PAGE EXPERIENCE:
A HIDDEN RANKING FACTOR?

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INTRODUCTION

Page experience is something we have discussed on our blog and in other resources in great detail over the last few years. We know that, if brands and businesses are to succeed online, they have to make a site that not only ranks for their target keywords and fulfills the users needs, but that offers a positive experience and reduces the risk of potential customers leaving the site. This resource will look at the complexities of page experience, the factors that make it important and what you can do to align your strategy with the fact that Google has announced that, in 2021, it will become a major ranking factor.

The developers at Google will make changes to its ranking algorithm by adding a combination of Core Web Vitals within their existing signals for page experience. These ranking changes won't come into effect until next year (2021) and Google will provide at least 6 months' notice before the update is fully rolled out.

Let's begin...

WHAT IS PAGE EXPERIENCE?

Page experience is a set of signals which measure how users perceive their interaction with a web page beyond its pure information value. It includes Core Web Vitals, which are a set of metrics that measure real-world user experience for loading performance, interactivity, and visual stability of the page. It also includes existing search signals such as mobile-friendliness, safe browsing, speed and the move to HTTPS.

We are writing this piece with the assumption that readers understand the concept of a webpage and that based on the navigation of a website, pages are built out to inform the users of different products and services as well as things like company information, contact details and other information such as blogs.

With that in mind, we'll now look at landing pages and internal linking and the factors that make for good page experience. In truth, all pages of a site are landing pages, they are the page that the user ends up on regardless of whether or not they came from an external link or an internal one.

In short, a landing page is a page consumers arrive at when clicking on links external to your site, from pay-per-click (PPC) ads, search engine results pages (SERPs) or any other external link. The purpose of them is to gain some sort of conversion. That could be a purchase orit could be an area where the customer requests further information or contact.

As the first page a potential consumer will see, therefore, the landing page serves many different functions depending upon the business needs of your brand, yet – at its most basic – you can consider a landing page to be a kind of gateway. Whether that is to the further exploration of your site, to conversion or to the completion of a designated goal. As such, landing pages can take various forms – even for the same product or service.

Although a generic landing page can sometimes be perfectly serviceable for a number of different levels of consumer interest or intent, it makes sense to ensure that the consumer is being well served by the page they see when first arriving at your site. The page consumers wish to see when at the various levels of the conversion funnel will contain different information.

A consumer at the awareness stage, for example, may be seeking information regarding the product – such as pricing, reviews or functionality, while at the purchase level they may simply need some refresher information to confirm they're in the right place and a buy it now or 'add to basket' button. As such, it is worthwhile considering matching multiple landing pages to your existing buyer's journey.

Landing page optimisation is the practice of 'optimising' a page to make it as easy as possible for the consumer to complete the action you and they both wish to – whether that is proceeding through various other pages, raising their awareness of your products or services or converting.

This can take a number of different forms, from general SEO to PPC and CRO – these will, in turn, optimise the page for SEO, as destination pages for PPC advertisements and for increasing your rate of conversion. Landing pages are also great for use in conjunction with segmentation – allowing you to further personalise the user experience (UX) of your site.

WHY OPTIMISE FOR SEO?

It's likely you'll have taken the previous steps for other areas of your site – but why should you do it for your landing pages? The short answer is that you want your landing pages (pages which are always important for the conversion process) to feature as high in the rankings as possible for all applicable search terms and should therefore abide by SEO best practice.

Even simplified landing pages, therefore, should feature useful copy below the fold to ensure that it does not fall foul of various algorithms or manual penalties for thin content.

Landing pages should:

- Be connected to all other areas of the site (easily navigable)

- Be unique

- Be substantial (in order to avoid appearing to contain 'thin' content)

- Be relevant to the search term

- Provide a useful and engaging user experience

The more able a landing page is to tick these particular boxes, the more likely it is to rank well in SERPs, enabling your potential consumers to find the page early and therefore easier for them to convert.

SO, WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR SEARCH AND DIGITAL MARKETERS AND THE BRANDS THEY WORK WITH?

To begin answering this question it is important that we first understand what Core Web Vitals are. Core Web Vitals are a set of metrics related to speed, responsiveness and visual stability, based on three key factors:

1. Largest Contentful Paint
Measures when the largest content element in the viewport becomes visible. It can be used to determine when the main content of the page has finished rendering on the screen. Sites should strive to have Largest Contentful Paint occur within the first 2.5 seconds of the page starting to load. The types of elements considered for Largest Contentful Paint are:

• <img> elements

• <image> elements inside an <svg> element

• <video> elements (the poster image is used)

• An element with a background image loaded via the url() function (as opposed to a CSS gradient)

• Block-level elements containing text nodes or other inline-level text elements children.

2. Cumulative Layout Shift
Measures the sum total of all individual layout shift scores for every unexpected layout shift that occurs during the entire lifespan of the page. Which means if text moves on a page without warning or you are about to click on an element and the element moves that would be considered a bad CLS. Sites should strive to have a CLS score of less than 0.1.

Layout shift score = impact fraction * distance fraction:

• The impact fraction measures how unstable elements impact the viewport area between two frames.

• The distance fraction measures the distance that unstable elements have moved, relative to the viewport.

3. First Input Delay
Measures the time from when a user first interacts with a page (i.e. when they click a link, tap on a button, or use a custom, JavaScript-powered control) to the time when the browser is actually able to respond to that interaction. Sites should strive to have a First Input Delay of less than 100 milliseconds.

OPTIMISING FOR WEB CORE VITALS

To optimise for Web Core Vitals, there are a number of tools that can be used such as:

• Google Search Console's new Core Web Vitals tool – This will help identify groups of pages that require attention

• Page Speed Insights can then be used to diagnose issues on a page.

• Lighthouse and Chrome DevTools can then be used to measure Core Web Vitals and get actionable guidance on exactly what to fix. The Web Vital Chrome extension gives you a real-time view of metrics.

• There is a new CrUX dashboard created by Google that incorporates Web Core Vitals.

WHAT ARE PAGE EXPERIENCE SIGNALS?

Page experience is a set of signals that measure how users perceive the experience of interacting with a web page beyond its pure information value. The existing page experience signals are:

Mobile-Friendliness - Is the page mobile-friendly? Having a mobile-friendly website is a critical part of your online presence. In many countries, smartphone traffic now exceeds desktop traffic. If you haven't made your website mobile-friendly, you should.

Search Console's Mobile-Friendly Test Tool is a quick, easy way to test whether a page on your site is mobile-friendly. The Mobile-Friendly test tool is easy to use; simply type in the full URL of the web page that you want to test. Any redirects implemented by the page will be followed by the test. The test typically takes less than a minute to run.

Test results include a screenshot of how the page looks to Google on a mobile device, as well as a list of any mobile usability problems that it finds. Mobile usability problems are issues that can affect a user that visits the page on a mobile (small screen) device, including small font sizes (which are hard to read on a small screen) and use of Flash (which isn't supported by most mobile devices).

Safe-browsing (ie, safe malware and no security issues) - If a Google evaluation determines that your site was hacked, or that it exhibits behavior that could potentially harm a visitor or their computer, the Security Issues report will show Google's findings. Examples of harmful behavior include phishing attacks or installing malware or unwanted software on theWhat are security issues?

Security issues reported here fall into the following categories:

- **Hacked content:** This is any content placed on your site without your permission because of security vulnerabilities in your site. In order to protect our users, Google tries its best to keep hacked content out of our search results.

- **Malware and unwanted software:** This is software that is designed to harm a device or its users, that engages in deceptive or unexpected practices, or that negatively affects the user. Malware can be either installed by a hacker or the site owner.

- **Social engineering:** This is content that tricks visitors into doing something If you have security issues, you'll see a count of all security issues on your site at the top of the report.

If your site has no security issues, you'll see a green check mark and an appropriate message. dangerous, such as revealing confidential information or downloading software. You can then expand an issue description to see a list of sample affected URLs. This list is not necessarily complete, but just a sample of pages on your site affected by the selected issue. Occasionally you might have a security issue with no example URLs; this does not mean that no pages are affected, only that we could not generate samples for some reason.

The issue details show the date that the issue was first detected on your site, as well as a brief description and a link to learn more about the issue.

Google webmasters highlight the follow guide to fixing a security issue on your site:

1. Expand the issue description on the Security Issues report.

2. Read the description of the issue and follow its "Learn more" link for detailed information and steps to fix the issue. (The 'learn more' links point to the descriptions below on this page.)

3. Use the sample of affected pages provided in the details section to troubleshoot and fix your issue. This list is not necessarily complete, but just a sample of pages on your site affected by this issue. You might have a security issue with no example URLs; this does not mean that no pages are affected, only that we could not generate samples for some reason.

4. Fix the issue throughout your site. Fixing the issue on just some pages will not earn you a partial return to search results.

5. If the report lists multiple security issues affecting your site, fix all of them.

6. Test your fixes.

7. When all issues listed in the report are fixed in all pages, select Request Review in the Security Issues report. In your reconsideration request, describe your fixes. A good request does three things:

   a. Explains the exact quality issue on your site.

   b. Describes the steps you've taken to fix the issue.

   c. Documents the outcome of your efforts.

8. Reconsideration reviews can take a week or two. You will be informed of progress by email. You will get a review confirmation message when you send your request, to inform you that the review is in progress; don't resubmit your request before you get a final decision on your outstanding request.

The reconsideration review can take up to a week or two. You will be informed by email when we receive your request, so you'll know it is active. You will also receive an email when the review is complete.

Please don't resubmit your request before you get a decision on any outstanding requests. Submitting a reconsideration request when the issue hasn't been fixed can cause longer turnaround time for the next request, or even get you marked as a repeat offender.

HTTPS - HTTPS (Hypertext Transfer Protocol Secure) is an internet communication protocol that protects the integrity and confidentiality of data between the user's computer and the site. Users expect a secure and private online experience when using a website. Google encourages you to adopt HTTPS in order to protect your users' connections to your website, regardless of the content on the site. Data sent using HTTPS is secured via Transport Layer Security protocol (TLS), which provides three key layers of protection:

- Encryption—encrypting the exchanged data to keep it secure from eavesdroppers. That means that while the user is browsing a website, nobody can "listen" to their conversations, track their activities across multiple pages, or steal their information.

- Data integrity—data cannot be modified or corrupted during transfer, intentionally or otherwise, without being detected.

- Authentication—proves that your users communicate with the intended website. It protects against man-in-the-middle attacks and builds user trust, which translates into other business benefits.

Use robust security certificates
You must obtain a security certificate as a part of enabling HTTPS for your site. The certificate is issued by a certificate authority (CA), which takes steps to verify that your web address actually belongs to your organization, thus protecting your customers from man-in-the-middle attacks. When setting up your certificate, ensure a high level of security by choosing a 2048-bit key. If you already have a certificate with a weaker key (1024-bit), upgrade it to 2048 bits. When choosing your site certificate, keep in mind the following:

- Get your certificate from a reliable CA that offers technical support.

- Decide the kind of certificate you need:

- Single certificate for single secure origin (e.g. www.example.com).

- Multi-domain certificate for multiple well-known secure origins (e.g. www.example.com, cdn.example.com, example.co.uk).

- Wildcard certificate for a secure origin with many dynamic subdomains (e.g. a.example.com, b.example.com).

Use server-side 301 redirects
Redirect your users and search engines to the HTTPS page or resource with server-side 301 HTTP redirects.

Verify that your HTTPS pages can be crawled and indexed by Google

• Do not block your HTTPS pages by robots.txt files.

• Do not include meta noindex tags in your HTTPS pages.

• Use the URL Inspection tool to test whether Googlebot can access your pages.

No intrusive interstitials - Pages that show intrusive interstitials provide a poorer experience to users than other pages where content is immediately accessible. This can be problematic on mobile devices where screens are often smaller.

Here are some examples of techniques that make content less accessible to a user:

• Showing a popup that covers the main content, either immediately after the user navigates to a page from the search results, or while they are looking through the page.

• Displaying a standalone interstitial that the user has to dismiss before accessing the main content.

• Using a layout where the above-the-fold portion of the page appears similar to a standalone interstitial, but the original content has been inlined underneath the fold.

By contrast, here are some examples of techniques that, used responsibly, would not be affected by the new signal:

• Interstitials that appear to be in response to a legal obligation, such as for cookie usage or for age verification.

• Login dialogs on sites where content is not publicly indexable. For example, this would include private content such as email or unindexable content that is behind a paywall.

• Banners that use a reasonable amount of screen space and are easily dismissible. For example, the app install banners provided by Safari and Chrome are examples of banners that use a reasonable amount of screen space.

The below shows the factors that now make up the page experience algorithm.
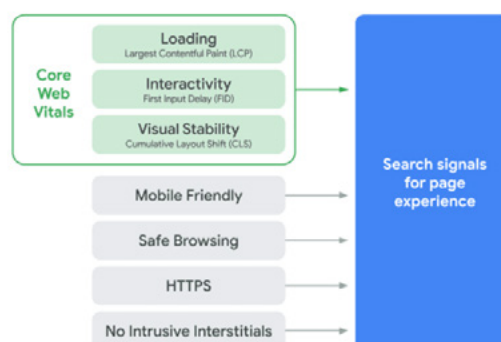
OPTIMISING FOR PAGE EXPERIENCE SIGNALS

The existing page experience signals can be measured by:

- Using the Google Mobile Friendliness test

- Using the Security Issues Report in GSC

- Check that the site connection is secure (ie, HTTPS)

- Ensure content is easily accessible and there are no intrusive interstitials affecting how easily content is accessed.

HOW WILL GOOGLE TOP STORIES BE IMPACTED?

When the update is rolled out in 2021 Google Top Stories criteria will also include the Web Core Vitals and Page Experience Signals. This means that there will no longer be a requirement for AMP to feature in Google Top Stories. However AMP will still be supported by Google. Google has also stated that pages must still meet the Google News content policies to be eligible for Google Top Stories. Sites that currently use AMP shouldn't experience any major changes, AMP pages will still be linked to from Google Top Stories.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Just like with the speed update and the prevalence that Google put on making the move to a more mobile way of searching, this update is one that could shape the future of search. In essence Google is saying that it is not enough to get your SEO in order and attract people to your site if your site offers a poor page experience.

Brands and businesses who truly want to rise to the top of search results need to make sure that the internal ranking factors match the external search signals. Customers demand a certain level of user experience and Google as a business wants to deliver the best results. In an ideal world, things like bounce rate would be eradicated and the Google algorithm would recommend a page based on a search and the user would click and convert in some way.

This update has been given such a build up and audiences have been told about it in advance in order to ensure that changes can be made and there isn't a mass drop in rankings. This is kind and completely unnecessary of Google, but most welcome.

In the next few months we'll keep an eye on developments and make sure that you look out for our step-by-step guide to page experience.

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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 Organic Search (SEO) Team of the Year 2020, 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.
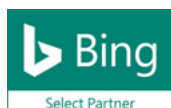
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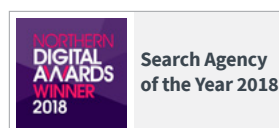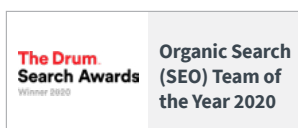
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