Google Explains Why They Need To Control Ranking Signals via @sejournal, @martinibuster



Google's Gary Illyes answered a question about why Google doesn't use social sharing as a ranking factor, explaining that it's about the inability to control certain kinds of external signals.

Kenichi Suzuki Interview With Gary Illyes

Kenichi Suzuki (LinkedIn profile), of Faber Company (LinkedIn profile), is a respected Japanese search marketing expert who has at least 25 years of experience in digital marketing. I last saw him speak at a Pubcon session a few years back, where he shared his findings on qualities inherent to sites that Google Discover tended to show.

Suzuki published an interview with Gary Illyes, where he asked a number of questions about SEO, including this one about SEO, social media, and Google ranking factors.

Gary Illyes is an Analyst at Google (LinkedIn profile) who has a history of giving straightforward answers that dispel SEO myths and sometimes startle, like the time recently when he said that links play less of a role in ranking than most SEOs tend to believe. Gary used to be a part of the web publishing community before working at Google, and he was even a member of the WebmasterWorld forums under the nickname Methode. So I think Gary knows what it's like to be a part of the SEO community and how important good information is, and that's reflected in the quality of answers he provides.

Are Social Media Shares Or Views Google Ranking Factors?

The question about social media and ranking factors was asked by Rio Ichikawa (LinkedIn profile), also of Faber Company. She asked Gary whether social media views and shares were ranking signals.

Gary's answer was straightforward and with zero ambiguity. He said no. The interesting part of his answer was the explanation of *why* Google doesn't use them and will never use them as a ranking factor.

Ichikawa asked the following question:

> *"All right then. The next question. So this is about the SEO and social media. Is the number of the views and shares on social media …used as one of the ranking signals for SEO or in general?"*

Gary answered:

> *“For this we have basically a very old, very canned response and something that we learned or it’s based on something that we learned over the years, or particularly one incident around 2014.*
>
> *The answer is no. And for the future is also likely no.*
>
> *And that’s because we need to be able to control our own signals. And if we are looking at external signals, so for example, a social network’s signals, that’s not in our control.*
>
> *So basically if someone on that social network decides to inflate the number, we don’t know if that inflation was legit or not, and we have no way knowing that.”*

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Easily Gamed Signals Are Unreliable For SEO

External signals that Google can’t control but can be influenced by an SEO are untrustworthy. Googlers have expressed similar opinions about other things that are easily manipulated and therefore unreliable as ranking signals.

Some SEOs might say, “If that’s true, then what about structured data? Those are under the control of SEOs, but Google uses them.”

Yes, Google uses structured data, but not as a ranking factor; they just make websites eligible for rich results. Additionally, stuffing structured data with content that’s not visible on the web page is a violation of Google’s guidelines and can lead to a manual action.

A recent example is the LLMs.txt protocol proposal, which is essentially dead in the water precisely because it is

unreliable, in addition to being superfluous. Google's John Mueller has said that the LLMs.txt protocol is unreliable because it could easily be misused to show highly optimized content for ranking purposes, and that it is analogous to the keywords meta tag, which was used by SEOs for every keyword they wanted their web pages to rank for.

Mueller said:

> *"To me, it's comparable to the keywords meta tag – this is what a site-owner claims their site is about … (Is the site really like that? well, you can check it. At that point, why not just check the site directly?)"*

The content within an LLMs.txt and associated files are completely in control of SEOs and web publishers, which makes them unreliable.

Another example is the author byline. Many SEOs promoted author bylines as a way to show "authority" and influence Google's understanding of Expertise, Experience, Authoritativeness, and Trustworthiness. Some SEOs, predictably, invented fake LinkedIn profiles to link from their fake author bios in the belief that author bylines were a ranking signal. The irony is that the ease of abusing author bylines should have been reason enough for the average SEO to dismiss them as a ranking-related signal.

In my opinion, the key statement in Gary's answer is this:

> *"…we need to be able to control our own signals."*

I think that the SEO community, moving forward, really needs to rethink some of the unconfirmed "ranking signals" they believe in, like brand mentions, and just move on to doing things that actually make a difference, like promoting websites and creating experiences that users love.

Watch the question and answer at about the ten minute mark:

[embedded content]

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