Google Advice: Duplicate Content on Product & Category Pages by @martinibuster

On a recent Google Webmaster Hangout a publisher asked if using content from product pages on the category pages will cause either of those pages or both to be demoted. Google's John Mueller offered his opinion on how Google handles the duplicate content, the consequences of repeating snippets of content on category and product pages and offers his advice on how publishers should approach this situation.



What's the Problem with Category Pages?

Category pages are top level pages that contain product listings. Category pages allow users to browse From there a user can click through to a specific product. The issue under discussion arises when a merchant uses identical content from the product pages on the category pages. The question is, how does Google handle the duplicate content?

How Google Handles Duplicate Content on Category and Product Pages

Google's John Mueller explains how Google handles duplicate content:

> *"What generally happens in a case like that is we find the same text snippet on multiple pages on your website and*

> *that's perfectly fine… What will however happen is when someone is searching for something just in that text snippet then all of these different pages are kind of competing against each other in the search results and will try to pick one of these pages to show and try to figure out which one is their most relevant…*
>
> *So that could be that maybe your category pages see more traffic but that would kind of come at the cost of your product detail pages seeing less traffic.*
>
> *So that's something which you essentially can decide on and think about for your website… to see does it make sense to bring more information at a higher level within the website at the cost of those higher level pages ranking more when people are actually searching for detailed information. Or does it make sense to kind of separate that out and clearly say well this is detailed information and this is kind of more general higher level information."*

Which is Best for Users, Category or Product Page?

It's a common practice to use a snippet of information from a product page and use it on a category page that contains descriptions of all the products in a single page. This makes it easy for users to browse products that fit within the same category and it's a good user experience feature.

But clearly, given John Mueller's comments, it may be a good idea to use unique descriptions in the category pages in order to help Google differentiate between a page that is general (category page) and a page that is specific (product page).

When a user is browsing for a type of product (and not a specific product), then the category page would be a good match. Thus the content of that page should perhaps be

constructed in a manner to rank for more general type queries appropriate for that kind of product. Additionally, it's important to make that category page well organized so that it's easy for a user to compare products and decide if they want a cheaper model, a model of a certain color, a model with more or less features etc. Google's quality raters guidelines states that a feature that allows users to easily browse multiple products is a signal of good quality (read about strategies based on the quality raters guides here).

Obviously, if a user wants a specific product, then the information on the products page will be more detailed. Thus it makes sense to list every available color option, user ratings, model numbers, weight, size, shipping information and any other relevant information.

Possible to A/B Test Organic Listings?

John Mueller goes on to suggest A/B testing to see which pages are best for your users. He suggests sending traffic to categories in one area and sending users to product pages in another section.

But to accomplish that for organic traffic one would have to block Google from product pages in the first test and category pages in the second test. That's impractical and probably not advisable because you can't control where Google sends traffic to your site in order to A/B test which one is best for users. Blocking Google from one section of your site doesn't guarantee that Google will then start sending traffic to the other section. It's a risky way to A/B test a site. It may be that John Mueller may have been thinking out loud with this piece of advice.

You can however A/B test user behavior with PPC (Pay Per Click advertising) and over time develop an idea of what users

prefer for specific keyword phrases. Here's John Mueller's advice:

> *"…usually you can kind of A/B test this as well, where you take some of your categories or some of the products and you kind of try this out, you let it run for a couple of months and you compare it to some categories where you have it set up differently and you see where users are reacting differently.*
>
> *Are they coming to your site, are they doing what you expect them to do? Or are they bouncing, are they going back or are they looking for something else, do they end up browsing to the detail pages anyway and maybe you can shorten that and just send them directly to the detail pages but that's something you can definitely test."*

Perhaps an ideal approach is to think of the category pages as a general page to attract users who are researching a kind of product but not a specific product. This means more higher level and general type of content. Users can thus compare features and click through to the individual products. On the product pages, a merchant can use more specific language that is appropriate for discussing a specific brand and model.

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