

► After the Panda Update: How Google Rewards Original, Relevant Online Content

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Introduction

On February 24th, Google introduced one of its most significant ranking upgrades to date, the Panda Update. The goal of the Panda Update, also known as the Farmer Update, was to further improve the relevance of Google's search results, by identifying and affecting the rankings of low-quality sites. Since its initial launch, there has been a lot of industry discussion about how search marketers and webmasters should best protect their sites from being negatively impacted by Panda. Numerous papers and articles have been authored, emphasizing the increased importance of content marketing post-Panda. According to these publications, an SEO's best line of defense against Panda is to ramp up quality content creation, by employing time-honored search engine optimization (SEO) best practices to create content that's both search-engine friendly and consumer-focused, and therefore likely to attract links and consumer engagement.

Although these papers and articles are valuable irrespective of Panda, the buzz around the update (and the multiple updates since) has promoted the notion that if we don't quickly fortify our sites with fresher, better content, our organic rankings are in danger of being downgraded. Considering that the Panda Update only affected 12% of queries, this opinion seems somewhat "Chicken Little" in its rhetoric.

In reality 88% of Google queries were not affected by the update, and most likely those marketers who were already focused on generating fresh, quality content were not among those adversely affected during Google's initial affront. So, while search marketers need to be cognizant of the effect the Panda Update has had on their site, and there's no guarantee future Google updates won't challenge content quality, it's certainly prudent to maintain proven content best practices.

With this in mind, the Panda Update is still far from insignificant. It has fundamentally changed our notion of what defines "quality content" and, by extension, SEO itself. Previously, SEOs have been focused on a set of understood requirements: generate keyword-optimized content, obtain links from relevant external sites and develop search engine friendly site architecture. Now SEOs need to think more about a quality experience, searchers interaction, trust cues, "shareability" and actual value to their visitor. The Panda Update has changed what marketers need to provide to their audiences in order to earn Google's recognition of relevance and trust. As such, it has redefined 'value' in the web experience, by placing higher importance on content as a function of engagement. Now, 'content' is not only defined by well-edited text, but also by its ability to disseminate a brand's presence and messaging across all earned media channels, e.g., social media, video sites, document sharing sites, etc.

In this white paper, we will discuss the history of Google's Panda Update, and introduce strategies and key best practices for improving relevance and authority across media channels, by generating keyword-optimized content that directly speaks to the needs and intent of your customer audience.

What is the Panda Update?

Google's success is dependent upon its ability to quickly connect its users with the relevant, quality information they seek. Low-quality sites impede Google's ability to achieve this objective, as they detract from the overall quality and efficiency of Google's results.

Thus the main goal of the Panda Update is to better distinguish between sites with relevant, valuable content and those with non-unique, duplicated or syndicated content. These changes to the algorithm were originally dubbed the “Farmer Update,” as Google targeted Content Farms. Content Farms are sites that generate massive amounts of low-value content that is explicitly tailored to popular search terms, e.g., celebrities, news events, and help topics. In more recent updates, corresponding with the international rollout of Panda and now on a more regular schedule, the update has had wider effects, especially on sites with “thinner,” i.e. low-value, content on pages. Google’s Matt Cutts explained the purpose of the update, stating:

““ This update is designed to reduce rankings for low quality sites-sites which are low-value add for users, copy content from other websites or sites that are just not very useful. At the same time, it will **provide better rankings** for high quality sites-sites with original content and information such as **research, in-depth reports, thoughtful analysis** and so on.”

The initial Panda Update launched in the U.S. at the end of February, which, according to Google, affected 11.8% of its queries on both a site and page level. Since then updates have been introduced to the U.S., U.K. and internationally to most languages except Chinese, Japanese and Korean:

- ▶ Panda Update 1.0: February 24, 2011
- ▶ Panda Update 2.0: April 11, 2011
- ▶ Panda Update 2.1: May 10, 2011
- ▶ Panda Update 2.2: June 16, 2011
- ▶ Panda Update 2.3: July 23, 2011
- ▶ Panda Update 2.4: August 12, 2011

Content Post-Panda: Relevance and Authority Across all Media

Ultimately, the Panda Update is good news for marketers who are already in the practice of developing high-quality content that strives to not only increase traffic, but also engage its users. Marketers who follow SEO best practices have generally delivered exactly what their customers want – useful, relevant, and unique content. What Google has done with its Panda Update is penalize sites that publish content scraped from other sources. In that process, however, Google has established new parameters for what defines “quality” SEO content, by demanding a better, more user-oriented site experience. Specifically, this means improving the overall experience of a site, by augmenting quality text content with engaging, entertaining forms of alternate media and widgets (e.g. images, videos, polls).

Let’s take a look at the key best practices marketers should implement in their post-Panda SEO content strategies:

The Essentials to Adding New Value to Your Site:

- ▶ **Focus on high quality content**

The key to ensuring that Panda does not penalize your site is to create content that is either educating, entertaining, enlightening and/or inspiring, and to optimize that content using traditional SEO best practices across all earned media channels, e.g., organic search, social media networks, video sites, document sharing services, etc.

- Address your audience needs – Quality content should address the needs and intent of your audience. Rather than rambling on about your products or services, figure out what your audiences needs and write to address those needs.

▶ **Engage in Social Media**

Having monitored the ‘social graph’ over the past few years, The Search Agency has identified distinct relationships between social engagement and organic rankings, and research has revealed that human interaction and engagement play a larger role in how Google defines relevance. While perhaps not directly related to the Panda Update, social indicators are becoming more visible, evident and relevant in trust and influence and this is a growing contribution to Google’s calculation of relevance and value.

- Engage with your audience on social networking sites, community forums and blogs.
- Participate with your customers online to help establish yourself and/or your brand as a credible industry authority.
- Develop a community to which you can efficiently distribute future relevant, authoritative, and valuable content.

▶ **Content covers any form of possible user value**

Content is not limited to the content on your site. Remember to optimize video, audio, infographics, statistics, images, polls, Q&A, testimonials, etc., to capture and align with Google universal search results. In the same vein, if you run a video or photo-centric blog, work to include relevant and crawlable content with your media galleries.

Never Forget the Basics:

▶ **Understand how Google assesses high/low quality content**

Google identifies low quality content through a variety of factors; lack of uniqueness, “thin” content, scraped content, duplicate content and dearth of social indicators.

- Understanding how Google evaluates quality content is equally as important. Google encourages marketers to think from the perspective of their customers, and to think about how you yourself would perceive the information on your site. *Would you trust it? Do you think the content is well edited, unique, useful and trustworthy? Does the content speak to the needs of its audience?* These are important questions for marketers to ask themselves to determine if their content is valuable to their audience and if it will be well received.

▶ **Replace low-quality content with value-adding, optimized content**

The old rule of SEO was to optimize existing content and then add content wherever you could. Now it’s more important to look at current content and consider removing it if it’s of low value. As Google explained directly after the Panda Launch, “If you believe you’ve been impacted by this change you should evaluate all the content on your site and do your best to improve the overall quality of the pages on your domain. Removing low-quality pages or moving them to a different domain could help your rankings for the higher quality content.” Content that augments existing pages should be well-written, engaging, and serve a purpose other than simply adding keywords to a site. It should be useful information to engage your audience and encourage social interaction.

▶ **Don’t forget synonyms**

Instead of generating content for every keyword variation, SEOs should focus on generating useful content that includes a variety of synonyms within the same piece of content.

▶ **Go back to school**

Use spell check and grammar check to ensure your content is readable, credible and free from errors that might indicate indifference. Quality content is proofread.

▶ **Unique product descriptions**

Large reseller/retailer sites should focus on creating unique product descriptions and copy instead of relying on manufacturer descriptions. Often manufacturer content is poorly optimized, so creating more descriptive, better-optimized copy is a benefit to both the customer and to the site.

▶ **Keep content fresh**

Google views sites that don't consistently generate new content as less value-driven. Keeping content updated with new information will also ensure revisiting spiders are aware that SEO best practices are being maintained.

Conclusion

The Panda Update has fundamentally changed the requirements marketers need to fulfill in order to have their sites earn Google's recognition as valuable, relevant resources. Whereas "quality" in SEO was previously measured by well-written, keyword optimized content, a strong linking strategy and search engine friendly architecture, Google's Panda Update places new emphasis on the quality of customers' site experiences. (How did they interact with the site? Did they trust it enough to share it with their online communities? Did it provide them with actual value?) It has redefined value in the web experience, making it more important for marketers to generate content that's engaging, entertaining, enlightening and/or inspiring across all available earned media channels.

Reference

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