Google algorithm updates 2020 in review: core updates, passage indexing and page experience

This year will forever be known as the year that brought introspection, slowed people down and had them focus less on business and more on family. But, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, business must go on, and so it did with SEO and Google's numerous algorithm updates throughout the year.

From core updates, to machine learning efforts with BERT, passage indexing (or is it passage ranking?), the upcoming Google Page Experience update and many unconfirmed changes – we would not call 2020 as a slow year for Google search algorithms.

Google's January, May and December core updates rocked the SEO industry

January 2020 core update. Google kicked things off early in 2020 with the first core update of the year, the January 2020 core update, that started to roll out on January 13, 2020. While most core updates take two weeks to fully roll out, Google said by January 16th, it was mostly rolled out. Like virtually all core updates, the January 2020 core update was big and impacted a lot of sites.

May 2020 core update. A few months later we had our next core update. This was after speculation that maybe Google would not release a core update during the pandemic – but it did. The next core update was the May 2020 core update released on May

4, 2020. It took about two weeks to roll out and was done rolling out on May 18, 2020. This update was bigger than the January 2020 update; in fact, some called it an absolute monster.

Then, things went silent for several months; just about seven-months to be exact.

December 2020 core update. Then on December 3, 2020, Google released the December 2020 core update. This update was released right after the Black Friday and Cyber Monday shopping season but still before the holidays, which upset many in the industry. That being said, we saw big spikes with this update on December 4th and December 10th, and it officially stopped rolling out on December 16, 2020. Based on some reports, this update was even bigger than the May 2020 core update.

Google BERT expands to all queries

In 2019, Google launched BERT for 10% of all queries. Well, that changed in 2020, where it is now used for almost 100% of all English-language queries. Google said at an event that BERT has helped improve search results on “specific searches” by 7%.

We also learned that Google’s efforts to integrate BERT into search was code named DeepRank, a project Google began possibly as early as 2017. Google expanded the use of BERT to many areas including matching stories to fact-checking.

Passage indexing, I mean ranking, was announced

Google introduced passage indexing, which really should be named passage ranking, during its SearchOn event. Basically, passage indexing helps Google zone into specific passages of

content on a page and rank those parts of your pages in Google search. This will help pages that are not well optimized for search, Google said. Google did not change how it indexes content, but rather how it will rank that content.

Google also said passage-based indexing will affect 7% of search queries across all languages when fully rolled out globally. We did expect it to go live in 2020 but it is still not live yet. So expect it sometime in early 2021.

Page experience update & core web vitals

In May 2020, Google announced a brand new shiny set of ranking factors – the Google Page Experience update. This includes a number of signals including old signals such as the mobile-friendly update, Page Speed Update, the HTTPS ranking boost, the intrusive interstitials penalty, and safe browsing penalty as well as new signals in the form of Google's new core web vitals. Core web vitals include metrics such as largest contentful paint (LCP), first input delay (FID), and cumulative layout shift. We have a guide to the core web vital so you can learn more.

When this goes live, in May 2021, Google will no longer only serve AMP pages in the Top Stories carousel but also pages that do well with these scores.

Another note, this new page experience update will only be applied to mobile rankings, not desktop rankings – for now. The more exciting aspect may be the visual indicator that Google may launch with this in May 2021.

Other Google algorithm changes,

updates, tweaks or bugs

There was more: We had plenty of unconfirmed Google algorithm updates, some that felt super big and some that were somewhat confirmed. In August, Google had a bug with its search results that really messed things up for some time as well. We even may have had a bug related to local search that Google confirmed.

Other changes in search Google announced include:

- New advancements in language understanding with AI include a new spelling algorithm, the ability to index specific individual passages from web pages and new techniques to help people find a wider range of results.
- Google Maps updates include an expansion of live "busyness" information and details about businesses' COVID-19 related health and safety precautions. In the near future, users will be able to find information about a restaurant, store, or business in Live View using AR.
- Users can use the mic icon in the Google search bar or the Assistant to ask "what's this song?" or "search a song." Then they can start humming for 10-15 seconds to get results for the song.
- New Lens and AR features in Google Search to discover (and even style) products as users browse online. With augmented reality, Google is enabling users to experience retail showrooms virtually.
- Finally, Duplex technology is now calling businesses to automatically update handy details like store hours and takeout options on Search and Maps. This year, Google said, Duplex has been used to make more than three million updates to businesses like pharmacies, restaurants, and grocery stores that have been seen over 20 billion times in Maps and search.

More in 2021

For 2021, we already know to expect the upcoming Google Page Experience update in May. We know the passage indexing change should be live soon, probably in early 2021. I did not mention above mobile-first indexing going full force in March 2021, because technically it is not a ranking algorithm change, but you may see ranking changes based on indexing changes. So. we are expecting a lot of changes next year.

But, expect more of the same as well: Expect more core updates and make sure to build content and web sites that survive those updates. Expect Google to continue to make advancements in understanding language and queries better. Expect Google to continue to make more tweaks to search with the goal of improving relevancy.

In short, expect, and even embrace, change, because that is what SEOs do best – adapt and anticipate to change.

About The Author

Barry Schwartz a Contributing Editor to Search Engine Land and a member of the programming team for SMX events. He owns RustyBrick, a NY based web consulting firm. He also runs Search Engine Roundtable, a popular search blog on very advanced SEM topics. Barry’s personal blog is named Cartoon Barry and he can be followed on Twitter here.
http://feeds.searchengineland.com/~r/searchengineland/~3/_cg7EhsNQbs/google-algorithm-updates-2020-in-review-core-updates-

passage-indexing-and-page-experience-345070