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SURVIVING GOOGLE'S MOBILE FIRST INDEX SEO YOU NEED TO KNOW FOR 2018



CONTENTS

3	INTRODUCTION
3	WHAT IS THE MOBILE FIRST INDEX?
4	HOW TO SPOT IF YOU'VE BEEN MOVED TO MOBILE FIRST INDEXING
4	WHAT IS YOUR LOG FILE?
4	HOW TO ACCESS YOUR LOG FILE
4	WHAT A LOG FILE LOOKS LIKE
7	SEO ELEMENTS YOU SHOULD ALREADY HAVE IN PLACE (URGENT)
7	A REACTIVE OR RESPONSIVE WEBSITE
7	THE SAME CONTENT ACCESSIBLE ON MOBILE AND DESKTOP VERSIONS
8	XML AND MEDIA SITEMAPS
8	SEARCH CONSOLE VERIFICATION
8	HREFLANG
8	STRUCTURED DATA
9	HTTPS
10	SEO ELEMENTS YOU NEED TO BE WORKING ON (MEDIUM-TERM)
10	NAVIGATION
10	SITE SPEED
11	SEO ELEMENTS YOU NEED TO LOOK IN TO (LONG-TERM)
11	HTTP2
11	AMP
12	PUSH NOTIFICATIONS
13	PROGRESSIVE WEB APPS
13	AI FIRST
14	CONCLUSION
15	CHECKLIST

INTRODUCTION

While the vast majority of brands will have heard of the concept of the Mobile First Index, a surprising number still have no concrete idea what it is, what it means for their business or how they intend to tackle it.

WHAT IS THE MOBILE FIRST INDEX

Mobile search surpassed desktop some time ago and is rising all the time (for most industries see [this Moz blog](#) for one exception), as such, Google has prioritised the mobile search experience. This means (as discussed in greater detail in the next section) that your site will now be crawled by the mobile and desktop Googlebots in inverse proportions – approximately 80/20% weighted in favour of mobile.

However, not only are the crawling habits of the world's most popular search engine changing, so too will the way it ranks content. Instead of – as it was prior to the shift – the desktop experience being used to calculate rankings, it will be the mobile experience. This is aimed at reducing the frustration of users who may click on the first result in mobile search engine results pages (SERPs) only to find a site calibrated for much larger screens and, therefore, either unreadable or requiring excessive zooming or scrolling.

As such, the introduction of Mobile First Indexing means that your mobile site will be considered your primary site, with good mobile user experience (UX) experiencing a rankings boost.

On announcing the change way back in 2016, Google stated:

“Although our search index will continue to be a single index of websites and apps, our algorithms will eventually primarily use the mobile version of a site’s content to rank pages from that site, to understand structured data, and to show snippets from those pages in our results. Of course, while our index will be built from mobile documents, we’re going to continue to build a great search experience for all users, whether they come from mobile or desktop devices.”

- Doantam Phan, Product Manager, Google

HOW TO SPOT IF YOU'VE BEEN MOVED TO MOBILE FIRST INDEXING

It's here at last (mostly), and Google has offered a helping hand for those who want to know if the switch has happened to them – check the log file, but how do you do that and what do you look for?

WHAT IS YOUR LOG FILE?

This will be the first question from many people and, as one of the easier to answer questions in this process, we may as well begin here. The log file for your site is a simple .txt file listing all interactions with your website as a series of coded information on visits, URLs, dates and time which capture all activity and interaction on and with your site.

HOW TO ACCESS YOUR LOG FILE

Your log file data is stored on your server, so you'll need to have access to the server and have it configured to save log files (if someone else manages your server or site, you'll need to ask them for the log file).

If you have access, you will – more often than not – find your log file in your control panel where you'll see a prompt to download something called 'raw log files' or 'raw log data' or similar. It will be a .txt extension and, once unzipped, can be imported into Excel (or a database, text editor etcetera).

WHAT A LOG FILE LOOKS LIKE

When you open your log file (it may take some time depending on the volume of your site's daily traffic), you'll see what initially looks like an enormous block of letters and numbers.

At the top of the data, however, the first three lines detail the date the file was generated and describe the server. The fourth line serves as column headers (#Fields) and will vary from server to server and then comes the actual data.

	A	B	
1		[19/Dec/2017:12:01:55]	GET / HTTP/1.1
2		[19/Dec/2017:12:02:01]	GET /wp-login.php HTTP/1.1
3		[19/Dec/2017:12:02:30]	GET /wp-content/uploads/2016/02/3663-bottom.jpg HTTP/1.1
4		[19/Dec/2017:12:02:30]	GET /wp-content/uploads/2016/02/3663-top.jpg HTTP/1.1
5		[19/Dec/2017:12:02:37]	GET /wp-login.php HTTP/1.1
6		[19/Dec/2017:12:02:29]	GET /atom HTTP/1.1
7		[19/Dec/2017:12:02:30]	GET /atom HTTP/1.1
8		[19/Dec/2017:12:02:34]	GET / HTTP/1.1
9		[19/Dec/2017:12:02:40]	GET /feed HTTP/1.1
10		[19/Dec/2017:12:02:55]	GET / HTTP/1.1
11		[19/Dec/2017:12:02:56]	GET /blog/how-international-content-marketing-can-go-horribly-wrong-q-a/ HTTP/1.1
12		[19/Dec/2017:12:02:57]	GET /question/how-do-i-know-which-links-to-remove-when-i-get-an-unnatural-links-mass HTTP/1.1
13		[19/Dec/2017:12:02:57]	GET / HTTP/1.1
14		[19/Dec/2017:12:03:40]	GET /robots.txt HTTP/1.1
15		[19/Dec/2017:12:03:53]	GET /feed/ HTTP/1.0
16		[19/Dec/2017:12:03:53]	GET /feed/ HTTP/1.0
17		[19/Dec/2017:12:03:55]	GET / HTTP/1.1
18		[19/Dec/2017:12:04:00]	GET / HTTP/1.1
19		[19/Dec/2017:12:04:07]	GET /services/content-marketing/case-studies/ HTTP/1.1
20		[19/Dec/2017:12:04:08]	GET /case-studies/ HTTP/1.1
21		[19/Dec/2017:12:04:13]	GET /wp-content/uploads/2016/08/google-algorithm-simline.png HTTP/1.1
22		[19/Dec/2017:12:04:30]	GET /robots.txt HTTP/1.1
23		[19/Dec/2017:12:04:30]	GET /sitemap-pt-client-2016-12.xml HTTP/1.1
24		[19/Dec/2017:12:04:36]	GET /resource/outreach-process/ HTTP/1.1
25		[19/Dec/2017:12:04:39]	GET /services/content-marketing/pr-editorial-outreach/ HTTP/1.1
26		[19/Dec/2017:12:04:55]	GET / HTTP/1.1
27		[19/Dec/2017:12:05:12]	GET /category/post/page/3/ HTTP/1.1
28		[19/Dec/2017:12:05:25]	GET / HTTP/1.1
29		[19/Dec/2017:12:05:48]	GET / HTTP/1.1
30		[19/Dec/2017:12:05:55]	GET / HTTP/1.1
31		[19/Dec/2017:12:06:05]	GET /case-studies/ HTTP/1.1
32		[19/Dec/2017:12:06:28]	GET /robots.txt HTTP/1.1

Click Consult's log file – with IP addresses removed from left hand column

While this data can tell you a lot (which we can tackle at some point if requested), for the time being, what you're looking to see which of the Googlebots are frequenting your site. Ordinarily, the split between the desktop and mobile bots is 80% desktop and 20% mobile; this will be reversed if you've been switched to Mobile First indexing.

You would probably recognize it in the log files. If you see, if you look now, probably something like 80% of the crawling is with the Googlebot desktop and maybe 20% is with mobile with the smartphone Googlebot.

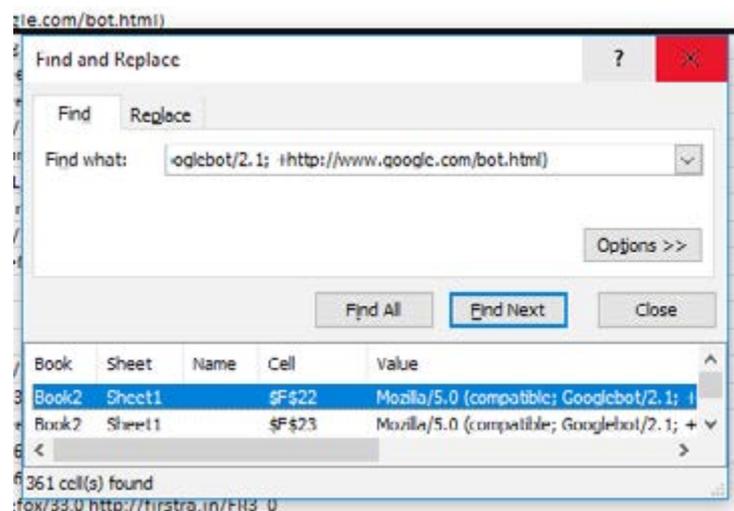
That will shift over and most of the crawling will be done with the smartphone Googlebot and less crawling with the desktop Googlebot. So if you really watch out for your log files probably you can notice that fairly obviously.

John Mueller - Google

There are, therefore, two agent strings you need to look out for:

Googlebot Video	Googlebot-Video (Googlebot)	Googlebot-Video/1.0
Googlebot  (Desktop)	Googlebot	Mozilla/5.0 (compatible; Googlebot/2.1; +http://www.google.com/bot.html) or (rarely used): Googlebot/2.1 (+http://www.google.com/bot.html)
Googlebot  (Smartphone)	Googlebot	Mozilla/5.0 (Linux; Android 6.0.1; Nexus 5X Build/HMB29P) AppleWebKit/537.36 (KHTML, like Gecko) Chrome/41.0.2272.96 Mobile Safari/537.36 (compatible; Googlebot/2.1; +http://www.google.com/bot.html)

Using the find all function and searching for both of these bots (from the Mozilla to the close of the first brackets will be enough to differentiate the two) will give you the count you need in order to make the call.



The example above shows 430 instances between the two Googlebots with a weighting of 84% desktop vs mobile. So we can safely say this sit is not yet... being indexed Mobile First.

SEO ELEMENTS YOU SHOULD ALREADY HAVE IN PLACE (URGENT)

Googler Gary Illyes has stated ([at SMX in June of 2017](#)) that it could take years for a truly Mobile First Index, but that doesn't mean you can afford to wait. With mobile sites likely to see a boost in rankings due to improved UX, you may see your competition creeping ahead due to early adoption of important mobile concerns.

A REACTIVE OR RESPONSIVE WEBSITE

Though reactive and responsive isn't necessarily the right choice for all brands (m. sites and apps will be necessary or more useful to some – for those that need a separate mobile and desktop site such as travel companies, airlines etcetera, for which the intent is different on different devices), the problem with running a desktop and separate mobile experience for most brands, however, is the demand it places on a brand's resources.

Maintaining an m. site in addition to a desktop site in the age of mobile first will require ensuring that both sites are updated continuously – something which is sometimes overlooked, with some m. sites lagging behind their desktop equivalent.

For this reason, it is simpler for most brands to convert to a reactive or responsive website, which will reduce the duplication of work and ensure a cohesive experience for consumers across devices.

THE SAME CONTENT ACCESSIBLE ON MOBILE AND DESKTOP VERSIONS

Regarding the above (and, again, with exceptions), if you have a mobile version of the site and are likely to see a delay in moving to a responsive site, or are otherwise unable to move, then it is vital that you have all of the content you want to rank for (and all of it where possible) on both versions of the site.

While desktop content will still be indexed (it's mobile first, not mobile only), it's important to do what you can to avoid losing ground on competitors who are able to be more agile in response to the change.

XML AND MEDIA SITEMAPS

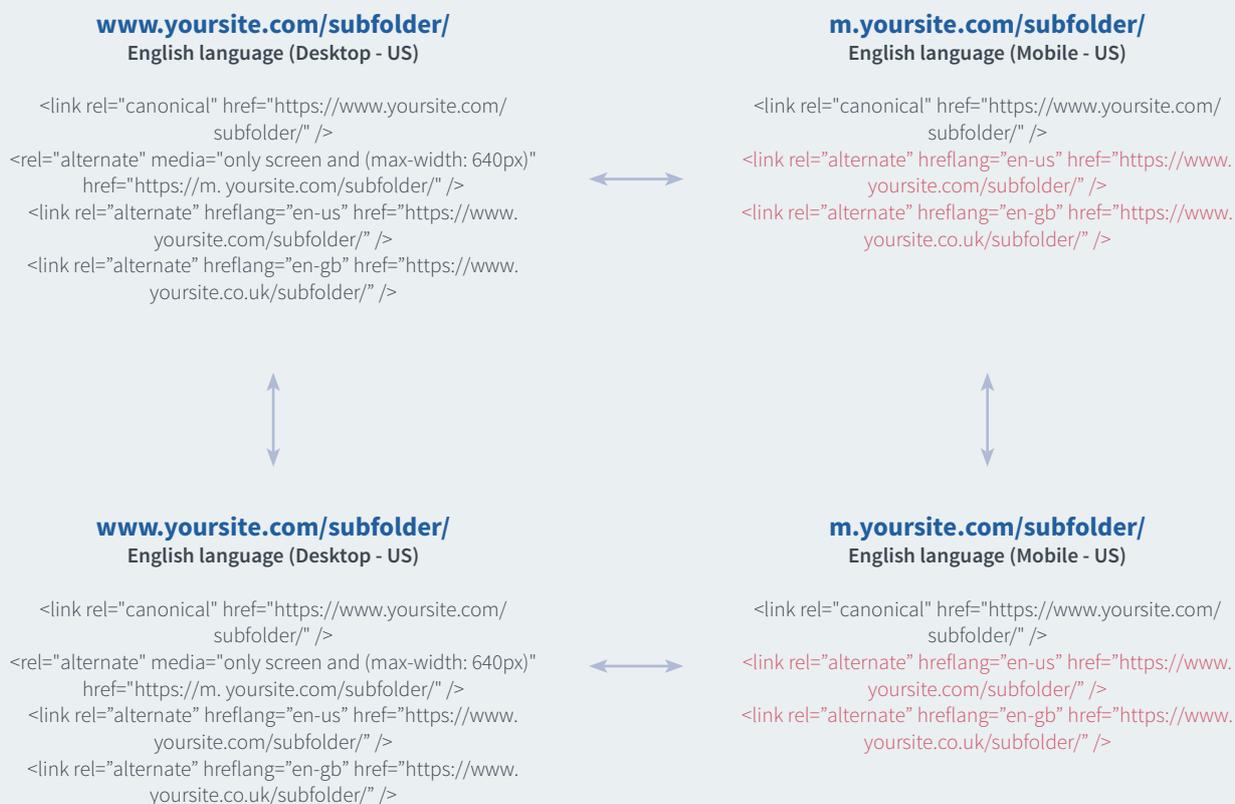
This follows again from the previous point and can be put simply as a result – your sitemaps must be available to both mobile and desktop users.

SEARCH CONSOLE VERIFICATION

If you are using a responsive or reactive site, then you can rest assured that this is covered, but be aware that mobile sites or variations will require separate Search Console verification – which should be done as quickly as possible.

HREFLANG

Equally, the implementation of hreflang will need to change if you are operating an m. site – with confirmation from Googler John Mueller, on Twitter, that following on from a move to Mobile First Indexing, AMP and standard hreflang will need to be “mobile-to-mobile & desktop-to-desktop”. Again, thankfully, this is another concern you can avoid if you are already, or choose to switch to a reactive/responsive site.

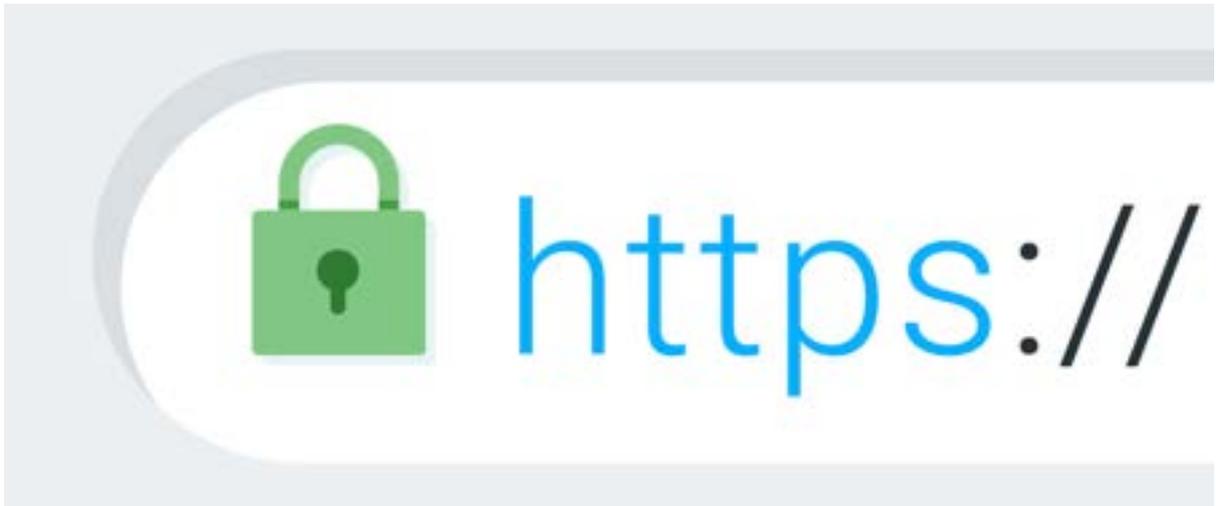


STRUCTURED DATA

Your structured data and mark-up should already be of a high standard, but with the move to JSON-LD assisting in the faster crawling and parsing of pages by Google, you need to ensure that you are covering all bases where your metadata is concerned (see our [technical SEO guide](#) for more information on implementing mark-up)

HTTPS

This recommendation has appeared and will no doubt continue to appear in hundreds of blogs and resources as it is a vital step in preparing your site for the future. Not only are HTTP sites now marked as insecure, but HTTPS is also a prerequisite for HTTP2 (the next generation of 'hypertext transfer protocol') as well as being necessary to retain the confidence of your consumer base.



SEO ELEMENTS YOU NEED TO BE WORKING ON (MEDIUM-TERM)

While there are, of course, main priorities, there are secondary and tertiary priorities which need to be factored in to the workflow over the next year. I say this because medium-term can be viewed in a number of ways, but ideally the elements listed in this resource are all things that need to be achieved at the very most within 18 months and, ideally, within 12. With this in mind, here is the work you need to be attacking come the middle of the year.

NAVIGATION

We're putting this in here as a mid-term aim solely because we're hopeful it shouldn't require too much work, but your site's navigation should be fluid and easy to use across all devices and screen sizes. This includes things like text size, line-spacing and other design features as well as more technical concerns regarding UX and the ease of the user journey.

SITE SPEED

There's more on this in the next section, but there are important things you need to do sooner rather than later. This is being listed as a medium-term priority only because speed is not yet confirmed as a major ranking signal – but it will be, and so you will need to be implementing changes such as image optimisation, asynchronous script loading, reduction of unnecessary scripts across your site and [other relatively simple changes to your site](#) which can cut down on load times.



SEO ELEMENTS YOU NEED TO LOOK IN TO (LONG-TERM)

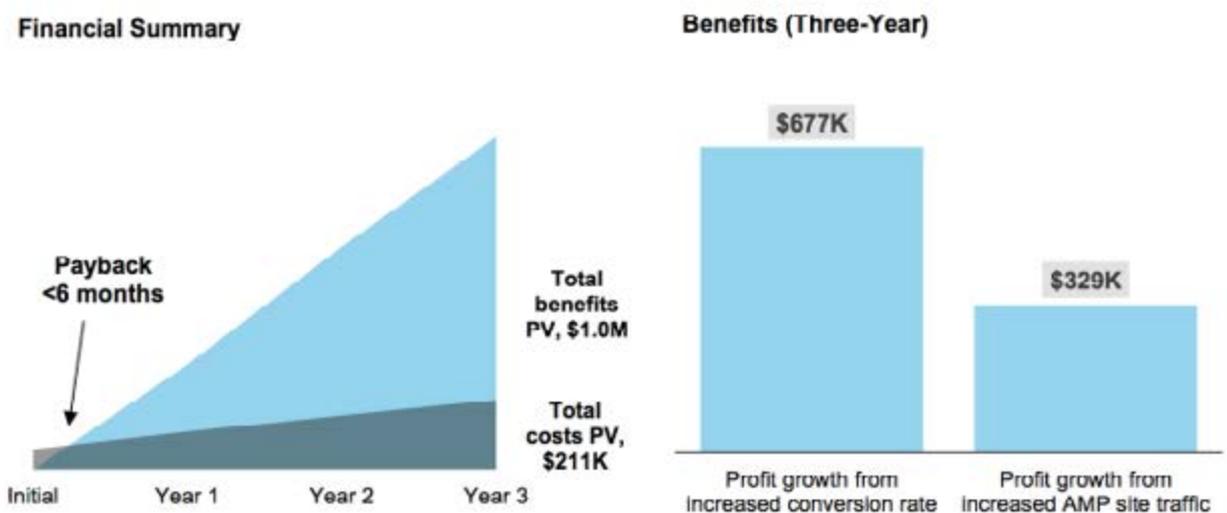
Some of these are aspects you'll need to round off the year implementing, ensuring you're in the best possible position as the Mobile First Index approaches full implementation, others look a little further down the line, but all are weapons you need in your arsenal in the years to come.

HTTP2

Feeling the need for speed? While Google has been less than helpful regarding whether speed is or is not a ranking factor (though most Googlers seem to hint that site speed is at least among the signals that Google's algorithm uses), it is certain that it will be and will be important in the future – especially as its own AMP project is designed specifically to give the web a bit of a turbo boost. For this reason, a move to HTTP2 should be a mid to long-term goal for brands big and small.

AMP

Speaking of AMP, Google's open source initiative to improve performance is likely to feature regularly over the year in Google announcements and on search marketing blogs – with AMP landing pages for PPC available and increasing HTML functionality combined with the announcement that (as of February 2018) canonical page content must match that of AMP, it is imperative that brands begin implementing the [necessary changes](#) to optimise for AMP.

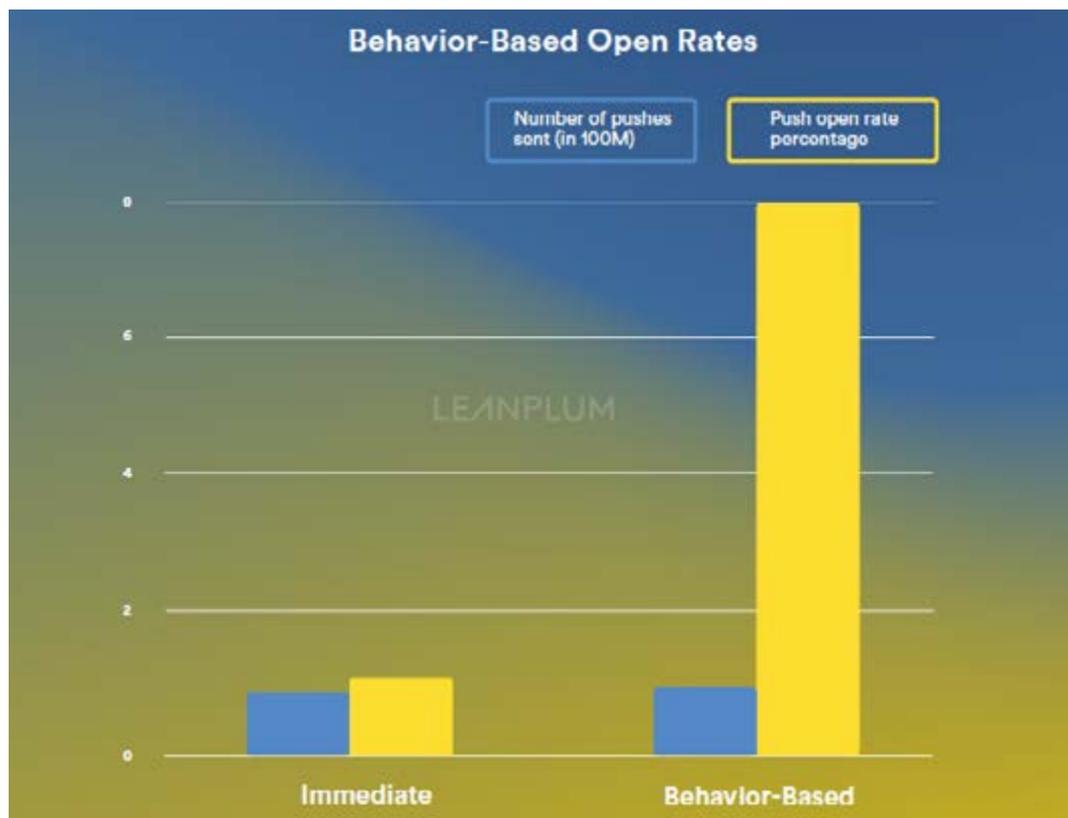


In addition to the benefits to the consumer in faster loading, less data heavy page loading, the AMP project has also released the above figures in a [blog post](#) which lists some fantastic business gains from AMP implementation. Google has also indicated that AMP will be indexed first and will be necessary for inclusion in many rich results.

PUSH NOTIFICATIONS

Requiring HTTPS to be used to their full potential, push notifications are a great way to engage and reengage consumers with attractive offers or new content. While unfortunately, the standards of push notifications are not great as things stand (as anyone with a mobile phone can attest); they are still in their infancy and with little or no agreed upon best practice for their use (though we have some [here](#) from when we first began the process of investigating their implementation more than a year ago).

Push notifications will doubtless become important to brands across industries and of all sizes – and, if nurtured and used well, could become as important to brands as email marketing in the coming years.



[Reference: Leanplum 2017](#)

PROGRESSIVE WEB APPS

progressive web app (PWA) combines the best of a website with the ease of an app. They are websites that enable an app shell and configuration file to be downloaded to a smartphone, which allows the app to take on all the best characteristics of a native app while living on the web.

According to [searchengineland.com](https://www.searchengineland.com) in their mobile SEO predictions blog they said: “It is important to remember that ‘web apps’ are basically just JavaScript-heavy websites that look like native apps, so making them function as a PWA just entails adding a couple of extra files and a little more functionality.

PWAs are also perfect for the mobile future as they allow all content previously viewed on a device to be viewed again – even when a device is offline – [see Google’s ‘Offline First’ initiative for developers](#). The combination of speed and ease of access combined with possibilities around personalisation make this one to look into if not in the next year, then certainly soon after.



AI FIRST

All of these advances in the mobile experience and the move toward Mobile First Indexing are great for UX and for consumers in general – but they are also a step closer to the target that Google CEO Sundar Pichai set out at the end of 2017 – that of AI first.

We’ve discussed in several places on the [Click Consult blog](#) the leaps that Google’s AI and machine learning projects have been making over the last year or so as well as the acquisitions that parent company Alphabet has made of tech companies that all point to one thing – that Google sees the future as AI in the palm of your hand.

For this reason, in addition to preparing for the rigours of Mobile First Indexing, we’d also recommend that time is put in to readying your brand for a voice powered future and, potentially even a SERPsless future. With Google seemingly driving inexorably toward an AI that can answer queries conversationally, provide answers that skip the click altogether, it is vital that you keep up with the pace of change so as not to be too far behind when the future arrives.

CONCLUSION

Mobile First Indexing may be only the first step Google makes in to the future, but while it may be only one small step for search, it's a giant leap for search marketers and requires major shifts in thought from some in-house departments and agencies alike. At a time when embedded media players (including the copy and paste code from YouTube) are almost always entered without responsive sizing and there are still retail and eCommerce sites with non-mobile friendly layouts, it's clear that the mobile message has not been understood by all brands (my go to complaint – the Next website – finally implemented a responsive site around the middle of 2017, almost a full year after the first of the Mobile First Indexing announcements).

Google has been unusually transparent on the future of search (at least in this instance) – it is the responsibility of the search marketing industry to implement the requirements of the next iteration of search, but also to communicate them effectively to clients and followers alike. Regardless of whether Google is the search engine of the future, these changes will be necessary to the future of search marketing.

CHECKLIST

- Have you checked whether you are presently being indexed Mobile First?
- Have you moved to a reactive or responsive website – or ensured that your m. site features the same functionality as your canonical desktop site?
- Are your XML and media sitemaps available to mobile as well as desktop users?
- Have you transitioned to JSON-LD and ensured your mobile meta-data matches your desktop without errors?
- If you are operating an m. site or other mobile specific subdomain, have you verified the site through Search Console?
- If you are operating an m. site or other mobile specific subdomain, have you made sure your hreflang is mobile-to-mobile and desktop-to-desktop?
- Have you made the move to HTTPS?
- Is your navigation clear and easy to use on both the mobile and desktop versions of the site?
- Have you optimised your site for speed – reducing image sizes, font uses and unnecessary scripts?
- Have you migrated your site to HTTP2?
- Is your site delivering AMP pages where possible and are you ready to implement the new variations that are on the way?
- Have you begun researching or implementing push notifications to help engage and reengage your consumers?
- Can your consumers access your site quickly and even offline through a PWA?

GET IN TOUCH WITH US TODAY

ABOUT US

Located in North West England, Click Consult is a multi award-winning search marketing agency with a focus on organic (SEO) and paid search (PPC), with over 70 professionals employed and with a portfolio of over 60 clients from across the UK, Europe, Americas and Australia.

Click was named Best Digital Agency in 2017, adding to its long list of other awards and accolades, and also ranks within both RAR's and Econsultancy's 'Top 100 Digital Agencies', and Prolific North's 'Top 50 Digital Agencies'.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Blog

Click Consult regularly posts actionable insights on its blog – dealing with all aspects of search marketing. From technical SEO to PPC, content marketing and Analytics advice, the Click Consult blog has something for everyone of any ability.

eBooks

Click Consult produces in depth eBooks on aspects of search marketing on a regular basis, dealing with the latest best practices, changes to standard practices, methods of improvement and more.

Infographics

Sometimes what you need is a quick point of reference about complex subjects. Thanks to its team of highly talented designers, Click Consult is also able to distil its vast experience into easy to understand visual content.

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