

A GUIDE TO Google **SEARCH ENGINE ALGORITHMS**

An easy explanation of the most prominent Google algorithms



“What causes my Google search engine rankings to fluctuate?” This is a question asked by many of our SEO clients. The answer to this is Google's numerous algorithm changes; algorithms are the computer processes and formulas that look at your search query and then return the most relevant results. Google algorithms rely on over 200 signals to work out what results to show; these signals include keywords used on websites, your location, the freshness of content and the amount of links coming to your site. Google will frequently update these algorithms to improve the quality and relevance of search results, sometimes these will incur big differences in ranking positions and sometimes you won't even notice. This guide will break down Google's major algorithms that have taken effect in the most recent years and explain what signals they look for and why.

PANDA

What does it do?

Panda was released at the beginning of 2011. Its job is to target and penalise sites with thin content, sites with too many ads, too many affiliate links and sites with duplicated content.

Why?

Panda's purpose is to ensure websites appearing on search result pages offer quality content so that the answer to your search query is as comprehensive as possible.

What signals does it look for?

Panda looks for engaging, fresh, unique and shareable content. Make sure your web pages have sharing mechanisms such as 'share this on Facebook' or 'email to a friend'. Video and Infographics are great ways to engage an audience and encourage sharing. Sites that have these signals will be favoured by Google and will rank more highly.



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VENICE

What does it do?

Have you noticed local results even when you haven't specified a location in your search query? This is down to the Venice algorithm that was released in early 2012. When a location has not been specified it looks at your IP address and returns local results. More recently search results are being influenced by Venice and more often than not you will see a mixture of local and national page 1 results.

Why?

The purpose of this algorithm is to return increasingly relevant and personalised results to the user.

What signals does it look for?

Venice will look for a location specified on your website, often websites have a company postal address on the contact page and Venice will use this. If a company has different locations that it serves or sells in, a way to get Venice to take these into account is to create individual town pages with quality content that are linked to by local directories. This is a local SEO tactic that we practice and have found to be very effective.

PENGUIN

What does it do?

Penguin was released in 2012 to tackle spammy websites that manipulate Google's search results. A key ranking factor is the amount of links coming to your website which act as popularity points. People misuse and manipulate this by carrying out black hat link tactics such as paying for links or obtaining links through link farms.

Why?

Much like Panda, the purpose of Penguin is to improve the quality of websites appearing on Google's search results pages.

What signals does it look for?

Penguin looks for and favours sites with natural links from high quality sites. If you have links which you think could put your site at risk of being penalised by Google, you can disavow these links through Google Webmaster Tools. There are also link research tools available to help identify unnatural links coming to your site.



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PIRATE

What does it do?

Pirate was released in 2012 to prevent sites which were breaching copyright laws from ranking well in SERPs.

Why?

The “pirate” update is designed to penalise sites in line with the number of valid copyright removal notices filed against them. Google came under fire from the Entertainment industry which criticised it for not doing enough to combat theft. As a response Google launched its Pirate filter.

What signals does it look for?

Google uses the Digital Millennium Copyright Act “takedown requests”. Although a request is not proof of copyright infringement, Google will evaluate each request to judge its content.

Torrent sites are one of the site types which have been affected the most from the “pirate” update. As long as your site contains original content which does not infringe copyright laws, your rankings should not be negatively affected.

HUMMINGBIRD

What does it do?

Hummingbird was introduced in September 2013. Hummingbird helps Google to understand webpages in the same way that it understands data in the Knowledge Graph. By understanding a webpage topic instead of looking at particular keywords it can bring back more accurate webpages in its search results when given a complex query.



Why?

The main purpose of Hummingbird is to provide better results for complex long tail keyword queries as users expect more conversational interactions with a search engine.

What signals does it look for?

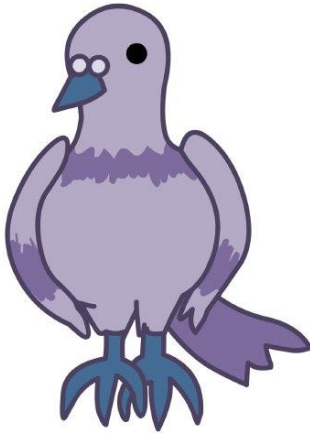
When writing content for your webpages you should ensure that your page is focused on one topic with a variety of keywords used to describe that topic; this should happen naturally as you write. It has been rumoured that there is a switch within this algorithm that will take into account social signals, it is therefore important to be posting your quality content regularly on social media with particular attention to G+; Google +1's were found to be one of the most [influential ranking factors last year](#).



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PIGEON

What does it do?

Pigeon was released in 2014 to provide more useful and accurate local search results.

Why?

The purpose of Pigeon is to tie in local search results more closely to the core algorithm. Previously Google map searches produced a different result to Google search. Google are looking to align the results with the introduction of the “pigeon” update.

What signals does it look for?

Pigeon favours sites that use region based keywords to reflect their location. One way of improving your local search is to list your site on directories that are ranking highly in local search results.

MOBILEGEDDON

What does it do?

Mobilegeddon was released in 2015. It is an algorithm focussing on mobile-friendly webpages. The new algorithm was so impactful that it was referred to as Mobilegeddon.

Why?

With the increase in people using the internet on their mobile's, Google made being mobile-friendly a rank booster for sites.

What signals does it look for?

Mobilegeddon rewards sites that are responsive to screen sizes and are quick to load. Mobile-first is becoming increasingly important with Google's introduction of AMP pages.



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RANKBRAIN



What does it do?

RankBrain was introduced in mid-2015. It is understood to be part of the Hummingbird search algorithm. It is a machine learning artificial intelligence which processes search results.

Why?

The main purpose of RankBrain is to improve search results and to better interpret relationships between words which are similar in meaning.

What signals does it look for?

RankBrain does not really look for ranking signals, instead it is a processing tool that goes beyond exact match queries. This is good news for your site because Google will now understand related queries and synonyms for the keywords that you are optimising for.

FRED (Unconfirmed Update)

What does it do?

“Fred” is a series of unconfirmed updates which seemed to take effect in and around March 2017. Fred penalises websites that deploy black hat techniques and have a heavy presence of paid ads.

Why?

Google is continually evolving in order to make sure that high ranking websites answer a user's search query. Those sites that have a poor user experience perhaps due to pop up ads or irrelevant advertising or content that is irrelevant or thin will be penalised.

What signals does it look for?

The majority of websites negatively affected were those that had thin content and/or a large presence of paid ads. Fred looks for clear websites that have good quality, relevant content and a low amount of paid ads which do not cause poor user experience. Usability and content are very important to Fred, thin content websites would have been affected negatively in rankings at around the time the algorithm was released.



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A Recent Unconfirmed Update – Maccabees

One of the more recent updates that affected quite a few sites is being referred to as the Maccabees Update. Sizeable disturbances in rankings were spotted from the 12th December 2017.

A Google spokesperson confirmed that they had “released several minor improvements during this timeframe, part of our regular and routine efforts to improve relevancy”.

Although it cannot be completely understood what sites have been affected and the exact causes in drops in rankings from some sites, a few experts are contributing drops to the below:

- Keyword Permutations: Sites which had landing pages targeting specific keywords that were not made for user experience, instead they were made to rank. For example a marketing agency may create pages targeting “SEO Surrey” and “SEO Hampshire” in order to rank in those areas, but the pages themselves not adding any benefit to users.
- Low value sites and those with advertising
- There are also sites that don't have any of the above that have also been affected negatively by the update

Our Advice.....

Our advice is to make sure that your website is targeting your ideal customer, not search engines.

All of these algorithms are updated frequently to improve what you see when you Google your search query. This is why Google remain the undisputed global search engine leaders.



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