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What's The Big Deal About Google's BigDaddy Update?

Every few months Google updates the algorithm it uses to rank websites in its index. Some of these updates are more significant than others, but because of Google's market leading position these updates can be extremely significant to many online businesses.

Internet Marketers assign names to these updates much the same way the weather service names hurricanes. Last October it was Jagger, before that we had the infamous Florida Update in late 2003, and Austin in early 2004.

Each update is designed to improve search results by either doing a better job of identifying high-quality content on the Internet, or by doing a better job of suppressing low-quality content.

Over the last two or three weeks, many website owners have seen traffic to their sites from Google fluctuate quite a bit. This is normal for algorithm updates – as the index is updated on one data center, a site will change positions. The fluctuations occur because the index in the new data center is not completely built, and therefore a site may be placed artificially high or low until all the data is brought into equilibrium.

A few days ago, Google completed a major overhaul of its algorithm – this one dubbed BigDaddy and in the world of search engine updates it's a category 5 hurricane; well, sort of.

You see, after all the turmoil of the past three weeks or so, most marketers are probably seeing their websites ranked more or less where they were about a month ago. This is unusual. Usually major algorithm changes result in significant changes in site rankings for virtually all sites on the Internet. Both the Florida and Jagger updates changed the landscape of Google's Search Engine Results Pages (SERPs) dramatically.

So, What's the Big Deal About BigDaddy?

At first glance, the BigDaddy update seems to be much ado about nothing. However, there are some welcome changes that have been included in this update that should make Google a much friendlier place for those of us who build valuable content-rich websites.

* Increasing size and scope of the index – One of the purposes of this latest update was to increase the size of the index itself. This will allow Google to dig deeper into your site and catalog even more of your content (HTML, JavaScripts, Flash, etc).

* URL Canonicalization – Yes, it's a scary word, but it's actually quite simple. Essentially, canonicalization is determining which URL is the most appropriate for a given page. For example, the following URLs are all valid ways of reaching the homepage of SomeWebsite.com:

- <http://www.somewebsite.com>
- <http://somewebsite.com>
- <http://www.somewebsite.com/index.asp>
- <http://somewebsite.com/index.asp>

By improving URL Canonicalization, Google is attempting to make sure your site gets credit even though the URLs might be spelled differently on different websites.

* No More Page Hijacking – Although not a common problem, there are unscrupulous jerks out there who will find a popular site and hijack it's content by using 302 redirects. Google is attempting to eliminate the ability to do this effectively – hopefully they are succeeding.

* New Spider – You will also see a new Google spider called Mozilla Bot instead of the old familiar GoogleBot. If you are into looking at server logs, the new agent is "Mozilla/5.0 (compatible; Googlebot/2.1; +<http://www.google.com/bot.html>)"

* Less Search Engine Spam – continuing with the recent trends, Google seems hell-bent on eliminating the effectiveness of purchased keywords and link farms. If you are still employing these "black-hat" techniques, then you probably just found out about the BigDaddy update the hard way. If you didn't, then you will probably be hearing from BigDaddy soon.

BigDaddy Foretells More Changes To Come

In the immediate aftermath of a major update like BigDaddy, there are a number of things you can expect to happen.

The first is that your website's PageRank (PR) will probably change over the next few weeks. If you've been doing the things that Google likes, then you will likely see your PR improve, if you are engaged in unscrupulous (by Google's standards) activities, then you can expect your PR to go down. To see a list of what Google likes visit <http://www.google.com/webmasters/>.

In addition, some of your site's older content will be re-crawled and older, unlinked content will probably be removed from the index.

Over the next few months, there will also likely be a series of smaller updates that will take advantage of the new "infrastructure" provided by the BigDaddy update. Flash-heavy sites that were held artificially low may move up in the rankings while sites that rely heavily on reciprocal linking will likely go down.

BigDaddy – Not Such A Big Deal

In short, as long as you are not engaged in "Black-hat SEO", BigDaddy itself is probably no cause for alarm. If your site has recently bounced around in Google's results, then you will notice that things have probably returned to normal in the last week or so, and your rankings have probably improved a little bit.

Moving forward, in the next few weeks you can expect changes to your PageRank, and perhaps deeper crawls by Google's new spider, "Mozilla Bot". In the next few months there will likely be a number of smaller updates, mostly pertaining to issues like Flash content and niche-specific algorithm changes.

As with all algorithm changes, there is no reason to panic just because "BigDaddy" blew through town. Like hurricanes in the real world, algo changes blow a lot of loose material around; but if your website's foundation is sound, you will weather the storm and be ready for business once the storm has passed.

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