

A **White Paper** by Percussion Software, Inc.



THE NEW RULES OF SEARCH:
Getting Found in the Age of
Personalized Search

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Executive Summary

You may not have noticed, but what you thought you knew about traditional SEO is completely gone for good. You see, over the past year, Google has quietly released a series of seemingly disconnected updates to its algorithm that have had a profound impact on SEO as we have known it. These updates include encryptions on searches, personalized search results that are tailored especially to you, and a brand new social media platform. When taken individually, they only impact a particular issue, such as helping to eliminate content farms from top search results, or helping to rank freshly updated content higher. But when taken together with the benefit of hindsight, it's game over for what you thought you knew about traditional SEO.

The New Rules of Search require that you shift from thinking merely about Page Rankings to how you drive inbound traffic. While the notion of "Page One" results is still important, it is now only in the context of the individual searcher. In the age of these New Rules of Search we recommend five concrete action steps that will help you maximize your inbound traffic from search. They include:

- Writing valuable content more frequently
- Updating stale and out of date content
- Scaling the number of content contributors
- Engaging within the social community (Google+ in particular)
- Telling a compelling story

Though simple enough in bullet form, this paper will dig further into what Google has changed, why each change matters to you, and how these five simple steps will enable you to capitalize on the search changes.

15 Months of Rapid Fire Changes

Since its launch back in the late 90s Google has quietly gone about the process of updating its algorithm practically daily to make sure its results are relevant. The more relevant the search results, the more likely you are to use the Google for web searches and most importantly, the more money they can earn from the paid advertising that accompanies your search request. No surprise here.

That quiet road diverged over the last year plus as they started to post more and more information about changes they made to the algorithm. Still a closely guarded secret, and only a few of the hundreds of changes were being reported, but the publicity was seen as remarkable by close followers of all things Google.

Over the course of the past 15 months, Google has delivered a number of remarkable updates to the algorithm that were stunning both in their impact and in their publicity. Even with cute names like Panda and Penguin, the impact on web search and by extension, the web itself, was very real.

Perhaps most interesting is the cumulative effect of these six changes. While each one individually addressed a particular aspect of search, taken together with the benefit of

“In just 15 months, Google has completely rewritten the SEO rules. Its no longer about SERPS and links, and now its all about **more** content posted **more** frequently, across **more** Channels.”

hindsight they have dramatically changed the landscape for SEO. As a result, Google essentially wiped out nearly 10 years of SEO dogma.

Just a few years ago, traditional SEO involved writing content with optimized keywords, title and keyword meta tags, unique title tagging, and building plenty of high quality links back to your website, among others. These traditional practices are still relevant, but Google's new algorithm requires new strategies to get found, which is ushering in a new paradigm for web content. Now, marketers and other SEO professionals have to rethink what they thought they knew about SEO, and they have to do it fast.

A YEAR OF GOOGLE UPDATES:

- 
FEBRUARY 2011:
 Google shuts content farms, affecting 12% of all search results
- 
JUNE 2011:
 Google drops social media bomb: Google+ has 170m users today
- 
OCTOBER 2011:
 Google encrypts searches impacting 9% of results
- 
NOVEMBER 2011:
 Caffeine Freshness update now ranks fresh content higher
- 
JANUARY 2012:
 Search Plus Your World displays personalized results right at top of results
- 
APRIL 2012:
 Google Penguin update goes after webspam by penalizing unusual link patterns and keyword stuffing, affecting 3% of searches.

Keep up on Google's changes:

- [Google's Own Insider Blog: "Inside Search"](#) (click here)
- [Google's Webmaster Central Blog](#) (click here)
- [Running timeline of major Google Algorithm changes](#) (click here)

To best understand the new rules of SEO, let's first look at each of the changes individually.

Timeline of the Changes

February 2011: Panda Update Shatters Content Farms

To this point, many of Google's algorithm updates had gone mostly unnoticed by the general public. But the initial Panda update (originally named "Farmer") in February 2011, which affected nearly 12% of search results¹, was far different. It all started with Google's war on "content farms." These are websites that typically delivered low quality content by providing virtually useless content, usually by producing large amounts of low-quality text or by copying it from websites with original content. The goal was to run paid ads on those pages to monetize this "accidental" traffic. After the first phase of Panda was implemented, CNN Money put a dollar value on the change, saying that over \$1B in revenue had been "redistributed" from content farms to websites with higher quality content.²

Almost immediately, users were starting to reap the benefits of the content farm crackdown. Many low quality websites dropped out of search results entirely, and better quality ones were ranking higher. But the content farm crackdown didn't come without a few hiccups along the way. The Cult of Mac, a widely popular Apple focused blog—and decidedly not a content farm—took a serious beating. Their website traffic fell nearly half in a single weekend.

"You're not on the web if you're not on Google," Leander Kahney, Cult of Mac's editor said. "Google is the web—who uses anything else to find stuff?"³ Since then, Cult of Mac has been able to regain much of its lost traffic by going after other websites who were republishing its original content without their permission.

June 2011: Google Drops a Social Media Bomb

At the end of June 2011, Google launched the invitation-only social network called Google+. This was Google's answer to Facebook, and demand for invitations to the exclusive social network sky-rocketed. Just two weeks after the initial launch, Google+ had reached 10 million users. By the time the social network opened to all just three months later, it had garnered nearly 40 million users, with an estimated total of 170 million⁴ users today.

At first one of the key differences between Google+ and other social networking sites was that Google's search algorithm would index users' posts. Seemingly innocuous at the time, and only potentially useful for individuals, it was clear even then that Google had their plans for this functionality. Their complete plans, however were not revealed until early 2012. (See Search Plus Your World Update in a few paragraphs)

¹ <http://searchengineland.com/google-forecloses-on-content-farms-with-farmer-algorithm-update-66071>

² http://money.cnn.com/2011/03/08/technology/google_algorithm_change/index.htm

³ <http://www.wired.com/epicenter/2011/03/google-spam-side-effects/>

⁴ "Now with 170 million users, Google+ gets a complete redesign"

October 2011: Search Query Encryption

In October 2011, Google announced that any search performed when a user is signed into a Google account will now be done using secure socket layers (SSL). This meant that Google would no longer pass the search term data to marketers for organic searches when that visitor was logged in to Google. (At first this was just a Google account like Gmail or even YouTube. When Google more recently consolidated its accounts to a single sign-on, now you just need to be logged in to ANY Google property). It was widely noted however, that search advertisers would continue to receive complete data.

This change has made it harder to track SEO traffic, especially those who are doing conversion analysis down to the keyword level. For instance, you would no longer be able to tell what the search term a visitor used to find your site. Estimates of its impact have varied widely, but typically range between 10-30%. For Percussion, the impact has hovered around 25%.

Those in the SEO community are upset over Google's claim that this move is to better protect user privacy because they feel there is a double standard in the implementation. Essentially, paid advertisers with Google will still receive all the search terms it did with the unencrypted search. Google feels that it is important for advertisers to know search terms when evaluating their campaigns. However, if you're not running paid campaigns with Google, you won't be able to ascertain the same level of information you once could.

November 2011: Freshness Update

Another very important update Google made in the past year was its so called "freshness" update. Affecting nearly 35%¹ of all searches, this second phase of Panda adjusted the algorithm to rank recently updated content higher. In a simple example, if you perform a Google search for "Olympics," Google realizes you most likely want to know about the upcoming 2012 Olympic Games first, and not the Olympics from 1980. By using their Caffeine indexing system update from 2010, which allows the search engine giant to crawl and index the web for fresh content quickly on an enormous scale, Google is able to determine which content is most recent and rank it first. Given the unbelievably fast pace at which information moves today, this is a tremendous boost to marketers who are frequently updating their websites by posting new, fresh content and a huge problem for marketers who are not.

Who were the winners from Google's freshness update? Brands such as Guitar Center, Martha Stewart, and Papa John's each saw SEO visibility increase by at least 10%.² Also, large news organizations such as The Huffington Post, Daily Mail, and tech news blogs like TechCrunch and Engadget also saw large SEO increases. These increases in SEO visibility, seemingly happening overnight, are due to the fact that these brands and companies are continuously updating their websites with valuable content on a regular basis. There were

¹ <http://searchengineland.com/google-search-algorithm-change-for-freshness-to-impact-35-of-searches-99856>

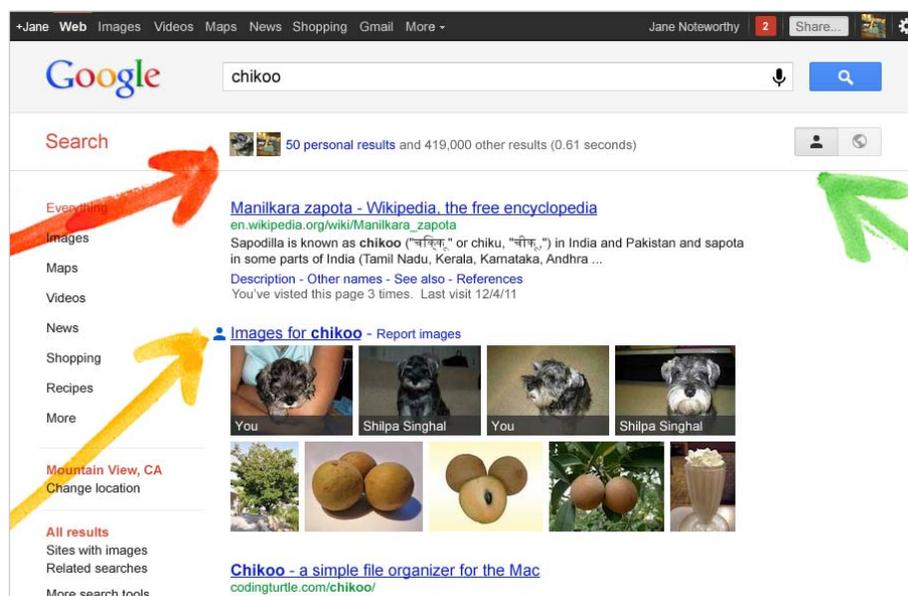
² <http://blog.searchmetrics.com/us/2011/11/06/google-freshness-update-many-winners-few-losers/>

also big losers from Google's freshness update, such as RadioShack, the State of New Jersey, and the State of New York. Each of these websites all saw double digit losses in SEO visibility due mostly to stale content.

January 2012: Search Plus Your World

Google knows that we turn to the people we know and trust for recommendations. The "Search Plus Your World" update now displays search results from your social feeds (Meaning Google+). Now you see tips, photos, and posts from your friends and other people you might be interested in related to your search query when signed into Google.

Shown below, Google uses arrows to pinpoint where personalized results are located in your search results.



Now the relevance of the search capability included in the initial launch of Google+ becomes clear. Search Plus Your World blurs the broader web with the social experience from within Google+. By combining the two worlds, Google expects that your search results will be more relevant, because it includes the recommendations and comments and content from within your social network. If I am commenting on the same topic my friends are searching on, there is a high probability that comment is relevant to their search. This is a huge boost for Google+, all but forcing marketers onto the social media platform to continue to stay relevant in searches.

Perhaps the most important result of Search Plus Your World is the personalization of search results. Your results vary depending on if you are logged into your Google Account. Your search results WILL be different than other people conducting the same search. In turn, the concept of achieving a page one search result changes dramatically. You now have to ask: "Page one for whom?"

Now, Google is giving priority in search results to those businesses with frequently updated Google+ profiles. Dutch marketing firm SEO Effect found that by getting just 72 people to share its content on Google+ translated to a 20% lift in click-through rates¹.

One potential drawback of Search Plus Your World is the limitation it puts on paid advertisers by dedicating prime page real estate to personal results rather than paid advertisements. There is only so much space to go around, and with personal results dominating spots once used for paid ads, marketers might be at a disadvantage.

April 2012: Penguin Update targets “Webspam” and keyword stuffing

Rumored for weeks and officially launched at the end of April, the Penguin update again takes “Webspam” on directly by addressing sites that abuse keyword placement and link stuffing strategies. Sites that aggressively use keywords, even in context, but for no added value, will be penalized in the rankings. Sites that aggressively use links out of context of content will also be penalized. By their estimate though, this change will impact about 3.1% of search queries in English.²

While this on its face this will sound scary to many search marketers (“wait, I do THAT”), Google has made it clear that they have a pretty good idea when you are using these tactics for good vs evil, though as with the Panda update, some quality sights will surely be impacted. In the end, as always, it’s important to focus on high quality content.

Looking Back: What This Means in Total

Looking back on the past year, Google has implemented very important changes designed to improve its already wildly popular search engine and ensure that the results are truly the best results, not just what marketers WANT you to see. With the addition of Google+ and Search Plus Your World, never before have search results been so personal and tailored to the user. Your search results are not your neighbors search results and search engine results pages are dead as you knew them. What you thought you knew about traditional SEO has literally been thrown to the curb, and a new era of SEO has taken its place.

Now that you have an idea of what Google has changed in the past year, there are five things you should do now to continue to be successful in your SEO endeavors.

¹ <http://mashable.com/2012/02/10/seo-google-plus/>

² <http://insidesearch.blogspot.com/2012/04/another-step-to-reward-high-quality.html>

Five Things You Should Do Now

1. **Write MORE content MORE frequently.** Get content up on to your website and other digital channels as fast as you can without sacrificing quality. Because freshness matters so much to Google, the ability to quickly update your website with quality content will pay dividends to you. More content means more opportunities to engage with your target audience around your core concepts, which drives traffic to your site and ultimately, conversions. If you are not already, try using a content management system to help you get your content on your site easier, faster, and with less cost. Though it's difficult, you need to maintain a content pipeline of relevant, topical, and fresh content to be added to your online channels.
2. **Add Contributors.** To create a full content pipeline with fresh new content, you will likely need to scale the number of people contributing content. Often other people on your team may be willing to contribute, but are constrained either by not knowing what they should write about, or by the actual process for getting that content published. Breakthrough these roadblocks by addressing your communications process and your technology barriers as fast as you can—you are going to need everyone's help!
3. **Clean out your stale content that you haven't touched in years.** Because Google is now penalizing you for having old content, make sure you're either updating old content or completely removing it from your website. Not only is old content bad for SEO, it's also not useful to your visitors. You should always be striving to keep information fresh and up to date, and when you can't, remove it from your website as soon as you can.
4. **Engage in the social community, including Google+.** Your customers are using social communities, so you should be too. They're reading blogs, they're active on social media accounts like Twitter, Google+ and Facebook, and they're reading and writing user-generated content. Social communities are a great way to engage and share news and information with potential customers, and they're also great for SEO. Keeping a blog allows you to be an authority on a specific topic or industry, and it adds many valuable keywords to your website. And as we discussed previously, Google+ is an SEO home run. Fill your profile page with useful company information, industry information and strategic keywords, but most importantly, create a community of people that will engage with your brand, raising your search profile even further.
5. **Tell a good story.** Above everything else, when you have an interesting and compelling story, your customers will engage. Make sure you're delivering your story across multiple channels, and don't worry about bringing those visitors back to your site. Utilizing multiple channels, while keeping a consistent brand image and story will allow customers to get a real insight as to who your company is, what you do, and how it can benefit them.

“Write more content than you ever thought possible, and post that content to more networks to tell your story”

The Takeaway

So, are you ready to ramp up your SEO game in the “Age of Personalized Search?” There’s no reason why you can’t start improving your SEO right here, right now. You now have the capability to drastically improve the quality and freshness of your content. You now know that Google+ is a social network that has a substantial impact on your marketing strategy, and you’ve learned that telling a good story with high quality content posted over a variety of channels is the way to create engagement, and engagement matters most.

As Google continues to roll out changes to its algorithm, you now will be able to stay proactive and continue to drive conversions and revenue from across the web.

Contact Percussion today to learn how a new approach to your content management and content marketing software will get you started scaling your content, your contributors and your posting frequency—keys to getting found in the Age of Personalized Search: www.percussion.com

About Percussion Software

Percussion Software publishes a family of Web Content Management (WCM) solutions, CM1 and CM System, that help businesses simplify their web content management processes to increase traffic, drive conversion, improve personalization, and build community. Percussion's solutions' decoupled architecture uniquely allows business users across the organization to take control of content and presentation, provides unparalleled control over how web content is used and distributed across channels, and enables IT organizations to freely integrate third-party, delivery-side applications without restriction. Percussion's WCM solutions are used by Travel and Tourism corporations to generate online results, including Hotwire.com, Vegas.com, Princess Cruises, and Discover America.

To learn more, visit percussion.com.

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