

SEO year in review 2020: COVID forces platforms to adapt their local and e-commerce offerings, and more

Last year, we called 2019 a “roller coaster of ups and downs.” Hindsight is 20/20, and while many of us can’t wait to put 2020 in the rearview, the way the search industry’s biggest players responded to the new needs of businesses and consumers, brought on by the pandemic, will have lasting consequences for how marketers perform their duties.

From Google’s new organic Shopping listings to how SEOs rallied for gender equality and diversity to the upcoming Page Experience update, here’s our retrospective of the most impactful SEO news of 2020.

RELATED: *PPC 2020 in review: COVID leaves its mark on e-commerce and paid search*

The Google algorithm updates of 2020

There was some early suspicion within the search community that major algorithm updates would be on hold during the pandemic – in retrospect, we can’t imagine that was the case. News Editor Barry Schwartz has already recapped 2020’s most important algorithm updates, so here’s a brief summary of what rolled out.

The core updates. Google got started early, launching the January 2020 core update less than two weeks into the year. It typically takes about two weeks for these things to complete rolling out, but the company said it was mostly finished four

days later, on January 16th.

Four months later, the May 2020 core update shook things up again, with some calling it an “absolute monster.”

The dust was allowed to settle for most of the year (in terms of core updates, at least), until the December 2020 core update launched, right between the Black Friday/Cyber Monday shopping season and the end-of-the-year holidays. Based on some reports, this was the most impactful core update of the year.

BERT goes from 10% to almost 100%. During its SearchOn event, Google announced that BERT is now powering nearly all English-language queries.

In December, keen-eyed search professionals recognized that the much-publicized departure of AI researcher and diversity advocate Timnit Gebru from Google was inextricably linked to the potential risks associated with training language models using large data sets. Those potential risks include using datasets from the internet, which may contain bias against marginalized peoples, which could then conceivably manifest in the language models used in search engines.

Announced, but not live. Announced in May, the Page Experience update is not expected to roll out until May 2021. It includes a mix of existing search ranking factors, such as the mobile-friendly update, Page Speed Update, the HTTPS ranking boost, the intrusive interstitials penalty, and safe browsing penalty, along with new metrics for speed and usability, known as the Core Web Vitals.

We already know that the Page Experience update will only be applied to mobile rankings, at least initially. There may also be a visual indicator to distinguish mobile search listings that offer a good page experience. And, when this update goes live, Google will also lift the AMP requirement for its Top Stories section, opening it up to articles that meet its

threshold for page experience factors.

Passage indexing was announced in October and slated to begin this year, but Google has confirmed to us that it is not yet live. To be clear, Google doesn't actually index passages separately; it's more "passage ranking" than "passage indexing."

The year in SEO news

On March 1, Google's new treatment of nofollow links arrived, bringing with it the new rel="sponsored" and rel="ugc" link attributes. SEOs were up in arms about the announcement last September, but that passion wasn't reignited when the change actually occurred; the impending pandemic may have given marketers larger issues to deal with.

Structured data. Google announced the end of support for data-vocabulary.org markup in its rich results; the end was set for April 6, but the company postponed it until January 29, 2021, citing the coronavirus situation.

The Rich Results Test Tool was released out of beta over the summer, signaling the end of the Structured Data Testing Tool – or so we thought. Instead, Google decided to keep the Structured Data Testing Tool around, but migrate it to schema.org this coming April.

SEO documentation. Both Google and Bing updated some of their important SEO documentation: Bing revised its Webmaster Guidelines, providing details on how it ranks webpages. Google's Search Quality Raters Guidelines only received one update this year; adding more detailed instructions for raters as well as a new section for dictionary and encyclopedia results.

The SERP. The search results page saw its fair share of changes this year as well. Google announced that it was

“decluttering” the first page of results by deduplicating featured snippets, meaning that pages that earn a featured snippet no longer repeat as a regular listing. The right-sidebar featured snippet variant was also migrated into the main results column, as well.

A right-sidebar featured snippet that was moved into the main search results column.

In an effort to provide more direct answers to users, Bing employed pre-trained language models to answer queries with a simple “yes” or “no.” It also added snippet controls, giving site owners more flexibility over how their search result previews. Google made it easier to locate featured snippet text on the page it lives on by formally launching a highlighting feature that it had been testing for years.

Image and YouTube. The “licensable” badge in Google Image search results came out of beta at the end of August, and the company also added a usage rights filter to return only images that include licensing information. The “key moments” feature also rolled out more widely; it can now appear on multiple videos in mobile results.

COVID-related updates. People turned to search engines as the coronavirus went from being a foreign issue to surging throughout the US. In response, Google’s coronavirus-related search results page received a drastic overhaul between the end of February and the end of March, giving us a preview of how search results pages might one day look.

Bing introduced a coronavirus tracker as well as a CDC coronavirus self-checker chatbot right on the search result page.

And, to help keep users informed, Google surfaced more local COVID news, opening up its Top Stories section to non-AMP, COVID content – something of a precursor to lifting the AMP restriction as part of the Page Experience update next year. It also began showing “travel trends” and “travel advisory” notices, displaying the percentage of flights operating to a particular destination, as well as adding a free cancellation filter to its hotel search.

Schema.org added COVID-related structured data types, which Google and Bing both adopted. The White House even urged private sector businesses to use the markup when appropriate. Features and resources were also made available to local businesses, which we’ll discuss in the local section of this article.

One highlight from this devastating period was the reaction from search marketers, who volunteered their services to help small businesses navigate the pandemic in a myriad of ways.

Industry news. In the EU, the Android search choice screen

rolled out on March 1, but the smartphone supply chain disruption due to the pandemic delayed its impact, making it uncertain whether it produced a significant shift in search market share.

Early on in the year, Verizon Media launched OneSearch, a privacy-focused search engine that is more of a direct competitor to DuckDuckGo than Google. As the year unfolded, other search engines were announced, following a similar tactic and seeking to differentiate themselves from Google instead of taking it head-on.

Former Google ad boss Sridhar Ramaswamy announced Neeva, which, instead of bringing in revenue via ads, will charge a subscription fee. Former Salesforce chief scientist Richard Socher announced You.com; although less has been announced about it, it seems like it will be geared towards e-commerce.

With the backdrop of increasing scrutiny over Google's business practices, both in the US and abroad, we asked the question: "What would it take for new search engines to succeed?" And, is the timing right for Apple to get serious about search and taking on Google?

The search industry is not shaped purely by Google, Bing, other tech giants or venture capitalists, though. Diversity and gender equality took center stage over the summer, and search professionals responded: The murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery drove us to find actionable ways to pursue diversity, equity, and inclusion within our own organizations.

SEOs Jamie Alberico (left) and Lily Ray (right). Alberico protested police brutality against people of color, and Ray regularly streams her DJ sessions, donating the proceeds to organizations devoted to furthering diversity and social justice.

North Star Inbound's Nicole DeLeon released a study that found that more than 70% of SEOs in the US are men, who also make more on average than their female colleagues. Networking and allies remain critical to eliminating that disparity.

RELATED: *10 ways you can support women in SEO*

Reporting and analytics

Google Search Console (GSC) received a number of updates in 2020, beginning with the launch of a new removals tool. The

tool lets site owners temporarily hide URLs from showing in search, as well as showing them which URLs were filtered by SafeSearch and what content isn't displaying in search results because requests have been made via the public Remove Outdated content tool.

One day before the Page Experience announcement, Google quietly swapped out the speed report in GSC with the new Core Web Vitals report. The current set of Core Web Vitals metrics focus on three aspects of user experience: loading, interactivity, and visual stability, in the forms of Largest Contentful Paint (LCP), First Input Delay (FID), and Cumulative Layout Shift (CLS).

The performance report was updated with a News traffic filter, giving site owners one more way to slice and dice their Google search exposure and traffic. A revamped crawl stats report was also launched to provide actionable data regarding crawling issues. A year after the old version of GSC was shut down, Google migrated the disavow link tool to the new version, updating its interface in the process. GSC users can now also download complete information, instead of just specific table views, from all reports, making them easier to analyze and manipulate.

An example of what Google Search Console Insights looks like.
Image: Google.

In August, the company launched Google Search Console Insights, a new view of data "tailored for content creators and publishers," as a closed beta. Search Console Insights blends Google Analytics and Search Console data to help content creators identify how well their content is performing, how people discover it across the web, what their site's top and trending queries are, and what other sites and articles link to theirs.

And, users of the Google Search Console API received access to fresher data as well as the ability to query, add, and delete their sitemaps on domain properties.

Google Analytics 4. One of the biggest analytics announcements this year was the unveiling of Google Analytics 4, an expansion and rebranding of the App + Web property. It includes expanded predictive insights, deeper integration with Google Ads, cross-device measurement capabilities and more granular data controls. When setting up a new property, GA4 will be the default option; however, Universal Analytics remains available, at least for now, as new feature developments will be focused on GA4.

RELATED: *How to get started in Google Analytics 4*

Bing Webmaster Tools. Microsoft revamped Bing Webmaster Tools this year; the overhaul was announced in February at SMX West and the migration was completed at the end of July. Unlike the Google Analytics update, the old version of Bing Webmaster Tools is no longer supported, but users of the revamped version are in for some new features.

The new Site Scan tool crawls your site and checks for common technical SEO issues. The backlinks tool enables you to compare your site's backlinks to another site, providing site owners with competitive data without verified access to the competing site. The company also resurrected and enhanced the robots.txt tester, a feature that Bing first dropped about a decade or so ago. And, Microsoft Clarity, the company's user experience visualization tool which came out of beta at the end of October, was also integrated with the new Bing Webmaster Tools.

E-commerce

Right about the time the January 2020 core update was rolling out, Google also announced the mobile Popular Products section

for apparel, shoes and similar searches, signifying the first in a series of e-commerce strategy shifts for the company. The section is organic and powered by product schema and product feeds submitted via Google Merchant Center.

The Popular Products section in mobile search results. Image: Google.

Also on mobile, Google extended the functionality of its related activity cards, with respect to shopping, job, and recipe-related searches. The shopping activity card may now show products that a user has been researching, effectively ushering them along their customer journey.

Google's most significant pivot in e-commerce strategy this year (and perhaps in several years) was opening up its Shopping search results to unpaid, organic listings, after eight years of being a purely paid product. There's still space for paid listings, though: ads now show up at the top and bottom of Google Shopping results pages. Retailers that want their items to show up organically must upload product feeds within Google Merchant Center. Those that choose to do so will also be eligible to have their product listings displayed in knowledge panels on the main search results page, as these slots have also gone from sponsored to organic.

RELATED: FAQ: All about Google Shopping and Surfaces across Google

As you might have expected, Bing made the same move from paid to organic with its Shopping results in August, just four months later.

On the social side, Pinterest rolled out a new "Shop" tab to its mobile app. It also integrated its visual search functionality directly into shoppable Pins to make it easier

to find similar products. Shopify retailers can take advantage of these updates through the Pinterest app in the Shopify app store, which enables merchants to upload their product catalogs to Pinterest, potentially allowing them to get in front of Pinterest's over 360 million monthly active users.

Local

Maps. Google Maps turned 15 this year, and the company celebrated with a refreshed version of the mobile app. The 2020 iteration expanded the bottom tabs to five ("Explore" "Commute," "Saved," "Contribute," and "Updates") and the company also announced an expansion of Live View augmented reality walking directions.

The Maps updates continued through to December, when businesses using Google My Business (GMB) gained access to improved performance metrics, showing whether customers found them on Maps or through search, as well as expanded messaging via their business profile in Maps. Web search results also began showing in the Google Maps search results listings for individual businesses.

Web search results appearing in a Google Maps search listing.

Apple also rebuilt its Maps app, adding or improving on features such as real-time transit schedules, sharable arrival time estimates, indoor maps of malls and airports, Look Around (its version of Google's Street View), one-tap navigation for favorite locations, and more.

Google My Business. In February, there was a lot of chatter on Twitter about a new section on the Google My Business Help site that encouraged business owners to include relevant keywords in their GMB descriptions.

Google quickly backtracked on that guidance after local SEOs brought it to the company's attention, and the messaging disappeared shortly after. Joy Hawkins, owner of Sterling Sky, has tested this advice previously, finding that the description field has no impact on ranking in the local three-pack.

As "buy online, pickup in-store" usage surged, Google announced it would be making nearby product inventory more discoverable via a more prominent "nearby" filter under the Shopping tab, adding new local store cards and increasing visibility for Curbside and In-store pickup labels. A few months prior to that, we learned that the company was expanding its Duplex tool to call local businesses to check

for inventory availability; prior to this, Duplex was primarily used for appointment booking and verifying business hours. As online services continue to influence offline spending, these moves could help position Google to dominate the online-to-offline (O2O) economy.

The Google Guaranteed badge became available to non-advertisers through an experimental “upgraded” GMB profile for \$50 per month – it’s not an organic feature, but the badge itself was spotted in Maps listings. If it becomes a permanent fixture, it may serve to distinguish the businesses that have it from the ones that don’t. Last year, Google fielded a survey and one of the proposed features was removing ads from your business profile – a small, whitelisted group of advertisers (Groupon, Seamless, and Caviar) were seen showing their ads on local business profiles. These ads can potentially redirect an order that might go directly to the business, and although it’s currently a small pilot program, there’s no way to opt-out or select the advertisers that appear on their profile.

Google said it saw a surge in searches for Black-owned businesses during the summer – more than 40% of Black business owners reported that they weren’t working in April, compared to just 17% of white small business owners, according to an analysis by *The New York Times*. To help distinguish these businesses, it introduced the “Black-owned” business attribute to local listings. Approaching the issue from the other side, Yelp announced a new “Business Accused of Racist Behavior” alert; when the alert goes up, Yelp disables new reviews for that business profile.

Google local support has had a less-than-stellar reputation, which the company is likely looking to recover from. In November, it introduced the Small Business Advisors program to help SMBs become more proficient with Google products. The program offers 50-minute individualized consulting sessions on topics such as GMB, Ads, Analytics, and YouTube. The program

is \$39.99 per session but there was no fee throughout 2020.

COVID. In the early days of stay-at-home orders, local SEOs called out multiple GMB problems, such as delays in posting new listings and updating hours and addresses, despite Google saying it would prioritize “open and closed states, special hours, temporary closures, business descriptions, and business attributes edits.” Local reviews were also temporarily disabled for both customers and business owners – review functionality returned about twenty days later.

To help convey the pandemic’s impact on businesses, Google enabled them to indicate that they were temporarily closed in Search and Maps. It later launched a feature to provide local businesses more flexibility with their hours of operation. Building on that, an indicator in GMB profiles now shows when business hours were last updated.

During this time, Google also allowed retail chains to publish COVID-related Posts at scale via the GMB API. Later on, that functionality was also extended to non-COVID posts as well.

Google wasn’t the only platform people turned to: Nextdoor rolled out Groups and Help Map. The Groups feature was in beta before the pandemic, but the crisis showed the company that it could help users overcome isolation. Help Map was launched to aid neighbors in need.

The donate button on a Yelp business profile.

Yelp was the first to announce a fundraising partnership with GoFundMe, enabling local businesses to place a “donate” button on their Yelp profile. Not so long after, GoFundMe donate buttons became available to Bing Places for Business and GMB profile owners.

Consumer confidence over safety became a priority as the

economy sought to reopen. TripAdvisor and Yelp both launched new ways for consumers to highlight how businesses are handling health and safety measures. On Google's platform, GMB owners can now indicate health and safety requirements for their stores via attributes such as "Mask required," "Staff get temperature checks" and more.

Just for fun

Search professionals know that our industry has the potential to drastically influence perspectives and affect business outcomes – every once in a while, the general public catches wind of that fact as well.

In February, Warner Bros. renamed its recently released *Birds of Prey (and the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn)* to simply *Harley Quinn: Birds of Prey* so that moviegoers (remember going to the movies?) would have an easier time finding tickets online.

And, while Netflix's *Tiger King* gave many of us something to binge during that initial shift to being home all the time, the Tiger King himself used illicit SEO tactics to mislead users searching for his main competitor. He didn't get away with it, and we certainly don't recommend it.

And, Google helped us get closer to the answer of the age-old question: "What's the name of that song?" Now, the Google app can tell you the name of a particular song, all you have to do is hum it for 10-15 seconds.

Looking forward to 2021

As mentioned above, Google's Page Experience update is set to go live in May. There's still time to get your Core Web Vitals ready for it, SEO for developers expert Detlef Johnson's guide can help.

Make sure to look over your structured data as well; data-vocabulary.org markup will be ineligible for Google rich results on January 29.

And, the deadline for mobile-first indexing is upon us, again. It's far better for Google to migrate your site over on your terms, when your site is ready, than it is to allow the deadline to lapse and have your site forced over.

About The Author

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