

## *It's Still Google, Stupid!*

*By Jason Stanard*

Online marketing has become a necessary component of the marketing mix for companies of all sizes, driving companies to step up their online presence in much more meaningful ways.

A critical element to consider is the impact of search engines on consumers' online behavior, which in turn leads business owners to turn to SEO, or search engine optimization, to increase their search ranking. Search engine optimization is an effective web tool that when used correctly can produce measurable and important results.

We define SEO as proactive things one does for and to a website to get it to rank well within the search engines for targeted keyword terms/phrases. A high ranking would be one within the first five search results for a targeted keyword phrase.

Due in part to some overly aggressive marketing efforts on the part of SEO practitioners to manipulate search engine results, Google has made substantial changes to their search algorithms to help find, index and rank websites.

According to past Google Webmaster Best Practices and our own research, we have found the following were key factors of SEO:

- Title tags
  - A title tag is the main text describing a webpage. This element gives an accurate and concise description of a page's content using keywords. Google restricts title tags to 70 characters.
- Meta description tag
  - A Meta description tag is a description of webpage content appearing in the search engines.
- URL page name
  - The URL is the specific page name within a website that gives the search engine a further description of that page for search engines and visitors.
- In-page written content
  - The quality of content is determined by how relevant it is to that page, its uniqueness, readability and the likelihood of it being shared by site visitors. A webpage with unique, in-depth and relevant content may increase the overall page rank within the search engine.
- H1 tag, Alt tags and image tag
  - H1 tags are used to indicate overall relevance of that page, similar to a chapter heading in a book. They explain to the site visitor what the page is about. These are typically put at the top of the page and emphasize a word or phrase.

Google no longer views the keyword's meta-tag to determine the rank of a website. While Yahoo and Bing still account for this within their algorithms, all signs point to them dropping this in the near future.

Although just about anyone working with websites is constantly looking for ways to understand how Google does what it does, we suggest staying current on Google's published best practices to learn more about their algorithm updates. These allow Google to distinguish between quality and poor websites.

Penguin and Panda are Google's most recent algorithms, emphasizing slightly different characteristics of a quality website. Both algorithms are highly advanced and even more secret – probably known to no more than a handful of people within Google. More than 200 data points are used within the Google algorithm to determine the quality of a web page and hence its rank within a search for a given keyword term or phrase.

The Google Panda algorithm was designed to diminish rankings of lower quality websites with poor user experience. With Panda, the quality of a website depends on content, outstanding user experience and design. The following are key factors of the Google Panda update:

- Design
  - A website should have a clear hierarchy and textual navigation links. Each page should be reachable from at least one other page on the website. A site map should be offered to guide the user to important parts of the site.
- Trustworthiness
  - A website is considered trustworthy if it delivers high quality content. Keyword stuffing and link schemes will lower the trustworthiness of a website.
- Speed
  - The speed of a site's performance and load time is monitored to evaluate the user experience. Google recommends that webmasters monitor their site's overall speed, and tools such as Page Speed, YSlow and WebPage test can be utilized to determine a site's overall load times. Faster sites increase user satisfaction and improve the overall quality of the web.
- Return visitors
  - The Google Panda update states that attention will be paid to return visitors of a website. I interpret this to mean that the more people return to your site, because of unique content, ease of use of the site, etc., the more popular that site will become within the SERP's (Search Engine Results Page) Integration of Google Places.
  - A Google Places listing in a relevant category can potentially boost a website's ranking overall and locally. Sign-up is free within Google local ([local.google.com](http://local.google.com)).

The updated algorithm, Penguin, kept the main components of Panda, but also introduced penalties for linking behaviors. The following are key factors of the Google Penguin update:

- Keyword stuffing
  - This occurs when a webpage contains an unnatural number of optimized keywords in the description or content.
- Cloaking

- This is a technique in which a webpage presents different content to visitors than it does search engines.
- Don't rely on landing/gateway pages for rankings
  - Gateway pages, landing pages, splash pages or doorway pages as they are commonly referred to, will not be recognized by Google as strong SEO avenues. There is nothing wrong with creating and utilizing them as a landing page to drive visitors to, but they will not garner the same SEO consideration by Google as they did in the past.
- Duplicate content
  - Repurposing content, or copying content from another site (commonly referred to as "scraping") and changing keywords will result in a larger penalty than pre-Penguin release.
- Massive link increase in short period of time or "link bombing"
  - Creating a large number of links that raise the search engine ranking within a short period of time (one day, one week, etc.) will result in lowered rankings in the Google Penguin update.

Now that you know some of the basics and where to look for more information (Google best practices), you're probably asking yourself what your next steps should be. Very briefly, here are some suggestions:

- Avoid an overly optimized site; otherwise, your site will be a target for Panda/Penguin.
- Visitor engagement and design matter.
- Content quality will grow in importance.
- Social media will become more important.
- Optimize and design for mobile devices.

Whether you like it or not, SEO is a key component of any successful online marketing strategy. Following Google's best practices and staying informed on future changes within the SEO community are the best ways to boost your company's ranking and stay on top.

The future of online marketing is ever changing. The massive expansion of the mobile market and social media will almost certainly change users' habits and behaviors. SEO can be simple, affordable and effective when executed properly. We advise companies that are exploring SEO options to start with the Google Webmaster Guidelines and Google's SEO best practices.

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