Google/
feature

>Search engine optimisation:
playing by the rules

Eager to find the path to search engine excellence and ascend the heady summit of Google? How do you climb ahead of the competition? SEO expert **Mark Buckingham** interviews Google's **Matt Cutts,** and provides his own take on the world of SEO

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"Life is Good" reads Matt Cutts' T-shirt – an unsurprising affirmation, considering that Matt is Google's renowned search sage and possibly the foremost authority on all things related to search engine optimisation (SEO). While many people view the path to search success as a veritable minefield, Matt believes that SEO needn't be as thorny as it sometimes appears.

Having joined the search titan as a senior engineer in 2000, Matt now heads Google's Webspam team. He explains to me how his first encounter with spam opened up his route into the SEO limelight, when Google asked him to create SafeSearch, a "family safe" version of Google: "I said I'd give it a go and ended up spending several weeks discerning which pages were or were not pornographic. I also had my first encounter with someone trying to cheat Google. Up to that point, for two and a half years, we'd had virtually no spam, but we had an inclination that, if we became more important for the world, then people could try to spam by specifically using our

PageRank methodology. I suggested that we ought to have a project to tackle web spam. For a long time, the Webspam team was smaller than you'd imagine, because the amount of people trying to spam Google, and the success they had, was very small. But as we've become an important search engine for the world, a lot of people have tried to tackle it."

Search engine ethics

Matt Cutts is lauded as Google's unofficial "official" search spokesman; its ambassador for webmaster guidelines and ethical, principled SEO. "I ended up being the "webmaster liaison", for lack of a better word. It's a lot of fun and it's really helped Google. Listening to outside feedback makes a big difference. I've seen companies speak at conferences and then leave immediately, but most of the

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SEO health checklist

It pays to do your homework if you want to excel at optimisation. Helpful resources abound, but a discerning approach is imperative – not all self-proclaimed "oracles" to SEO wisdom can back up their claims. Google's Webmaster Guidelines & Help Centre is essential reading, and participation on forums such as Webmaster World is a great way to learn from others in the search marketing community.

"Crawlability"

Check for hurdles to crawlability. "Viewing your site in a text browser such as Lynx is a great way to know whether you can get to all your pages, and whether there are potential obstacles such as JavaScript, Flash or frames," advises Matt Cutts.

Webmaster console site maps

Submitting an XML site map may expedite the indexing process and enable you to glean information about possible crawl errors (see tutorial on page 82).

Google Analytics

This is a way to evaluate your user behaviour, benchmark yourself against conversion goals, observe bottlenecks and identify popular search terms.

Style and substance

Visitors may arrive from any page, so ensure that every page is eye-catching, balanced and intuitive. Grab your visitor's interest – your competition is just a click away. Brainstorm new ideas that your audience may be interested in, especially those your competitors don't offer.

Everybody join in!

Let your users help you build new content. Establish yourself as an authoritative resource, or just a cool place to hang out and exchange ideas. Create a buzz – traffic and links will follow.

Trial and error

Rankings can take months to generate, so be patient. Tweaking and updating is fine, but avoid impetuous wholesale changes if your rankings dip unexpectedly.

Log your changes and monitor your results.

Inbound links

Quality and relevance matters over quantity. Avoid link farms and dubious link schemes. The best links are natural, warranted links from reputable sites. Submit your site to Open Source Directory (DMoz.org), plus industry and geo-specific directories.

Text links

Include a clearly visible subnavigation row of text links at the bottom of each page, especially if you have dynamic menus at the top of the page. Add a hierarchical 'sitemap.html' page, and ensure that links in your text include descriptive keywords rather than just "click here for more". Text links should be placed strategically to aid readability.

Things to avoid

Getting it right is only half the battle of enhancing your optimisation skills. There are also pitfalls you should avoid if you want to ensure your sites are reaping rewards …

Be friendly

"Make sure your technologies aren't so leading-edge that engines can't keep up with them yet," says Matt Cutts. And if you use Flash, provide a HTML alternative and as much search-engine-friendly content as possible.

Don't mislead

Deceptive, black-hat SEO techniques and sites bearing hallmarks of spam, may render your site penalised or even blacklisted, and could cost you conversions, undoubtedly sullying your hard-earned reputation.

SEO overkill

Above all, avoid duplicate content, page cloaking and sneaky redirects, keyword stuffing, and invisible or tiny text. In other words, avoid anything that just doesn't look or sound right.

Mark Buckingham and Matt Cutts discuss the benefits of working as a team in the interests of web development

Matt Cutts: Gadgets, Google, and SEO

Archive for February, 2007

Got malware? Google will help you find it.
February 26, 2007 @ 1:44 pm · Filed under Google/SEO

A while ago I did a post about a site that was getting the malware interstitial on Google. They said "We don't have any bad software on our domain" and I was all, like, "Psst, buddy, check out these urls." But that's not really a scalable approach. 😊

Now the webmaster console team has added a "please show me some urls that Google thinks are bad" feature. Much more scalable, and it should be a big help to webmasters that might have gotten a few pages hacked. I've updated my original post and said:

Looks like the webmaster console team has now added example urls for sites that we think are hosting malware. This is a great step to give webmasters more tools to self-diagnose any malware-related issues with their site. As always, thanks to the folks who added this feature.

Not much more to say about it. If you do see that malware interstitial page for one of your sites, hit Webmaster Central to get more info. Barry's got a bit more detail up about it over here as well.

⚫ Permalink | ⚫ Comments (31)

Misc bits
February 25, 2007 @ 8:49 pm · Filed under Google/SEO

I'm mostly caught up on my feeds. It was relatively quiet the last couple weeks, but I've seen 2–3 things I wanted to talk about in the last couple days or so.

First, WebProNews ran this post that claims that Google is selling PageRank 7 links.

My quick take: when you dig into it, it turns out that it's a Google directory of enterprise companies that can do things like write plug-ins for proprietary data types for the Google Search Appliance, merge geospatial GIS data, and integrate telephony products with Google Apps. This is a program for enterprise companies, and I don't think anyone has even suggested before now that this directory could be construed as selling links, but just to avoid even the appearance of anything improper, I've already submitted a change to ensure that there's no PageRank benefit from those links. I left a comment on the original post. I wish that WebProNews would show comments on their pages

Matt Cutts' blog (www.mattcutts.com/blog) forms part of the staple diet for SEO first-timers and veterans alike

> "Google uncovers cheating in short order and takes it very seriously" — Matt Cutts

then your interests diverge from those of our users and therefore Google's interests."

It's not just Google's employees who have the interests of clean, accurate results at heart, either. Their algorithms also benefit from the beady eyes of conscientious Googlers. "We have a large network of people who help us spot the new schemes and tricks that people try, says Matt. "Luckily, the vast majority don't work anyway, and we find out rapidly about the few that do."
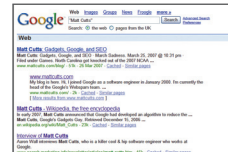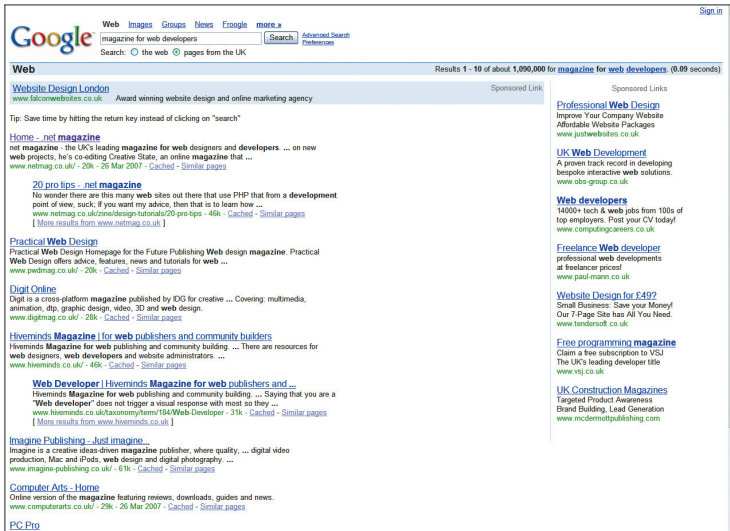
Tools of the trade

Google has opened up in the last few years, listening to its users, sharpening its ranking methodologies, honing its array of free tools, and lending web developers a helping hand. Webmaster Central, along with Google Analytics (which helps to track visitors, analyse conversions and evaluate user behaviour), should be the first ports of call for site owners. "Communication and transparency are vital," Matt stresses. "We want to be as transparent as possible to help developers make better sites, and realise when they've done something that could cause problems."

Even for a behemoth such as Google, there's clearly no substitute for a little human input and tweaking, something that Matt clearly relishes: "I have a notebook in my pocket all the time," he says. "I might go to an art fair, where I collect 50 or so URLs in a day. I'll find we have 47, and I'll say, 'OK, how we can get those other three?' Our goal is to index at least a page or two from every website. We'll look into it and find that maybe we weren't able to crawl the site – it may be down, or there could be another issue. For example, it may be a frames-based site, so we'll ask how can we tackle frames or JavaScript better."

>> value of a conference is in the interaction; to hear what we're doing well and what we're doing badly."

Google may not be foolproof, but it's an efficient machine at filtering out the wheat from the chaff. With the web seemingly saturated in every genre, it's more important than ever to establish credibility by producing unique content of the highest quality. Trying to trick the system or seek shortcuts along the way is an exercise in futility, and Matt agrees: "Google uncovers cheating in short order and takes it very seriously. It's much easier to stay on the good side of things – your traffic will be higher quality and more consistent. If you're just trying to go for a quick buck or to push yourself up higher than you deserve,

Above: A search for "Matt Cutts" yields nearly 1,240,000 results. We're still sifting checking the results for relevancy and we'll let you know when we've finished, sometime next year!

Left: Google's search engine results pages typically display natural listings indexed by Googlebot and sponsored advertising (AdWords) to the right, and sometimes at the top of most results pages

Striving for pole position ahead of fulfilling your audience's needs and expectations often proves counterproductive. As important as SEO is, it shouldn't be championed over usability and accessibility. "Those who try to get the rankings first and then look at how well they do, given their rankings, are putting the cart before the horse," advises Matt. "Instead, try to make such a compelling site that your rankings naturally rise and send you a lot of traffic." However, it's not just about rankings: "You can have two thirds of the traffic, but if people convert twice as much, you'll still get more with that two thirds of traffic."

Getting copy right
Successful conversions are all about hooking your potential customers and inbuing them with the confidence to browse your site. It's relatively easy to create absorbing content, especially if you're passionate about your subject field, but it's just as easy to over-compromise when optimising your site. One common mistake that many sites still make, for example, is to overburden their text with unsubtle keywords in every sentence, or into tiny or invisible text at the bottom of the page. In short, if your text isn't clearly legible, it most likely shouldn't be there.

Researching and selecting the right keywords or search terms is also an important part of the process. In doing so, you'll glean a valuable insight into search trends that can stimulate ideas for new content and benefit other areas of your business. There are various keyword tools to guide you, but don't get preoccupied with this at the expense of your copy. Your text should flow naturally and be persuasive, and each page should be as tightly focused as possible on a specific area, with a handful of relevant niche key phrases naturally incorporated.

Commissioning a search engine copywriter can be useful. A good one will ensure that your site is primed and presented for optimum readability, and help you strike an important balance between keyword density without compromising the tone and balance of your text. Above all, always think about your reader and field-test your copy.

Even in a saturated market, it's still possible to rise above your competition. Allow user participation to help you create content – forums, comments and reviews on your site will help you keep things fresh.

"It all comes down to creativity," says Matt Cutts. "Suppose you're in commercial real estate – you could start a blog of someone trying to buy their first house. There are many different angles. In some cases, for those websites that have a little bit of creativity and a kernel of something different, it can often be enough to gain the advantage."

Link popularity
One of Google's chief "off-page" determiners of your site's credibility is the quality of your inbound links. Most of us want to be popular, but it needs to be for the right reasons and recommended by the right people. A trend of links from disreputable or irrelevant websites could malign your status, whereas a host of natural high-quality links will bolster your standing and improve your PageRank. It's best to encourage natural links, but there's no harm in creating links with relevant affiliates, as long as you steer clear of link farms and link exchanges with poor-quality sites.

Matt Cutts is clear about how to make the kind of site to which people would want to link: "Think about a compelling hook. If you have a language translation site, for instance, what sets you apart from other sites that look just like a brochure? You could have a tutorial to teach you to write your name in Japanese. If someone lands on your site, you need persuasive content to help them convert. Conversion may be signing up for an email newsletter or buying something, but unless there's a good reason to stay on the site, users just won't return."

For mainstream B2B sites in saturated areas, this can prove to be tricky for some. Be creative. Think about writing and syndicating articles and White Papers, and create a blog about something you're

> "Above all, always think about your reader and field-test your copy"
> Mark Buckingham

passionate about. In doing so, you're not only likely to generate search-engine-friendly content, you'll also enable your customers to get to know you better.

Tackling technology
A common misconception is that SEO compromises design. While a number of designers are comfortable with SEO, some still balk at the idea that it can be integrated into the design process. "Some people think of web design as the pretty pictures in Photoshop," says Matt, "but I think the fundamentals of SEO will become more integrated into web design, and designers that make these pretty sites that are uncrawlable will eventually move towards sites that are pretty and also crawlable. In addition, it's so helpful to have your site accessible, not just by search engines, but by blind users, users who don't have a mouse, those using different platforms and so forth."

It's worth erring on the side of caution if you're using technologies that may present obstacles to deep indexing, such as frames, JavaScript, cookies, session IDs and long URL query strings. "The vast majority of the time," says Matt, "Google can crawl very deeply, and even if a website uses

Hiring an SEO firm

You can secure good results with a little self-tuition, but SEO can be a time-consuming process, and you could still need expert assistance. While there are many legitimate search marketing consultants that practice principled, ethical SEO, there are also charlatans who cost the less-informed thousands with little to show for it. Here's a checklist for avoiding SEO fraud, gimmicks and misunderstandings.

References
View an agency's work and references before commissioning its services.

Guaranteed results
Be very suspicious of anyone who guarantees top rankings. No one can.

Monthly retainers
Some bona fide companies may seek monthly payments, but ask what they'll be doing each month that you couldn't do yourself.

Open communication?
An agency should want to work closely with you and your design team, aligning their recommendations to your designs and objectives.

Beyond SEO
Look for a company that takes the time to get to know your business and vision. It should want to help you improve your site's overall success, not just your rankings.

Copywriting expertise
A good consultancy will also be well versed in the art of creating lucid copy and the principles of keyword research. Be wary of any firm that proffers this without looking to attend carefully to your website text.

Terms and conditions
Expect fair and reasonable conditions. Not all SEO hits its targets, but what will they do if things go awry, or results don't appear? It may not be their fault, but they should demonstrate intentions of support.

Training
Keen to tackle SEO yourself but need a guiding hand? A good agency should be willing to offer on-site training and subsequent off-site support.

Beware of cheap offers
Quality and expertise costs, but it returns dividends and could save you money in the long run.

Keep it local
Choosing a local firm can be helpful, one that's open to meeting to discuss your objectives and how they can be satisfied. Your aim is a mutually respectable, professional, and ultimately profitable association.
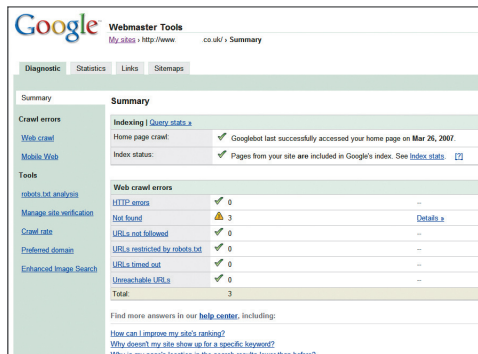
Once you've verified your site, the Webmaster Tools diagnostics dashboard provides useful statistics at a glance
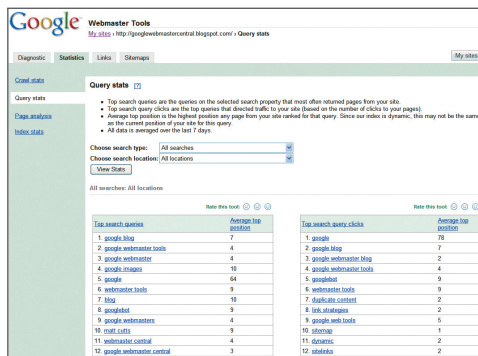
Google's Query Stats gives a useful insight into the top search queries and clicks, along with average top positions

>> frames or is completely dynamic, for instance, we do a very good job of crawling those. However, if you have a choice between one thing that's completely safe, and another thing that involves more time and development, why not choose something that's completely safe? Our aim – for anybody who makes any site at all, even if they use all kinds of strange features – is to crawl, index and return it well."

It also pays to gain a clear appraisal of how search engines operate. "If you have one website where people are aware of how search engines work and another site where people pay no attention to it whatsoever, and the content is otherwise identical, the website that's a little more aware will tend to make that content more accessible. The natural consequence is that we'll be able to crawl more pages and the site might show up a little better."

Some challenges for SEO firms appear to be Ajax, JavaScript, and how to make a site designed for Web 2.0 crawlable. This shouldn't be an afterthought, because a website that looks fantastic, yet looks like one simple page to a search engine, may prove hard to rank. "A lot of the time," adds Matt, "you can have something in the middle, be it Flash or Ajax, but you

> "Usability and accessibility will always be overlooked at your peril" Mark Buckingham

can also have all your navigation as static HTML around the edges, and have a site map HTML link at the bottom that leads to all of your product pages, and things like that. It's fantastic to have new technologies like Ajax, but at the same time, you can absolutely embrace accessibility," confirms Matt.

A little time invested upfront can return significant dividends. Not only will you have greater awareness of relevant dos and don'ts, but you could also better appreciate the outside help of any agency or consultant you may consider it wise to engage. If you want to do it yourself, Google's Webmaster Help Center (www.google.com/support/webmasters) is a good place to kick-start your self-tuition. Either way, you need to ensure that your site's crawlability is built into the design process from the beginning. While there are many schools of thought in the burgeoning world of SEO, adopting a strictly ethical "white hat" approach, where users come first, is the best policy. Usability and accessibility will always be overlooked at your peril.

The future of SEO
While the advent of tailored search is good news for users, giving more control over search results, some

"It's fantastic to have new technologies like Ajax, but at the same time you can absolutely embrace accessibility" Matt Cutts

Create compelling content

Your text needs to be engaging and authentic, "and have a compelling angle", says Matt Cutts. Here are a few more insider tips to make your content stand out from the crowd.

Study your stats

Examine your traffic logs, as Matt Cutts suggests: "What keywords are people using to find your site? Look at the words people are using, maybe by accident – they might just happen to occur on your page – and incorporate those into new content."

Think of your audience

"A simple example," says Matt Cutts, "is if you're doing something about taxes, then you may want to also talk about VAT. Keyword tools can raise your awareness of other words or phrases that people may use."

Choose carefully

Selecting the right keywords and understanding the fundamentals of keyword density and proximity is important, but don't get bogged down by this (a favourite tool to help gauge density on-the-fly is www.live-keyword-analysis.com). Resources such as Wordtracker, Overture's Keyword Selector Tool, Google Trends, Analytics, AdWords and Google Sitemaps all provide information on popular search terms relevant to your market. Think carefully about the search queries used, and aim for a good mix of primary phrases and precise "long tail" niche terms.

How does it sound?

Read your copy aloud. If it reads as a natural syntax that both inflects and reflects well, it's perfect for your users. Write snappy headlines and subheaders that convey the message of the page, independent to your body copy.

Pay-per-click/AdWords campaign results

These can provide an invaluable real-time pulse on search trends. Use other keyword tools and create an implementable list of niche keywords.

Every page matters

View every page as a landing page, ensuring that each solicits a call to a positive action. Demonstrate a reason for users to stay on your site.

Use keywords wisely

Ensure that your page titles, tags and subheaders are concise, descriptive and inviting and include primary key phrases corresponding to that page.

Proof it

Have your site professionally proofread, and remember that SEO copywriting is about balance. Pages that overflow with paragraphs of incongruous text may drive people away.

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search marketers believe that with potentially different users receiving different results, SEOs could find it difficult to clearly gauge their rankings success for particular search terms. On the other hand, it could force web publishers to focus more on their niche. Matt explains: "Personalised search absolutely improves quality. I'm excited that we're able to offer personalised search more often, so that users can have their search get better without doing any work at all. I think it changes the nature of the field a little bit for SEOs, but it will ultimately make the field stronger.

"One of my personal theories is that those SEOs who are able to adapt to change are among the strongest and will always have a real value to add to businesses. So, you can belabour and worry about being number one for "car insurance", or you can ask yourself how you appeal to a large segment of people and find a niche going for insurance on a second car! Find those important segments of the market."

Personalisation reveals opportunities to be able to excel within a niche, and softens the blow of not being in pole position. You may not be number one for everyone, but you're number one for your community, or for those people in your demographic or common areas of interest.

Present yourself well

SEO can either be an integral part of the design process or an afterthought, brimming with bogus methodologies that may render your site temporarily penalised or even blacklisted. The path to success with SEO often begins and ends with the questions, 'What sets you apart from the rest?' and 'Have you designed your site with the user in mind?'.

"Think of SEO like a résumé," suggests Matt. "You may be a fantastic worker, but unless you present yourself well, people might not realise just how good a candidate you are." Quite simply, if you don't offer your user enough relevant content, or convey your assets clearly and convincingly enough, your pursuit for rankings success will be redundant and you'll relinquish leverage to your competitors. There are rarely overnight fixes with SEO. It's attention to the finer details that adds finesse, so smarten up, and put your best face forward. ●

www. *We invite you to share your own thoughts about SEO at forum.netmag.co.uk*