

## Google Updates

### Pandas, Penguins, Pigeons and other animals in the Google Zoo

You might have heard stories in the press about the “Google Panda update” or how “Google penguin hits online businesses” but what are these animals and why should they matter?

To answer this, we need to first explain how Google ranks websites. Each time you do a search on Google, your query is matched against a number of factors. Like a KFC recipe, the things that go into generating search results (the search algorithm) are a closely guarded secret. Supposedly there are over 200 different ingredients in the dish, each with different amounts of influence (although there are some people who counter this claim) Some possible influences on the rankings are: number of backlinks, power of backlinks, age of website, quality of content, content of meta tags, page loading speed, domain name extension (.ac and .gov domains are more trusted), social reputation, the list goes on.

The problem is no one can tell 100% which factors are in play at any time and what their relative importance is. Even if you did find out what the most influential factors are, there is no guarantee that one of animals in Google’s menagerie won’t mess it up.

When Google releases an update to its search formula, sometimes the first we know about it is when the rankings of websites change. Often it’s a minor change, less often there are big changes in ranking. Working in SEO is a bit like trying to sail a boat across the Atlantic. If you are lucky, then you will not have any problems but if you get hit by a Google update, then it’s like sailing in a hurricane. The best you can do is try to weather the storm and keep afloat in the top pages. The first few days after an update is when you notice the biggest peaks and troughs of rankings. This is sometimes called the ‘Google dance’ – where websites move up and down the rankings, switching places with other sites quite quickly. Generally after a few days, the storm eases, then you get to figure out whether you have done well or badly out of the update. As I write, there has been a minor update in the past few days and search engine experts are still discussing whether this is an undisclosed new update, or a tweaking of a previously released update

Some of the major updates in the past couple of years have been given interesting names. Here’s a quick rundown on the major updates, and what it has meant for SEO:

**Panda** – in terms of updates, this was a biggy. First released in Feb 2011, the effect of this update was to reduce the rankings of sites of low quality or thin content – sites with good quality content did well from this update. Sites which relied mainly on backlinks to boost rankings did very badly. The first version reportedly changed the rankings of 12% of all websites – which is the largest ranking change ever recorded. There were numerous panda updates in the first



couple of years but things slowed down after that, the last one recorded was September 2014.

**Penguin** – If you thought panda was bad, penguin was worse. Just like the nemesis of Batman, this update caused chaos in the SEO world. The first penguin update was April 2012. This update cracked down hard on websites that were seen to be manipulating the rankings in violation of Google’s webmaster guidelines (a code of good practice published by Google). One of the things targeted was link exchange schemes, or reciprocal linking. This is simply where one website links to another in exchange for a backlink in return.



This practice was common in the early days of SEO, but is now a sure fire way to get penalised. Another practice now outlawed is the use of doorway pages – these are pages set up to focus on a narrow set of keywords created solely to generate keyword relevant backlinks to the main website.

According to Google’s own figures, 3.1% of websites were affected by this update. That’s still a big number considering the size of Google’s index, but nowhere near the level of panda.

To date, there have been 6 versions of the penguin update, the final one was in October 2014 but more minor updates have been announced for the future.

**Pigeon** – This is the unofficial name for this update given by the SEO community and it reflects the fact that the update focuses on local search. The pigeon update was released in July 2014 and had the effect of improving the relevancy of local search results. This was good news for those sites that advertised local business as it removed a lot of spam from local search. Changes also affected searches in Google maps and Google business.



**Hummingbird** – not really an update to the ranking algorithm per se, but an entirely new backend for the search engine, and replaced the earlier “caffeine” engine. Hummingbird was released in August 2013, and one of the focuses of the new system was to allow for semantic search (searches that use context to generate meaning) and more natural speech processing. Previously, if you put into Google “where is the nearest pizza place to me” – the results would not always display the nearest pizza shops to you, but instead show those web pages which have the words ‘nearest’ and ‘pizza’ in the content. If you owned nearestpizza.com you could have got a lot of traffic. With Hummingbird, natural text is translated into more accurate search queries by taking into account of the context of the text around it, so when you do the same search now, Google will attempt to use your location data to show nearby takeaways. Hummingbird was an essential update for the release of Google Voice. If you do a search for ‘lead and collar’ it will give you a completely different set of results to ‘lead pipes’.



### **Avoiding being hit by Google Updates**

The intention behind all Google’s updates has been to remove the lower quality sites from the results that people get from search. Therefore if you don’t want to be hit by another Google animal in the future, you have to create high quality sites with ethical and natural link building and good structure and avoid anything that might look spammy. It’s as simple as that.

To learn how to make high quality content sites that Google loves, read the next installment “Basic Search engine optimisation”