Everything You Need to Know About the Google ‘Fred’ Update by @schachin

Editor’s note: *This post is part of an ongoing series looking back at the history of Google algorithm updates. Enjoy!*

Around March 7-8 of 2017, there was a lot of chatter that some sort of algorithm update was going on.

It seemed like Google was targeting low-quality content meant to generate revenue.

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Google wasn’t talking. At least not at first.

In fact – even though Google’s Gary Illyes jokingly “named” the update “Fred” on March 9 – no one from Google would officially confirm the update happened until March 24.

So what was Fred, really?

Fred isn’t really an algorithm. Fred isn’t even one set of processes.

“Fred” is a catchall name for any quality related algorithm(s) update(s) related to site quality that Google does not otherwise identify.

Where Did Fred Come From?

Starting in 2015, there were a string of what appeared to be Google quality updates (a.k.a., Phantom) that were not related to Panda. (And these updates appear to have continued through

2017, though Google has not confirmed any of them.)

Like Fred, these Google quality updates did not refer to one set of algorithmic processes and/or update(s). It was largely just a common way for SEO professionals to refer to a series of unconfirmed Google updates that had a much wider scope than Panda.

Then, on March 9, 2017, Search Engine Roundtable's Barry Schwartz asked Google's Gary Illyes if he wanted to name the fairly significant update that just occurred.

Gary replied:

> *sure! From now on every update, unless otherwise stated, shall be called Fred*
>
> *— Gary "□□" Illyes (@methode) March 9, 2017*

And "Fred" was born.

Why the Name 'Fred'?

Well, a tweet by Ryan Jones gave us some insight there. It seems Illyes calls everything un-named Fred. Fish, people, updates – anything unnamed is Fred:

> *What those who aren't friends with @methode don't realize is that he calls EVERYTHING un-named, fred. Fish, people, whatever.*
>
> *— Ryan Jones (@RyanJones) March 9, 2017*

Fred, in the beginning, was really just a joke, a bit of sarcasm that Illyes tossed off at an industry journalist.

Then the joke took off.

Now Fred is whatever we make it to be.

Right now that is a name for a series of quality updates that are in violation of the Webmaster Guidelines.

How Was the Fred Update Different?

Fred was different than any other "named" algorithm updates because it doesn't actually mean anything except that Google updates the core algorithms to deal with quality issues and they only gave it that name as a joke.

Now Google does many of these quality updates and most go unnoticed.

An update only gets the Fred name if it has significantly affected a large number of sites or a certain vertical and SEO professionals want it identified.

Basically? All unnamed updates related to quality are now "Fred."

What Google Said About Fred

Illyes was interviewed about Fred at Brighton SEO 2017. What follows is a transcript:

> *Interviewer: Let's talk about Fred.*
>
> *Gary Illyes: Who?*
>
> *Interviewer: You are the person that created Fred. So Fred is basically an algo that…*
>
> *Gary Illyes: It's not one algo, it's all the algos.*
>
> *Interviewer: So you can confirm it's not a single algo – it's a whole umbrella of a bunch of different changes and updates that everyone has just kind of put under this umbrella of "Fred".*

Gary Illyes: Right, so the story behind Fred is that basically I'm an asshole on Twitter. And I'm also very sarcastic which is usually a very bad combination. And Barry Schwartz, because who else, was asking me about some update that we did to the search algorithm.

And I don't know if you know, but in average we do three or two to three updates to the search algorithm, ranking algorithm every single day. So usually our response to Barry is that sure, it's very likely there was an update. But that day I felt even more sarcastic than I actually am, and I had to tell him that.

Oh, he was begging me practically for a name for the algorithm or update, because he likes Panda or Penguin and what's the new one. Pork, owl, shit like that. And I just told him that, you know what, from now on every single update that we make – unless we say otherwise – will be called Fred; every single one of them.

Interviewer: So now we're in a perpetual state of Freds?

Gary Illyes: Correct. Basically every single update that we make is a Fred. I don't like, or I was sarcastic because I don't like that people are focusing on this.

Every single update that we make is around quality of the site or general quality, perceived quality of the site, content and the links or whatever. All these are in the Webmaster Guidelines. When there's something that is not in line with our Webmaster Guidelines, or we change an algorithm that modifies the Webmaster Guidelines, then we update the Webmaster Guidelines as well.

Or we publish something like a Penguin algorithm, or work with journalists like you to publish, throw them something like they did with Panda.

Interviewer: So for all these one to two updates a day, when

> *webmasters go on and see their rankings go up or down, how many of those changes are actually actionable? Can webmasters actually take something away from that, or is it just under the generic and for the quality of your site?*
>
> *Gary Illyes: I would say that for the vast majority, and I'm talking about probably over 95%, 98% of the launches are not actionable for webmasters. And that's because we may change, for example, which keywords from the page we pick up because we see, let's say, that people in a certain region put up the content differently and we want to adapt to that.*
>
> *[…]*
>
> *Basically, if you publish high quality content that is highly cited on the Internet – and I'm not talking about just links, but also mentions on social networks and people talking about your branding, crap like that.*
>
> *[audience laughter]*
>
> *Then, I shouldn't have said that right? Then you are doing great. And fluctuations will always happen to your traffic. We can't help that; it would be really weird if there wasn't fluctuation, because that would mean we don't change, we don't improve our search results anymore.*

Note: This transcript has been lightly edited by author for clarity.

Recovering From Fred

Because Fred is not a singular algorithm update that targets a single or set of common issues, a "hit" by Fred (all unnamed updates going forward) will only be known to you if other SEO professionals note it and talk about it as well.

Google won't be announcing future iterations or refreshes of

Fred. They will not tell you what they targeted and they will not give you information that helps you recover from it.

So the first way you can identify a Fred issue is to look and see if multiple sites were affected. If so, then it is likely an update. Otherwise it is just a site issue.

Google sees all quality updates as being “Freds” and also unactionable and common.

But is this true? Is there really nothing you can do if hit by “Fred”?

No, there is plenty you can do.

Once you have made sure that your site was affected by was a “Fred” update there are two Google documents that can help you locate your issue and make a fix.

First is the Google Webmaster Guidelines, which Illyes referred to in his Brighton interview.

If you have never read these guidelines or have not read them in some time, this would be a good time to review. You want to make sure you have covered the basics before diving into the deep end.

Google Quality Evaluator Guidelines

So what if you know your site is in compliance with Google’s Webmaster Guidelines and there are no other apparent issues? What do you do then if you are sure you were hit with the negative effects of a quality update that is *not* seemingly Panda, which as a named algorithm has a very specific focus?

The good news is you have a Google guide that gives you a roadmap with specifications on what to review: The Google Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines.

Google gives quality rater guidelines to users it employs to

effectively review the quality of websites. These quality raters make assessments of what is a good or not good site based on these specifications.

The good news? You can use this for your site, too!

However, the quality evaluator guidelines are *not* an SEO guide. Do not use it as a tutorial on search engine optimization. It was not designed with this in mind.

That said, these guidelines can give you all the information you need to better understand how Google interprets your site and what it believes is (and is not) a quality site.

The Google Webmaster Guidelines provide a checklist of what generally might be wrong, while the search quality rating guidelines give you the details on how that is potentially evaluated, generally speaking.

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