Site Tag Optimization Improves International Page Rankings

BACKGROUND:

The Search Agency discovered that a number of international versions of our client's pages were appearing in Google's US search results, despite US versions existing. Most often, these were the international English versions, found within http://www.clientname.com/en/, but in some cases, the UK or Australia versions would appear.

For example: Specific athletes were featured on the website and had pages like:

http://www.clientname.com/us/en/athletes/123456789/athletename

However, when searching for the athlete's names in Google US, the international English version was showing up in the results, rather than the US version.

THE PROBLEM:

At the time, the client's hreflang tags were implemented using HTML link elements within each page's <head> section. These tags are supposed to reference all language versions of a page to ensure that Google serves the correct language/regional URL in search results. Our investigation showed that while a robust hreflang implementation was in place, the references to alternate versions were not 100% exhaustive on every page. The international English version itself was self-referenced, which is good, but the US English version was nowhere to be found.

THE SOLUTION:

We recommended that every alternate language/regional version of a page should be included in an hreflang tag, and we provided examples of implementation within on-page HTML and within XML sitemaps, either of which is valid. In December of 2014, the hreflang tags were removed from each page's HTML code and re- implemented within the XML sitemaps. As per our recommendation, an even more robust implementation was put in place, with every alternate version referenced.

RESULTS:

Since this hreflang implementation was put in place, the correct URLs are showing up in Google's search results in nearly all cases. For example, the US page for all athletes now appear on page one of the US search results for that athlete's name.