The Panda anniversary and what we desperately must remember about search

30-second summary:

- This week marks the 10 year anniversary of Google's landmark web quality algorithm Panda
- It was a seminal moment for the SEO industry with 12% of US sites being targeted for poor quality and manipulative optimization practices
- Despite removing much of the worst black-hat tactics SEO is still hasn't lived up to its experiential potential ten years on
- Many clients and practitioners still use outdated language and practices to position the value of Search in this vastly more mature marketing landscape
- To escape this pre-Panda legacy SEO needs to take the best of its constituent parts and shape a new customer-centric Search future once and for all

I was recently notified of a significant work anniversary which transported me back in time to the turbulent start of my SEO career just over 10 years ago. I was prompted to reflect on the industry I love, where it continues to fall short, and ultimately where I see it going. This professional milestone closely corresponded with what was a seminal event for the immature SEO business. On February 24th, 2011 the 'Death Star' took aim, and with a typically understated Tweet from the Head of Google's Web Spam team, Matt Cutts confirmed it. Google had launched its landmark web quality algorithm that would forever be known as Panda.

Google just launched a new algorithmic ranking change. Here's

> *the blog post: http://goo.gl/J1e0a*
>
> *— Matt Cutts (@mattcutts) February 25, 2011*

Source: Twitter

The day of reckoning had arrived for an industry that tied their client's lucrative search fortunes to a house of cards built on the spammy and manipulative best practices that had become SEO's calling card. Thin, duplicate and often stolen content was accompanied by on-site keyword stuffing and obvious over-optimization. This might have gamed the rankings for a time but provided little value to the users who bounced en masse giving Google a solid signal that many sites deserved an algorithmic slapdown.

What exactly happened in 2011 with Panda?

In what was a relatively short rollout, around 12% of US search queries were affected and the target of the rollout was poor quality sites relying way too heavily on content farms and directories to fabricate their popularity in search.

Shell-shocked webmasters stared at their Analytics dashboards like Wall Street traders on Black Monday, watching in disbelief as their search share plummeted and asked, "What do we do now?"

At the time, I was simply a fledgling Search Executive with a mere nine months' industry experience under my belt, with the only thing protecting me from this fallout being the founders of our agency. As a start-up, luckily we were free and clear of this mess as they had seen the writing on the wall long before.

SEO was dead, or so we thought, and a new age of experience

was dawning. We looked on as Rome burned.

But, despite its obituary being cynically written every year since SEO refused to die. At the time, practitioners paid lip service to profound change but were far too invested in their ways of operating, and clients, although badly burned, were addicted to the quick wins the hackers of the algorithm had peddled. And so, the dance went on.

Was Panda a missed opportunity for the industry?

Yes Panda, and its sister link-spam algorithm Penguin, had a profound effect and removed the absolute worst of the worst black-hat practices but a significant proportion of the industry simply did their best to clean up the mess they'd created – often charging clients to take out their own trash so to speak – and so the probing began for what was the new acceptable minimum you needed to meet in order to get your site ranking once again.

- "Is 300 words enough now?"
- "How many keywords can I get away with using without angering Google?"
- "How much content do I need to change for it to be considered unique, will 60% do it?"

This mentality of chasing the ever-evolving algorithmic goalposts is the continued failure of many in the industry who still largely prefer to please bots ahead of delivering real value for users.

I'm not meaning to preach, my hands aren't squeaky clean and these tactics do have a use but it's a belief gaining momentum that they should not be allowed to ride roughshod over both brand and UX. I was lucky enough to have been scared straight from the start, firmly putting my focus on how to drive real

value to the consumer, building great experiences, authority, and trust.

Panda's pain is still real

This is the Jackal and Hyde reputation the industry has suffered through ever since. The straightest of strait-laced operators – who see search as a powerful and useful customer touchpoint, are tarnished with the same brush as the sketchiest of spammers and scammers who are still alive and well within the industry.

Their presence diminishes the overall value of search and can create a race to the bottom kind of mentality. Clients who are still sore with the industry ten years on sometimes expect "old-school" results without being willing to invest in long-term value – ironically because they're terrified of being burned again by another update.

It's crazy but it's true, I'm still having these conversations on a basis that is more than is reasonable and it is because the discipline is haunted by the original sins of its birth.

It goes without saying that I want to scream every time I hear the words:

- "Can you do some quick SEO for me?"
- "I'd love it if you could build us some cheap links?"
- "Can you just get rid of this negative article from Google for me?"
- "Just tell me what keywords I should use!"

All with the retort of,

"… it will cost what?! I found a guy online who'll do it for peanuts".

The damage has been done and this is the cross that SEO has to bear, but is there a way to move out of the long shadow cast

by a decade-old catastrophe?

The answer is resounding, “yes!” but we need to meet the revolutionary promise we made in 2011 and we desperately need to stop talking just about SEO and reposition the value of search.

What does our SEO past mean for our search future?

First let’s start with the term itself, what it means to clients and how it needs to be repositioned. SEO is a collection of data-driven tactics which are often seen as a cure-all by clients, a channel unto itself, this it is not.

Despite sitting at the critical crossroads of web development, content, and PR, SEO is far too often a siloed activity that does not play nicely with other marketing disciplines, even separated in mind and budget from its closest counterpart SEM.

Instead, we need to be evaluating search, not SEO, as a valuable driver in a customer’s path to purchase and how it can facilitate discovery, consideration, and purchase, driving an overall brand experience.

The reason SEO too often operates in a vacuum is that historically it’s far less complicated to manage and measure in isolation. But the impact and delivery of search should be more dynamic and incorporated across marketing departments as you can see above or agencies with the constituent tactics of SEO being greater as part of the search.

It’s fair to say that the Panda SEO ripples from 10 years ago have not yet matured nearly as quickly as the dynamic marketing ecosystem that’s grown up around it. 10 years ago, rich media, mobile and social media weren’t yet huge drivers or mediums, also with the arrival of personalized email and marketing automation being relatively new on the scene too.

Google has evolved well beyond its blue link roots providing a valuable blended search experience featuring products, local results, answers, reviews, news, video and is powered by advanced AI which actually understands user intent and voice searches.

Search is no longer the one-dimensional digital bottleneck it once was and consumers hold the power to choose how they interact with brands and follow the path that’s most convenient for them, not one that’s engineered by SEO alone.

Remember, people will always do what’s right for them.

Three considerations for how search should learn from SEO’s past

1. Put the customer first

A customer-centric approach is a given in most marketing disciplines but a lot of people in the SEO community did not seem to get the memo.

Instead of talking about search share and obsessing about the ranking opportunities we need to focus on, try to refocus the lens on what the customer feels, wants, and needs as the foundation of an experiential strategy from which, not only search will be the tactic it delivers on.

Beyond the implied minimum of a technically sound site, we need to put a greater emphasis on analyzing search behavior, not just keywords, to provide the customer with the right information at the moments that matter in their journey.

Marketing teams need to be asking themselves, “why?” more often and for search the answer needs to be, “because it’s what’s best for the customer”.

2. Change the tone and vocabulary

These points all have one thing in common in that we need to try and move away from the acronyms, verbiage, and lingo that was coined in a non-customer-centric world and based on optimization rather than value.

This will be one of the hardest things to move away from as so many veterans wear SEO as a badge of honor and clients will more than struggle to learn a new way of referring to a discipline they still don’t fully understand.

Obviously, I don’t have all the answers here, so from a quick poll I ran on LinkedIn, I wanted to gauge other industry opinions on this divisive topic.

As you can see, even from this small pool of 39 people in my marketing network, there are almost half of them who also sense that there is a problem but either feel that the hill is too high to climb or that the problem is there but can continue to be ignored. The conversation continues.

3. Create don’t build

Just showing up in the right search simply isn’t good enough and we know that we need to move away from the mentality of building SEO-optimized content and links as simply a means to an end.

Search data should inform what kind of content people are looking for and also what they like to consume but owned branded content should not be the playground of optimization.

There aren’t any shortcuts to creating great user experiences or content that is genuinely useful and deserving of press but you can use search data to make valuable decisions.

Search as a collaborative marketing discipline will win the day.

The final conclusion to all of this is that search holds extreme value but the industry still is not living up to its full potential because of the ghosts of its pre-Panda past.

The long-term beneficiaries of SEO will be those who can effectively rip it apart and piece it back together in everything marketing teams do, which is no easy feat.

If we educate the experience makers, everyone from the copywriter to the PR director, the developer to UX designer on the beneficial insights that search teams can provide then a new paradigm can be born.

Then, and only then, can SEO finally be put out to stud and enjoy the retirement it so desperately deserves.

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