Thin Affiliate Sites

Introduction
Google states in its Webmaster Guielines to “Avoid … approaches such as affiliate programs with little or no original content” (http://www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=35769).

Google also says that “Affiliate content should form only a small part of the content of your site” and “Pure affiliate sites consisting of content that appears in many other places on the web is unlikely to perform well in Google search results and can cause your site to be negatively perceived by search engines.” (http://www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=76465).

The Problem
These statements are based on a textual centric view of the internet. This may be expected from a search engine company and may have been valid in the early 90’s when most web sites were fairly static, however, it reflects a rather archaic view of today’s internet.

Textual content aside, here are some examples of the ways in which web sites can distinguish themselves:

* Usability - e.g. presentation improvements and the use of AJAX to make sites more dynamic and faster;
* Accessibility;
* Integration with other sites, mashups etc;
* Internationalisation and localisation; and
* Alternate feature focus.
* Alternate platform delivery focus (e.g. mobiles).

So by only using textual content to distinguish web sites, Google is overlooking the value that alternate features contribute to the web.

I do not dispute that search engines should rank pages with duplicated content below those containing original content, however, I don’t believe there is anything wrong about affiliate sites containing significant proportions of affiliate sourced content so long as this is made transparent to end users.

Hypothetical Case Study
Take for example, an e-commerce web site, Widgets R Us, selling Widgets which also offers an affiliate program. The Google Webmaster Guidelines cited above indicates an affiliate site would not rank well if the only significant content they delivery was obtained through the affiliate API. However, what if the affiliate site provided a much better user interface than the Widgets R Us site? Surely it would be beneficial to allow users to use the superior interface offered by the affiliate? After all, the first point in Google’s corporate philosophy (http://www.google.com/corporate/tenthings.html

 is titled “Focus on the user and all else will follow”. Similarly, there might be another affiliate focusing on delivery of the content to mobile platforms. This would most likely offer a vastly improved service for mobile users.

The Way Ahead
Search engines such as Google obviously prefer automated ways of interpreting web sites and thus any proposed solutions must allow for this. I believe a solution should be based on affiliate sites being transparent with respect to the sources of their content. This will allow search engines to more easily identify affiliate content. Affiliate programs often require the display of logos or hyperlinks where affiliate content is displayed. This could be supplemented by insisting affiliate content is displayed using a generic duplicate content tagging format that indicates the original source of content. A microformat could serve this purpose. Search engine algorithms could count each citation to affiliate source content as a “vote” in a similar way that hyperlinks provide votes to pages.

Further to the introduction of duplicate content tagging, we need to ensure alternate features are easily recognised by search engined. This would involve the addition of further tagging schemes (such as microformats again) on an as required basis.

Lastly, the guidelines relating to thin affiliate content should be amended so that they allow for duplicated content where declared as such and is accompanied by features providing improved delivery or alternate delivery mechanisms.