Safe or Risky SEO: How Dangerous Is It REALLY to Change Your Article Dates? by @ab80

Fresh content is a powerful currency when it comes to search.

Not only does fresh content keep your brand relevant and help you engage with your audience's current interests and pain points, but ever since Google's Freshness update, the more recent and relevant your content is, the better it's likely to rank in SERPs.

But what about the *appearance* of freshness? What happens when a website tweaks old content or changes the date on an article from 2014 to today? What are the SEO benefits – and the consequences?

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Most importantly, how do you keep "evergreen content" – content that's meant to withstand the test of time – current and relevant year after year?

In this article, I'll answer these questions by examining how key influencers in the SEO and digital marketing industry treat date stamps, and I'll discuss my strategy for combating outdated content.

Why Might You Change Article Dates?

Conrad O'Connell, digital marketing strategist and consultant, has recently encountered an interesting "fake freshness" case. He noticed a discrepancy between the date on one of Airbnb's property listings and the number of reviews it had

received.

Specifically, a cabin listing stamped with the current date had somehow accrued more than *5 million* reviews.



Upon further examination, it appears that various Airbnb pages auto-generate fake dates that roughly correspond to the last time Google crawled them.

The benefit of changing article dates like this is subtle, and it doesn't obviously improve your SEO (the date listed in your SERP meta description won't inherently impact your freshness).

Instead, what date manipulation does is appeal to user bias. Users are naturally drawn to the most current, up-to-date information, and there's a good chance that a user who sees a cabin listing from 2012 and another from 2017 in their SERPs will click the most recent result.

Conrad confirms that he's seen some pages with a CTR as high as 55 percent after a simple update to the month and year in their title tag. And, date manipulation in SERP meta descriptions isn't currently penalized, this benefit comes at little personal risk.

The deceitfulness of the date manipulation did leave some people wondering, however:

> *Shady or smart? Kind of a fine line there…*
>
> *— Mike Archer (@MrMikeArcher)* ***November 15, 2017***

Will Changing Article Dates Impact Your SEO Negatively?

While changing dates in article snippets seemed like a

shortcut to higher CTR, it leaves one wondering about the potential future ramifications. After all, just because date manipulation isn't currently penalized doesn't mean it won't be in the future.

Jennifer Slegg from TheSEMPost shared my concerns. In October 2017, she asked Google's Gary Illyes whether auto-generating dates might have consequences, such as triggering Google's spam filter:

> *"From our perspective, from Core Ranking perspective, I'd like to believe that in some way that will hurt you. At least from, let's say, we will not believe your dates anymore.*
>
> *Typically when you search something, especially if it is newsy content, or your query is newsy, then I found that those date bylines in the search results can be very helpful in determining if it is relevant to your query – the result – or not.*
>
> *Imagine if you were a news publisher and suddenly your byline dates would be gone overnight because we believe you were abusing them, you probably don't want that. So I would advise against that."*

The answer seems to be that while you might get away with changing a date a few times, there *could* certainly be consequences down the road. Consequences could even include the complete removal of dates for your site, which would be a huge blow to news sites.

Furthermore, ShoutMeLoud's Harsh Agrawal published a recent case study, the results of which seem to contradict Conrad's findings that recent dates always improve CTR.

While Harsh's blog posts have always included a "last updated" tag, he has typically not included dates in his site's

snippets. Upon the reintroduction of snippet dates, his blog traffic dropped by almost 40 percent.

Despite the fact that dates should enhance user experience, snippet dates had a significant negative influence on ShoutMeLoud's keyword ranking and blog traffic and only removing the dates allowed him to recover in SERPs.

How Do You Safely Keep Your Content Fresh?

Keeping your content fresh has little to do with the date on your article, at least as far as Google's concerned.

There are many factors that affect freshness, including the:

- Frequency of your updates.
- Amount of content changed.
- Rate of new link growth.

The date an article is published is only one of these factors.

In other words, what really matters is the quality additions you've made to an existing page.

There are three main strategies for breathing fresh life into your old content, and all of them hinge on one simple principle: your content needs to be timeless, relevant, and valuable.

1. Use the Same URL but Refresh the Date

The most common strategy you'll see is to add even more value to posts that were proven top performers. Typically you do this either by supplementing the article's original publication date with a "last updated" date stamp or an updated date beneath it.

Search Engine Journal uses this strategy, so I reached out to

Danny Goodwin, SEJ's Executive Editor, to learn what makes this strategy so effective:

> *"Search Engine Journal has been around since 2003 and published thousands of posts through the years. In an industry that moves as quickly as SEO and digital marketing, information can quickly become outdated – sometimes in as little as a year or sometimes even a few months.*
>
> *Outdated information is bad for users – which will reflect back on you as a brand/business. If you have a post ranking #1 that was written in 2013, it makes perfect sense to update it.*
>
> *Like cars, content typically loses value as time goes by. Traffic declines. And if you're ranking well, those rankings tend to go away as fresher and more up to date (or more thorough) content is published by your competitors.*
>
> *Here's one example. When I was editing for Search Engine Watch, we had a popular post, How to Use HTML Meta Tags. I believe it was originally written in 2005 (if not earlier), ranked number one at the time, and typically drove more than 1,000 pageviews to the site every day.*
>
> *But by 2012, it needed a refresh. SEO had changed quite a bit in those many years. We kept the title, URL, and changed everything else. After republishing (maintaining the same URL), it maintained its top spot and in fact surged for a while.*
>
> *Here's another example. Over the years, SEJ had published probably 4-5 posts about optimizing your URL structure. None of them were driving much traffic, and all of them had been published at least five years ago.*
>
> *So, earlier this year, one of our authors rewrote it, turning it into a comprehensive post on the topic, 8 SEO Tips to Optimize Your URL Structure. After publishing, our developer*

301 redirected all the old/outdated posts to the new post.

The final result: Traffic increased by 8x!



While all these posts existed before, we updated them. That included the publication date. I would never recommend just changing dates for the heck of it – you need to make some significant changes.

Also, with Google showing dates posts were published in the SERPs, I can pretty much guarantee you that will impact which post searchers will click on. If I have the choice of reading content published in 2017 that ranks #3 or something published in 2011 that ranks #1, I often find myself clicking on the newer result. Most of us humans are biased toward the 'new.'"

2. Add Live Updates to a Single Page

Another strategy that's been gaining steam in recent years is to publish news as it happens, by updating a single page with live coverage. On these pages, you'll typically time stamp each new entry as you post them.

Examples of this type of post include FiveThirtyEight's live coverage of the U.S. elections in March 2016 and the BBC's live coverage of the solar eclipse in August 2017.



Live updating a single page and time stamping each new addition to the page is also one of the methods Illyes recommended to Slegg – in addition to adding an updated date to old articles:

"I know that especially the news team are working with lots of news publishers, for example the BBC, on trying to figure

> *out how to put content online that is better for the users, and BBC has these very interesting live coverage pages and basically they just time stamp every single addition to the page – that works too."*

3. Create New Landing Pages with Distinct URLs

At the SEO PowerSuite blog, we use a third method to refresh valuable, old content.

When we find a blog post that's in need of an update, and we can see that it's performed well in the past, we prefer to create a new landing page altogether. That means creating a new URL that shares some of the same content, with extra added value for our users.

We then specify to Google that the new page's URL is canonical, to avoid posting duplicate content. A crucial final step is to support the new page in social media.

Conclusion

My own preference is not to change article dates. But naturally the path you choose is up to you. No matter which strategy you choose, you need to remember that not every article is worth updating.

The best types of content to breathe more life into are those that are evergreen – content that is just as relevant now as it was when you first published it. The content should also be detailed enough to have resonated with your audience when it was first published, and there should be enough new, helpful information about that topic to add new value without derailing your original article's subject.

And, just as you would with any other new article, don't

forget to encourage new social shares. Use social media to tell your users that you've updated your content, and actively engage with them through social media and your comments section to keep them interested in your update. That's the best way to ensure your content stays fresh.

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