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## How Google has Changed and What You Can Do About it

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The SEO landscape has changed so much over the past five years that sometimes it's difficult to understand what is 'good' SEO and what is 'bad' SEO. Indeed, the word 'SEO' isn't a satisfactorily accurate term to explain what it is we do in the industry as it has been hijacked by so many of those who are simply looking to dupe search engines. Instead, more firms are looking to get people used to the term 'digital marketing' or similar.

Marketing of websites is really no different to marketing any company, whether real-world or not; a key element is promotion and, in the case of a website, the aim is to increase 'popularity' so that the site will rank higher in search engine results. As long as we keep that end goal in mind, our job is simple to explain and essentially simple to do - it just requires legwork.

The problem comes when people attempt shortcuts - and there are many people who are happy to try these shortcuts to promote their site and those of their clients in what some would term an unethical way. Such a moralistic view of the process is highly subjective - surely all's fair in love, war and business? However, Google rules the roost and if you break its rules and try to fool the search engine, it will cut off your traffic.

Google is not the sort of company to be swayed by large business, either. There have been some notable take-downs of large organisations in its past and it does not shy away from imposing its rules on all, regardless of size.

## Google's Algorithm Updates

In order to remain effective at enforcing these rules, Google is constantly 'improving' its ranking algorithm and gaining in intelligence.

Google tends to tweak its algorithm countless times each year but over the last few years it has made a number of hugely significant updates - known as Panda, Penguin and Hummingbird. These changes have been so significant they have already achieved infamy within the industry. Designed to penalise websites that over-optimize and fail to provide sufficient quality content, these updates have had devastating effects across the Internet with many website search rankings literally disappearing overnight.

### Panda

The Panda update was rolled out in February 2011 and has seen a number of tweaks since it was first introduced; with a great many becoming active during 2013. This particular algorithmic change essentially works to eliminate low quality content and low quality backlinks. It focuses on penalizing those websites that offer a poor user experience, such as those with 'thin' content or which feature a large number of advertisements.

Following these numerous tweaks to the Panda update, in May 2014, Google's Head of web spam, Matt Cutts tweeted the arrival of Panda 4.0, which reportedly seemed to be a more significant tweak to those that had preceded it.

Still focused on content, Panda 4.0 noticeably affected at least 7.5% of all English-language Google searches with other languages expected to have also been affected in differing proportions.

One of the biggest names to fall victim to Panda 4.0 was eBay. If you have ever searched for any kind of physical product, chances are you have come across one or two eBay listings. Click through to these and you will find a page that features the standard information an eBay listing includes – eBay’s own internal search results, lots of ads and lots of internal links. Not much in the way of actual content; which underlines just how much value Google is now placing on those web pages that offer plenty of valuable, detailed information that answers peoples’ questions and is genuinely useful.

Press release websites have also seen their rankings hit by Panda 4.0 with research data indicating that the likes of PRWeb, PR Newswire, Business Wire and PRLog have lost between 60% to 85% of their search engine visibility. This highlights the importance of fostering genuine relationships with the media rather than relying on distribution services to get your news out there.

## Penguin

A number of algorithmic changes under the banner of the Penguin update followed throughout 2012 and 2013. To complicate matters there were multiple versions of this particular change with announcements from Matt Cutts revealing the launch of iterations such as Penguin 2.1, yet other commentators referring to it as Penguin 5.

Overall though, the original Penguin and the subsequent Penguin 2.0 were the most significant of these updates, resulting in Google becoming much better at understanding and interpreting the text you put on your website and, consequently it’s reliance on ‘keyword anchor text links’ to be able to figure out what your site is about.

Taking this a stage further, Google now devalues the ‘link profile’ of websites where there is an unnaturally high proportion of keyword anchor text links pointing to the site. A devaluation in your link profile leads to a drop in your rankings. Potentially anyone who did any significant SEO during the last three years could be penalised because some of the techniques that previously worked beautifully could now, at best, mean your site won’t rank well or, at worst, it won’t rank at all!

## Hummingbird

Google’s new Hummingbird algorithm is designed to understand the human element of search more effectively in order to provide better quality search results. Studies show that more and more searches are conversational in their style; (i.e. people asking questions or using ‘long tail’ search queries that are made up of longer phrases). As a result, those websites that produce high quality, more detailed content that seeks to specifically answer customers’ questions will attract more search traffic. This is why blogging is such a powerful way to generate visitors as it is a platform which lends itself to the creation of content which answers those ‘how, what, why, where and when’ questions about long-tail subjects that are becoming more commonplace.



Interestingly, whilst Google’s official announcement about Hummingbird was made at the end of September 2013, the algorithm change had in fact already been in place for a month, impacting 90% of Google searches – and nobody had noticed! This just highlights how important it is to keep abreast of the latest changes in the SEO industry by working with those companies who constantly track and measure search results. By staying up-to-date with Google’s changes we can react and plan our strategies accordingly.

### So why do we still only bother with Google?

Google is by far the most popular search engine in the western world as it attracts around 90% of all searches performed. It is also a leader in search technology and, as we have mentioned above it continually strives to adapt its algorithms to battle an ever-increasing number of people who would do their best to fool it.

So, despite the constant battle to stay onside with Google, the rewards to be gained are significant. Of course, there are other search engines but their share of the market is miniscule in comparison.

Therefore, for our purposes, all the examples given in this report are based on Google.

### Why do people try to fool Google?

To understand the answer to this question, you have to first realise the sheer number of people using Google day-to-day. You probably use it to find things yourself – for instance when you’re looking for a new TV, a holiday or looking up information on a famous celebrity - but how many other people are searching for the same thing?

As an example, let’s imagine we’re looking for a new LED TV – we could just pop this into Google and see what the results are:

As we can see in Figure 2, the first result is the retailer ‘Currys’ followed by ‘Wikipedia – an information site that many people will go to in order to find out how an LED TV works. Underneath that are three further results from top UK retailers. Now, we can assume that many people each day are searching for these products, but how many exactly?

To find out, we can go to the Google Keyword tool and simply look it up:

Keyword	Competition	Global Monthly Searches	Local Monthly Searches
[led tv]	High	201,000	18,100

Figure 3: Google Keyword Tool results

So in the UK, there are approximately 18,000 searches each month for ‘LED TV’ and Currys appears first in the results. Now, it is estimated that approximately 90% of people will click somewhere in the top three of the search results, so we can assume that Currys will get somewhere in the region of 16,000 visits for that one keyword alone. So all they have to do is convert those visitors to customers. Assuming their conversion rate is just 4%, this means they can expect to sell nearly 8,000 TVs per year as a result of one Google search. Spread this across their entire range of products and you can see that ranking well with Google is very lucrative indeed.

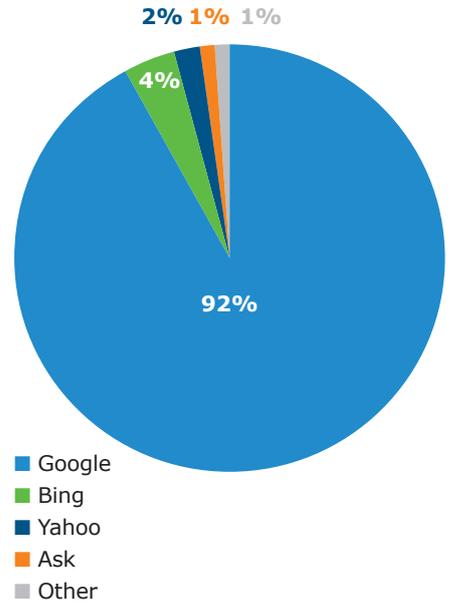


Figure 1: Search engine market share

Large Screen TVs (32" and over) - Currys  
www.currys.co.uk/gbuk/tv-televisions...  
Results 1 - 12 of 212 - 1 LG 60LN578V Smart 60" LED TV With its built-in Wi-Fi, this exclusive smart TV lets you access the latest apps and catch-up TV services.  
LG 84LM96V 3D Ultra HD 84 - SAMSUNG UE75E9000

LED-backlit LCD display - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia  
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LED-backlit\_LCD\_display  
While not an LED display, a television using this display is called an "LED TV" by some manufacturers and suppliers. In the UK, the Advertising Standards ...

Buy LED Televisions at Argos.co.uk - Your Online Shop for ...  
www.argos.co.uk... Televisions and accessories - Televisions -  
Items 1 - 49 of 147 - Buy LED Televisions at Argos.co.uk, visit Argos.co.uk to ...  
Hitachi 32 Inch HD Ready LED TV 9154177 £179.99  
Toshiba 46DL7020 46 Inch Full HD 1080p Freeview LED TV 7471401 £399.99

Buy LED TVs from our Televisions range - Tesco.com  
www.tesco.com Home Technology & Gaming Televisions  
Buy LED TVs from our Televisions range at Tesco Direct. We stock a great range of products at everyday prices. Clubcard points on every order.

Amazon.co.uk: Products tagged with led tv  
www.amazon.co.uk/tag/led%20products  
Samsung UE40E56300 3D Full HD 1080p Smart 3D LED TV with Wi-Fi built-in  
Samsung UE40E56300 3D Full HD - by Samsung 4.4 out of 5 stars (251)

Figure 2: Typical top five search results

## It's not just large business though...

That's a retail example, but there is much more going on in the world of the Internet that bears some scrutiny. All over the web there are people selling products that will help you lose weight, gain muscle, make money, get cheaper loans, get money back on loans – all sorts of things that can make your life richer and more healthy.

Some of these products are good, some are bad but most of them are aimed at a particular search term and demographic. You thought selling TVs was good? Check the number of searches for "how to lose weight fast":

Save all Search terms (1)		1 - 1 of 1	
Keyword	Competition	Global Monthly Searches ?	Local Monthly Searches ?
[how to lose weight fast] ▾	High	246,000	74,000

**Figure 4: Number of searches in a typical 'niche'**

That's 74,000 searches in the UK and nearly a quarter of a million searches in the world each month!

There are many people who will try to sell products based on this keyword and there are many products available to sell. For example, we checked out a company called 'ClickBank' who offer products, mostly digital (i.e. download only) for sale in their marketplace. They will give you \$24 for each weight loss product you sell through their system, so let's see what that means based on our calculation above.

**74,000 searches \* 90% = 66600 clicks**  
**Conversion rate of 4% = 2664 sales per month**  
**\$24 per sale = \$63936.00 per month**

And that's just the UK. The web is global so if you can get to the top across the world, you could be looking at huge amounts of money for selling something that has zero outlay.

That is why people try to fool Google!

## How do people fool Google?

There are so many intricate answers to this that it would be difficult to cover them all in this report, but there are two main methods that have historically been employed to raise Google search rankings for a site.

The first was to make a website look more 'attractive' to Google in some way by embedding more keywords than would be natural in the page or even having a different page appear to Google than to normal users. Such methods are easy for Google's latest algorithms to detect so are now not as effective as they once were.

The second method was to build links to a site. And here is where it begins to get difficult because 'link building' as it is called is also used by legitimate businesses - so it's where most of the controversy appears when Google announces an update.



## How link building affects your ranking

Link building is a course unto itself so we won't go into it in detail here, but we will explain briefly what we mean by it.

Essentially, ranking well with Google means taking part in a contest where those companies that appear to be the most popular achieve higher Google search rankings. Google measures this popularity in many ways, but one of them is the number of links to any particular site. So if someone posts a link on their site to yours Google counts this as a (mostly) positive indicator. Assuming you have more links than your competitor, you will rank higher than them for a particular search term. So, knowing this we can, theoretically, affect our ranking by increasing the number of links to our site. But is it as easy as that? Unfortunately not.

Google knows that this link building goes on and with the recent Penguin and Penguin 2.0 updates it is becoming much more effective at stamping it out; taking steps to stop the artificial promo on of sites in this way. Mostly, it is doing it to stop the online proliferation of sites that appear one day, sell an awful lot of (sometimes poor) products and then disappear. However, sometimes it has taken high profile companies down too.

The rest of this report explains what the changes are and how they have affected many companies – yours may have been affected too. It will also explain how to execute your campaigns in a way that shouldn't give any problems in the future (though bear in mind that Google changes all the time!)

## The great Google "Slap"

This has been quite a year for changes in the algorithm that rules Google search and it saw many companies being penalised for the way they have been link building. The changes were varied and affected different sites for different reasons but, ultimately, they were designed to reduce the amount of 'gaming' that could go on and increase the quality of results provided to the user.

## What is a low quality result?

We have to remember that, while there are real people working on adjusting the algorithm, in the most part Google is automated. It has to be due to the sheer volume of searches and the number of web pages that need to be served up in its results.

So, whenever there is a change to how results are calculated it is unavoidable that some legitimate sites are going to be hit. That said, most of the sites that have been penalised this year are those that many people would agree are 'low quality'.

Sites can be deemed low quality for a number of reasons, including:

- Having very little content – they aren't 'rich' and don't provide much information to the user.
- Having too many adverts that are obviously just there to get clicks and ad revenue for the site owner.
- Bearing no relation to the search query – a site that has appeared for a result yet really does not relate to that result.
- Containing obvious attempts to 'fool' the user – an example might be a 'switch'. The website describes one product and yet clicking on a result will give the option to buy or learn about another.
- Offering no real user engagement leading to a very high 'bounce' rate (i.e. people go to the site and immediately return to the search results).

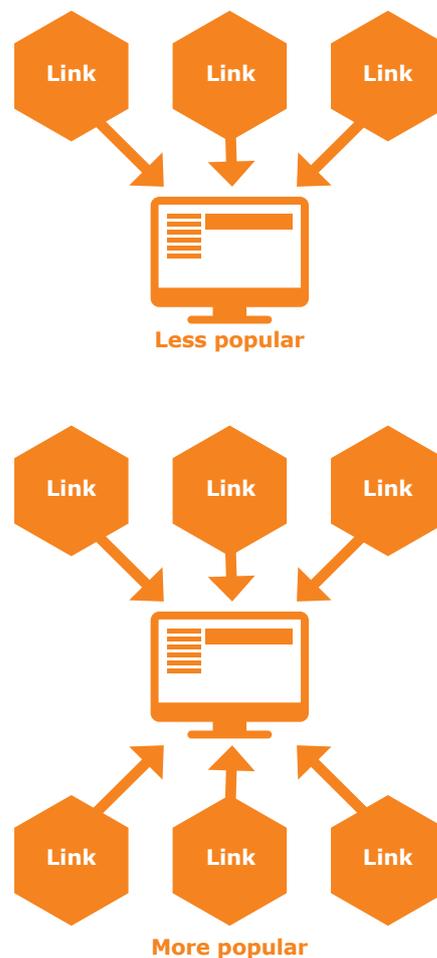


Figure 5: All things being equal, more links means higher ranking

You may have noticed that when you've searched for any particular keyword you sometimes get the option to 'block' a site in the future. Google also collects this data, allowing it to further fine-tune its algorithm.

Many 'low-quality' sites have often been set up to promote a single 'affiliate' product. For example, there are sites that contain affiliate products from Amazon. Anyone can set such sites up, it simply means promoting a website that is, in turn, promoting products from the Amazon main site. When people buy, they end up buying from Amazon. As these sites do not represent true companies it could be argued that it is not good for the user when they feature in the search results. However, historically lots of people have set up such sites, recognizing the fact that it was sometimes very easy to rank for keywords that don't get large number of searches but also don't have much competition. However, while the site may have ranked well one day, if it got 'caught out' by Google because the content was poor, it could easily suffer a significant drop in the rankings the next.



## How to stop this happening to your site

This is an easy one to solve. A good site with plenty of visitors will be changing all the time – not just in terms of the number of products it sells but also in the type of content it presents to the user. For example, the FAQs may change, there could be regular product and news updates, or it may feature reviews.

Amazon is a good example of this type of site – it is constantly growing and changing and provides plenty of rich information.

Here are a few simple guidelines that should help your site maintaining good search rankings:

- Give visitors a way to 'interact' with your site; e.g. through social networking or via a forum Have one or more regularly updated blogs
- FAQs and support areas are a great way to engage with users - use and update them If you sell a product, include product reviews and let people comment on them
- Make it easy for people to 'share' your pages through social media such as Google+, Twitter and Facebook

The update earlier in 2012 took care of a lot of low quality sites but it is evolving all the time so you need to stay on your toes. All in all though, the philosophy is simple – give your users a content-rich, seamless and engaging experience on your site, and make the Internet a 'richer' place.

## Cracking down on blog networks

Later in 2012 things got very nasty when systems known as 'blog networks' got penalised (and, in fact, were totally de-indexed by Google). In effect they were excluded from Google's massive index of sites and anyone who had used them to build their links to increase rankings got penalised along with them.

One of the highest profile casualties was 'Build My Rank', a site that offered links from its own blog network to other sites in exchange for a monthly fee.

## What is a 'blog network'?

Weblogs or 'blogs' can be used to impart information about products or services, to comment on key issues and trends, to convey information and opinions and to raise levels of engagement with a target audience. They are also a fantastic way to make sure a site appears to be 'fresh'. These days it is very easy to add a blog to a website and they are quick and easy to update.

A 'blog network' is simply a group of hundreds or thousands of blogs that are used altogether to impart some value onto your website. Remember earlier when we said that Google measured popularity and this could be seen as the number of links to your site? Well quality of those links is also measured and if an apparently high-quality site links to yours, you can get a lot of benefit from it.

Recognizing this some companies started building up an index of blogs, filling them with content and, when they had reached a certain quality (in the eyes of Google that is), selling links to other sites. For many, this was seen as the acceptable face of link building.

Google, however, saw it differently, stating that buying links was not acceptable. Years ago it took action by penalising sites that were blatant in their buying of links. As blog networks were simply a more sophisticated way of buying links, Google's increasingly sophisticated algorithm took action against them.

## Why is it wrong?

Google's stated aim is to provide the best possible user experience and it views popularity as something that should be assessed by people naturally linking to a site or through growth of a brand or product both online and off. If you can artificially grow popularity by simply buying your way to the top, it seem to suggest the Internet isn't a level playing field – those with more money can simply beat those with less.

We don't get a say in the morals of this by the way – Google rules!

Buying links from blog networks was always 'lazy', but thanks to Google it also became quite ineffective. If a blog network gets found out, Google will take not only take it out of the index but will also penalise any sites using it to artificially raise rankings.

The changes above, which affected a great many sites, were collectively known as the 'Panda' update. But, if you thought Panda was bad, the march of the Penguin was about to ruffle more feathers.

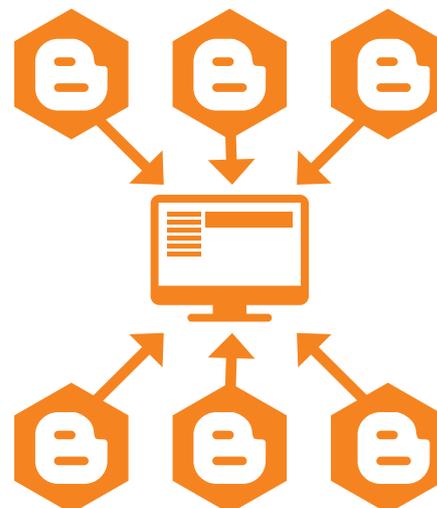
## Penguin – the 'over optimisation' penalty

Mid 2012 saw a massacre.

It was announced by Matt Cutts, the head of Webspam at Google, that there would be a change to the Google algorithm that sought to cut out 'over-optimisation'. Nobody really knew what that was and it's taken months of research still to understand it fully. And just when we have, Google has now rolled out Penguin 2.0!

## A quick overview of technology

First of all, let's take one of the things that caused sites to be penalised (yes, 'penalised', more on this later), 'anchor text'.



When you link from one page to another on the web, you are likely to link an image or some text. If linking some text then you are probably looking at linking a word that relates to the website or product you're linking to, or another word to gain people's attention. Whatever it is, it becomes known as 'anchor text' as it is in effect the anchor to the target page.

For example, if you were writing an article discussing the amazing quality of the Ford Mondeo you might highlight the words 'Ford Mondeo' and then link these words to the page on the Ford site. This passes a link to the site and, as we know, Google sees links to a page as one of the measures of that page's popularity.

Of course not everybody writing such an article would use those words. Others might simply type the words 'click here' or 'read more' or something else that encourages the reader to click through to the Mondeo page. So it is fair to say that if the words linking one site to another are varied then the links have been created 'naturally'. Conversely, if all the links going to the site are 'Ford Mondeo', this could indicate somebody creating links with a view to trying to fix the results (the default tactic for SEO companies for years). This is what Google looked to address in its Penguin and Penguin 2.0 updates.

### How anchor text affected sites

There has been much analysis on the way Penguin affected sites and right is a 'meta' analysis of other pieces of research mixed in with some of our own. The upshot is that, overall, companies that over-use keywords as anchor text could be penalised.

In the example of a penalised site right, the main keyword was used 64% of the time when link building and this was seen as unnatural. A site selling LED TVs, for instance, where the majority of the links feature the text 'LED TV' would probably be similarly penalised.

As regards non-specific keywords these are phrases such as 'read more' or 'click here', while 'Images' will be links from pictures, charts or other graphics. 'URL' is simply the web address to the site.

As we can see from Figure 7, diversity is the key - making sure the phrases used in the links back to a site are much more 'natural' can help prevent Google penalizing pages when it considers 'over-optimisation'. This doesn't mean a page won't be penalised, but research to date shows that the issue of 'natural links' has become more important.

### How to avoid it happening to your site

So one of the keys to link building success in the post-Penguin world is to be 'natural' - any links you build should have a smattering of other keywords in them such as 'click here' and 'read more'. By their nature, people are pretty inaccurate beasts when it comes to writing so you could also benefit from misspellings too!

### The elephant in the room – negative SEO

So we know that too many links from 'bad' places or too much targeted anchor text can result in penalties. And many sites have had direct experience of such penalties recently. So if you've been reading the above with a growing feeling of dread then you're not alone. Especially as there has been an entire industry grow overnight of companies that would gladly perform any of the actions outlined above in an attempt to knock a site down in the rankings. It's not cheap and Google says it can detect such 'negative SEO', but it's a worry.

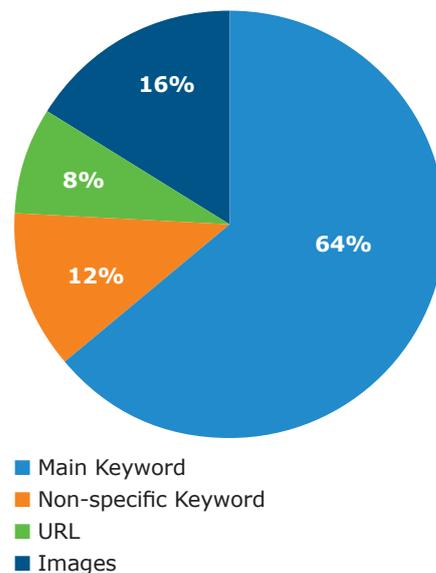


Figure 6: Anchor text analysis example of a site that was penalised

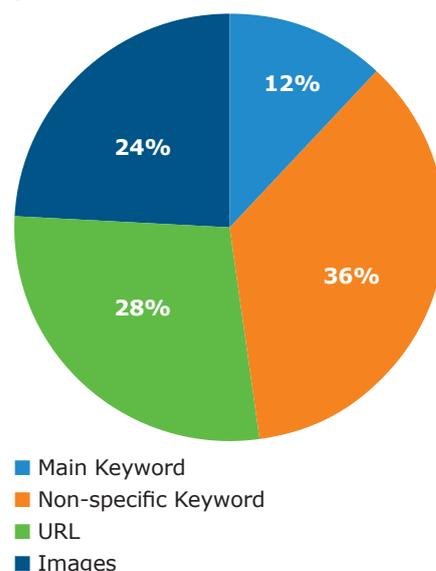


Figure 7: Anchor text analysis example of a site that wasn't penalised

## More general indicators – how Google is performing now

Putting all the bad stuff aside, how is Google performing generally and how will SEO work in the future? Well, in this final chapter we will discuss some of the main questions we have been getting and, hopefully, give some reassuring answers.

## How long does it take to rank a website?

This is the classic 'how long is a piece of string' question and it's dreaded by many in the digital marketing industry simply because there's no straightforward answer. It depends on the quality of the site, the competition, the number of searches and many more factors besides.

However one thing is sure, it's now taking much longer to rank sites than previously (hardly surprising when Google expects sites to 'naturally' grow in popularity!) The chart below gives an idea of how things have changed when it comes to ranking a keyword in Google's top twenty.

	Low Competition/ Easy keywords	Medium Competition/ Medium keywords	High Competition/ Difficult Keywords
<b>2010</b>	1-6 weeks	2-6 weeks	1-3 months
<b>2011</b>	1-2 months	1-4 months	4-12 months
<b>2012</b>	3-6 months	4-8 months	8-12+ months

## Why does it take so long?

It seems that Google is now applying a time delay on most web pages as the amount of time a website has been around can also be a good indicator to its quality. A high-quality site will likely be getting a lot of hits, be around for a long time and be mature. A low-quality site that is just there to make a fast buck will appear and probably disappear in a few months if the owner deems it's not worth it.

Making quick cash on the Internet has now become far more difficult, but there's more to the story than just that. You see, with a view to testing how 'natural' a site's improvement in ranking is, Google is now not only monitoring how the site performs but also how companies react to that performance. In fact, it has a patent that explains how it will modify a search result in ways that could be random. It can then look to see if a company tries to fix a bad ranking (which isn't a bad ranking at all, just a 'flux' by Google), helping it to understand who is trying to 'game' the system. Blimey.

Here's what the patent says:

*A system determines a first rank associated with a document and determines a second rank associated with the document, where the second rank is different from the first rank. The system also changes, during a transition period that occurs during a transition from the first rank to the second rank, a transition rank associated with the document based on a rank transition function that varies the transition rank over time without any change in ranking factors associated with the document.*

And then this:

*During the transition from the old rank to the target rank, the transition rank might cause:  
a time-based delay response, a negative response  
a random response, and/or an unexpected response*



We've always known that Google analyses then re-addresses the position for any particular keyword. However, if it is indeed using the above methodology then we can assume it is capable of penalising pages if it feels the rankings aren't natural. This means you have to be even more careful with what you do.

Of course, Google has done this to try to level the playing field but it has made it even harder to rank sites as there are now so many more things to think about. Certainly it is not possible to rank a website by simply buying links – you need to work on the popularity of your site in ever more creative yet natural ways and try not to focus too much on the results you get when you start.

SEO, more than ever now, takes a long time.

### **Does it help if I have an 'exact match domain'?**

One of the most recent changes to the algorithm has been the reduction in power of domains that exactly match target keywords. For example, in the past a company wanting to rank for the keyword 'LED Television' could have bought the domain 'led-television.co.uk', which would have made it easier to rank that website for that keyword.

Sometimes this was incredibly easy to the point of (we would assume) embarrassment to Google, which is probably why it has taken steps to reduce the effectiveness of such practices. It has been suggested that this domain-matching change has had a small effect and will simply remove the advantage of having the domain in the first place. However, some companies are reporting a more marked effect, losing ranking altogether regardless of other factors such as links and content.

We can probably put this down to the continual 'tweaking' of the algorithm and would expect that, eventually, the changes will be toned down so that you can't be penalised simply for having such a domain but that you cannot gain any advantage from it.

Is this fair? Some would say not, but we don't have a choice.

### **Does this effect microsites?**

Some companies set up microsites as alternative methods of gaining backlinks to their main site. Many of these are created with a view to using them to rank alongside their real money-making website. It could be argued that the change above would also mean the links from these sites are not as valuable but, as yet, nothing has been said by Google and there's no evidence to suggest it is true.

The links from your microsites may still be working just as well so it's too soon to be packing them away just yet.

### **Is link building dead?**

Absolutely not! Google has been trying to push Google+ for a while now and it is believed that the aim is for Google+ signals (and those generated from other social websites) to have a more marked effect on the rankings of websites in general. However, at the moment this just isn't possible.

Even though social networking is a huge part of our lives, the signals it generates to websites are tiny in comparison to general link building. Go to a really popular site and look at how many times it's been recommended on Google+ and you could be shocked. Fifty is a high number, even though the site itself could have tens of thousands of links.



The simple fact is, people don't recommend that often using social media – at least not enough for it to be the only signal in ranking.

### **Unrelated sites and backlinks**

Although only a small indicator, it appears that links from sites that have absolutely no relevance to the target site are also of little value. This probably came to prominence and promoted Google to act when JC Penny was penalised for getting lots of spam links.

In that particular example, links to 'pillow cases' could easily be found going to the JC Penny site from blogs discussing nuclear reactors – very little in common.

### **Should I bother with social networks?**

Absolutely yes!

Social media is no doubt going to be a big part of SEO in the future. It is changing the way we work, rest and play and so it would be remiss of Google not to use it in some way. But it should be used to complement your SEO efforts rather than be the only thing you do.

If you can promote your site through link building as well as social media then you are potentially engaging with a more diverse range of people – so it very definitely should be one of your tactics.

### **Is optimisation the same for Bing and Yahoo?**

Although we obviously have a bias towards Google, we shouldn't forget that there are other search engines out there (and neither should Google!)

Bing and Yahoo are big sites and, while they don't have anywhere near the presence of Google, they are still there and should Google do something that drives away customers they are no doubt ready to step in. So should we optimise any differently?

At the moment it seems that what goes for one, goes for the others too. They all seem to use similar algorithms (although the others are not as aggressive as Google in changing them) and they all want the same thing – the best quality for users. It's therefore sensible to assume they're going to work in the same way.

### **And finally...**

As we always put at the end of every document where we discuss Google – this is now and things could change quickly.

The search engine world is a bizarre and ever changing one and so you should always keep up with best practices. It's definitely got harder to do good SEO and it's not going to get easier any time soon. Certainly you can now totally discount 'get ranked quick' schemes as scams – there is no quick way to a permanently good ranking on Google and the latest updates mean that trying to 'game' the system could land a website in a much worse position than it started with, and from which recovery could be very slow.



## Executive summary

Much of this will be worthless if you haven't read the above, hence the summary is at the end. Anyway, here's a quick summary of what this document explains:

### Things that affect your ranking

- Google is the top search engine – being number one is valuable and companies can be tempted to try lots of routes to achieve and maintain rankings.
- Google Panda, Penguin and Penguin 2.0 are attempts by Google to remove benefits that could be seen as 'spam' and mostly target those companies with 'thin' sites that don't offer good value to a search user.
- It is still true that all things being equal, a site with more links will get a better ranking than a site with fewer links.
- Google Panda also affected 'blog networks' – sites set up purely to build links. Similar to 'link farms' from years ago, when discovered by Google they are de-indexed and any value from their links is lost.
- Google Penguin and Penguin 2.0 affected 'over-optimisation' – excessive use of target keywords in link building or linking just to the home page causes this to kick in. Anchor text percentages should be kept quite low and words should be mixed with 'natural' links.
- Speed to rank – it's taking much longer to rank now, sometimes over 12 months for difficult or highly competitive keywords.
- Google can fool you – it has a patent that suggests it may give you a random position for a while in order to test whether you are using underhand means to fool the search engine. For instance, if a position drops drastically and a company 'over-optimises' to compensate, Google could spot this and penalise the site.
- Links from microsites are probably not affected, but it's too early to know. Social networking should be used as well as link building.

### How to do good SEO

- Be diverse with everything you do. There's no 'one' answer.
- Don't panic when things look like they're going wrong – it could just be Google testing you. Do it slowly and methodically and with the objective that everything you do should be adding value to the end-user.
- Produce great content on your website that a visitor would find genuinely interesting/useful.





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