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The Mysteries of Google by Dyanna S. Culp Temos

Google is hands down the #1 United States search engine of choice. Why?



They offer a massive database, split second search response time and relevant results. This is great if you're searching the Web, but their dominance has turned many webmasters into neurotic Google position watchers.

If you don't rank well on Google you might as well not exist, especially now that they provide data feeds to AOL and Yahoo. Depending on the source, it's estimated that Google now covers 60- 75% of all Web searches done in America. Keeping up with, and understanding, the mysteries of Google is critical for a Web site's success.

GOOGLE BEGINNINGS

Google hit the Web in 1998. In 1998, two Stanford computer science students (Sergey Brin and Larry Page) began identifying Web link structure patterns for a class project. Their analysis of "backlinks" (pages that link back to a site) inspired the basis for the first Google algorithm ranking system.

*"Exactly how
Google
ranks page content is
a MYSTERY..."*

Google is a play on the word "googol" first used by the mathematician Milton Sirota. It represents the number one, followed by 100 zeros. The term Google emphasizes the mission to collect and organize vast amounts of online data. When the two Stanford students presented their search engine idea to their first investor, they received a check made out to "Google, Inc." They rushed out to formally set up the company name, and a bank account, so they could cash that first check.

Google was a late starter, but in just five years they came to dominate the Web in America and are extending their reach worldwide. Google provides search services (or data feeds) to over 130 search engines, portals and corporate Web sites in more than thirty countries. You are seeing Google search results if you visit AOL, Cisco, Netscape, Yahoo, Sony and hundreds of other sites. The first three Google years were heaven for searchers and for webmasters who took a little time to study Google for ranking strategies. The fourth year, as Google came to dominate the search scene, it held the success or failure of any online business in its grasp.

During the year 2003 webmasters experienced nervous breakdowns as the Google System underwent a massive change. Google is radically altering the brains behind their system's ranking algorithm in an attempt to offer "more relevant results" and to stymie webmasters who've figured out how to rise to the top of the ranks after a Google Dance. Google results were a mess for most of spring 2003. Sites online for over a decade disappeared completely. Sites that were nothing more than link farms sometimes rose to the top. The infamous "relevant results" were gone. Google quickly lost an estimated 10 % of their search audience. This summer things settled down (improved), but Google still has some strange quirks in their results, especially after a Google Dance.

THE GOOGLE DANCE

What is the Google Dance? Google crawls about eight billion Web documents (including HTML, PDF, RTF, Word, Excel, PostScript and PowerPoint files) to update its search indices. This data is collected at eight primary data centers and then distributed to thousands of computers in many locations. The Google Dance occurs when new information is being distributed and the eight data centers do not have the same final results. During the dance, dead URLs are dropped, titles and descriptions updated, and ranking positions changed. It might seem reasonable to think that your personal PC is always fed by the same center, but that is not the case. So one hour you might see your optimized site at #3 for "heirloom roses," and the next hour (to your dismay) you might be at #45.

You can check your site keyword status at each of these eight data centers. If the results vary radically at the different urls - then you're experiencing a Google Dance.

www-sj.google.com
 www-fi.google.com
 www-cw.google.com
 www-dc.google.com
 www-va.google.com
 www-ab.google.com
 www-ex.google.com
 www-in.google.com

Until spring of 2003 the Dance predictably occurred roughly once a month. After two or three days the dance stopped, and ranking results were pretty stable until the next month. For about three weeks each month webmasters could breathe easy - they knew where they stood. Well, things have changed, and a new acronym is now used to describe many webmasters "GDS" or Google Distress Syndrome. Google is now updating its index more often and without any discernable time pattern. Many speculate that Google is moving to a constant spider/ update process where large established sites are visited almost daily. This appeared to be the case for about a month, but now the spidering is becoming more erratic. Now why would this concern anyone?

The problem is not the Dance time frame, but the quirkiness of the new Google ranking algorithm. Google is implementing new spam filters to penalize sites that do not adhere to the Google webmaster rules. They are also experimenting with new ranking methods for analyzing backlinks- the number and type of links that go to your site. These changes might be welcomed if they were working properly. But the new system has problems, and many good Web sites are being penalized.

LINKING AFFECTS ON THE NEW ALGORITHM

We've known for a long time that Google ranking was influenced by incoming links and that exchanging links with a low ranking site, or link farm, could radically reduce a site's ranking. But that influence is increasing with the new system. As Google activates new changes in how links affect their overall algorithm, those with highly optimized Web sites may experience severe GDS. If the links aren't there, an

optimized site will find itself in a much lower position than it enjoyed six months ago.

Page Rank Algorithm matches a site's relevance to its incoming links. It is the heart of Google's ranking system. Google was the first, but now most major search engines use link popularity as part of their ranking system. If you have 10 sites linking to you which Google ranks as important, relevant, popular sites, this carries more weight than a hundred links from Web peons or link farms. Those links won't hurt you, but they won't do you much good. However, a link on your site to a low ranker could actually drop your site's position. So, be careful with whom you exchange links.

The descriptive text in incoming links is now critical to ranking position. Even the hyperlinks within your own site should be carefully worded. Let's say your company name is Taylor's Nursery and you want to rank high for your heirloom roses. You have other sites linking to you, and their hyperlinks are followed by descriptions of your company or Web site. Having the keywords in the description is not enough. They must be in the hyperlinked text, and the closer to the front of the text, the better.

Poor text link choice: Taylor's Nurseries

Better choice: Taylor's Nursery Heirloom Roses

Best choice: Heirloom Roses Taylor's Nursery

Google software engineer Matt Cutts: "Google's PageRank search technology works by first identifying the link structure of the entire Web, then ranking individual pages based on the number and importance of pages linked to them."

CONTENT AFFECTS ON THE GOOGLE ALGORITHM

Site content is the second major component in the Google ranking system. You need quality incoming links AND an optimized Web site with great content. Remember, Google's goal is to provide searchers with the most relevant results. They do this by analyzing your Web site content and the links in to your Web pages.

Exactly how Google ranks page content is a mystery. No-one really knows, but anal retentive webmasters and Internet marketing consultants spend a great deal of time comparing observations and trying to reach some type of conclusion.

When ranking a site, Google places a heavy emphasis on page content. It evaluates the words on each page and the relationships between words. Let's say you want to rank high for the search phrases "growing heirloom roses" and "heirloom roses" and these words are sprinkled liberally about your home page (Don't be too liberal or you could get a spamming penalty and get dropped). Let's make an example out of a hypothetical Web site.

Site elements:	Not bad, but...	Much better optimization!
Visible Page Title	Joe's Rose Nursery	Joe's Heirloom Roses Nursery
HTML Page & Meta Title	Joe's Rose Nursery in Miami, Florida	Joe's Heirloom Roses Nursery Grow Heirloom Roses from Joe's Miami Florida Heirloom Rose Nursery
Page Text Key Phrases	growing our roses, how to grow our	Growing heirloom roses, how to grow

	roses, how to grow our heirloom roses	heirloom roses, heirloom rose growth tips, disease resistant heirloom roses
Meta Tag Description	Top quality disease resistant heirloom roses.	Heirloom Roses disease resistant quality HEIRLOOM ROSES and growing heirloom rose tips from Joe's Rose Nursery

Write lots of good descriptive content and you'll be rewarded. Google will look at page text for variations on words such as grow, grows, growth, etc. If the term growing heirloom roses is used over and over again, this is not as effective as sentences with variations on the term. The Google spider evaluates about 25 factors, including page content and key phrases in the page's html title, meta tags and alt tags. A short paragraph on a fancy flash page will get you nowhere on the engines unless you use techniques such as cloaked or redirect pages- which could result in serious penalties if you're caught by the new Google system.

An optimized Web site has keyword rich content, carefully crafted meta-tags and a killer html page title for each Web page. When writing content or tags, think like a search engine. The majority of searches are not for single words, as in roses, but for multi-word phrases as in heirloom roses, growing roses, or disease resistant roses. Roughly 30 percent of all Internet searches are two-word phrases. About 35 percent are phrases consisting of three keywords or more. Google provides the best search results when users type in phrases rather than single words. This fact provides some insight into their methods.

QUEEN GOOGLE'S GUIDELINES

Matt Cutts, a Google software engineer tells us "it's possible to find pages in the current index that use tactics Google dislikes, such as hidden text and hidden links. It's hoped our new filters will help eliminate this."

"You need quality incoming links AND an optimized Web site with great content..."

What We DO NOT do for success with Google:

- We do not Cloak pages.
- We do not use hidden text or hidden links.
- We do not build pages loaded with keywords that auto redirect to our home page.
- We do not cram our pages with excessive use of our keywords.
- We do not create multiple pages or sites with duplicate content.
- We do not have link farms on our sites.
- We do not link to sites Google calls "bad neighborhoods" or Web spammers.
- We do not use automatic submission/ranking data programs such as Web Position Gold (Google heavily frowns on these programs and mentions Web Position Gold specifically)

What We Strive to DO for success with Google:

- We provide extensive site navigation links using text hyperlinks in page footers and site index maps. Every Web page must be reachable through at least one text (not image) link.
- We write descriptive content without the overuse of our keywords.
- We use text instead of images whenever possible for important titles and keywords.
- We include our primary keywords in the html page title, meta description and keywords.
- We write brief to-the-point titles and descriptions.
- We use short appropriate descriptions for Alt tags.
- We place under 50 links on one page, even on our own site maps. If we have more than 50 pages in our Web site we break the site map into separate sections on different pages.
- We realize pages in flash, java, or adobe images may not rank high, and may not appear at all.
- We submit our home and site map pages for free to www.google.com/addurl.html. We submit a carefully worded description to The Open Directory Project www.dmoz.org which does datafeeds to Google.
- We build link exchanges ONLY with relevant Web sites that do not participate in link farms.

Google guy, "The guidelines are pretty simple: Stay away from hidden text, hidden links, cloaking, sneaky redirects, lots of duplicate content on different domains, and doorway pages. Webmasters should also stay away from programs that send automatic queries to Google. The worst thing you can do is try to cheat: Shortcuts to boost PageRank or rankings usually do more harm than good. Even if an SEO [search engine optimizer] does think he's found a shortcut, about two-thirds of the time it may be a sting operation. Don't bother with link exchanges, signing guest books, or other tricks -- the best use of a webmaster's time is building good content -- and honestly promoting their site. When Google punishes spam like cloaking, we sometimes take out not only the cloaked domain but the SEO's client as well."

GOOGLE PAID ADVERTISING

If all else fails you can use Google paid ads. Google offers the basic AD word program where you bid for position on keywords and the newer content targeted AdWords. You can sign up for both at google.com/ads. Low traffic clickthrough rates will result in them dropping you from bidding on that term. Place the word in brackets, for ex. [slave] and you'll get back in. Changing the ad text also allows you to try a word again. All of your ads must have the same display root url (trouble.com), but the individual ads can link to sub pages such as trouble.com/florida.html. A real human reviews your ads and click URL for relevancy. Don't advertise on the word "sex" if your site doesn't have any. adwords.google.com/select

Google's popularity, coupled with data feeds to Yahoo and Aol, gives them a ferocious monopoly on the engines and webmaster sanity. But things may be changing. Yahoo recently purchased Overture, Google's main competition in the PPC arena. Many speculate that Yahoo and Google may part ways by the end of the year. The continued troubles of AOL make it a smaller player each day. And, Google's quirky new algorithm has cost them users. A possible scenario: Yahoo and AOL break from Google, Google straightens out its relevancy system, Google continues to be the best and most popular engine but loses it's monopoly on the Web. Wishful thinking? I hope not, but no matter which way the dice roll, Google will remain important. Any successful Web site has to learn the rules for courting Queen Google.

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