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A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO
GOOGLE'S ALGORITHM TIMELINE

2016

2017

2018

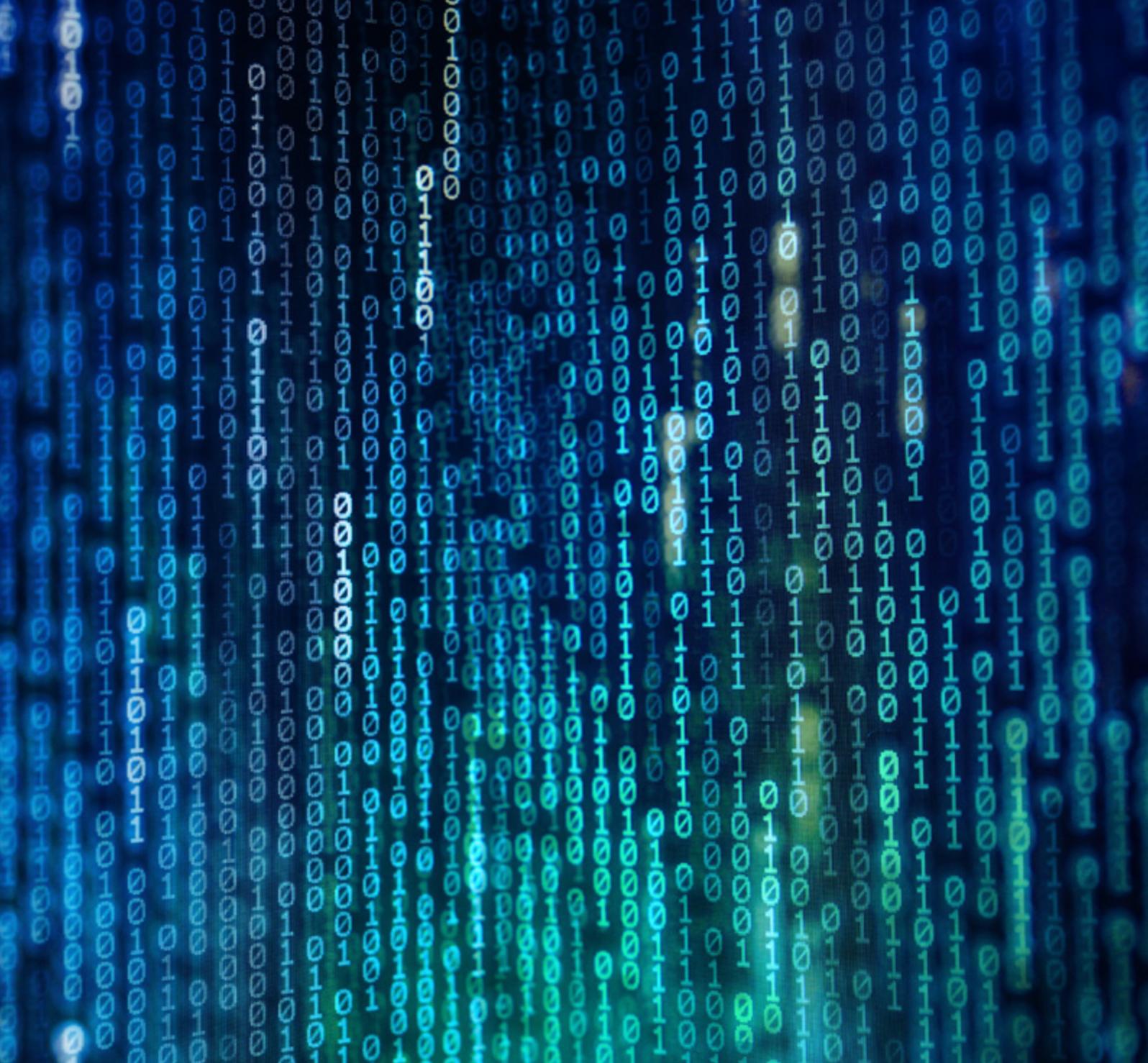
2019

2020

2021

2022

2023



INTRODUCTION

Early in its existence Google adopted the unofficial motto ‘don’t be evil’ to set out its stall in opposition to competitors they felt were exploiting users. Though whether Google has achieved the paragon status it seems they were aiming for early on is debateable, what cannot be denied is that they have demonstrated a consistent commitment to reducing the effects of black hat SEO tactics and rewarding quality content with improved visibility. From the Florida update on through Austin, Panda and Penguin, there has been direct and effective action taken to stop unethical third party action skewing search results.

Early changes to the google algorithm came somewhat thick and fast at times and not at all at others, so here we’ll take it by year at first before elaborating on some of the latest, most important changes.

2003

The **BOSTON** update (announced at SES Boston) began the rolling update of the Google algorithm – initially monthly – which increased in frequency following **ESMERELDA**, an update that seemed to be an infrastructure change more than an algorithmic one. The **CASSANDRA** followed quickly behind, coming down hard on cross-linking, hidden text and hidden links. The **DOMINIC** change appeared to alter the way Google counted backlinks, though its true face has never been seen and led to more than a little confusion as rankings seemed vary wildly for a while. **FRITZ** completed the change from irregular, to monthly to daily update of the index, while **FLORIDA** put yet another nail in the coffin of black-hat SEO tactics such as keyword stuffing and is probably responsible for the SEO industry as a whole by making the process as a whole much more difficult to achieve, rounding off one of the busiest years the Google algorithm has seen to date.

2004

2004 welcomed the **BRANDY** update which increased the importance of latent semantic indexing (LSI) and anchor text relevance, while **AUSTIN** continued to lay down the law against deceptive on-page over-optimisation (such as invisible text and meta tag stuffing).

2005

ALLEGRA is rumoured to have been the first update to begin actively penalising suspicious links, though another theory is that it tweaked LSI. **BOURBON** however, addressed the manner in which duplicate content and non-canonical URLs were treated and **JAGGER** ended the year much as Austin had the year before, targeting reciprocal links, link farms and paid links. **BIG DADDY** mostly represented an infrastructure change, though it did affect how the algorithm viewed redirects, URL canonicalization and other technical aspects.

2007

The major search update of the year was the vertical integration of video, image, local and other results into the main search engine results pages (SERPs), while a smaller collection of minor tweaks was rolled out under the name **BUFFY** in honour of the departure from Google of Vanessa Fox.

2008

DEWEY appears to have been a large scale, though difficult to parse reshuffle – though the rumour was that this was to push Google's own assets (such as Google Books).

2009

VINCE rolls out, a change played down by Google, but which many SEOs believed to have been a large change in favour of big brands, while **CAFFEINE** – a major incoming infrastructure change was previewed, designed to speed crawling and expand the index and rank in almost real time – a change which would impact the effectiveness of the **REAL-TIME SEARCH** update, which showed real-time feeds on some SERPs.

2010

The **MAY DAY** update seems, in hind-sight, to have foreshadowed **PANDA**, hitting sites with thin content especially hard. **CAFFEINE** rolled out completely, resulting in (as per Google) a 50% fresher index and a boosting of Google's overall speed.

2011 onwards

After the initial updates, it was in 2011 where Google really got serious in terms of tweaking the algorithm. These are the changes we have seen...



2011 - Panda

With its first iteration appearing in 2011, the Panda algorithm update initially targeted thin content, high ad-to-content ratios and other content quality issues. On release, Google reported that it had affected 12% of searches. It was followed quickly by Panda 2.0 and 3.1 in the same year and has undergone regular updates since. Iterations 4.0 and 4.1 occurred in 2014, while a Google announcement in late 2015 suggests that 4.2 is imminent.



2012 - Penguin

Introduced in 2012, the 'Penguin' update targeted a host of different 'spam' factors and, on release, impacted an estimated 3.1% of all English language queries. Penguin targets practices such as the purchase of links, link networks, keyword stuffing and other over-optimisation techniques. Its last update, a switch to continuous updating (Penguin Everflux) occurred in late 2014. In October 2016, Penguin was incorporated into the main Google algorithm, meaning that penalties and recoveries will occur whenever web-pages are crawled.



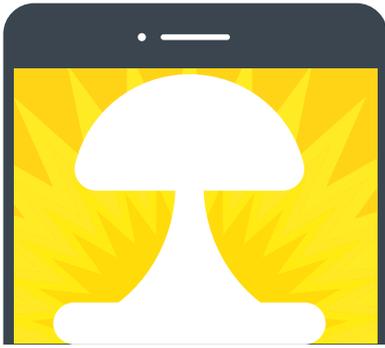
2013 - Hummingbird

Imbuing Google's algorithm with a much improved lexicon, Hummingbird changed the way Google deals with latent semantic indexing, decreasing the importance of keyword density for SEO and shifting toward natural, speech oriented search - a move seen as representing Google's belief in mobile as the future of search. As mobile search and conversational search increase in prevalence, this is likely to be the subject of update or refresh in the coming year.



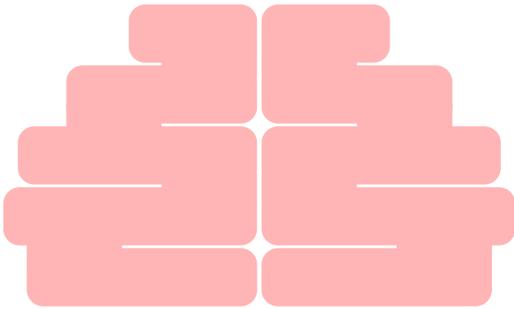
2014 - Pigeon

The 'Pigeon' update caused quite a stir in SEO as it seemed to sharply alter the manner in which Google dealt with local search - as well as improving its distance and location ranking parameters, traditional ranking factors became much more significant to local search. Local search is likely to become more important as mobile becomes the home of the internet, and with mobile gaining larger and larger shares of search volume year on year, local results accessible and pertinent to users on the go are increasingly paramount.



2015 – Mobilegeddon

Mobilegeddon was a rare update, insofar as it was announced in advance, sending the SEO industry into paroxysms as they tried to plan for an update that didn't really end up impacting as much as feared. Essentially Mobilegeddon represents Google acknowledging once again the importance of new platforms and devices, rewarding those who catered well to customers using them.



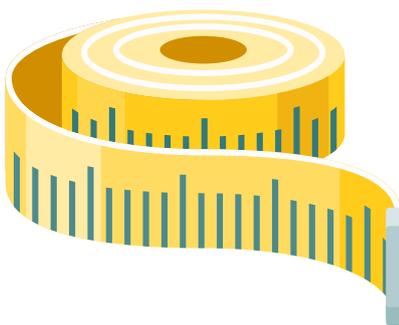
2015 – RankBrain

Google's 'RankBrain' was announced with much hyperbole in the press, however, the still impressive reality is that this piece of programming vastly improves Google's ability in latent semantic indexing and its ability to return pertinent results for never before entered queries.



2017 – Phantom

Probably better described as fluctuations rather than full scale updates – the name Phantom has been primary given to two rankings shifts – one in 2013, and another in 2015. At these points several prominent sites noted significant, unexplained traffic losses. Google has mentioned 'quality signal' updates around these times, but there have been no confirmed sightings of these particular phantoms, or at least none acknowledged by Google themselves.



2017 – Snippet Length

After testing longer search snippets for over two years, Google increased them across a large number of results. This led us to adopt a new Meta Description limit -- up to 300 characters from the previous 155 (almost doubling). Google confirmed an update to how snippets are handled, but didn't provide details.



2017 – Mobile Interstitial Penalty

Announced in August 2016, Google began penalising the mobile rankings of sites whose interstitial advertisements were deemed to hide 'a significant amount' of page content on transition from the search result page.



2018 - Broad Core Algorithm

In March 2018 Google confirmed that they ran an unnamed “broad core algorithm update” that impacted the appearance and rankings of some websites in the search results. Google posted that they do these types of updates “several times per year” and there is nothing a site can do specifically to “fix” their ranking after the core update runs. “Some sites may note drops or gains,”



2018 - Mobile-First Indexing

Google began basing its index on mobile, rather than desktop, versions of websites.

Google introduced ‘Mobile-First indexing’, demonstrating the importance of mobile search by basing their index on mobile, rather than desktop, versions of websites. Before they crawled and indexed the web as a desktop browser would see the web page. Now, while still taking desktop into account, Google crawls and indexes the web as a mobile browser would see the web page.



2018 - Speed Update

Page speed becomes a ranking factor for mobile searches. This affects pages that deliver the slowest experience to users and applies the same standard to all pages, regardless of the technology used to build the page.



June 2018 – Video Carousels

Google moved videos from organic-like results with thumbnails into a dedicated video carousel, causing a shake-up in results that were previously tracked as organic.

At the same time, the number of SERPs with videos increased significantly (+60% in MozCast). This change had widespread impact on sites that relied heavily on video or pulled from YouTube.



[July 2018 - Chrome Security Warnings](#)

After warning users of unsecured (non-HTTPS) forms months earlier, Chrome 68 began marking all non-HTTPS sites as “not secure.” This followed loosely from the E-A-T update as it made users aware of untrusted content.

[August 2018 – Medic](#)

Google confirmed a “broad core algorithm update,” with wide reports of massive impact. It rolled out over the period of about a week, but peaked in early August. This update seemed to disproportionately affect sites in the health and wellness vertical, although large-scale impact was seen in all verticals.

[December 2018 - E-A-T Update](#)

If you hadn’t guessed already, E-A-T is an acronym for three factors that have become much more important in Google’s search algorithm. Expertise, authoritativeness, trustworthiness (E-A-T). In essence it relates to a user’s perception of a site’s overall value.

[March 2019 - Google Core Update](#)

This update was initially given the nickname ‘Florida 2’ after it was announced at Pubcon in Florida. In fact it was simply a broad core algorithm change that may or may not impact brands online. Google insist this update has no specific required action or ‘fix’, but was announced in order to prevent overreaction from webmasters who might see a drop as a trigger for making a lot of unnecessary and potentially damaging changes.

[June 2019 - Core Update](#)

Google pre-announced a “core” update, but with limited details. Sites impacted in previous core updates seem to have been affected, in some cases, and some major UK publishers reported heavy losses.



July 2019 - “Maverick” Update

Ranking trackers and webmaster chatter registered a week of heavy flux that was later dubbed the “Maverick” update by the search community. Google did not confirm an update, and details were limited.



October 2019 - BERT Update

Google upgraded their algorithm and underlying hardware to support the BERT natural language processing (NLP) model. BERT helps Google better interpret natural language searches and understand context.



December 2019 - International BERT Roll-Out

Google confirmed that the BERT natural language processing algorithm was rolling out internationally, in 70 languages. This announcement came after speculation from the SEO community, and the exact timing of the roll-out is unclear.



Jan 2020 - Featured Snippet De-duping

Google announced that URLs in Featured Snippets would no longer be appearing as traditional organic results, in line with Google’s philosophy that a Featured Snippet is a promoted organic result. This had significant implications for rank-tracking and organic CTR.

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ABOUT US

Click Consult is a multi award-winning digital and search marketing agency with a focus on organic (SEO) and paid search (PPC). Part of global consumer brand business Ceuta Group, we have a team of 70-plus specialists and a portfolio of more than 60 clients worldwide.

Our complementary services include content marketing, outreach, social media, conversion rate optimisation (CRO) and international/multilingual search marketing. We can also offer training and consultation to support your teams or existing strategy.

Click was named SEO Agency of the Year 2019, adding to our long list of other awards and accolades, and also ranks within Econsultancy's 'Top 100 Digital Agencies', and Prolific North's 'Top 50 Digital Agencies'. We're also a Google Premier Partner, a Bing Select Partner and feature in The Drum Recommends.

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