

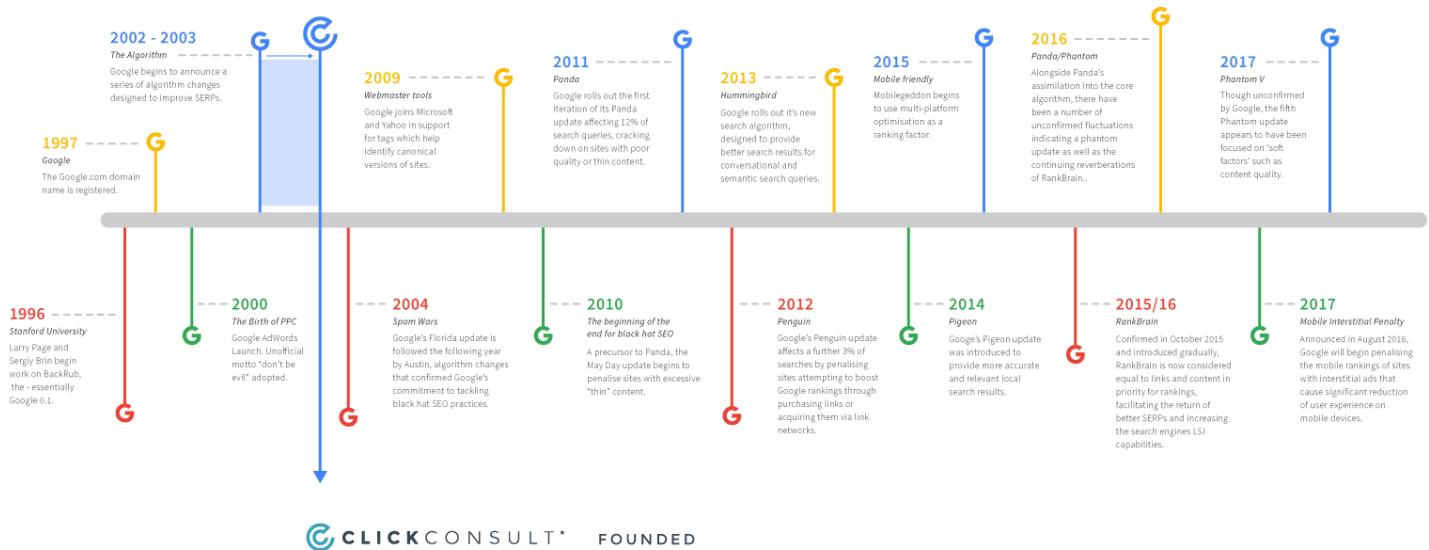


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A Beginner's Guide to... GOOGLE'S ALGORITHM TIMELINE

2011
2012
2013
2014
2015
2016

Google Algorithm Timeline



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

The **ATTRIBUTION UPDATE** was rolled out to better organise content attribution and stop scrapers, leading to **PANDA** (discussed in greater detail later) – a major change affecting 12% of all search results and cracked down even harder on thin content, high ad-to-content ratios, among many other quality issues, while **PANDA 2.0** incorporated new signals and rolled it out to non-speaking countries, the Panda incarnations multiplied exponentially over the year, featuring incremental improvements to the update's abilities ending with **PANDA 3.1** in mid-November.

2012

PANDA updates continued throughout 2012, but the major change of the year was the introduction of another bird altogether. **PENGUIN** (again, discussed in detail later) aimed to penalise sites attempting to manipulate search results through purchasing links or acquiring them through link networks. This impacted an estimated 3.1% of all English language queries.

2013

As **PANDA** and **PENGUIN** continued to be refined, there was a spike in activity, still unexplained, which led to many sites noting significant traffic loss and the name **PHANTOM**. Google also begins to heavily penalise niches with a large percentage of 'spammy' content – such as Payday Loans and those featuring adult content. Another big entry into the update annals came with the announcement of **HUMMINGBIRD** (see our glossary for more information) – a core algorithm change to the way in which Google deals with latent semantic indexing and providing the search algorithm with a much enriched lexicon.

2014

PAYDAY LOAN 2.0 (quickly becoming **PAYDAY LOAN 3.0** shortly after) and **PANDA 4.0** – the latter of which was a major update affecting some 7-8% of English language queries. **PIGEON** added to the Google aviary in the middle of the year, striking up a storm in the SEO world as it changed the way they handled and interpreted local search queries. News that HTTPS sites would receive a nominal rankings boost was also revealed. **PANDA 4.1**, **PENGUIN 3.0** and **PENGUIN EVERFLUX** – a shift to continuous updates for **PENGUIN** – appeared toward the end of the year.

2015

MOBILEGEDDON, a mobile-friendly ranking algorithm aimed to reward cross device optimisation, was somewhat less than apocalyptic than feared. Rumours abounded following this change however, and the spectre **PHANTOM 2.0** stalked the web – though Google confirmed an update impacting “quality signals”, it has not revealed any specifics. **RANKBRAIN** has also been widely reported this year – with much being made of its apparent similarities with an AI – we’d be reluctant to go so far, but with 15% of all Google searches having never previously been entered, **RANKBRAIN** allowed the algorithm to return relevant results even on a first search. Announcements of impending **PANDA 4.2** “before the end of the year” left us hanging for a while, before an announcement was finally made in October that PANDA’s 4.2 iteration had been rolling out for two months.

2016

Beginning with temperature spikes on the Mozcast, there was certainly something afoot within Google for the first few months of the year, with changeable rankings and various apparent but unconfirmed updates. However, in May, just over a year since MOBILEGEDDON, Google confirmed a second MOBILE FRIENDLY update to boost the benefit of mobile-friendly sites for those using them. This was followed by the unofficial (Search Engine Land named) POSSUM update in September which affected local pack prevalence, with large-scale results for local and organic results. Next there followed long awaited PENGUIN news – with PENGUIN 4.0, and its inclusion into the core algorithm, announced in September (and continuing in phases one and two through to October).

2017

Early in 2017, Google announced that it will begin to penalise, or lower the rankings of specific web pages that display **INTRUSIVE INTERSTITIALS** on mobile web pages. This was followed by **PHANTOM V**, an unconfirmed update which appeared to be focused on content quality, rewarding substantial, useful content and punishing the inverse. While this update remains unconfirmed, a study of its effects as well as the winners and losers resulting from it can be found on Searchmetrics' blog.

GLOSSARY

PANDA

The first indication of the possible effects of this ursine update came in a Google blog in January of 2011 wherein they stated that they were evaluating ‘multiple changes that should help drive spam levels even lower’. The Panda update certainly did this, effecting 12% - potentially billions – of search queries by penalising sites filled with low quality, thin or copied (scraped) content.

However, though content relevance and keyword density was an important and, until Panda, reasonably easily gamed, ranking signifier when considering the implementation of site-wide content, it was not the only one. Many companies moved on to other easy SERP’s factors such as link-farming and various other varieties of link-spam; which is why the SEO industry would find a new black-and-white friend waiting for them in 2012.

PENGUIN

Link schemes or ‘spamdexing’ was the target of the first of Google’s three recent avian updates which aimed to crack down on sites which breached its Webmaster Guidelines by seeking to game the Google algorithm by manipulating the number of inorganic, paid or rented links to a page in order to increase its ranking. This has, over successive refreshes and updates, come to affect up to 7% of English language searches as well as driving black hat SEO further underground.

It seems the last straw with this was a piece of unsolicited spam email offering (in clear breach of their quality guidelines) to pay Matt Cutts (yes, the former head of Google’s web spam team) to feature linked articles. The very fact that this email went to him is indicative of how this corruption of outreach is being conducted. Instead of seeking to earn organic links, companies had begun to offer payment to a non-specific list of bloggers. To quote Matt Cutts: ‘The objective is not to make your links appear natural; the objective is that your links are natural.’

Penguin finally became part of the core algorithm in October of 2016, meaning that there will be potentially reduced recovery times from penalties. Referred to as ‘more granular’, penalties may be restricted to specific pages or by reducing the value of specific links.

Just as Google have targeted link networks, scraper sites, site-wide factors and other aspects of black-hat SEO, the only things to speculate about really is not if or when Google is to be able to track and punish this paid outreach activity but which animal the algorithmic update will be named for.

PENGUIN was eventually incorporated into Google’s core algorithm in September of 2016, this included an adjustment to devalue bad links, rather than penalise sites (though penalties are still possible for breaches of PENGUIN rules).

HUMMINGBIRD

Hummingbird is a bird of a different feather – and the first major update to Google’s core algorithm since 2010’s Caffeine. Where Panda and Penguin sought to limit opportunities to game the existing core algorithm and punish practitioners, Hummingbird sought to better reflect the changes in the way people search, adding to its ability to extract words synonymous with keywords and seeking to promote natural language using semantic search – which permitted the engine to add weighting to the context of entire sentences when considering relevance to search topics.

The idea here – and why many in the industry considered it a mobile-positive update – is that it boosts the relevance of long-tail keywords, a more natural, human, more speech-reflective manner of searching which has increased as mobile technology has advanced and search queries from mobile devices have surpassed those from desktops. Hummingbird also has the positive benefit, due to this ability to decode speech-reflective search, of heightening the usefulness of voice activated search, increasing the ability to ‘okay google’ any subject.

PIGEON

Pigeon is another update which looks to humanise and personalise SERP’s. Utilising hundreds of other ranking signals, this update gives preference to local listings in search results. It looks, also to have been significant in Google’s acceptance of the dawn of mobile technologies and is no doubt a part of the recent Your Timeline upgrade to Google Maps, though whether this becomes a domain for targeted location and behaviour driven advertisement remains to be seen.

This update, along with the Knowledge Graph, can also be seen as a real bell-weather for the direction in which search and therefore SEO is headed. The update represents a response to increased demand for the personalisation of a consumer’s interaction with the web. As mobile internet becomes ever more popular – and some would say critical – in everyday life, the demand for easily accessible, relevant content on the move must become a driving force for brands looking to maximise their online potential.

MOBILE-FRIENDLY

More accurately described as a boost to the MOBILEGEDDON update, the MOBILE-FRIENDLY update earns its own place on the list by virtue of its less hyperbolic reception. Probably due to the fact that many brands rushed to put mobile-friendly sites in place before the previous iteration was released, the resultant change to rankings was minimal. However, this update also represented another in a line of changes to SERPs which point toward a mobile-weighted unification of user-experience across devices.

POSSUM

Despite lack of confirmation from Google, the SEL christened POSSUM update had undeniable impact on SERPs, especially the reduction of local packs from seven to three and a resultant shake-up in pack results. Again, due to its unconfirmed nature, the simultaneous changes in organic search results cannot be definitively attributed to POSSUM, but unless there was a second, simultaneous and equally unconfirmed update, we can safely attribute both sets of changes to Google playing POSSUM.

MOBILEGEDDON

The calm and collected response to Google's announcement of an upcoming mobile usability update was the somewhat understated nickname: Mobilegeddon. In actuality, despite causing panic in some quarters, this update was simply a further nudge by Google toward standard SEO industry best-practice, placing the user at the heart of a brand's online presence by encouraging sites which permitted users to interact enjoyably with a brand on any device.

RANKBRAIN

RankBrain has also been widely reported this year – with much being made of its apparent similarities with an AI – we'd be reluctant to go so far, but with 15% of all Google searches having never previously been entered, RankBrain allows the algorithm to return relevant results even on a first search. Announcements of impending Panda 4.2 “before the end of the year” have left us hanging so far, but an additional announcement about an imminent clamp down on hack-spam suggest that 2015 is not yet over in algorithm news, even if it creeps slightly into 2016.

Noticed a drop in traffic that matches one of these updates? Why not take a look at our penalty removal guide?

We have plenty more [resources](#) to help guide you through your SEO journey and, if you need it, you can always speak to us [directly](#).



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