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SEO

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1   Google's Latest Algorithmic Changes Demystified

Google had announced details on the search algorithm and quality changes that were made recently. In all, Google lists 65 changes made throughout August and September. This time the key changes include Panda updates, an improved knowledge graph, page quality and ranking changes, snippet changes, freshness updates and SafeSearch changes. You can read the full post here.

Here is our analysis on what we think are the top factors, which might be influencing search results either positively or negatively.

What Google Says:

LTS. [project "Other Ranking Components"] We improved our web ranking to determine what pages are relevant for queries containing locations.

#84586. [project "Other Ranking Components"] This change improved how we rank documents for queries with location terms.

Our Assumption:

This is more or less related to optimizing a site for local search. All the basic factors that you would use to rank a site for local keywords apply here.

Our Take:

It's a positive change and will definitely help to improve the quality of results appearing in Google. However, below is a checklist of things to be done to ensure your site is not de-listed from Google:

- Have keyword rich content on the site. Make sure not to spam the text with too many keywords or geographic areas.
- Optimize titles and meta tags as per the guidelines. Do not overstuff them. Keep it short and simple.
- If you are targeting different locations, create specific GEO-targeted landing pages for each location.
- Stay away from overly aggressive link building. Vary the anchor texts on a regular basis.
- Preferably, get links from pages with geographic content signals in those areas. It's a time consuming task but will definitely help you to strengthen your link profile.
- Finally, get your business verified in Google+ Local. Submit your business to other local directories. Make sure to also add genuine reviews to these listings.

What Google Says:

#82279. [project "Other Ranking Components"] We changed to fewer results for some queries to show the most relevant results as quickly as possible.

Our Assumption:

This is in fact directly related to the much talked about SERP shrinkage issue that got a lot of criticism from industry experts like Danny Sullivan and Dr. Pete. Just in case you might have missed it, we had a whole article written about this in our last newsletter.

Our Take:

We would definitely define this as the worst change by Google ever. According to a study by SEOMoz, about 20% of the search engine results pages (SERPs) at Google now show just 7 listings, which started to take effect from August 13th, 2012. You can read the full post here.

Although Google acknowledged the problem by saying "There's always room for improvement, so we're going to keep working on getting the mix right", there's still no information coming regarding how they will fix these experiments which are hitting small businesses.

Another negative change that happened involves "Single Sites Eating Up the Results" which showed many listings on the first page of results all from the same web site affecting some percentage of sites too.

What Google Says:

#82862. [project "Page Quality"] This launch helped you find more high-quality content from trusted sources.

#83689. [project "Page Quality"] This launch helped you find more high-quality content from trusted sources.

#84394. [project "Page Quality"] This launch helped you find more high-quality content from trusted sources.

#84010. [project "Page Quality"] We refreshed data for the "Panda" high-quality sites algorithm.

Our Assumption:

This is related to the Panda update which aims at targeting sites with low quality and spammy content.

Our Take:

It's difficult to decide whether it was a good or bad move, especially because some spammy sites have been hit. Unfortunately, some innocent sites have been affected by this update as well. If your site has been affected, here are some recommendations to follow:

- Content Freshness – Make sure to update the site at regular intervals with new pages, blog posts, and similar updates.

- Number of Pages on the website should be higher. Point 1 should help this cause.

- Site Speed – Although we keep ignoring this, make sure that the site loads up quickly. We feel the 2 second limit set by Google is a bit harsh. We recommend the load time to be under 6 seconds.

- Thin Content – Do not use hidden content or content with tiny font size.

- Avoid duplication of text and page titles. Make sure they are unique.

- Avoid keyword stuffing and hiding.

What Google Says:

#83761. [project "Freshness"] This change helped you find the latest content from a given site when two or more documents from the same domain are relevant for a given search query.

Imadex. [project "Freshness"] This change updated handling of stale content and applies a more granular function based on document age.

Our Assumption:

This would be somewhat related to the "Freshness" update which Google introduced in November of last year. However, we do not completely agree with Google returning the latest page for a search query.

Our Take:

Although it's a good move to deliver the most recent page from a domain, it should not be for all keyphrases / domains. This update should be particularly targeted at news sites, or sites providing up-to-date information about a particular event. For small business sites, this should be neglected. For small businesses, if you have multiple pages on your site that target the same keyword, you have to re-consider your strategy and re-purpose its content so that it focuses on a slightly different variation of the keyword.

What Google Says:

#84652. [project "Snippets"] We currently generate titles for PDFs (and other non-html docs) when converting the documents to HTML. These auto-generated titles are usually good, but this change made them better by looking at other signals.

Our Assumption:

Google now displays proper titles in searches for PDF or non-HTML results with a QuickView link which opens up that PDF or non-HTML page in Google Docs. As per our research, Google picks up the displayed title from the body of the document (provided it's not an image). In most cases the heading of the PDF is used as a title to be displayed in search results.

Our Take:

We would term it as a good move by Google since it has started to pick up the text in PDF which would make optimizing and ranking a PDF much easier rather than just focusing on links alone.

Here is the list of some of the other changes listed in the blog post categorized by topic:

Web Ranking & Indexing

- #83709. [project "Other Ranking Components"] This change was a minor bug fix related to the way links are used in ranking.
- #82546. [project "Indexing"] We made back-end improvements to video indexing to improve the efficiency of our systems.
- #83777. [project "Synonyms"] This change made improvements to rely on fewer "low-confidence" synonyms when the user's original query has good results.

Page Quality & Scoring

- #83135. [project "Query Understanding"] This change updated term-proximity scoring.

Sitelinks & Snippets & UI

- #83105. [project "Snippets"] We refreshed data used to generate sitelinks.
- #83442. [project "Snippets"] This change improved a signal we use to determine how relevant a possible result title actually is for the page.
- #83443. [project "Knowledge Graph"] We added a lists and collections component to the Knowledge Graph.
- #83012. [project "Knowledge Graph] The Knowledge Graph displays factual information and refinements related to many types of searches. This launch extended the Knowledge Graph to English-speaking locales beyond the U.S.
- #83304. [project "Knowledge Graph"] This change updated signals that determine when to show summaries of topics in the right-hand panel.
- Knowledge Graph Carousel. [project "Knowledge Graph"] This change expanded the Knowledge Graph carousel feature globally in English.
- #82407. [project "Other Search Features"] For pages that we do not crawl because of robots.txt, we are usually unable to generate a snippet for users to preview what's on the page. This change added a replacement snippet that explains that there's no description available because of robots.txt.
- #83670. [project "Snippets"] We made improvements to surface fewer generic phrases like "comments on" and "logo" in search result titles.
- #84211. [project "Snippets"] This launch led to better snippet titles.

Image Search

- Maru. [project "SafeSearch"] We updated SafeSearch to improve the handling of adult video content in videos mode for queries that are not looking for adult content.
- Palace. [project "SafeSearch"] This change decreased the amount of adult content that will show up in Image Search mode when SafeSearch is set to strict.
- #82872. [project "SafeSearch"] In "strict" SafeSearch mode we remove results if they are not very relevant. This change previously launched in English, and this change expanded it internationally.
- Sea. [project "SafeSearch"] This change helped prevent adult content from appearing when SafeSearch is in "strict" mode.
- Cobra. [project "SafeSearch"] We updated SafeSearch algorithms to better detect adult content.
- #84460. [project "Snippets"] This change helped to better identify important phrases on a given webpage.

2 Important Information Added to Google's Webmaster Guidelines

Earlier this month, Google announced an updated version of their Webmaster Quality Guidelines which focuses on the kind of practices you need to avoid on your website (such as link schemes and hidden text) as well as added a set of quality and technical guidelines for rich snippets.

For ethical SEO professionals, these guidelines might be repetitive. However, if you take a closer look, it provides more extensive and explicit information – and lists more infractions. If you read through our earlier newsletters, we have always warned about avoiding such practices to boost your rankings. Take a closer look below.

Link Schemes:

According to Google, "any links intended to manipulate a site's ranking in Google search results may be considered part of a link scheme. This includes any behavior that manipulates links to your site, or outgoing links from your site. Manipulating these links may affect the quality of our search results, and as such is a violation of Google's Webmaster Guidelines."

The following are examples of link schemes which can negatively impact a site's ranking in search results with our take as well:

- **Buying or selling links that pass PageRank. This includes exchanging money for links, or posts that contain links; exchanging goods or services for links; or sending someone a "free" product in exchange for them writing about it and including a link.**

  We never indulge in practices involving money for low quality links. However still, we recommend buying links if they are exactly related to your business and from within the content. Authoritative directories like Yahoo and Business are great examples.

- **Excessive link exchanging ("Link to me and I'll link to you").**

  Any type of link exchange practice, be it reciprocal linking or 3 way linking, are no longer seen as safe. This is something we have been advising our clients for the past year.

- **Linking to web spammers or unrelated sites with the intent to manipulate PageRank.**

  We have always made sure to get links only form related domains, blogs or directories and not with the intent to manipulate the PR. In fact, it's been ages we have been recommending our clients to stay away from such practices.

- **Building partner pages exclusively for the sake of cross-linking.**

  As mentioned above, we have stopped all such practices involving exchange of links and even advise our clients to stay away from this.

- **Using automated programs or services to create links to your site.**

  We have always made sure to stay away from tools that generate bulk automated links which are often unrelated. We make sure to get you links form authoritative sites.

Moving forward, "Here are a few common examples of unnatural links that violate our guidelines" as mentioned by Google:

- **Text advertisements that pass PageRank.**

  We do not advertise links on sites for the purpose of advertising or to manipulating the PR. On the contrary, we have been getting you links from authoritative sites, which help you improve rankings in an ethical way.

- **Links that are inserted into articles with little coherence. Example: "most people sleep at night. You can buy cheap blankets at shops. A blanket keeps you warm at night. You can also buy a wholesale heater. It produces more warmth and you can just turn it off in summer when you are going to France on vacation."**

  The text that we add in the Article Resource box is not off-topic as mentioned in the above example. We try to make the text to look related to the topic with a link to the site. While linking we make sure to deep link the pages as well as vary the anchor text thus not making it repetitive.

- **Low-quality directory or bookmark site links.**

  We always make sure to avoid such low quality links. We take care in selecting which directories to submit your website to. We keep adding industry specific or local directories which would benefit your website.

- **Links embedded in widgets that are distributed across various sites.**

  We never use this technique to gain backlinks. Although, it's a creative idea to get a link, excessive usage is not something that we recommended.

- **Widely distributed links in the footers of various sites.**

  We always advised our clients against using this technique. Many times our client's intentions would have been right, but we had anticipated such a response from Google.

- **Forum comments with optimized links in the post or signature.**

  Although we do not recommend them for SEO, genuine networking can include posting great content in forums and posting backlinks in signature. In our opinion, it seems Google has "thrown out the baby with the bath water" in this case.

Hidden Text and Links:

No matter what clever way you may have thought of to hide such things as excessive keywords; Google is aware of it. We recommend staying away from the below practices Google has pointed out:

- Using white text on a white background

- Locating text behind an image

- Using CSS to position text off-screen

- Setting the font size to 0

- Hiding a link by only linking one small character—for example, a hyphen in the middle of a paragraph

3   Google EMD Update is Directed at Low Quality Exact Match Domains

On September 28, Matt Cutts tweeted that Google will be rolling out a "small" algorithm change that will affect low quality Exact-Match domains from showing up in the top search results.


Cutts said this update will impact 0.6% of English-US queries to a noticeable degree. He also added that it is "unrelated to Panda/Penguin" updates.

To be honest, we are a bit surprised that it took Google almost 2 years to roll out this update. Matt himself publicly mentioned at PubCon (which happened back in November 2010) that Google will be looking at why exact domain matches rank so well. We thought Google will take an action right after the event.

Anyways, as far as our clientele is concerned, we have registered just a couple of sites being affected by this update so far. However, overall it seems like many sites were hit, as many webmasters have reported being hurt by this update. A WebmasterWorld thread has several webmasters claiming to be victims. This update seems to be pretty significant, especially for SEOs and exact-match domain holders.

SEOmoz has some early data on who was hit and how many sites were impacted. They say it seems like a pretty big update and shared this chart via MozCast.
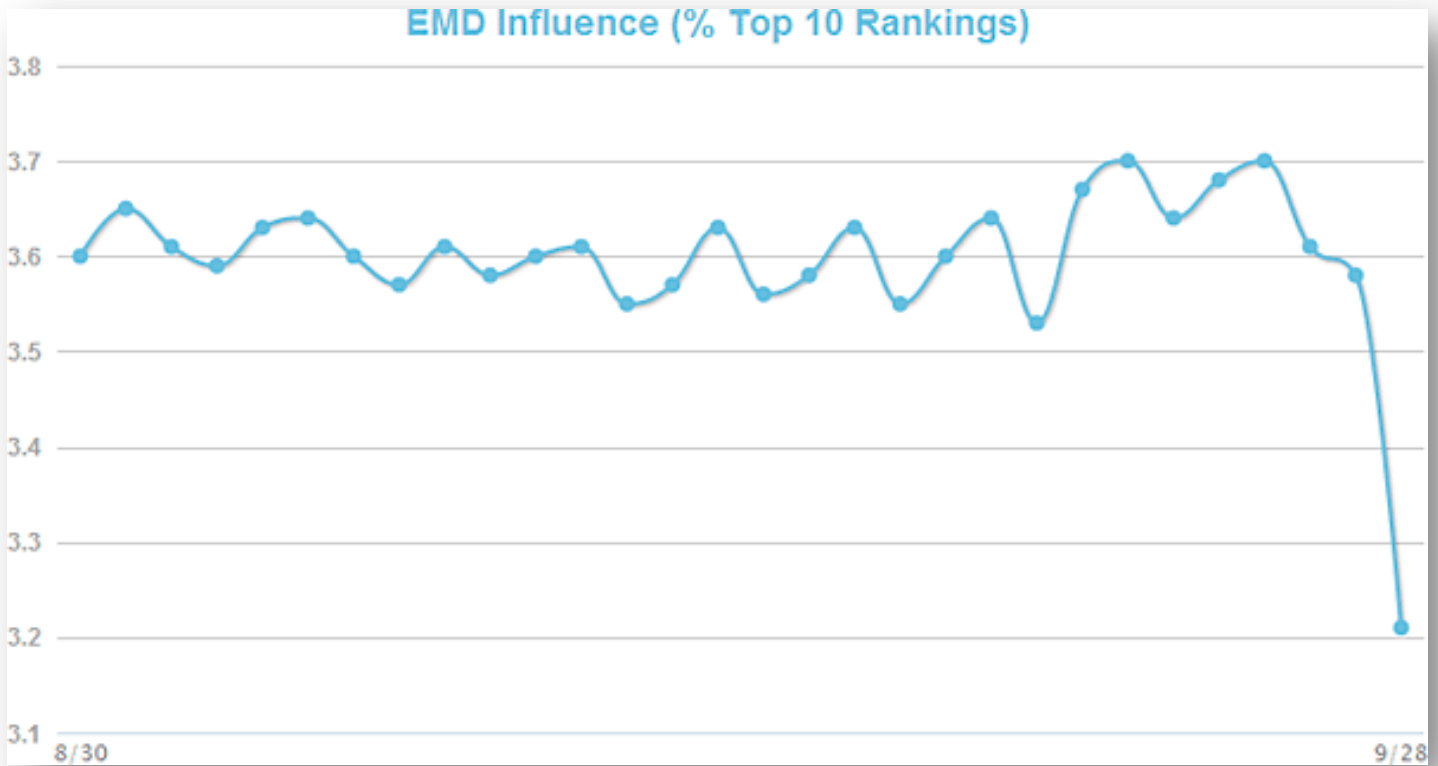
This is what SEOmoz had to say about this change:

> "We measured a 24-hour drop in EMD influence from 3.58% to 3.21%. This represents a day-over-day change of 10.3%. While the graph only shows the 30-day view, this also marks the lowest measurement of EMD influence on record since we started collecting data in early April."

We aren't very sure what the hit-pattern is yet, but some may have dropped in ranking due to factors that had nothing to do with this algorithm update (and were only coincidentally just EMDs). One unfortunate example is www.vacuumcleaners.net which seems to be a legitimate site representing an online vacuum cleaner store. Before the EMD update, this site used to rank on page 1 of Google for "Vacuum Cleaners" and other such terms which had "Vacuum Cleaners" in it, but it's nowhere to be found now (within the first 30 pages at least). It's just another example of innocent site being hit by a Google update.

At this point, we have to settle down assuming that Google is considering multiple factors to de-rank a site like aggressive keyword usage, low-authority, spammy link-building, etc. and seem to have been ranking solely by the benefit of their EMDs. However, as the example portrays, innocent sites as usual have too been hit by this update.

Keep in mind that this doesn't mean sites with keywords they hope to rank for in their domain names are now doomed. Rather, the change aims to target low quality sites that might be riding on the basis of exact matching.

So, is a full recovery possible from this update?

Well, we can say a full recovery might not be possible. However, according to some trusted resources, we can take a few steps to ensure that the rankings are partially back.

1. Take enough time to re-write the low-quality content on your site and make sure it meets the quality guidelines.

2. Make sure that the pages are well SEOd. Do not stuff or spam. Avoid excessive on-page optimization.

3. Work on getting quality backlinks for your domain. However, make sure to carefully choose the anchor texts this time. Use variations of the anchor text. Do not over use the "exact match" keyword.

4. Once the above things are cleared, file a reconsideration request to Google using the Webmaster Tools account.

5. Finally, if you think the above steps are not working out, the last option would be to get a new domain (a branded one this time) and perform a proper 301 redirect from the old domain to the new one. Follow steps 1 to 3 above for this new domain.

Moving forward, as far as domain recommendation is concerned, make sure to avoid exact match or keyword rich domains. Unless the domain is well established with higher DA (Domain Authority), PA (Page Authority), Page Rank and strong link profile, it is a good idea to avoid these types of domains and go with a branded name.

We will keep doing more research and keep a close eye on further EMD updates to learn more. We will keep you posted in the upcoming newsletters.

4   New Data Refresh for Google's Penguin Update

On October 5, Matt Cutts released another Weather Report confirming a data refresh to the much talked about Penguin update. Below is the tweet confirming the same information.

Matt Cutts ✔
@mattcutts

Follow

Weather report: Penguin data refresh coming today. 0.3% of English queries noticeably affected. Details: goo.gl/AF5kt

← Reply   ⟲ Retweet   ⟲ Old RT   ★ Favorite

Matt confirmed that this update will affect 0.3% of the English search queries. To add to this, he also mentioned in his reply that it will affect ~0.4% of Spanish queries, 0.4% of French queries and ~0.3% of Italian queries as well.

Google's Penguin Update, was first released in April and impacted 3.1% of English queries. The goal of the update was to clean up link profiles relying on heavily sculpted exact match anchor text and comment spam, among other tactics, to artificially inflate search rankings.

This is the second Penguin data refresh. The first Penguin data refresh occurred on May 26 and affected only 0.1% of English searches. So, this update is slightly bigger than the first.

However, we haven't noticed any sites being affected by this change in our clientele. We will do some more research on this and release information as we see necessary.

5   Google Confirms A Major Update To The Panda Algorithm

Google launched a new iteration to its Panda algorithm on September 27. As confirmed by Google, this is a major Panda update affecting 2.4% of the English queries.

Google's reply to Search Engine Land, when asked for confirmation about the Panda refresh, is as follows -

> "Google began rolling out a new update of Panda on Thursday, 9/27. This is actually a Panda algorithm update, not just a data update. A lot of the most-visible differences went live Thursday 9/27, but the full rollout is baking into our index and that process will continue for another 3-4 days or so. This update affects about 2.4% of English queries to a degree that a regular user might notice, with a smaller impact in other languages (0.5% in French and Spanish, for example)."

As noted above, they pushed out a new Panda algorithm update that isn't just a data refresh but an algorithm update.

The confusing part is that there are many sites affected by either this Panda update or the EMD update and it is hard to know which update you were hurt by more. For more details, check out The Return of the Google Dance.

We will keep you updated in our upcoming newsletters as we research more on this topic.

On September 19, Google announced the roll out of a "news_keywords" meta tag which will allow bloggers and news organizations to tag newsworthy posts so that they can ensure their post doesn't get mis-categorized by Google. According to Google:

"...the news_keywords metatag lets publishers specify a collection of terms that apply to a news article. These words don't need to appear anywhere within the headline or body text."

So it's a quick and easy way to tag your content with keywords that are not necessarily included within the body itself. Although, if they're important enough to tag your content with, then it's a good idea to include the same keywords within the content as well.

"One of the best ways to ensure that your site appears for particular user queries is to make sure that your article naturally contains the words, names, and figures that are central to a particular news story. If you create an information-rich site that clearly and accurately describes your topic, you will improve your chances of appearing in our search results for relevant queries.

Our crawler also makes use of a Google-specific metatag to help determine how to best classify your content. By implementing the news_keywords metatag you can specify which keywords are most relevant to your articles. For example, in an article about the World Cup you could add the following code to help Google News better understand the nature of your content:

<meta name="news_keywords" content="World Cup, Brazil 2014, Spain vs. Netherlands">

Keywords could also be used to help disambiguate between related terms. Again, if this particular publisher wanted to specify that this article reported on soccer's World Cup -- as opposed to rugby's World Cup -- then they could try the following:

<meta name="news_keywords" content="World Cup, Brazil 2014, Spain vs Netherlands, soccer, football">

Use a comma to separate each phrase or group of keywords. (Commas are the only punctuation allowed in the field.) You can add up to ten phrases for a given article, and all keywords are given equal value. For instance, the first keyword is not considered a stronger signal than the tenth keyword.

Please keep in mind that we use a number of signals to determine ranking in addition to the prominence of certain keywords."

It's important to note that this tag as usual will not do wonders to get your content ranking at the top of Google. It is included in the ranking algorithm and is an easy tag to add.

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