

Google Changes for 2009: What They Are, And How They Affect Us

As many people know, Google has always taken pride in their ability to deliver the most relevant search results possible for all of our many searches. This is due in part to their Search Algorithm which helps Google determine where a website should be positioned in their search engine results pages (SERPs). Sadly, with the rise of “live web” which tends to be dominated by social bookmarking sites and other social networking sites as well as viral videos, Google is now being to change their algorithm.

The reason for this change is due to nefarious individuals known in the SEO Community as “Blackhatters”. Black Hat SEO is the unscrupulous optimization of a website using often illegal methods such as page hi-jacking, cloaking and other methods. As Google gets smarter in dealing with them, they get smarter in terms of getting around new Google updates.

And, it has now happened again. “Live web” made Google change how they look at incoming links. It used to be that when Google started seeing a burst of new links to a website, they would immediately throw up a red flag, thinking the site was possibly engaged in shady link practices. However, with the many social bookmarking and networking sites out there now, it is not surprising to see hundreds of new links appear in a single day. This is referred to as “link velocity”, meaning the speed of new links arising from newly created web pages. With the rapid explosion of new content coming from the numerous social media sites, Google and other search engines were forced to take this into account and consider link velocity as proof of new, fresh content on a site.

Due to this, Blackhatters began abusing link velocity in order to position spam sites in top results in Google. They have exposed Google’s vulnerability to spammers and reaped the benefits... until now.

Google has been forced into action, and unfortunately, we all must suffer now due to the actions of these Blackhatters. Based on what we currently know about the new changes coming from Google, incoming links to a website will start to be de-valued in an attempt to curtail these spammer attacks on the SERPs. What this means for those of us who actually took the time to build our links ethically, is that our hard work will now count for much less.

The changes don’t just end there however. Moving forward, Google will be pushing their Personalized Search functionality to the forefront of their platform. Many people have already begun to see this with Google offering local business results whether you are logged into a Google account or not. Google is gathering data from every search you do, trying to present you with data they feel will be more relevant to your searches. The effect of this on SEO as we know it today will be very dramatic. The traditional means of optimization will soon be done away with, in terms of what this writer has now dubbed as “Personalized Search Optimization”.

Personalized Search Optimization (PSO), will focus on new factors to help websites rank. Part of what Google will now be taking into account is the click through rate (CTR) of your search listing as well as how much time a user spends on your website after clicking through. Google is yet to release

information on how this will be accomplished, but it is believed that Google Analytics will play a role in tracking this. Based on this data, Google will be more likely to serve up the same results to another searcher with similar behavior patterns.

This effort will only further illustrate the importance of having well written, relevant titles and meta tags for your website, as well as excellent page content. If content was King before this, it has now become the Emperor. Your website title and description will now serve as the most valuable hook you have in getting your search traffic. This will force people to optimize their websites not for the search engines, but for their prospective visitors.

In addition to this, as technology has become better, so has Google's spider-bot. The new "smart spider" not only has the ability to read flash websites now, but can also dissect an audio feed such as a podcast, converting all conversation to text format for indexing, but can also do the same with video for better indexing by Google.

This further illustrates the weight behind having rich media on your website. It is no longer just a bonus for your users, but also added content which is indexable by Google.

This leads into Google's "Universal Search". Universal Search is not something new by any means. However, most people do not even know that it exists. Universal Search is Google's attempt to blend many different results to your search, showing you image results, video results, book results and even RSS feed or news results. This will change the competitive landscape quite a bit as Google begins to push Universal Search more to the forefront of their functionality.

This change has both pros and cons. As a pro, it means that we can now leverage rich media on websites in order to achieve better ranking and stand out more on the results pages. As a con, it also means other websites have the ability to knock yours out of position just by having rich media on their site, or having the images properly named and tagged for simple indexing by Google.

So, What's the Plan?

Obviously, with the search algorithm changing, we are forced to change the way in which we optimize websites. This is nothing new, since Google has made changes before and we've simply adapted and moved on. However, this time is a little different as technology is now much more advanced and all the rules are changing.

Many people are now outside the SEO comfort zone.

Moving forward with Google, SEO will become PSO (Personalized Search Optimization) which means we need to begin focusing not on link building, but on content building. On-site optimization will now play an extremely large role in how your website will rank for user searches. Your content must be highly

focused on specific subjects with good internal link architecture. The focus will now be making your website *user friendly*, not *search friendly*.

Rich media is becoming a must. RSS feeds, video, audio. These things matter now not just as a bonus for users, but to increase your visibility in the search engines. Videos that go viral have the ability to drive massive amounts of traffic to your website.

Image optimization is now extremely important. The name of your image file and the ALT tag used to describe it will help that image get listed in a regular organic search, thanks to the rise of Google's Universal Search.

Use social media initiatives to help drive more traffic to your website and increase brand awareness. Social media optimization is still the best way to engage potential customer's online, opening a channel of communication with them.

Make sure you are using web analytics to understand the behavior of your users. Behavioral analysis will soon play an extremely large role in how you can rank in Google with the rise of Personalized Search. You need to be sure that your visitors are actually being engaged by your website and that your bounce rates keep low.

Written by Ryan Dinelle