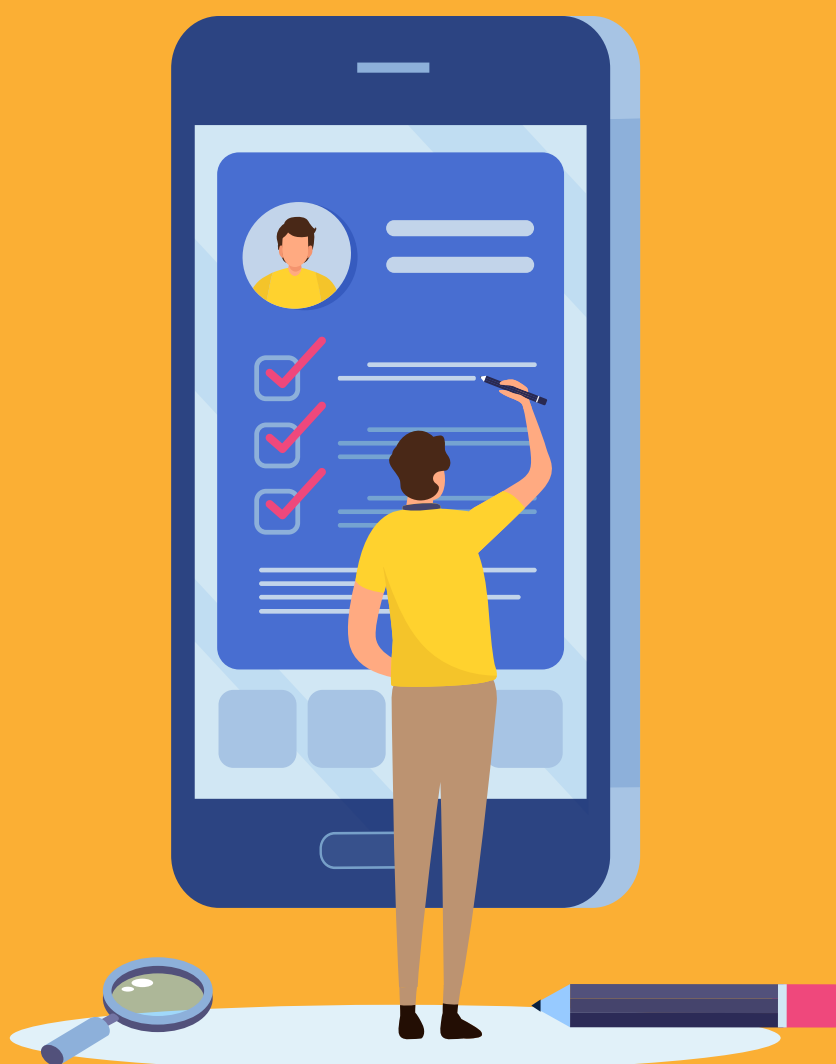




MOBILE-FIRST INDEXING GUIDE 2020

COMMENTARY AND ADVICE
ON THE UPDATED GOOGLE GUIDE



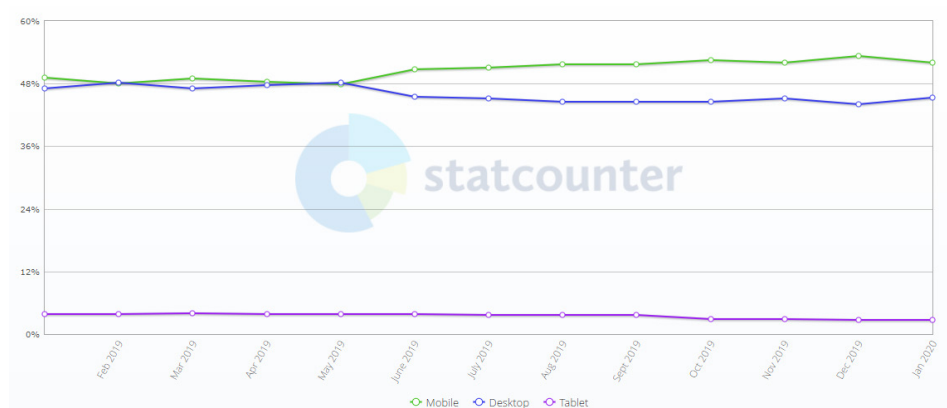
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INTRODUCTION

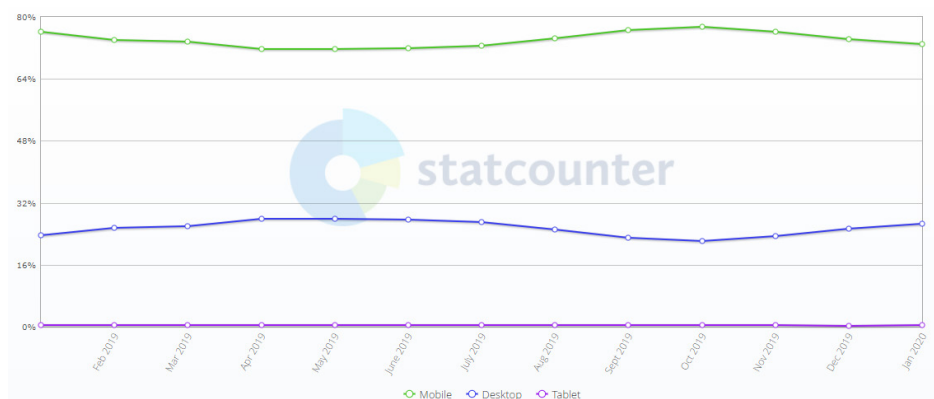
Following an update to Google's Mobile-first indexing guide, and our own prediction that 2020 could be another 'year of the mobile' as mobile searches continue to grow, 5G is rolled out and the resulting 5G ready handsets hit the shelves potentially opening new avenues for user experience (UX) and a host of new marketing opportunities.

While there wasn't anything sensational in the most recent update, the ever growing importance of mobile and the related optimisation techniques means that more attention should be given to the mobile experience and to mobile search regardless of your industry.



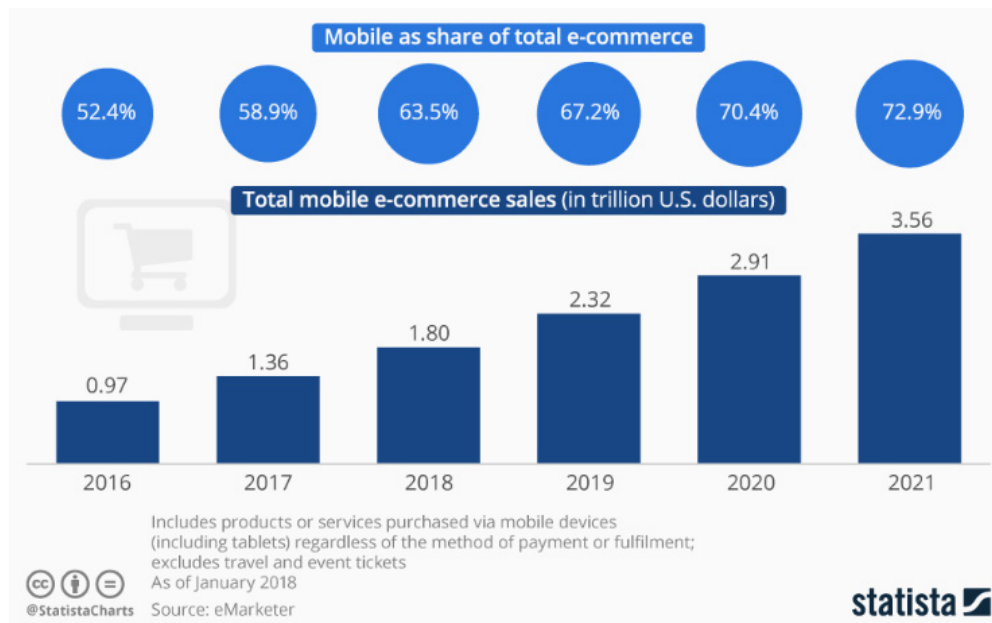
Share of mobile vs desktop vs tablet (Global)

Globally, mobile is now (marginally) the preferred device for connecting to the internet, while this difference is massively inflated in developing countries.



Share of mobile vs desktop vs tablet (India)

The more we trust our mobile phones, the faster they become, the longer we are exposed to them, the more we expect them to do and the more we are willing to let them do. In addition to the increased amount of mobile search, for example mobile ecommerce is driving overall ecommerce growth.



Ecommerce mobile statistics 2018 (US)

While brands have mostly come to terms with mobile, there are a surprising number still providing a subpar experience. Mobile is still growing in importance, and it's vital for us to understand how we should be looking to optimise in order to give us the best chances of success.



ACCESS AND RENDER

Unsurprisingly, at the top of the list for Google is to ensure that your mobile site and content is both accessible and possible to render for the Google crawlers. The three points that the document makes are as follows:

- Use the same meta robots tags on the mobile and desktop site. If you use a different meta robots tag on the mobile site (especially noindex or nofollow), Google may fail to crawl and index your page when your site is enabled for mobile-first indexing.
- Don't lazy-load primary content upon user interaction. Googlebot won't load content that requires user interactions (for example, swiping, clicking, or typing) to load. **Make sure that Google can see lazy-loaded content.**
- Let Google crawl your resources. Some resources have different URLs on the mobile site from those on the desktop site. If you want Google to crawl your URLs, make sure that you're not blocking the URL with the **disallow directive.**

This is all essentially the same piece of advice – make sure that all of your mobile content is accessible to the Google crawlers. Obviously, this is dependent upon you wanting Google to see all of your content – and if your desktop site blocks some of your content, feel free to block it on your mobile site. The importance of this advice is that anything the Google crawlers can access on your desktop site, it should be able to access it on the mobile version.



DESKTOP=MOBILE

Directly following on from making each of your sites equally accessible is to ensure that they are functionally identical – with the same content navigable from the same pages in the same way. In fact, the document carries a blunt warning – that your site can expect less traffic from Google search if your content is pared back for mobile.

⚠ WARNING: If it's your intention that the mobile page should have less content than the desktop page, you can expect some traffic loss when your site is enabled mobile-first indexing, since Google can't get as much information from your page as before.

As the warning clearly states, the crawler will be unable to find as much information once the site is moved to mobile-first indexing, therefore it will rank for fewer search terms and it will see less traffic as a result.

This request for identical desktop and mobile versions (in terms of content and functionality – not user experience which will require some layout disparity) goes further, however, with the section also advising the webmaster to use 'the same clear and meaningful headings'. Again, it seems common sense, but mobile site development (m.) is often not overseen by SEO professionals and sometimes these things can be overlooked.

Essentially, you want your mobile site to communicate to Google exactly as your desktop does – and for that reason, there's a second and final highlighted section:

★ Even with the equivalent content, differences in DOM or layout between desktop and mobile page can result in Google understanding the content differently.



STRUCTURED DATA

Again, and for identical reasons, your site should be describing your data in the same way to Google. As we've discussed incessantly, there's a growing necessity for sites to include or improve their structured data as it assists machine learning algorithms in understanding and contextualising your data. The advice from Google reinforces this need and though Google has consistently stated that there is no ranking boost for schema markup, it has to be noted that there is a categorical need for it to feature in various rich result types and the improved ease of understanding for the various algorithms can only help the correct understanding of your content and, therefore, for it to be ranked at least for the right key terms.

Google's advice in this regard is:

- Make sure that your mobile and desktop sites have the same structured data. If you have to prioritize which types you add to your mobile site, start with [Breadcrumb](#), [Product](#), and [VideoObject](#) structured data.
- Use correct URLs in structured data. Make sure that URLs in the structured data on the mobile versions are updated to the mobile URLs.
- If you use Data Highlighter, train it on your mobile site. If you use [Data Highlighter](#) to provide structured data, regularly check the [Data Highlighter dashboard](#) for extraction errors.

The second point here is probably the easiest to get wrong – as the code JSON-LD is unlikely to require change, there is an increased likelihood that it will simply be copied and pasted into the m. version of a site. Thankfully, if you are running a responsive website, your URLs will not need to be changed.

As with the majority of advice from Google on this subject, the main thing to remember is literally to do as the shift in search suggests – to think mobile-first.



ADS, VISUAL CONTENT AND VIDEOS

While the majority of advice is to replicate the desktop site's content and information load across your mobile site, the advice on ads, video and visual content has to go a step further – taking in to account the user experience of the mobile site. It is for this reason, for example, that the mobile interstitial penalty was introduced – with interstitial ads on mobile (directly from the search engine results page [SERP]) seen as delivering a poor user experience. In addition, due to the nature of the advice, this is the first section that is applicable for brands using both m. and responsive sites.

ADS

Similar to the situation that led to the mobile interstitial penalty, Google advises not to place ads at the top of a page (common to desktop sites) as it can push the content the user wants to see below the fold, again delivering a poor user experience.

Ads are seldom welcomed by users, so the aim should be to make your ads as unobtrusive as possible to avoid making the user experience unpleasant, or – in cases of poor design – unusable for mobile users.

VISUAL CONTENT

Visual content advice – as with the ad advice – takes in rendering, discovery and usability in to account.

1. Provide **high quality images**. Don't use images that are too small or have a low resolution on the mobile site.
 - This is often an issue of image placement in mobile layouts (responsive or m.) which can result in icons, product or feature images taking a larger number of pixels proportionally to what it would on a desktop screen. This can result in a noticeably lower quality appearance on mobile. As such, image sizes should be based on the mobile requirement rather than the desktop version.
2. Use a **supported format for images**. Don't use unsupported formats or tags. For example, Google supports SVG format images, but our systems can't index a .jpg image in the <image> tag inside an inline SVG.
 - As we've discussed in other resources on the site – images take up a lot of space, so there have been plenty of workarounds (some which work, others which only appear to work). The only approach to using images on your site is to use up to date image file types (such as JPEG-XR), **squooshed** images in traditional format (JPEG, PNG etc), or lossless formats like SVG and to do so in a readable image format (such as).

3. Don't use URLs that change every time the page loads for images. Google won't be able to process and index your resources properly if you use constantly-changing URLs for them.
 - Fairly self explanatory, your images should have a unique, fixed URL (which should be descriptive) to assist resource indexing.
4. Make sure that the mobile site has the same alt text for images as the desktop site. Use **descriptive alt text** for images on your mobile site as you do on your desktop site.
 - Again, fairly self explanatory, the need for alt-text is both to assist machine understanding of the image but also for accessibility for the visually impaired. This need is required equally on a mobile or desktop site and so should be the same on each.
5. Make sure that the mobile page content quality is as good as the desktop page. Use the same **descriptive titles, captions, filenames, and text** relevant to the images on the mobile site as you do for the desktop site.
 - Provided you've followed other advice about matching content across site versions, this should be no problem. Again, you just need to switch from thinking of your desktop as your primary

⚠ If your site is using different image URLs for the desktop and mobile site, you may see a temporary image traffic loss while your site transitions to mobile-first indexing. This is because the image URLs on the mobile site are new to Google indexing, and it will take some time for the new image URLs to gain enough historical search results to get a better ranking. To avoid a temporary image traffic loss, use the same image URLs across both versions of your site. If you don't mind a temporary image traffic loss, you don't need to take any action.

VIDEO

Much the same as image content, Google advice here is split in to the UX and crawling rationales. Firstly, the aim is to ensure that URLs for video are fixed, that they are embedded in a page using readable tags <embed>, <object>, etc. In addition that, however is the advice to feature video in a prominent place on the page – with Google stating that extensive scrolling is equal to a poor user experience.

One other thing to consider here is player dimensions – it is often the case with responsive sites that players will break the boundaries of a page – requiring a side scroll to access full screen and volume controls. While this is not explicitly mentioned in the document, it is likely more an oversight than a statement that such poor UX is unimportant.

ADDITIONAL BEST PRACTICES FOR SEPARATE URLS

The document also offers a host of additional advice for brands that are still running an m. site. While much of it could again be summed by ‘make the sites the same’, it bears repeating.

ERROR PAGE STATUS

While it does so in few words, the meaning of this point could appear a little obscure to many. Essentially, however, it boils down to advising that if you want to send a user to a 404 page or similar error page for a specific URL, then do it on both sites. If you do not wish to display an error page, then certainly do not do so for the mobile site only as this will remove the page from the index for both desktop and mobile versions.

FRAGMENT URLS

These are an interesting inclusion in the document that could cause some confusion. Fragment URLs (URLs which end in a hash) have been discussed frequently in search marketing circles as Google began adding what came to be referred to as ‘fraggles’ to results – however, rather than calling for a moratorium on their use, this piece of advice is intended to forbid the use of hashes as a differentiator between mobile and desktop pages. Because the hash indicates a subsection and is not generally indexed as a result, using the hash to differentiate mobile pages could lead to all pages (including the root desktop page) being removed from the index.

REDIRECT

As with the error pages, the important take away from this is that your redirects should match across your two sites. Disparities in your redirects are likely to result in loss of indexing for the desktop pages that don’t match.

VERIFY BOTH SITES IN SEARCH CONSOLE

This is a really good bit of advice if you haven’t done so already. If you haven’t verified your mobile site in search console, you will lose out on a lot of data and, therefore, potential insights once your site is moved to mobile-first.

HREFLANG AND REL=CANONICAL

I’ve combined these because they are essentially the same piece of advice which is to check your code. Operating two sites is a logistical nightmare. Dev time can be hard to come by at the best of times, so to have to battle twice is something that needs to be avoided. Therefore, if your hreflang or rel=canonical changes, you need to ensure appropriate changes are made on both sites.

Mobile Desktop

In this example, the mobile site URL is `https://m.example.com/`.

```
<link rel="canonical" href="https://example.com/">
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="es" href="https://m.example.com/es/">
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="fr" href="https://m.example.com/fr/">
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="de" href="https://m.example.com/de/">
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="th" href="https://m.example.com/th/">
```

Mobile Desktop

In this example, the mobile site URL is `https://m.example.com/`.

```
<link rel="canonical" href="https://example.com/">
```

CAPACITY

Depending on how you have your sites set up, you may have a reduced server capacity for your less popular version. If that's your mobile site, the increased crawl rate could see the crawlers detecting 500 errors and your site's rankings suffering as a result.

ROBOTS.TXT

Use the same robots.txt for both sites! Unless you specifically have some areas of one site you don't want to be visible, you should use the same file for both sites to ensure the best chance of indexing the content you want.



TROUBLESHOOTING

While there is not much commentary we can add to the trouble section – which is fairly comprehensive, we have included the text in the eBook to give you all of the information you need in one place. If you'd like to see the troubleshooting section in its natural environment, you can do so on the [Google blog](#)

From Google...

Here's a list of the most common errors that can stop sites from being enabled for mobile-first indexing or could cause a drop in ranking after a site is enabled for mobile-first indexing. If your site isn't enabled for mobile-first indexing yet, you've seen a drop in ranking after your site is enabled for mobile-first indexing, or you've received a message in Search Console, check the list of common errors and resolve possible errors you may have.

ERRORS

Missing structured data

error What caused the issue: The mobile page doesn't have all the structured data markup that the desktop page has.

done Fix the issue

Verify that the structured data is present on both versions of your site (desktop and mobile).

Make sure that your mobile and desktop sites have the same structured data.

Use correct URLs in structured data. Make sure that URLs in the structured data on the mobile versions are updated to the correct URLs.

Check extraction errors for your structured data. If you use [Data Highlighter](#) to provide structured data, regularly check the [Data Highlighter dashboard](#) for extraction errors.

Use the [URL Inspection tool](#) to check that the content is visible on the rendered page (the rendered page is how Googlebot sees your page).

'noindex' tag on pages

error What caused the issue: A mobile page is blocked from indexing by a noindex tag.

done Fix the issue: Use the same meta robots tags on the mobile site and the desktop site. Don't use the noindex tag on the mobile page (otherwise, Google won't index your page when your site is enabled for mobile-first indexing).

Missing image

error What caused the issue: The mobile page doesn't have all the important images that the desktop page has.

done Fix the issue

Make sure that your mobile site contains the same content as your desktop site. If your mobile site has less content than your desktop site, consider updating your mobile site so that its primary content is equivalent with your desktop site. Only the content shown on the mobile site is used for indexing.

Use the same meta robots tags on the mobile site and the desktop site. Don't use the nofollow tag on the mobile page (otherwise, Google won't crawl and index the images on your page when your site is enabled for mobile-first indexing).

Use a supported format and tag for images. For example, Google supports SVG format images, but our systems can't index a .jpg image in the <image> tag inside an inline SVG.

Don't lazy-load primary content upon user interaction. Googlebot won't load content that requires user interactions (for example, swiping, clicking, or typing) to load. Make sure that Google can see lazy-loaded content.

Blocked image

error What caused the issue: An important image on the mobile page is blocked by robots.txt.

done Fix the issue: Let Google crawl your resources. Some images have different URLs on the mobile site from those on the desktop site. If you want Google to crawl your URLs, don't block the URL with the disallow directive.

Low quality image

error What caused the issue: An important image on the mobile page is too small or low resolution.

done Fix the issue: Provide high quality images. Don't use images that are too small or have a low resolution on the mobile site.

Missing alt text

error What caused the issue: An important image on the mobile page is missing alt text.

done Fix the issue: Use the same descriptive alt text for images on your mobile site as you do on your desktop site.

Missing page title

error What caused the issue: A mobile page is missing a title.

done Fix the issue: Make sure that the titles and meta descriptions are equivalent across both versions of your site.

Mobile URL is an error page

error What caused the issue: The mobile page is an error page.

done Fix the issue: Make sure error page status is the same across desktop and mobile site. If your desktop site serves normal content and the mobile site is an error page, this page will be missing from the index.

Mobile URL has anchor fragment

error What caused the issue: The mobile URL includes an anchor fragment; Google can't index URLs that include fragments.

done Fix the issue: Make sure your mobile version doesn't have fragment URLs. Most of the time, fragment URLs are not indexable, and these pages will be missing from the index after your domain is enabled for mobile-first indexing.

Mobile page blocked by robots.txt

error What caused the issue: The mobile page is blocked by a robots.txt rule.

done Fix the issue: Verify that your robots.txt directives and robots meta tags work as you intended for both versions of your site. Use the same robots.txt directives for both mobile and desktop versions of your site.

Duplicate mobile page target

error What caused the issue: Multiple desktop pages redirect to the same mobile page.

done Fix the issue: Ensure desktop versions which serve different contents have equivalent mobile versions. If different URLs redirects to the same URL, on mobile devices, after your domain is enabled for mobile-first indexing, all these pages will be missing from the index.

Desktop site redirects to the mobile homepage

error What caused the issue: Most or all pages on your desktop site redirect to the mobile site's homepage.

done Fix the issue: Ensure the desktop version has an equivalent mobile version. If different URLs redirect to the homepage on mobile devices, all these pages will be missing from the index after your domain is migrated for mobile-first indexing.

Page quality issues

error What caused the issue: The mobile page has issues with ads, missing content, titles, or descriptive elements for images on the page.

done Fix the issue: Don't let ads harm your mobile page ranking. Follow the **Better Ads Standard** when displaying ads on mobile devices.

Make sure your mobile site contains the same content as your desktop site. If your mobile site has less content than your desktop site, consider updating your mobile site so that its primary content is equivalent with your desktop site. Only the content shown on the mobile site is used for indexing.

Page quality issues continued...

Make sure you use the same clear and meaningful headings on the mobile site as you do on the desktop site.

Use the same descriptive titles, captions, filenames, and text relevant to the images on the mobile site you do for the desktop site.

Video issues

error What caused the issue: The mobile page has a video that is not in a supported format, is placed in a difficult to find location, is missing meta descriptions, or is very slow to load.

done Fix the issue: Use a supported format for your videos and put them in supported tags. Videos are identified in the page by the presence of an HTML tag, for example: <video>, <embed>, or <object>.

Don't lazy-load primary content upon user interaction. Googlebot won't load content that requires user interactions (for example, swiping, clicking or typing) to load. Make sure Google can see lazy-loaded content.

Place the video in an easy to find location on your mobile site. For example, it might harm the video's ranking if users need to scroll down too much to find the video on mobile page.

CONCLUSION

Google made a fairly bold move when it made clear that mobile was to be considered the main experience for all brands – while the search data had been showing a shift to mobile for a while, the purchase data has lagged behind. However, there's growing evidence (no doubt somewhat helped along by Google's emphasis) that mobile is likely to be the primary device in all areas.

We have come, whether wisely or not, to trust our mobile devices – consumers have pushed for more security, they have driven improvements in usability through purchase decisions, and as such we use our mobile devices in every aspect of our lives. To give brands the best chance of succeeding in a predominantly mobile centred world, we need to be delivering the best possible experience.

This Google document, and the advice in it, gives some much needed information for brands who, for one reason or another, are still operating an m. site or are struggling to get the most out of a responsive site. Mobile is the primary device for most people and will be for many more, and combined with Google's emphasis on mobile, brands need to be making a big push to reach the expected standard.

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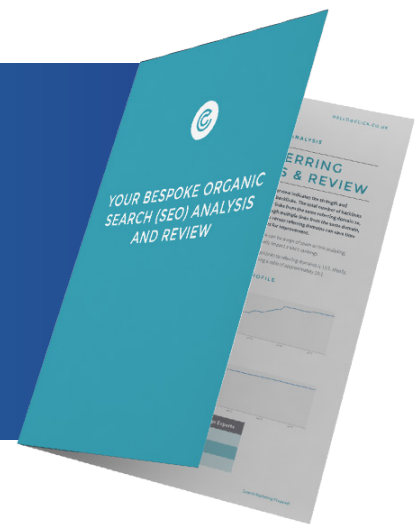
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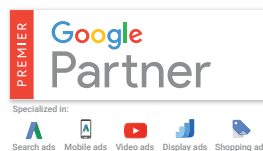
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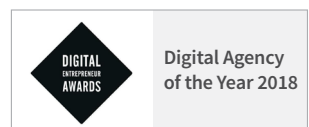
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