What to evaluate ahead of Google's Page Experience update

Google unveiled the Page Experience update in May, coupling that announcement with a new set of metrics called Core Web Vitals and laying out its plan to remove the AMP restriction on its Top Stories carousel. Last week, the company revealed that the page experience signals in ranking will go live in May 2021.

With roughly six months remaining before the impact manifests in the search results, marketers may think that there's plenty of time to prepare in the new year. However, there are many considerations to evaluate and conversations to have with stakeholders before the work can even begin. Here's what you need to start thinking about now so that your site is prepared when the update rolls out.

The page experience update's impact on and off the search results page

In the search results. "It's not going to be a major change, but you shouldn't ignore it either," said Pedro Dias, head of SEO at British publisher Reach PLC and former search quality analyst at Google. Many of the page experience criteria, such as mobile-friendliness, HTTPS, the presence of intrusive interstitials, page speed and browsing safety are already Google search ranking factors, meaning that sites should already be optimizing with those aspects in mind.

If you're not familiar with the Core Web Vitals, the performance metrics –Largest Contentful Paint (LCP) First Input Delay (FID) and Cumulative Layout Shift (CLS) – that

Google is incorporating as ranking signals in the Page Experience update, see our Guide to Core Web Vitals for SEOs and Developers.

“Cumulative Layout Shift, First Input Delay, and load performance are important to your site and to your user,” said Matt Dorville, SEO manager at BuzzFeed, “but they don’t replace core priorities like the user’s search intent and the quality of the content.” This sentiment was also shared by Dias, who said, “Google likely will never sacrifice quality and relevancy over other technical aspects.”

This concern was addressed in Google’s initial page experience announcement in May, and Rudy Galfi, a product manager for the company, confirmed to Search Engine Land that great content can still rank highly in Google search, even with a poor page experience.

However, as quality content has become more ubiquitous, a technical advantage may be a deciding factor in the rankings with this update.

In the day-to-day for SEOs. In addition to its potential impact on the search results, the page experience update may also affect the way SEOs approach optimization by providing them with a set of quantitative metrics to strive for.

“When it comes to improving page experience, SEO’s have stumbled their way through interpreting Search Quality Evaluator Guidelines while never really understanding their prominence in ranking,” said Kim Dewe, head of SEO at UK-based agency Blue Array.

The page experience update may also speak to the evolving nature of SEO as a profession. “It does continue the trend that SEOs are going to have to get more technical (if they aren’t already) to be able to talk to engineers as they troubleshoot solutions relating to speed, JavaScript rendering and ways to prioritize what Google is asking for in relation

to other priorities that the business has," Dorville said.

Why you need to start planning and evaluating the tradeoffs now

While the update is still half a year away from launching and may take a while to roll out fully, that time cannot be taken for granted. "All these improvements are cumulative, and many take time to deploy and get processed by Google," Dias said, "It's something where you want to be as prepared as possible – much like the Google mobile-first index change, I wouldn't recommend leaving the Core Web Vitals for the last minute."

Some of the factors included in the page experience update, such as page speed, are already core tenets of SEO, and should always be part of the conversation. "Site latency is something that can (and should) be discussed at any time in a site/page's life cycle (earlier in the architecting process is best though!)," Alexis Sanders, SEO director at Merkle, told Search Engine Land, noting, "The challenging part with page speed is that everything requires trade-offs."

"Google's requirements can't be considered as gospel as publishers will have to weigh other business responsibilities as well," Dorville said. "For example, setting dimensions on ads will help your cumulative layout shift metric but many companies refuse to change this because of the need for ad dollars and, because of this, no change will be made. That's something that SEOs will either have to live with or make an argument to offset the revenue that is gained from the ads," he said.

Assessing the AMP alternative

Google has told us that the majority of AMP pages perform very well in terms of page experience metrics. "Any sites that are currently using AMP may have a leg up, since they've already

considered latency in their experience," Sanders said, caveating, "I don't think AMP will be mutually exclusive with successful ranking."

Since it's possible to achieve, or exceed, AMP-level page experience metrics, publishers that have well-equipped technology divisions may opt to forego or abandon the framework. "Instead of maintaining what is essentially two sites [the original non-AMP version and the AMP version], one of which may get less money in ads, they'll focus on coupling Google's requirements for page experience with UX metrics, which they should already have on the site to measure retention and loyalty," Dorville predicted.

When the page experience update goes live, Google will also open up the Top Stories carousel to non-AMP pages. This may further incentivize publishers to invest in improving their page experience metrics so that they can be more competitive in the search results, increase their odds of landing content in the Top Stories carousel and deliver a more positive experience to their visitors while potentially bringing in more ad revenue.

"Page experience and Core Web Vitals are meant to exist as a parallel alternative to AMP, and not act as a replacement," said Dias, offering his perspective on the options publishers have at their disposal, "If you have all the resources and want to try to make your site faster and leaner than you'd achieve with AMP, now you have been given the opportunity. Otherwise, if you can't afford taking this challenge, AMP will likely still be your fallback."

Get ready for visual indicators

Google also plans to launch a visual indicator to distinguish search results that have met all of the page experience criteria. The company says it plans to test the page experience indicator soon, and if it is successful, it will

also launch in May 2021. Google has a history of using visual indicators, such as the AMP icon, slow and mobile-friendly labels, in the search results.

The prominence of the indicator, which Google has not yet revealed, will be a factor in their decision making, said Sanders, Dorville and Dias. “However, any visual changes to the SERP present potential for shifts in CTR,” Sanders noted.

“If Google makes [the indicator] substantially different, where one of them is more appealing than the other, you might have another reason to push towards the option that becomes more desirable,” said Dias, adding, “If a label is displayed, and it’s a positive reinforcement, users will likely start paying attention to these labels.”

Since it is in Google’s best interests to deliver search results that match users’ expectations, regardless of whether those results meet all their page experience criteria, Dewe expects that the indicator will not have a considerable impact for users. “Visual indicators for a subset of ranking factors shouldn’t be required to decipher whether a webpage is worth clicking on or not,” she said.

Should this affect your roadmap for 2021? It depends…

The amount of work to bring your page experience up to par will depend on the amount of investment that has already been poured into it. Larger publishers may currently be utilizing AMP to deliver their content or they may have the resources to make regular updates to their user experience. Smaller publishers may have to be more deliberate and plan ahead.

“Honestly, it depends on the impact of the change in terms of ranking and traffic,” said Dorville, adding that, while BuzzFeed isn’t looking at Google’s specific metrics, it does

focus on similar metrics for its users. “We’re looking at measuring this, watching our competitors and quantifying the impact of it when it comes out, but we don’t plan on making any significant change to the site or to the backlog until this comes out,” he said.

“Despite Google stating that they ‘will provide at least six months notice’ before the update is rolled out, I don’t think it’s ever too early to start preparing,” Dewe said, adding that page experience metrics have been integrated into her agency’s ongoing client auditing process. Dias also says has also been steering his clients in this direction long before the update was announced.

“If you’re competing in a vertical where most players already have great content but the [user] experience is not that great, improving experience might give you an edge,” Dias said, “Just don’t expect [to see] great improvements just by hitting all the Core Web Vitals with poor content.”

About The Author



George Nguyen is an editor for Search Engine Land, covering organic search, podcasting and e-commerce. His background is in journalism and content marketing. Prior to entering the industry, he worked as a radio personality, writer, podcast host and public school teacher.

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