The need for speed in search: 5 speed types to master now

Google has long been secretive about the nuts and bolts of its search ranking algorithms, but we do know for a fact that page speed is a factor. In its “How Search Works” resource, Google flat out states that, “We develop algorithms to promote more usable pages over less usable ones, all other things being equal. These algorithms analyze signals that indicate whether all our users are able to view the result, like… whether the page loading times work well for users with slow Internet connections.”

Consumers with lightning-fast connection speeds are growing impatient with slow sites, too – particularly those on mobile. When Google last analyzed mobile landing page load times in 2018, the average time it took to fully load one had dropped by seven seconds. However, it still took about 15 seconds, which is far too slow. Considering that 53% of mobile site visitors leave a page that takes longer than three seconds to load, marketers still have a long way to go.

When customers are searching for products and services like yours, it’s critical that you’re positioned to appear prominently with accurate, engaging, quickly accessible information to convert them. You don’t want to miss out on optimizing for these five important types of speed.

1. Site and page speed

Whether they’re actually buying online or trying to find information about one of your local stores, today’s constantly connected consumer demands a seamless—and speedy—shopping experience. In fact, 79% of shoppers who are dissatisfied with site performance say they’re less likely to purchase from the same site again.

Marketers and web designers need to take care not to clutter pages with slow-loading elements that bog download times and frustrate users. In a recent study, Google found that “as page load time goes from one second to 10 seconds, the probability of a mobile site visitor bouncing increases 123%. Similarly, as the number of elements—text, titles, images—on a page goes from 400 to 6,000, the probability of conversion drops 95%.”

Image source: Think with Google
The impact of slow site and page speed can be devastating, as the hard-won visitors it cost you scarce marketing dollars to attract ultimately leave your site disappointed.

Take care to compress images and text. According to Google, 25% of pages could save more than 250KB and 10% can save more than 1MB that way. Pay special attention to elements above the fold. Here’s what Google recommends as best practice for speeding up your webpages (and remember, over half of traffic is now mobile, so these are best practices for *all* sites):

- Mobile pages that display content to users in 3 seconds or less
- Under 1.3 seconds average time to first byte
- Fewer than 50 pieces of content needed to display an entire mobile web page
- Less than 500KB total page weight

2. Mobile-specific speed

According to research from e-marketer, the average US adult will spend more time engaging with their mobile devices than watching TV in 2019. This is something not to be complacent about. In an effort to combat widespread slow mobile page speeds, Google-backed AMP launched in October 2015 with a

handful of technology company partners. Google's Accelerated Mobile Pages initiative is an accessible, open-source framework for creating fast-loading pages for mobile users. On Feb. 24, 2016, Google officially integrated AMP listings into its mobile search results and today, you'll find AMP on over 25 million domains.

AMP can help you achieve the best practices we discussed in the previous section. It reduces the weight of HTML pages through superior code hygiene and AMP markup that delivers a separate version of a page optimized for fast delivery on mobile. Google hosts AMP files on its own content delivery network (CDN), so content behaves as if it's loading from the browser cache rather than a remote server.

AMP isn't for everyone, and you may not need it across your entire site. Still, it's worth checking out if you want to provide a better experience for your mobile visitors. Page speed for retailers can be just as important as price.

3. Content that quickly answers a need

Here, we aren't talking about how fast your content loads, but how quickly your content fulfills a consumer need. In a word, we're talking about *relevance*.

CX consulting firm Walker predicts that customer experience will overtake price and product quality as the key brand differentiator by 2020. How can you deliver exceptional experiences without content to meet the unique needs of customers at various stages of their journey?

According to the Think with Google blog, the vast majority of marketers agree that to be successful they must improve their understanding of user journeys across multiple channels and different device. Search intent analysis should be an integral

part of your content creation process. Dig into first- and third-party data to discover your customers' pain points, needs, wants and triggers. The right technology partner can help here, as the amount of data we have to contend with grows exponentially with each new interaction.

It's important that you create the right content formats, as well. Search is becoming increasingly more visual as consumers look for different ways and experiences to find the products they want.

Google is reflecting this consumer preference back in mobile search results, which display far more image thumbnails than they used to. Recently, Google announced that it's making visual content more useful in search by "helping people better find information visually and making it easier to pursue the things people come to Google Images for help with."

Marketers need to help the search engine understand what each image is about and how it relates to a specific query by optimizing image labels, data, tags and descriptors. Choose images with special attention to quality, load speed, viewability, context, authenticity and the general visual appeal of the image. Be cognizant of image placement.

Watch where you place images on the page, as well. Back in the fall, I shared the following statement from Google: "We now prioritize sites where the image is central to the page, and higher up on the page."

4. Data ready for activation

The data struggle is real. All of the reports, insights, trends and analysis in the world are useless if you're unable to quickly activate your data and use it to drive business results.

Brands are turning to AI in greater numbers to power automated

data analysis, communications including email and chatbots, research and information aggregation, operational and efficiency analysis, predictive analytics and more. Last year, I spoke at SMX London about how you can use AI to supercharge your SEO through insights, automation and personalization.

It's important that you recognize the ways that Google is using AI, as well. At last count, there were 37 different search engine result page (SERP) categories. Google is using AI to better understand the intent behind each searcher's query, then bringing back different types and formats of results to try to meet their needs.

As searchers try out different queries and search more often to compare solutions, the number one Google result still gets 28 percent of the clicks (positions two and three get 13 percent and 9 percent, respectively).

As a marketer, you need to do your part to show Google how your content relates to various types of queries. Structured data allows you to describe your content in a language Google understands. Make sure you mark up all text, videos and images, and follow best practices for image search optimization to ensure maximum visibility.

Aside from the data you're feeding into Google, you need to get in position to move faster from analysis to optimization. In fact, a lot of consumers now expect personalization in real-time. Which brings us to…

5. Real-time optimization

Search practitioners can use up to six tools and spend up to four hours a day, on average, on research, reporting and analysis. You simply can't compete on this level against AI-powered machines and heightened consumer expectations.

Just a few years ago, automated data analysis was

revolutionary. Today, you need to be able to not only glean insights from your data but to then use that intelligence to optimize in real-time. Keyword research, opportunity forecasting, content recommendations and optimizations, site monitoring, website traffic reporting, search volume and rankings monitoring and more can all benefit from smarter automation that powers data-driven optimization.

Bringing it all together: Feed your need for speed

It just isn't possible to compete in search today without speeding up your site, analysis and optimizations. You can't do it all by hand, and you can't do it alone. If you don't have the smart technology in place to achieve these five types of speed, take the time to audit where your time is being spent – and the opportunities you may be missing on as a result.

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