail. "Microsoft is essentially being DDoSed by thousands of people hundreds of times per minute, but they are mistaking this rise in traffic for people actually *using* Live Search."

Live Search Club awards players tickets that can be redeemed for [prizes](#) including Microsoft Xboxes, Zunes, and other items. A Live Search Club user who wrote to *InformationWeek* claimed that [Windows Vista](#) was a prize option earlier this week, but Microsoft removed it because the number of winners was so high.

To hear Microsoft tell it, the company's fulfillment center simply ran out of Vista. "We hoped the club would be successful, and planned accordingly," said a Microsoft spokesperson via e-mail. "As you can see from the numbers it was far more successful than we ever could have imagined. [Windows Vista](#) and Office 2007 have been the most popular offer, and ran out of our allotment from the fulfillment center. Both products will be available again shortly."

"You can completely max out the number of tickets available within 6-8 hours without even being at your computer," a Live Search Club user said in an e-mail. "Many, many people were doing this, redeeming the tickets for several copies of Windows Vista, and reselling them on eBay, etc. There isn't even a limit to how many accounts you can open and how many prizes you can win."

eBay currently shows 16 completed auctions in the past week for Live Search Club accounts with 20,000 points -- enough for a Microsoft Zune. With those accounts going for between \$25 and \$35, Microsoft may be moving quite a few discount Zunes.

Stephen DiMarco, Compete's CMO, said that Compete had [updated](#) its numbers as a result of questions, removing search gains attributable to Live Search Club. Without Live Search Club, Microsoft Live's U.S. search query volume rose from 8.4% to 9.1%, rather than 13.2%. So the good news for Microsoft is that more people are using Live Search. The bad news is that more bots are using it.

DiMarco claims that bots don't affect data collected from Compete's 2 million person audience panel. "Bots can't impact our data," he said. "Our data is immune to bots so our metrics would be [bot](#) free."

Pressed on this point, he conceded that the [software](#) Compete employs to track the clicks of consenting panel members might not be able to distinguish macros -- which he said are different from bots -- from user-driven input.

The [forums](#) hosted at Facepunch Studios (registration required) currently contain hundreds of messages detailing the lengths to which users have gone to obtain Live Search Club prizes. So does this [forum](#) with a [Naru](#) country code domain. One user of the Facepunch forums has posted more than a dozen [photos of prizes](#) (registration required) other Live Search Club participants won, including Windows Vista Ultimate Edition, Xbox games, Microsoft tote bags, and two Zune music players.

The [forum](#) posts contain links to bot code that can be used for automating Live Search Club games. [One of them](#) is currently hosted on [Google](#) Pages. There's even an [instructional video](#) on YouTube to teach would-be scammers how to beat the system.

Not everyone appears to be pleased however. The Facepunch Studios forums contain numerous posts berating those abusing Live Search Club.

Microsoft may or may not be catching on. One forum post from earlier today notes that Microsoft has starting to ban users for Terms of Service violations. Another post warns not to use the Club Live Player bot because Microsoft can detect it. However, Facepunch forum members have indicated these posts are fakes.

"As for click fraud, there is always a risk with these kinds of promotions, and we are working diligently to shut down any illegal activity," a Microsoft spokesperson said.



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