Penguin Update: The Good, The Bad, and the ?

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Well, fellow SEO fanatics, we have experienced yet another crushing blow by Google. Some of these changes effect work that many of us have been doing for years. It's time for change once again. Here are the latest updates on how we should consider doing our SEO in the future. I will first cover what happened and why, after which I'll make a few suggestions on how to continue to be more effective in your SEO efforts moving forward.

What Just Happened?

Let's get a few things straight right from the beginning - I know there has been some panic ad angst with the sight of so many websites dropping like flies with this latest algorithm change, however SEO isn't dead. Google has built a system which rewards you for getting backlinks, and then slaps your hand when you don't do it the way they want you to (oh please). They think we're going to buy into their hippie-esque "natural linking" notions...(laugh)! As long as they reward sites by having backlinks...we'll get backlinks.

Backlinks, anchor text, and blog networks still work as well (if not better) as they always have. Not only that, "low quality" links continue to work as well. We just need to be more careful about how we use each of these. The thing that has been shown to have changed the most is the strong shift towards social signals. These social signals have taken a prominent roll and won't go away anytime soon.

Panda

First of all, there are two separate changes we need to take into account. Panda and Penguin. Each update was very different in nature. **Panda was a penalty change** targeted at penallizing websites that had a lot of advertising in them, as well as pages that were considered "low value" or poorly written content.

The basic focus of the Panda update included:

- content "quality" of your site
- thin, affiliate, or squeeze pages
- website load times
- bounce rates
- authentic contact information (real addresses, phone numbers, and emails)
- the presence of "terms and conditions" and "Policy" pages present on websites.

Penalties have a timeframe associated with them and will eventually be removed. Usually within 90 days. These penalties from Panda had to do with your site...not necessarily with the linking, but, to make matters more complicated, it also took place in a way that had never been seen before. This time, Panda first began with an automated detection process which spotted websites that matched certain criteria. Then they sent out automated notices to kick off this witch hunt.

Google couldn't tell who was really doing this so they used this scare tactic to try to get people to raise their hands (ignorantly thinking they would be safe if they ratted out to Google who was doing their SEO.

After notices were sent out as a result of the automatic detection, an army of Google drones (actual people) stepped in to manually review sites...most of which were slapped with huge penalties even though they willingly cooperated. It turns out Google penalized both the site owners who raised their hands as well as targeting SEO firms who were ratted out. Everyone turned into carnage who respond to these letters. Those who ignored them....for the most part escaped injury.

While Panda was targeted at improving the quality of the web, however the penguin update neither improved the quality of the web, or improved search results. In fact..it made results much worse. Ranking blank 404 error pages at the top of the SERPS for very popular keywords.

Panda was a penalty update, Penguin was an algorithm update. Penalties have a time associated with them where algorithm effects you only when you match that criteria.

Penguin

This penguin update was entirely different. **The penguin update was an algorithm change** targeted specifically at SEO and Web Service companies. Along with this update we saw the demise of some of the largest blog networks out there. There were 5 major blog networks that were affected. The interesting part about this attack is that it was a single round of attacks that were apparently achieved by placing "moles" pretending to be marketers into each of these blog networks and then nuking any blog that reported a link that was reported.

> **Algorithm changes only effect you if you match that algorithm. Once you don't match it anymore, you are immediately not affected. There is no timeframe like there is with a penalty**.

There is no algorithm that was used to detect these blog networks. This is demonstrated by other very large and medium sized private blog networks (which shall remain anonymous) that were not affected at all. These networks that are being shared by a relatively small group of marketers were unscathed because they were not actively soliciting new members and you couldn't just buy into the network. So, Google couldn't find and get into these networks. This shows us that blog networks are still an extremely viable method of linking. All networks are going to have to change to a referral based or strictly private membership model to survive future witch hunts.

Another reason this penguin update was interesting was due to the fact that Google has targeted sites that are "over-optimized". For now, it seems that having the keywords in the title tag, meta tags, alt tags, named images, first and last sentences of the body, bolded, italic, or underlined keywords, H1-H4 tags etc etc... are now signals of over-optimization.

Here a few of the major things Google has targeted with the penguin update and some thoughts on what to do moving forward.

First Target: Anchor Text Ratios

Anchor text has traditionally been a primary focus for creating a "popular" site. Each link back to your website has been seen as a vote for your popularity. These links can appear many different places, each carrying their own link values based on the PR (and other factors) of the site the links originate from.

> *Definition*: Anchor text is the text used for people to look at with a link connected to it.

Here is an [example](#) where the word "example" the anchor text and the URL is where you go when you click "example"

A link on a website with high PR has provided more "link juice" or passed on more power to your website. While this is still valid, the number of percentage or ratio of a particular anchor text is now taken into heavy consideration. If you were trying to rank for the keyword "work boots", you would get links from other websites, articles, blogs, or forums using the key phrase "work boots" as the anchor text. The problem is...this isn't natural. Not all people state things the same ways, and Google knows it, but just hasn't been able to determine this with a high amount of accuracy until the technology and math behind the Panda update. (or they have a subscription to SEO MOZ).

With some research done by the good folks over at MicrositeMasters.com they found that every site that got detected and was affected by the Penguin update had their "money keyword" in over 60% of it's incoming links. This is not surprising because human nature is too random for this to happen in real life. This has greatly affected websites that have a single theme and are targeted on either a single or very few number of keywords. Sites that haven't been affected are typically websites that have a broad base and many topics that they discuss including e-commerce where they market many products.

First Target: What to do going forward:

My firm has always taken a paranoid approach to linking and have primarily gotten links from industry related websites and massively changing both the structure and content of the anchor text, the URL and the description that accompanies the link. For instance..if the "money keyword" was "**designer Jeans**" we would still keep the keyword in the anchor text, but would mix it up by using phrases to accompany it such as

- "popular designer jeans"
- "new designer jeans styles"
- "designer jeans sale"

and so on. Even the links behind the anchor text get mixed up. If the link we were pointing to was **http://thedesignerwherehouse.com** (i just made that up) we mix it up like this

- http://thedesignerwherehouse.com
- http://www.thedesignerwherehouse.com
- http://thedesignerwherehouse.com/
- http://www.thedesignerwherehouse.com/
- http://TheDesignerWherehouse.com
- http://www.TheDesignerWherehouse.com/
- etc...

When you are mixing up www and non www urls, you will need to use canonical reference to tell Google which one they should use to represent you. [Google sees all of the above URL's as the](#)

same. I could write an entire blog about canonical URL usage, but here is a simple example of what a front page may have within the tags to signify that Google should list the site "with" the www.

Note: *If you use Wordpress as a framework for your website...there are some good plugins that can do this for you automatically.*

So the bottom line for this is that you need to spend more on your linking by diversifying your anchor text to make sure no single anchor text gets above the 60% mark. Instead of doing a single linking campaign..you probably need to do 2 now. one for your "money" keyword, and another with related keywords to balance out your money keyword. This makes SEO more expensive and a bigger hassle, but ...that's the game as it stands at the moment.

Second Target: Link Placement

It is often been said "a link is a link", however this does not seem to be as true anymore. It matters more where your links come from. Recent studies from websites that have been affected by Penguin have shown that links coming from blog comments, form profiles, and other spamming type links have been affected. This clearly shows that it matters where the incoming links are coming from. Websites that have been marketing using paid press releases, unique article content with embedded links, micro-sites (small websites that focus on a single topic or just a couple topics), and social media have been the websites that have escaped the wrath of the penguin.

It appears the industry related links are becoming more and more relevant as those will carry much more weight and relevancy for your SEO efforts.   getting these industry related links require sophisticated software and are much more expensive to obtain. In our work we are focused for many years on industry related links for our larger clients. These links can cost anywhere from $17 and $37 each which is cost prohibitive for most companies. In the past couple of years we've grown accustomed to buying links for almost nothing, however this game is coming to a close.

Second Target: What to do going forward:

From this point forward working to have to target an audience that is closer to our industry or topic.   Make sure you get at least 10-15% of your links from industry related sites or "high quality" links. Some companies have resorted to building hundreds of websites called micro-sites that focus on different aspects of the industry they are in to build up their own industry network.   Although this is a fantastic method for building your own private blog network, this

requires a tremendous amount of work and is very time-consuming and expensive to create (and maintain), as well as continuing to produce unique relevant articles on each of the websites.

Some ideas on how to get these 10-15% "high quality" links could be obtained by using Press releases, doing high quality blog commenting (with actual good comments), guest blogging, buying links from trusted websites (be careful), and creating your own private blog or micro-site networks.

Third Target: On page SEO

This has been in the rumor mill for a long time now and it seems it finally made it into an update. Over optimization of a website is now being frowned upon by Google. For a long time we could optimize a website and have it rank very well just because of the structure of the page itself. This change is both good and bad. It's good in the sense that I no longer have to spend countless hours perfectly balancing the 311 algorithms that we used to optimize a single keyword. We can do all the SEO we need for a page now in about 10 minutes. It's bad...because it takes away an edge that we held for a long time. We could rank in the #1 position for massively popular keywords with this as the main differentiating factor between our site and our competition.

Third Target: What to do going forward:

Going forward, here is what I would recommend (which will probably change as Google settles down over time) that you use the keyword once or twice in the body text, use several LSI keywords (http://lsikeywords.com) on the page to help Google understand the context of the keyword and still put the keyword in your meta title and descriptions. That's it. Inner site linking within the site still seems to work well, but I wouldn't overdo that either. Just make it natural and you should be fine.

     Linking anchor text is the key and tells Google what you are about!

What To Do Moving Forward

Google will refine their latest updates (they always do) over time and a lot of the current chaos (and highly ranked blank pages) will go away. Here are my suggestions for the moment....and are what I'm doing with my own websites as well as those of my clients.

1. Get rid of Google Analytics. They are using your data like a club to beat you over the head with. Use PIWIK instead. (just Bing PIWIK) Avoid all Google free tools like the plague.

2. Get rid of Google Webmaster tools. These are the spikes on the club they are beating you over the head with. Any time Google offers you free tools...be very very careful. They always have a hidden agenda that is entirely self serving.

3. Get rid of Adsense. Evaluate if you are really making enough money to justify having Google know important statistics about your website. If you have a strictly adsense driven site...than you should probably keep it, but all other websites should seriously consider removing it. Google gets too much data about you from this and your site is always under scrutiny due to click fraud (which is still rampant).

4. Include social and share buttons on your site. These signals are very very important now and you should begin focusing on them a lot more with your SEO efforts. Focus on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Google+, and other social sharing sites.

5. Focus on getting at least 10-15% high quality backlinks. Whether it's from PR Web, Private blog networks, guest blogging, natural blog commenting, or buying links from trusted websites....make sure a minimum of 10% of these are from these quality sources. You can still get 90% medium and low quality backlinks, however i'd be careful about using sites such as fiverr where although it's cheap and easy, Google knows about this and i'm sure if they haven't already been targeting, will be targeting these services as well. You don't want the next update (targeted at fiverr and similar services) to take you down again!

6. Clean up your site - this is to protect agains both panda and penguin. Any un-researched statistics or poorly written content that you hired out....it's time to purge. I'm not a huge proponent that content is king, but I have seen poorly written content to hurt a site.

7. Diversify your anchor text to obtain good ratios. If you have any anchor text ratios that are above the 60% ratio (see ways to find this out above) than fix it. Get a bunch of links to offset this ratio and you will quickly regain your rankings.

8. Use and diversify your naked links. Get plenty of these out there as well. This is a natural occurrence..so make sure you get plenty of these out there and mix up the way the link looks.

9. Use canonical URLS on your site. If you don't want to do your entire site, just add this to your index page and most popular landing pages.

10. Add a "Terms & Conditions" and "Policies" page to your website. Just find one from another site and personalize it to your own.

Now go get your rankings back and reclaim your rightful place at the top of the search engines.

??? Now click this G+ button if you got something useful from this article so I can rank!