What Are ‘Google Penalties,’ and Why Do You Need to Avoid Them?

Many businesses have been sunk by Google’s algorithm updates. Don’t become one of them.

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Ever since Google started up in 1998, its core mission has been to deliver the most relevant search results tousers. This started with checking a user’s search query against several criteria, key among them being the frequency with which the search query appeared on any given web page.

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If the query appeared frequently, then that page would rank higher in search results. All well and good. But a big, big problem soon became obvious: Businesses caught on to how important it was to rank high in search engine results. And that meant war.

The battle for rankings

Owners wanted all the extra business and exposure that could come from ranking on the front page of Google, so they began stuffing their sites with stock phrases they thought would win them traffic. This “keyword stuffing” in turn negatively impacted Google’s core mission: People were attempting to trick Google’s algorithm.

So began the ongoing battle between Google and the people who know the most about SEO (search engine optimization).

Google updates

Google’s solution to this fundamental problem has been to periodically release updates to its algorithm. These updates are kept secret, often appearing suddenly, and they tweak the requirements for relevant, high-quality content.

As part of this, Google now takes more serious account of writing quality, looking at everything from sentence length to the level of good grammar. It also looks for signs of SEO tricks, like unnatural links coming from other websites to a business’s web pages, or unnatural use of language.

Meanwhile, website architecture remains, crucial for high rankings; audiences shouldn’t have to click through a dozen different links to find the content they want; this isn’t a high-quality experience.

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That’s why Google’s updates have been good for businesses, in the improvement in the quality of search results they provide users, and in the emphasis they place on businesses providing quality content in exchange for the online exposure they receive.

The problem for many web developers, marketers, bloggers, and online businesses,, however, is that business owners can still be penalized by Google, even when they aim to do everything right. These Google penalties can send a site plummeting down the search result rankings, crippling its standing and ability to generate business.

What does a “Google penalty” mean?

A “Google penalty” is a loose term for what happens when a site or page is negatively impacted by a Google algorithm update or is manually penalized for an infringement on the search engine’s Webmaster Guidelines. While a site’s sudden dip in search-result rankings isn’t always easily explained, and could relate to any number of issues, you as the business owner can try to ascertain the nature of the update and adjust your website accordingly.

To do this, check sites, like Search Engine Roundtable, which discuss new Google updates and related rumors. Though you’ll understandably be concerned about your site’s ranking, it’s important not to rush to make changes to your site or content, as you may exaggerate the negative effects.

Instead, take some time to find out exactly what happened with the update, check to make sure the update coincides with your changes in rankings and carefully analyze how your site may have fallen afoul of those algorithm changes.

The other possibility is that your site has been manually penalized. This means that your site has likely been reviewed by a Google employee after being flagged for not meeting its quality guidelines. While these penalties can be serious, you’ll have the opportunity to resolve them, as they will appear in a report in your Google Search Console account. If you are not yet set up on Google Search Console, or just want a quicker way to check on your penalties, try this penalty checker that my company developed.

What do you do when you’re hit by a Google penalty?

If you receive a manual penalty, you can begin a resolution process from Google Search Console itself. Once you have

addressed and corrected the specific problem, you will be able to request that Google re-index your site, hopefully reversing the damage that was done.

The most important thing is that you carefully address the problem and find a solution. There are many guides for specific penalty problems out there, so here is what you need to know about the usual suspects and what needs to be done when they occur.

What are the typical problems?

Thin content: This is one of the easier penalties to fix. Google will often penalize sites which have many pages that offer no real value and have low word counts. To fix this, start providing more in-depth information and remove any auto-generated content.

The use of free hosts: It is unlikely that you use free hosting services if you run a serious website, but businesses that do expose themselves to all sorts of spam advertising they can’t control. It’s better to use a paid hosting service and avoid the trouble.

Keyword stuffing: If you have added too many keywords to your pages in hopes of ranking higher, Google can tell if this is unnatural. These days, it’s better just to be aware of your keywords and make sure you aren’t missing them entirely – but leave it at that.

Virus hosts: Google will clamp down on any site that plays host to malware or spyware viruses. If there’s anything on your site which might be infecting visitors’ computers or phones, you need to get rid of it immediately.

Bad redirects: If your site redirects traffic away from certain pages as a way to boost traffic numbers on other pages, you may get a penalty. Redirects like these will cause

visitors to your site to leave quickly, as they have been served the wrong content. Don’t do it.

Duplicate/scraped content: If your site features content that can be found elsewhere on the web, or has been outright copied, the result may be a penalty. Checking for duplicate content is one of the easier things Google can do, so make sure all your text is unique and up to date.

Be aware: Dropped rankings aren’t always due to penalties.

Remember, if your site drops in the search results, the reason may not be due to any penalties or algorithm updates. It’s possible that competitors are improving their content or perhaps have benefited from Google’s updates, where you haven’t.

Trying to ensure you have the best content and do a good job of marketing it, is the best way to ensure you maintain your rankings.

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If you do experience a sudden traffic decline, however, carefully analyze what might have gone wrong, and ensure you are following the guidelines laid out in Google’s Webmasters Guidelines. You should then have little trouble from Google updates and penalties in the future.

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