The Google Algorithm Zoo

PANDA — February 2011

Lowered page ranks for thin, low-quality sites and rewarded sites containing rich, deep content

Who It Hurt
- Content farms and other sites that copied content from other sites.
- Non-authority sites.
- Spammy sites and link structures.

Who It Benefited
- News and social media sites.
- High quality sites with useful content.

Named after a Google engineer who helped lead the effort, Panda has been updated dozens of times since its launch. Impacting an estimated 12 percent of search traffic, the primary focus was to reward sites that provided quality, original content and penalize those that copied information from other sites and other thin sites.

To help sites navigate the algorithm update and better "Panda Proof" their site, Google released a number of bullet point questions so sites could identify if they might be penalized. Questions were generally open ended, such as "Would you trust this site with your credit card information?" and "Does this site have a large amount of redundant, duplicate content throughout?"

What You Can Do?
Content for the sake of content is a philosophy that Panda wanted to get away from. When publishing a new blog article or updating a page on your site, don't simply write to get more content on your site. Ask yourself "Is this useful, original information?" prior to posting.

Google has said that even having a few low-quality pages can impact your entire site, so be deliberate in using noindex tags, canonical links, and determining page content. Using Google Analytics can be a good place to begin to find out pages that aren't frequently accessed. Consider merging the information on those pages into others or purging entirely.

PENGUIN — April 2012

Launched to decrease search engine rankings of sites that violate Google's Webmaster Guidelines, namely through blackhat link schemes.

Who It Hurt
- Doorway pages built exclusively to attract search engine traffic.
- Sites with unnatural backlink profiles.

Who It Benefited
- Sites with natural backlink profiles.
- Diligent webmasters that take action against bad links.

With backlinks long being a crucial element of Google's search algorithm, it was only a matter of time before sites began gaming the system. Companies popped up virtually overnight selling thousands of backlinks, assuring that customers would get a top ten ranking almost instantly because of their purchase.

Naturally, these backlinks came from spammy, non-authority sites, all using virtually identical anchor text to the destination site. Penguin looked to solve this problem by lowering the ranks of sites with unnatural, manipulative inbound link profiles. Estimates indicate that roughly 3 percent of sites were impacted by Penguin when it was introduced.

What You Can Do?
As opposed to purchasing backlinks to your site, earn backlinks to your site. Craft content and provide information that is worthy of other sites linking to yours. This isn't just a best practice to counteract Penguin, but a good pillar for your site in general.

Try to get as many of the low quality and spammy links that point to your site removed. In addition, get used to using Google's Disavow Links Tool. Found in your Webmaster Tools, you can essentially alert Google to not take selected links into account when assessing your site. Be very cautious when using this tool. If used incorrectly, it can negatively impact your site.

HUMMINGBIRD — August 2013

Designed to get at the "intent" of a search, Hummingbird rewards sites that get at why people are searching for information.

Who It Hurt
- According to Google, it didn't hurt anyone. Skin deep sites with only high level information.

Who It Benefited
- Searchers.
- Deep, thorough sites with a developed content strategy.

Named for providing fast and precise search results, Hummingbird is all about understanding the context of a search. Hummingbird was introduced to pay attention to every word in a search query and understand the intent of the search. A focus on "conversation" language was also a highlight of the algorithm update.

While Panda and Penguin were considered updates, Hummingbird is essentially an entirely rewritten algorithm. Formerly, if you would search for "Where to buy a 2014 Toyota Camry near me" Google would likely hone in on the keywords "Toyota Camry" and "buy," populating the Toyota homepage as a top search result. With Hummingbird, the entire search query is considered. Your addition of "near me" triggers more local results to your location. "Near me" and "buy" likely indicates you want an actual physical location. Search results are more in line with the intent of what you are searching for, in this case purchasing a car, rather than just the sum of the keywords you searched for.

What You Can Do?
Craft your content with the end goals of your users in mind. Instead of thinking about what they are looking for, think of why they are looking for it. With this improved focus on conversational searches, quality content that features long-tail keyword combinations are a great opportunity to compete in the new world of search engine marketing.