

Rethinking Affiliate Sites With Google's Product Review Update

Google released a new product review update two weeks ago, which rewards higher quality product reviews while directly or indirectly negatively impacting low quality product reviews that have become a popular source of content for many websites over the past few years. The rollout affects only English language reviews, and Danny Sullivan from Google has confirmed it is now completely rolled out (as of April 22, 2021).

One misconception about this update is that Google is explicitly targeting affiliate sites with this product reviews update. But it is not that Google is specifically targeting all affiliate sites; what they are doing is targeting affiliate sites that are not doing anything to add to the user experience for those reviews. In other words, Google wants to ensure that the higher quality product reviews are the ones being elevated in the search results, while the crappier product reviews that do not have any additional value to them are discounted in those same search results.

While this update impacted many affiliate sites, SEOs need to look at this update on a deeper level. How many of these affiliate sites offer the same old type of product reviews that can be found on a dozen or more other sites? And how many affiliate sites provide something unique and different in their product reviews that are elevated in quality compared to their competitors?

When you look at the types of product reviews that are still ranking today, there are still plenty of affiliate links and advertisements to be seen. They also add something to the user experience that the type of product review sites that dropped rankings did not.

First and foremost, Google wants to ensure that its search results are of the highest quality. And a thin content product review that is simply a regurgitation of an Amazon description is one that Google wants to rank lower. This update is Google looking specifically for these low quality product reviews and ranking them lower.

So with the Product Review Update, while on the surface it seems to be an “affiliate sites bad” kind of an update, it is really a “super crappy thin content affiliate websites bad” kind of update. So if your site lost rankings, you need to consider how your site is falling into that “super crappy thin content” bucket of sites and not a “high-quality content”

bucket of sites from this update.

But again, Google wasn't targeting specifically affiliate sites. They were targeting low quality sites, and it just so happens that has a lot of them were affiliate sites. But there were also sites offering low quality product reviews that were earning revenue via Google AdSense or other ad networks and not through affiliate links. But the result is the same, if they are low quality product reviews, regardless of how those reviews are monetized, it can be impacted with this update.

It is also worth noting that Google was specific that this particular update is entirely separate from the regular Google core updates. However, they do share many of the same elements, and the guidelines for a core algo update regarding quality content are also relevant to review sites. It is just that this is an additional update targeting product reviews specifically.

If Your Reviews Lost Rankings

If your product reviews lost rankings, then you need to take a hard look at those reviews because, for reasons, Google has decided your reviews are lower quality than your competitors. So the first thing you should do is audit your reviews and see where they are lacking, particularly when compared to other reviews for the same product.

Google doesn't want to rank reviews that are just rewritten versions of what is on the manufacturer's site. Google – and users – want to see more originality and detail than a simple regurgitation, and that is what brings those users to look for reviews in the first place.

Are your descriptions relatively short? Are they just a regurgitation of what you found on the original product page for the product you are reviewing? Many of these reviews that

lost rankings have in common is the lack of original content in the review.

If you lost rankings, you probably were not adding any value to set your review apart from any other review that can be found on the web. Many of the Google devalued product reviews covered the basic features and probably include a fair number of keywords but lack the components that users are looking for when searching for product reviews, particularly product reviews for more expensive items.

Google does not explicitly say that this update negatively impacts reviews, but says it rewards higher quality reviews. However, Sullivan did state that for a site to see recovery, they would need to wait for the product reviews update to refresh, which seems to imply there is a negative component to this. However, regardless or not, if higher quality review sites saw a boost in the rankings with this update now fully rolled out, then there would be a number of lower quality sites that lost rankings too.

Quality Product Reviews

Google does have some guidance detailing what they want to see in product reviews that will rank well in their search results. While on its very base is just high quality, Google goes into some good detail about the kind of specifics they feel are showcased in higher quality product reviews.

They also state that their goal is to “further help those producing rich content in the product reviews area” with their guidance.

Expert Knowledge

Express expert knowledge about products where appropriate?

Not surprisingly, expert knowledge plays a part in the product

reviews update. For many years I have commented about the importance of E-A-T for affiliate sites because affiliate sites tend to be on the lower quality spectrum of sites on the web. And showing off expertise is crucial because if the user can't tell that the creator of the affiliate content has some kind of expertise in the topic, that is also the type of thing that Google's algorithms are attempting to re-create with their focus on E-A-T. And this applies to all content, not just affiliate content or product reviews.

Take a hard look at your product reviews and the authorship associated with each one. Are you showcasing the author who reviewed the product, or are they all posted under "Admin"? Is it easy for a user on your review to learn why they should trust what the review author is talking about? Many affiliate sites still make it difficult for users to find out anything about the author, although this is often because it is cheap or respun content. And with this update, Google wants to see some sort of expert knowledge involved in these reviews.

Ensure that you are showcasing the expertise of your authors. Have a bio page for each of your authors that details more information about the author and why someone should trust what they have to say. Include links to recent articles, highlight any accolades or awards they have won or link to other places they have also contributed to, which shows that others have vouched for your author.

Don't forget to add a mini bio about the reviewer at the bottom of each product review too, so users can have a quick at-a-glance peek at the author of the review.

Show off the product

Show what the product is like physically, or how it is used, with unique content beyond what's provided by the manufacturer?

Many product reviews are not really product reviews but are simply product descriptions with the keyword “review” added to the title tag and a few <h> headings. And this is evident to a user looking for authentic reviews for a product when most of the reviews for the product are these generic “I’ll tell you about the product even though I don’t own it and have never seen it in person” type of reviews.

Google wants to try to differentiate product reviews where the author has a physical product in hand. They want these genuinely honest product reviews to rank well versus some of the spammier and more generic reviews where it is clear that the review is based off a product description.

Suppose you have a site with quite a few of these “non-reviews” where you didn’t actually have the physical product to review. You need to revamp the reviews to either make them an informative article about the product that is not trying to pass itself off as a review or actually do a proper review with the actual product. If that is not an option, get someone who has the product to give you their review for publication on your site.

Remember, Google wants quality in their search results for product reviews. And a page disguised as a product review where you haven’t really reviewed the product is not a good user experience.

How does the product stack up?

Provide quantitative measurements about how a product measures up in various categories of performance?

Many reviews lack information that helps the consumer make an informed decision about the product. Yes, they include a great description, but they lack quantitative measurements, something Google is specifically looking for with this update.

This is one way that sites can set themselves apart from the competitors when you are testing, particularly when you are pitting one product against another. It helps the consumer decide which product is best for them based on their personal preferences and what they are looking for.

This is something that sites doing computer part reviews have been doing for years, and not surprisingly, the sites that have been doing their own original testing and benchmarks did quite well.

For example, Tom's Hardware page on GPU(graphic card) benchmarks and rankings is about as detailed a review page as you can get and is an excellent example of how original research and testing can be showcased.

While computer part sites were an early adopter, this kind of review can be applied to any market area where there are important measurements or statistics or some other relevant metric that you can use to compare different models or compare similar products between companies.

In most market areas, this is one area where most sites are lacking, so really think about how you can utilize it within your reviews if you aren't doing so already.

Why is this product the best?

Explain what sets a product apart from its competitors?

If you showcased a single product as the product that the consumer should buy, detail why this is. Don't just say it is the best. You want to show why this product is the best compared to any other competing product, whether a different model by the same company or a competitor's version of the product.

Sometimes there is a far superior product in a market area or

a product that is recognized as being the particular one most people choose. Even so, there are reasons why a specific product is the best. But you need to be able to show why that is.

More specifically, as Google states, you want to look at the things that set this product apart from all the rest. And don't be afraid to link to other sites that reinforce your findings too.

Other considerations for the best

Cover comparable products to consider, or explain which products might be best for certain uses or circumstances?

There is seldom just one best product that is suitable for every single person. Even though you might have your personal favorite as its reviewer, look at specific applications or reasons why some users might find a competing product better for them.

For example, Instant Pot is the pressure cooker that dominates pretty much every product review as being the best. But is it really the best, or is it just that it happened to be an early adopter in the pressure cooker market so by default it happened to be the one that people bought originally and which continued to drive the market so much so that many people have started to use the words "instant pot" and "pressure cooker" interchangeably.

So think about those competitors who have their version of a pressure cooker – or whatever the Instant Pot of your market area is – and look at the ways that those might be better for certain people, for specific applications or in some instances.

Pros and Cons

Discuss the benefits and drawbacks of a particular product, based on research into it?

Pros and cons of a product or a series of products is a great way to help users differentiate between products, whether different models or competing products. But you need to go beyond just what is on a product page to really detail those pros and cons.

Often, especially when sites are writing product reviews where they don't have the physical products on hand, they will highlight basic or obvious things like "this one's black and this one's red." But not only is it obvious to users, but it's also not helpful when it comes to helping consumers decide based on the review unless color is a huge decision-making factor, such as sofa colors or dishes.

Instead, you want to drill down into the positives and negatives of each product you're reviewing and detail things that are not included on the manufacturer's product page. Look at the types of things that are not noticeable from looking at photos of the product or reading the description, but rather highlight things users would not notice until they physically use it.

For instance, looking at the Instant Pot example, there are many pros and cons that will not be evidenced on the product page description from the manufacturer. These things could include how easy or difficult it is for the user to program it or to secure the lid to seal correctly. A manufacturer's page will never tell you that something is hard to do but instead focus on ease-of-use, even when that is not the reality. But in a detailed and helpful product review, these are the types of things you would discover and be able to document in detail and that users would find immensely helpful.

Many review sites implement an additional visual chart highlighting the significant pros and cons. This can be easily added to help users see these pros and cons at a glance, and for WordPress site owners, there are multiple plugins that do exactly this.

You can also embed links to each appropriate section of the review for each point you make. This enables a user interested in learning more about a particular pro or con to find that part in the review easily. This is especially useful for lengthy and highly detailed product reviews.

You can also elevate these pros and cons by showing any relevant research into it, or you can do the research yourself and become the site that others link to because of the original research your site has done.

New and improved

Describe how a product has evolved from previous models or releases to provide improvements, address issues, or otherwise help users in making a purchase decision?

While some products stick with the tried-and-true and are very seldom updated, other products seem to be revamped or updated practically monthly. Often, searchers are looking for the latest and greatest information and want to know if the model of Keurig that was released this month is any better than the then-latest model they bought six months ago.

And this is also true when there are significant price differences between the newest model and one that is merely a year old. The user wants to learn whether the price increase justifies whatever new features or functionality were added to the product. This is something that review sites can really showcase and why comparison reviews are so popular.

Decision-makers

Identify key decision-making factors for the product's category and how the product performs in those areas? For example, a car review might determine that fuel economy, safety, and handling are key decision-making factors and rate performance in those areas.

There are usually key things that users are looking for with any product review that are important to their ultimate product decision. In your site's reviews, you need to identify the most critical decision-makers for each product you review.

When it comes to those key decision-makers on a product, some of the things you can consider are price, reliability, safety, features, speed, and ease of use, but this will vary widely depending on the product type and how it is used.

Other decision-making factors are influenced by the purchaser rather than the product itself. It can be things such as does a product need to be a professional-grade or consumer-grade? For example, a coffee shop owner would be looking for a far different espresso machine than someone looking to purchase one for personal use at home.

Economics can play another role in purchasing decisions, such as looking for a top-of-the-line no expenses barred purchase versus someone on a strict budget looking for the most bang for their buck kind of decision.

So it is crucial to consider all of these types of factors in product reviews and consider that you might need to highlight different products for different kinds of users, which might necessitate a different set of reviews for each.

You may also find that there is a niche market for product reviews targeting a specific subset of users that might be

neglected in your market area too. However, this can be something that could be easy to miss unless you're doing a detailed product review audit.

What the manufacturer missed

Describe key choices in how a product has been designed and their effect on the users beyond what the manufacturer says?

Manufacturers tend to highlight the great things about their product. They rarely mention any of the negatives unless it is simply in their own best interest because they are trying to upsell to a better version of a product. Frequently, users are looking for more detailed information about some of the product's key features that the traditional products information does not include.

And of course, you also want to highlight the negatives too. Is there something about a product that someone would find quite annoying?

For example, an air purifier meant to run in a bedroom might have a full-featured display panel to give information such as air quality but that feature can be a detriment if there's no way to turn off the screen at night.

But these are the types of things that manufacturers won't have on their websites or product page and won't be discovered in lower quality reviews where the reviewer did not have the product. But it becomes evident once the product is used once at night by someone doing a legitimate review.

These are also the types of things that will elevate your site's review apart from your competitor's reviews, because these are only discovered by someone who has used the product. And with so many review sites not truly being product reviews, where they don't physically have the product to test and try out, the fact that you can include these details makes it much

more evident that your review should be more valued than those competitors.

Setting yourself apart from your competitors

There are also other ways that you can make your reviews stand out more from competitors. And again, these are the types of things that Google is looking for when they want to ensure that only the highest quality product reviews are the ones that are ranking at the top of the search results.

Single product reviews, top lists and roundups

There is a need for product reviews that are super detailed into a single product. There is also a need for roundup style reviews, which can help consumers decide between multiple similar products, whether they are similar models from the manufacturer or similar models from competing manufacturers. And both types can co-exist and rank well on a review website, provided they are high quality.

Likewise, top list roundups are just as valuable for researchers when looking for something to more detail the hierarchy of how much better specific models of a product are compared to others. For example, Tom's Hardware regularly ranks products in a top list format based on overall factors from their testing and reviews. However, there are just as many low-value content versions of these top product lists that Google is clearly trying to devalue.

Because the product reviews update impacts all types of review content, whether a single product review page, a roundup style list of products or a top X number products list, you do need to ensure that all types of product reviews are being held to this higher review standard Google is looking for.

Videos

Product videos created while you review a product are a huge benefit. First, they make it very clear that you have the physical product in hand for your testing, which instantly shows your reviews are legitimate than the spammier reviews.

You can use the camera to give your initial impressions of a product or even create an unboxing video if it is an in-demand product people are interested in. Show off the pros and cons of a product as you come across them, and you can show how the item is operated, or any problems you see as you are testing it.

And also with videos, and then you have the option of not only embedding the video on your product review page, but you can earn a spot in the Google search results for both the page and the video, as well as showing up in YouTube when people are searching for product videos too.

There is a huge amount of video search is being done for products because people are looking specifically for more information than the promotional videos they can find on the manufacturer's website about the product. So there is an additional traffic opportunity there.

As a bonus, videos often work well on social media, or just need editing slightly to market better as a shared video on Facebook or Instagram.

Product Photos

Take additional pictures of the product as you are reviewing. And especially if you are highlighting any features that are fantastic or features that you find are hurting the product, you can take pictures of those issues to show the greatness or the problems.

Also, look at the types of pictures used by the manufacturers

and consider how you can make your photos look better. Some manufacturers have awful images for their products, and if your review product photos are better than the manufacturers, there is an opportunity there to have your product images rank higher than the manufacturer's product photos.

Look to see if there are any essential photos that you feel the manufacturer is missing, and take photos of that. For example, perhaps the manufacturer doesn't have photos of the backside of the product, or what is inside the product when you lift the lid or remove the cover.

Or even worse, maybe the manufacturer's only real photo is of the box that shows an image of the product on the box, something that is more common than you think. There's often a lot of room for improvement in product photos, and the bonus is that your site will be the only one utilizing those photos.

You also don't want to forget that really great photos of the product can show up in the featured snippet for the product as well as in image search.

Action Shots

Take photos of the product being used. Some products may have great product photos, but they might be missing any photos showing the product being used.

Of course, this is also product-dependent. While you might not need to see a set of salad tongs put to use, users would find it exceedingly helpful to see action shots of a food processor being used with various blades and add-ons.

Revisit Reviews

While many product reviews are more of a first thoughts type of review and maybe just cover the first few hours of use unless otherwise specified, there is a need for product reviews that go back and give an update on the use of the

product after a month or after a few months of use. Sometimes annoyances with the products are only really evident after something has been used for a while.

For example, an espresso machine that many consumers think is really great on the initial use, might not reveal a major flaw immediately. But after a week or so of use, the fact there is no low-water warning is hugely annoying and some users consider it a huge negative about the machine. But the reviewer wouldn't realize that until a week or so later when the water tank emptied for the first time without warning.

Target Audience

Include who you feel is the target audience for every product you review. For example, a coffee site will want to detail if a specific espresso machine targets the home consumer or if it is meant for an industrial application such as in a coffee shop. This can be crucial on products you are not listing a price on or where pricing might not be available. You don't want a user with a \$500 home coffee budget fall in love with a \$10,000 industrial espresso machine based on your review because while you detailed all the wonderful things about the machine, you failed to mention it is meant for coffee shops and constant daily use.

Other products might be more subtle or their target audience changes based strictly on budget. This is especially useful for comparison model reviews to help a consumer decide whether they want the latest and greatest with updated features at the higher price point, or if the lower budget model is perfectly suitable for most consumers who don't want to spend above a specific price point as long as the quality is good. And your recommendation in your product review could be that the fewer bells-and-whistles version of the product is the better one.

Tech Specs

Include any relevant tech specs that are important to the user. While Tom's Hardware does a great job at showcasing the tech specs of all the products they review, it can easily apply to other products too.

Are you reviewing sewing machines? How many stitches can it do? Can it do buttonholes? Is it Bluetooth or wireless-enabled?

If you are reviewing an Instant Pot? How many functions does it have? Is it also Bluetooth or wireless-enabled? How much power does it draw?

Most products will have some technical information that some users want to know. This is often hard to find on the manufacturer's page or is hidden away on a downloadable document in the support section, so you can showcase it and your review can be the go-to place users go to find the information.

Avoid the Hype

While sometimes you might just absolutely love a product and can't foresee any other model or competitor's version possibly being better than your current favorite, you need to be careful that you aren't hyping up the product to such a degree that your review appears skewed or displaying overt favoritism.

It is okay to love a product, but sometimes it can also cause some users to become suspicious and feel like you are only trying to make the sale or affiliate commission and not serving the user an honest opinion.

When it comes to super glowing product reviews, it is seldom that a product has every last thing about it perfect, and again, a product review without a single negative thing to say

can come across as untrustworthy. Try to include at least one or two downsides to a product, even if they are relatively minor in the grand scheme of things.

This is also why you want to avoid basing your review too highly on the manufacturer's marketing material – it is designed very well to convince you that you can't live without the product. But that is not what users looking for actual high-quality product reviews are wanting. It is probably the PR hype that made them look for reviews.

Lastly, ensure all your reviews are unbiased and objective. That said, if there is genuinely a reason someone should never purchase a product based on your personal experiences with a product, that is fine. But be sure that you aren't simply saying "this product sucks" but you detail why you think so. Sometimes users can find an honest and detailed negative helpful, allowing the user to make their own judgment after reading the review and considering how your experiences apply to themselves.

Feedback on reviews

With so many sites removing comments, it can be easy to overlook how valuable moderated comments on content can be. An active community on a site, such as people commenting on a page, can really show how popular a site is.

Of course, with any user generated content, you need to moderate the comments, but don't simply approve positive comments, it is important to show the negatives, as long as those negative comments are written in a thoughtful and constructive way.

Just as users find product reviews as untrustworthy if they are too glowing, the same applies to comments if the only comments on the page are very positive. Don't manufacture fake negative comments, but don't automatically refuse to approve

them simply because they aren't raving about the awesomeness of the product and potentially costing you affiliate commissions.

Don't forget that comments can also earn featured snippets and provide additional ranking opportunities. Someone commenting on a useful application of a product that you may have omitted in the actual product review can end up ranking for that application and bring additional users to the page looking for that specific information.

Date your content and refresh as needed

It is important that you include dates on your review content, as users will look for that date to ensure the information is up-to-date and not years old.

Google will also sometimes show the date of the content in the search results, and this can certainly affect your click-through rate if your review is dated July 2016 and a competitor has a new or newly updated review that is only a few months old.

So don't forget to revisit older reviews and make any necessary changes or check to see if there is a newer version or model you should be reviewing instead.

Older reviews

What about older reviews for products that are no longer readily available? Just because the product isn't readily available today doesn't mean that content isn't still useful to users. For example, they could be purchasing the product used or have been gifted it second hand and your content is still relevant to them. So those reviews can still drive traffic, links and ad revenue, even if the product is harder to find today.

You can add a disclosure to the top with "Acme now has an

updated version of this product, click here for the latest review” with a link to the newer version, if there is one.

But don’t automatically remove or noindex older product reviews if they are still useful for those with the older product or considering a secondhand purchase.

Mobile-friendly

Make sure your product reviews are mobile-friendly. While this should be second nature by now, I still come across product reviews that don’t scale well on mobile devices.

Some of the danger points for mobile-unfriendly reviews are exceedingly long without a way for the user to jump to the part of the review most relevant to them, or they feature additional content such as charts, images or PDFs that do not scale well on mobile.

Recovery

If you are impacted by this product reviews update, recovery for this seems be one that Google is required to push out. Danny Sullivan confirmed that it will be a periodic refresh, but they won’t always announce when refresh happens because of the “more limited nature of content involved here.”

Sullivan recommends to continue working on improving the quality of the reviews, and continue to improve for regular core updates too.

Final Thoughts

Ideally, you want to ensure your product reviews are multi-faceted and have as many of the Google recommended elements of a great product review as possible. Work on updating your older reviews to a higher quality level and make sure any new product reviews follow the same guidelines as well.

Don't forget E-A-T. Highlight the expertise of your reviewers and why users should trust those reviewers.

Include as much original information and data in those reviews as possible to bring them up to a higher level of quality, whether that is videos, images, additional research, benchmarks, statistics and real hands-on feedback on the products.

Some market areas will require a much higher level of quality in order for product reviews to rank well. Someone reviewing computer parts will have a much more difficult time breaking into a highly competitive product review area without increasing the quality of those reviews in every possible way.

But a site reviewing products in a more niche market area might discover less competition and might not need to do quite as much work to elevate their reviews to get them ranking at the top of the search results.

Lastly, don't worry about including affiliate links in your product reviews. The Quality Rater Guidelines state there is nothing wrong with affiliate links and advertisements on high-quality content and high-quality sites. The Product Reviews Update was simply targeting the many low quality product review sites and pages that also happened to have affiliate links on them.

The following two tabs change content below.

Jennifer Slegg is a longtime speaker and expert in search engine marketing, working in the industry for almost 20 years. When she isn't sitting at her desk writing and working, she can be found grabbing a latte at her local Starbucks or planning her next trip to Disneyland. She regularly speaks at Pubcon, SMX, State of Search, Brighton SEO and more, and has been presenting at conferences for over a decade.

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