Google to treat nofollow link attribute as a ‘hint’

Google has announced Tuesday that today the nofollow link attribute (i.e. rel="nofollow“) will be seen as a “hint” rather than as a directive for ranking purposes. In addition, Google is adding two additional link attributes, in addition to the rel="nofollow" to provide a bit more context about the content you’re linking to.

Until this change, any link with the rel="nofollow" attribute added to it would not be counted at all by Google for use in its search algorithms. Google said it is now time for link attributes to “evolve”. New attributes for sponsored content and user-generated content (UGC) are joining nofollow, and the three will function in the following ways:

rel="sponsored": The new sponsored attribute can be used to identify links on your site that were created as part of advertisements, sponsorships or other compensation agreements.

rel="ugc": The ugc attribute value is recommended for links within user generated content, such as comments and forum posts.

rel="nofollow": The nofollow attribute is for cases where you want to link to a page but don’t want to imply any type of endorsement, including passing along ranking credit to another page, Google said.

Today vs March 2020: Today Google will treat the nofollow attribute as a hint for ranking purposes. Meaning Google might count a link as credit, consider it as part of spam analysis or for other ranking purposes.

On March 2, 2020, Google will use it also for crawling and indexing. That means will Google use it as a “hint” as to what

should be indexed or crawled but it is better to use robots.txt or meta tags for that purpose anyway.

History. Google launched the nofollow link attribute in 2005 as a way to fight comment spam. It then expanded it to be used as a way of "flagging advertising-related or sponsored links" that might get you in trouble with link schemes.

Hint vs. ignore. Google said each of these methods will be considered "hints" about how to treat the links rather than an instruction to ignore the links. The company said it is making the change because it can now collect data on the individual links, including the words within anchor text, and evaluate links in aggregate to better identify link schemes while still considering the link attribute signals.

"Links contain valuable information that can help us improve search, such as how the words within links describe content they point at," Google said. "Looking at all the links we encounter can also help us better understand unnatural linking patterns. By shifting to a hint model, we no longer lose this important information, while still allowing site owners to indicate that some links shouldn't be given the weight of a first-party endorsement."

Will the search results change? Google told us that it does not expect significant changes to the search results as of a result to this. However, Google is now able to begin looking at how to use this data in its search ranking systems and changing to the hint treatment will give Google more flexibility in how it treats links with these attributes in search.

"All the link attributes – sponsored, UGC and nofollow – are treated as hints about which links to consider or exclude within Search," said Google.

No change needed. There is no need to change your nofollow links today, the company said. You can leave nofollow

attributes in your UGC or sponsored links. “There’s absolutely no need to change any nofollow links that you already have,” however Google added, for sponsored content it “recommend[s] switching over to rel="sponsored" if or when it is convenient.”

Multiple link attributes supported. You can use a combination of one or more of these attributes in a single link tag. You can tag a single link with rel="ugc sponsored" or rel="nofollow ugc". The first would hint to Google that the link came from user-generated content and is sponsored.

Result in more comment spam? Google said no, this should not result in more comment spam. Google wrote, “Many sites that allow third-parties to contribute to content already deter link spam in a variety of ways, including moderation tools that can be integrated into many blogging platforms and human review. The link attributes of “ugc” and “nofollow” will continue to be a further deterrent. In most cases, the move to a hint model won’t change the nature of how we treat such links. We’ll generally treat them as we did with nofollow before and not consider them for ranking purposes. We will still continue to carefully assess how to use links within Search, just as we always have and as we’ve had to do for situations where no attributions were provided.”

Why we care. Google told us there should be no significant impact to the search results as a result of the change. If Google starts counting nofollowed links on large and respected sites that simply implemented a nofollow link policy as a blanket rule and now Google counts those links, you might see those links start counting for sites; if and when Google decides to change how it respects the nofollow attribute. For example, all external links on Wikipedia are nofollowed, if those links start counting, and you have a lot of links from Wikipedia, you might see your rankings improve.

At the same time, you can bet this will result in more work

for your SEO agency. You will now need to adapt your client recommendations on what link attributes you should apply to specific links, based on the criteria above. Plus, the toolset providers that measure links will need to adapt as well.

The nofollow link attribute has been a staple of the SEO industry for almost 15 years and now it is changing for the first time, in a big way.

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