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Google's Shake Up: A View From the Beginning – Part One

By Jim Hedger

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Monday, December 16, 2003

It has been exactly one month since Google introduced its infamous Florida Update. As the Florida Update has brought about the largest and most comprehensive shake-up of Google's listings ever, it has generated a great deal of interest around the world and genuine panic for the literally millions of webmasters who's sites have been adversely affected by the change. The following article is a compilation of our writings about the Florida Update since November 17th, the first Monday after the shift.

Monday November 17, 2003 – Happy Monday Morning Folks... DON'T PANIC!

Have you taken a look at Google today? Yes, what you are seeing is real. Google is showing totally different listings on the search engine returns pages today. Actually, this weirdness started sometime on Friday night or Saturday morning. Most of our clients have not been affected and the only one we have seen effected has had his rankings rise dramatically. Our site has been affected though, rather badly at that. From the #6 spot under the phrase "Search Engine Placement", the happy-go-lucky StepForth site has dropped past the fifth page of returns.

I think this is a temporary thing. We last saw such a massive shake-up six months ago and the listings went back to normal after a few days. This sort of shake-up generally indicates that Google is re-ordering their entire database of spidered sites.

Something big is happening at Google but we're not sure what it is. What we do know is that since a major update of Google's database started on Friday night, the search returns have been extremely buggy with long-term Top10 pages dropping from existence, recorded back links decreasing or disappearing for many sites, and more than the usual amount of spam appearing in the Top10. We have also noted the disappearance of one of their major servers (www-sj.google.com).

Google has been delivering questionable returns for several months now with spam and duplicate listings often making it into the Top10. The last time their listings have been this upset was in October

2002 when Google tried introducing Blog entries and news releases into its general listings. Within two weeks, the listings had been restored to a shakey state of "normal" but that marked the beginning of strange and often spammy entries into the Top10. This month's update is being referred to in the SEO community as the "Florida Update" and has a lot of SEO practitioners scratching their heads. Our current advice is to wait it out for at least two weeks and see what Google does next.

December 3, 2003 – Google's Florida Update

The impact of Google's Florida Update has not been fully realized yet, but it appears the damage will be extensive considering the reports we are getting from some clients. Literally hundreds of thousands, if not millions of websites have seemingly disappeared from Google's listings, most of whom enjoyed a Top10 placement before the massive update which started on November 16th. Like most retailers,

ecommerce sites that have faded from the listings needed a good Christmas season to remain viable into the next year and many of them staked their sales plans on a their previously strong placements at Google. The fallout will be noticeable, particularly among small businesses where advertising options are limited by small business budgets. Small businesses, however, will not be the only companies facing an uncertain future because of the Florida Update. When the SEO community starts receiving calls from the mainstream media and people who are not clients, asking what is wrong with Google; one knows that Google itself has a problem that goes far beyond their data centers. As one of the pioneers of the web, Lee Roberts of The Web Doctor points out, "It was word-of-mouth that generated their popularity because people could find what they were looking for. Now, we only find sites with less quality content and less sites that offer what we want."

The Florida Update encompasses the most substantial changes to Google's famed ranking algorithm in the young company's history. There are several theories as to why Google forced this update. Some say that Google is trying to force small businesses to join their highly profitable AdWords program by making such a comprehensive update just before the Christmas shopping season. Others say that Google has always used the weeks around the US Thanksgiving holiday to make changes in the hopes that the sudden decrease in traffic over what is often a 4-day weekend will give their engineers enough time to introduce a new algorithm, (and fix any minor errors), without causing massive disruptions to their normal users. A third theory, (the one I lean towards), states that Google was simply tired of being gamed by the growing cadre of less ethical players in the SEO sector and has simply changed the rules overnight by applying this new algorithm. Whatever the reason, the damage is being done and now advertisers and web-users want to know what to expect next. Unfortunately, that is not an easy question to answer as Google does not comment on any changes to their algorithm, therefore the only thing we can do is offer experienced and educated guesses.

I suspect that the folks at Google know they have a major problem on their hands and are working to fix it. We have seen MAJOR spider activity from Google-Bot in the past 48-hours and see evidence that another Google-Dance is currently underway. We have seen updates to the algorithm in the past. The most recent happened earlier this summer and the one before that was in October 2002. Each time Google augmented its algorithm with a new feature or filter, massive dislocation was temporarily felt across the commercial web. Both times, however, Google began producing relevant results within a matter of weeks. The new filters added to this update were too comprehensive and penalized sites that Google couldn't have been targeting on purpose. Again, I suggest that Google's engineering staff knows this, and if they don't, their customer relations and PR departments are most certainly telling

them. I expect to see parts of this filter retained and applied to the formula that eventually evolves into their new algorithm but I simply can't see Google keeping this algorithm, continuing to serving up spam, and throwing its hard-earned reputation out the window. Regardless of the number of MBAs they have on staff, Google's brain trust is simply too smart for that.

Google is not in the business of driving websites out of business. Google exists to make money by providing the most relevant listings possible, a goal they are clearly not achieving. As Lee Roberts stated above, Google was built on (and, implicitly can be brought down by), word-of-mouth advertising, a fact that cannot be lost on the management at Google. Google is not in the extortion business and has in fact, built its reputation on being above reproach in the separation of paid advertising (AdWords), and the general free listings. I have a difficult time accepting the theory that Google is simply trying to increase AdWords revenues, or increase its own perceived value before issuing the expected IPO next quarter. In reality, what I think we are seeing is Google trying to reclaim its power when it comes to choosing how it will rank websites. Think about this update as a pendulum. Before the update happened, the pendulum had swung to one extreme where, with enough hard work, some could make Google do almost anything they wanted it to. Now, with the application of the Florida Update, Google has pushed the pendulum back to the other extreme. Eventually, and based on past observation, the pendulum will find its way back to the middle. As for those of us adversely affected by

the Florida Update, StepForth's best advice is to continue making minor changes to your site as normal. We do not advise a full reoptimization at this point, a task that would not likely produce strong results before the end of the purchasing season anyway, until the SEO sector has an honest handle on what is happening at Google. As a wise and wonderful person recently told me, "... you can't push a rope."

Jim Hedger is the SEO Manager of StepForth Search Engine Placement Inc. Based in Victoria, BC, Canada, StepForth is the result of the consolidation of BraveArt Website Management, Promotion Experts, and Phoenix Creative Works, and has provided professional search engine placement and management services since 1997. <http://www.stepforth.com/> Tel – 250-385-1190 Toll Free – 877-385-5526 Fax – 250-385-1198

Shake, Rattle, and Roll

By Tina Rideout

Shake, Rattle, and Roll
Google, Yahoo, and Msn

Does everyone have their dancing shoes on??

Shake:

Google started shaking things up earlier this summer when they went Public.

This is of little importance to the average webmaster, unless of course you are an investor.

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Google took it's time updating and ranking new and old sites during this time period, which had the webmasters whispering and scratching their heads.

Google did finally start dancing again, but with no apparent new dance steps being noticed.

Rattle:

Yahoo joined the dance floor with its new Partner Overture.

The result has been sites which had good status on the Yahoo Search Engine have danced off into Cyberspace. Noticeably being replaced by sites with less significant value, as far as content and longevity.

Again whispers of a new algorithms. The masters are feverishly trying to out boogie the inventors.

Roll:

Msn, sat on the sidelines, watching the dancers and analyzing their moves. Like a slow easy Fox Trot.

Move over Google and Yahoo, we got the rhythm and we will give you the Blues.

Sites that will help you keep up with the latest Search Engine war.

Search Engine Watch:

ResearchBuzz:

Search Engine News

SEO Consultants Directory:

The question at hand is how does the little guy get an invitation to the dance?

Learn the dance.

Written by Tina Rideout

For more information regarding Reciprocal Linking, Writing Articles, and Webite and Marketing Tools, please visit at:

or

Shake, Rattle, and Roll

Google and its data centres.

Jagger Algo Update– Part 2

Are You A Google Junkie

What's Hot In Google Labs - Google Trends

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Email Spider Software

Google Site Map Maker

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