What Is Rank Transition & What Does It Mean for SEO? by @SEOGoddess

We've all been there.

A client, or boss, presents a problem with the website: "Rankings are down despite all this work we have done on the site."

You scratch your head looking at the pages you updated with internal linking, meta tag updates, and perhaps some small text on the page that mentions the focus keywords.

You're not spamming, at least you don't feel you did enough to alert Google that you're spamming.

The pages are showing up in search results, but the rankings aren't what you predicted, and they aren't consistent across the pages you edited.

Your advice to the client, or boss: more work needs be done to adjust.

So you make those changes. And the rankings change again – but not for the better.

It's as if the pages are all ranking randomly, and each change is making it worse.

Every SEO professional at some point has experienced this **rank transition**, whether you realize it or not.

What Is Rank Transition?

Rank transition is Google's way of confusing spammers as they adjust for rankings and continually readjust in an attempt to

obtain a good position for one or more documents within a website.

It's Google's way of identifying specific techniques and formulating an algorithmic rule that appears to randomize rankings.

Google's Ranking Documents patent was approved in 2012. The SEO industry covered it extensively, including Bill Slawski at SEO by the Sea and myself as I was experiencing the effects of the patent.

In 2014, the U.S. Patent office approved a similar updated patent, Changing a rank of a document by applying a rank transition function.

Both patents are fairly specific about what Google considers spamming, and the timing is quickly mentioned.

However, the wording leaves it somewhat open-ended which I believe could be used for most changes for SEO as well as the timing.

What Appears to Be Random Isn't Actually Random

Computers and programs can't function in a random way.

Therefore, the ranking documents patent contains 29 claims detailing a set of rules in which the pages (or documents) that are affected by the patent are set up in a way that rankings appear to be random during the established transition period.

The patent's abstract describes:

> *"A system determines a first rank associated with a document and determines a second rank associated with the document, where the second rank is different from the first rank. The*

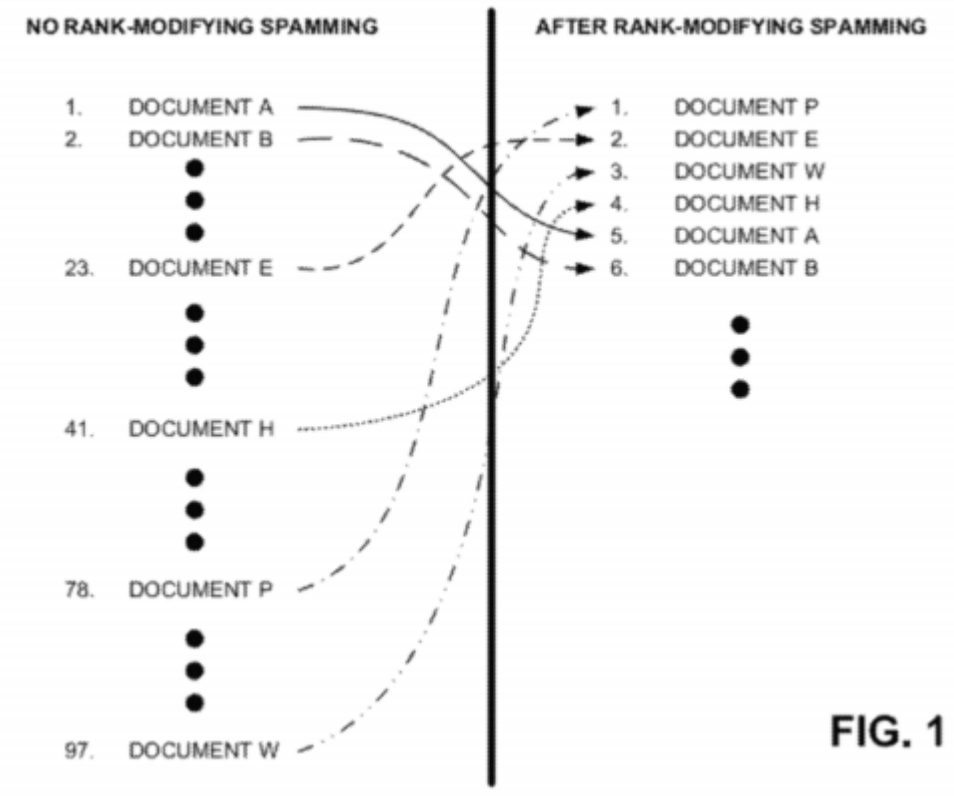
system also changes, during a transition period that occurs during a transition from the first rank to the second rank, a transition rank associated with the document based on a rank transition function that varies the transition rank over time without any change in ranking factors associated with the document."

Upon a change to a set of pages on a website, the new ranking position is determined.

However, it is not set for an amount of time. Instead, each page is assigned a position based on the algorithms defined in the patent.

The positions will appear to be random until that determined amount of time is complete and no further work or adjustments to those pages were made.

Figure 1 from the Patent:



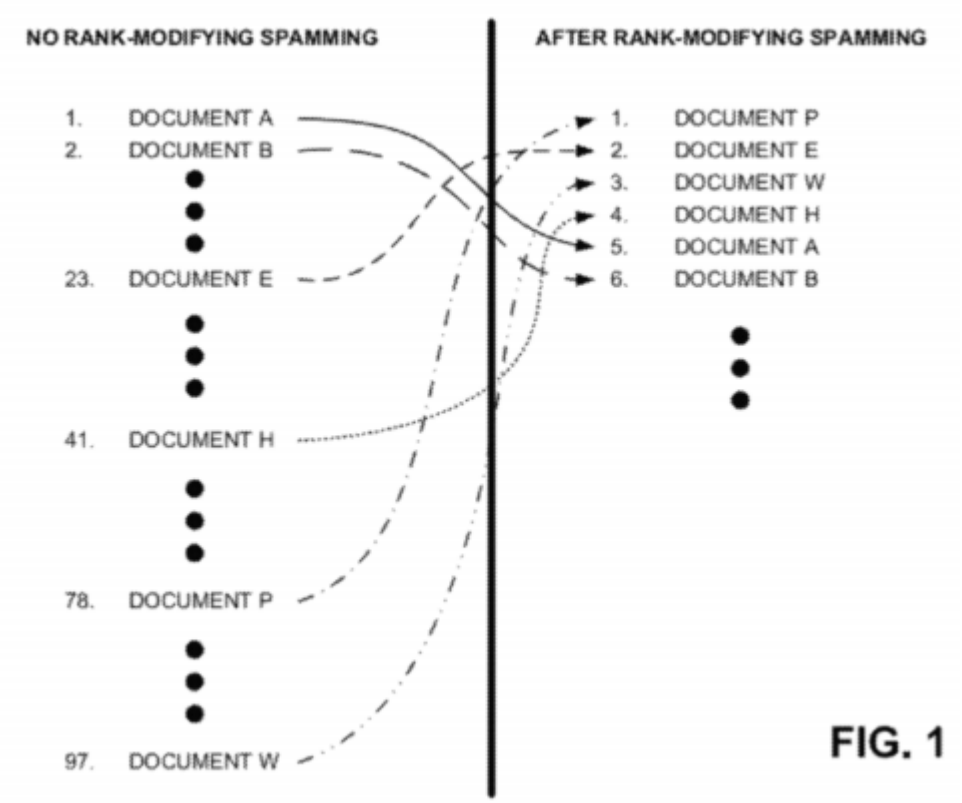


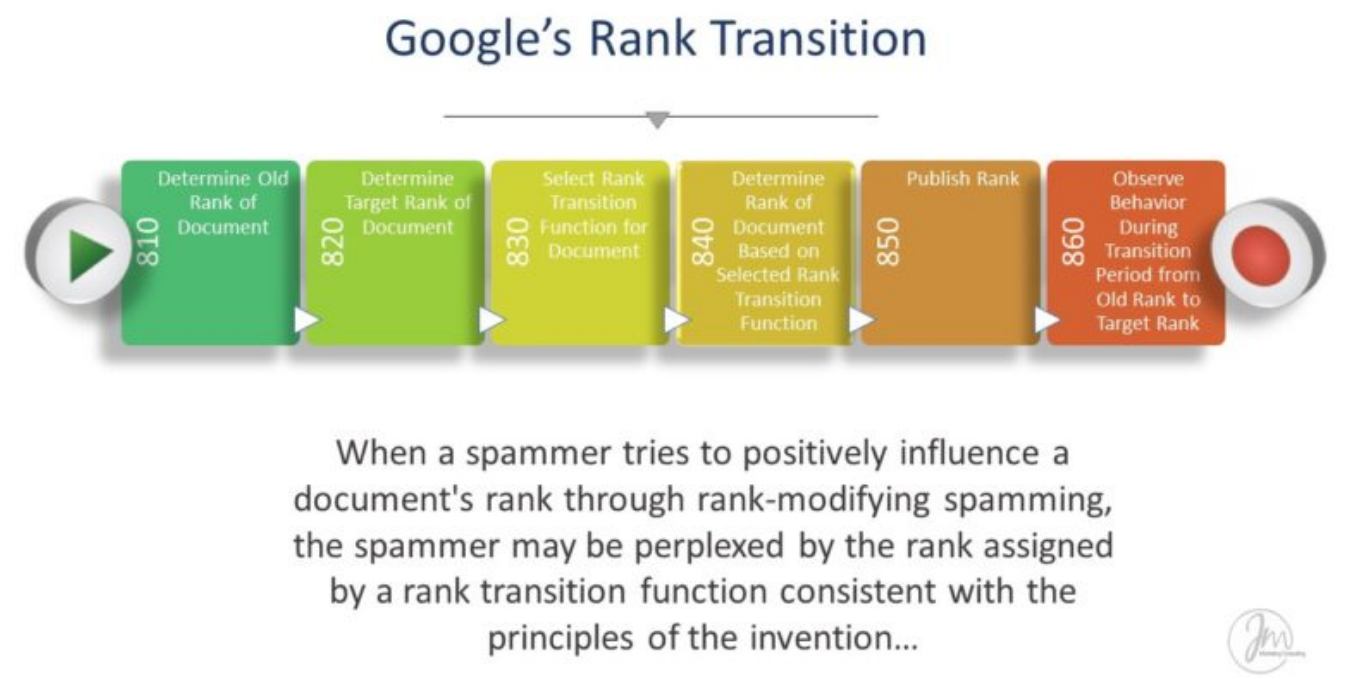
FIG. 1

U.S. Patent – US 8,244,722 B1

Google looks at the page that is now changed (or optimized), determining the old rank and then the new rank based on the changes.

The rank transition is set and published.

If there are no further changes during the transition period then the target rank is set. However, the transition period is reset if more changes are made.



Google's Rank Transition

When a spammer tries to positively influence a document's rank through rank-modifying spamming, the spammer may be perplexed by the rank assigned by a rank transition function consistent with the principles of the invention...

The patent talks about spamming techniques in detail:

> *"Various techniques exist, such as keyword stuffing, invisible text, tiny text, page redirects, META tags stuffing, and link-based manipulation."*

- **Keyword stuffing**: Repeatedly using a keyword within a page to make the page appear to be more relevant to the keyword being searched.
- **Invisible text**: Including a set of words on a page in which the text is the same color as the background.
- **Tiny text**: Using keywords in small text within a page in an attempt to make a page appear relevant for a wide range of search queries, even though the page may not be relevant.
- **Page redirects**: Using a first paragraph of code to automatically redirect the user to a second page that has nothing to do with the search query (typically a browser side JavaScript redirect rather than a server side redirect 301, 302 or similar which is safe).
- **Meta tags stuffing**: Using a large set of keywords in the meta tags in which the keywords do not relate to the content on the page.
- **Link-based manipulation**: This may include the creation or manipulation of a first document or a set of first documents to include a link, or several links, to a second document attempting to increase rankings for the second document.

While these spamming techniques are mentioned in the document, many more could be included that trigger rank transition – even just simply making changes to a specific set of pages.

How Long Does This Ranking Transition Last?

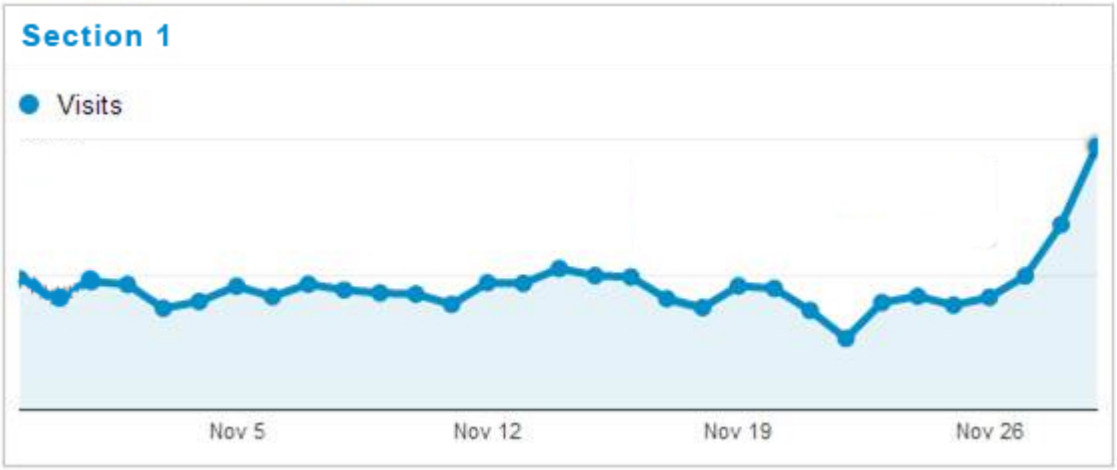
The patent mentions:

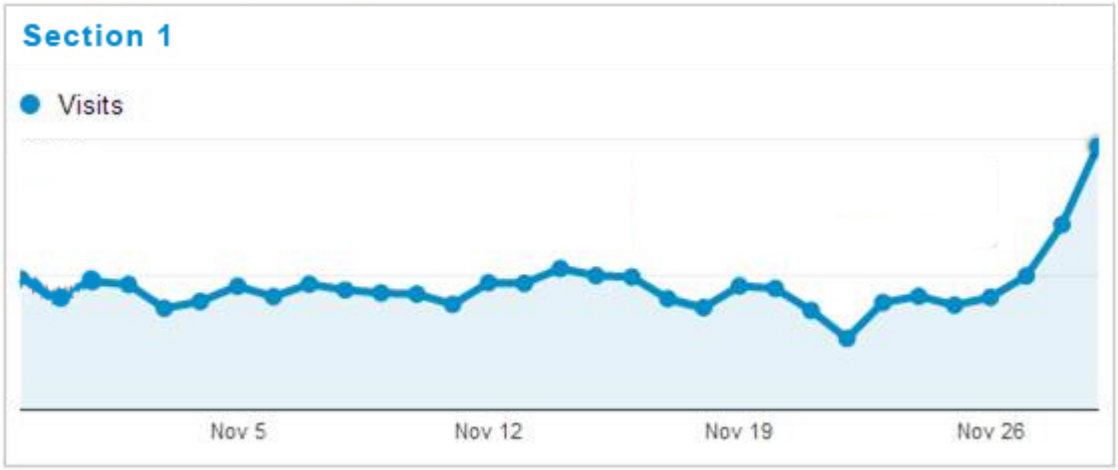
> *"After a period of time, the document's rank might rise to its new steady state (target) value. Like FIG. 6, the time line shown in FIG. 7 may be represented in days in one implementation consistent with the principles of the invention. In other words, the document's rank may decrease*

for a period of approximately 20 days before settling in on its new steady state (target) value (e.g., 1.0 in FIG. 7) in approximately 70 days after a positive change in its link-based information."

When the patent was approved in August 2012, Google was pushing Panda updates and refreshes and my team launched a major project that cleaned up many issues.

Three months (to the day) after launching the updates we saw a significant increase in traffic and improvements in rankings for the series of pages.





Ranking transition is triggered when changes are made to a set of pages on a website.

Those pages begin with a first rank for the page (or document) with a second rank then set.

During the transition period, a transition rank is set based on the rank transition function that varies the transition rank over time without any change in the first or second ranking factors for the page.

This year, I worked with a property management company. I helped redesign and optimize their website.

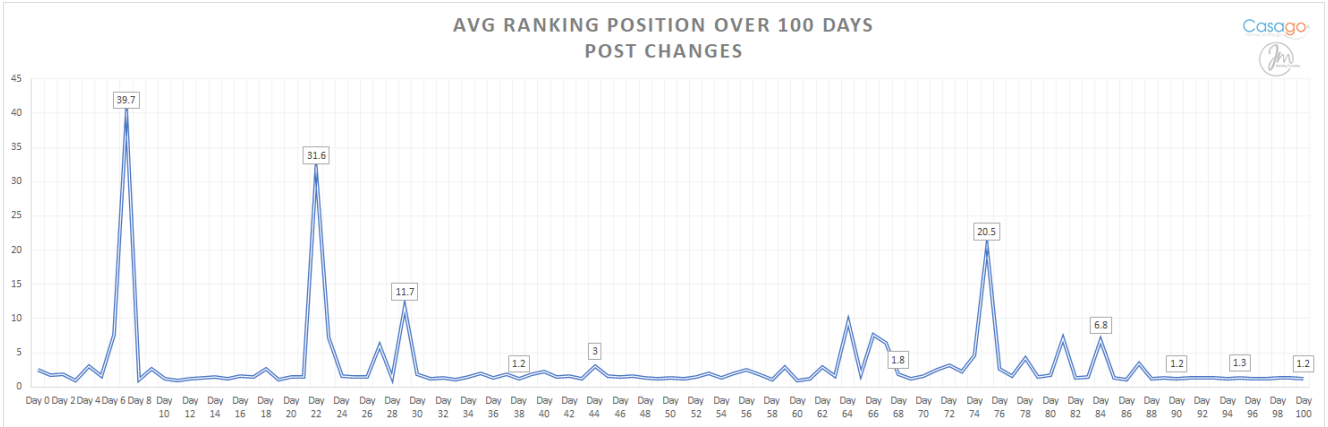
The site was completely overhauled. The roughly 100 URLs and content stayed the same with a design refresh after completing an SEO audit and market research.

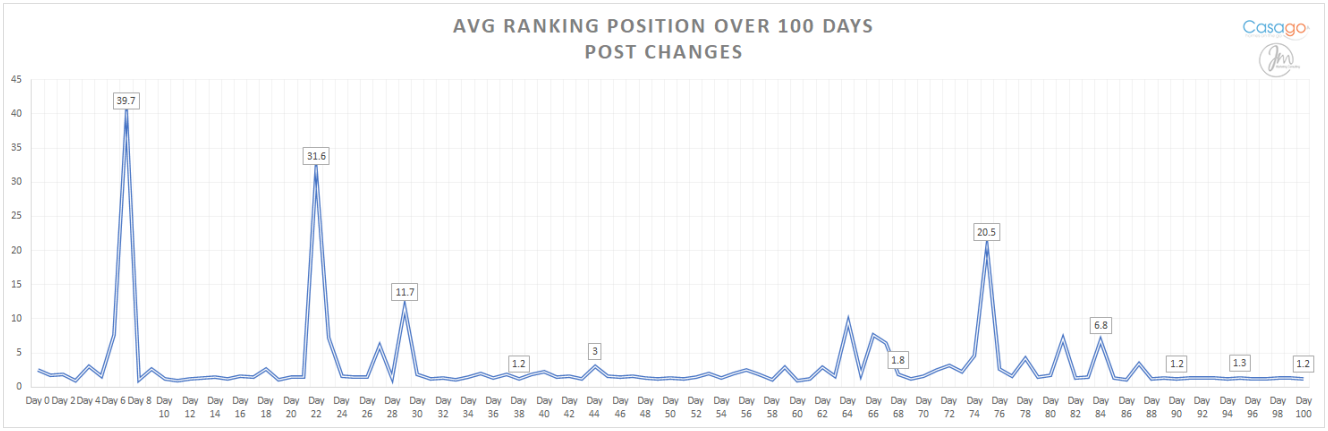
I cleaned up some internal linking that appeared spammy and made some usability improvements.

The site added 500+ new pages of content optimized following today's best SEO practices.

Using the Keylime Toolbox tool, I monitored the rankings in Google over time from Day 0 (before launch) to Day 90, and 10 days past.

At Day 90 the site saw a stable average ranking position and seemed to hold with minimal fluctuation. The 90 days appears to be the transition rank with a few volatile bumps.





Average Position over 100 Days Post Changes

Summary

The massive efforts in 2011 and 2012 to fight spamming has left us SEO professionals often wondering what is going on with our results.

Never fear, though.

It could be that your changes are in the ranking transition period and simply waiting to show their permanent place.

I have often sent the articles written about the patent, and even sent the link to the patent itself, to help make my case to clients and bosses that we simply need to wait it out and see how we did in a few months.

More Resources:

Image Credits

All screenshots taken by author, February 2019

Subscribe to SEJ

Get our daily newsletter from SEJ's Founder Loren Baker about the latest news in the industry!



http://tracking.feedpress.it/link/13962/11083340