

What to expect from SEO in 2021?

30-second summary:

- The pace of technological advances and progress in the SEO sector isn't slowing down, and you should expect major changes and updates in 2021.
- Google has already announced two algorithm updates slated for March and May 2021.
- There are various trends for SEO in 2020 like UX SEO and feature snippets which appear to become more prominent in the upcoming year.

From the humble beginnings of the Internet and online advertising, we've reached an era where the Internet is an essential communication tool, and online advertising is valued at more than 400 billion dollars a year, more prominent than even the TV ad industry. The global pandemic only accelerated this trend and pushed more companies online. So, what can we expect out of SEO in 2021? Which trends should we be looking forward to? Which changes will impact the industry? In this article, we'll discuss the main trends we expect to have an impact and change the direction of SEO in the coming year.

Direct changes to search engines

SEO is entirely dependent on the major search engines, primarily Google. Any changes to Google's *modus operandi*, algorithm, and priorities will have direct, wide-ranging impacts on SEO in 2021. These changes lead to losses in billions of dollars for some businesses while leading to gains

of billions of dollars for others. It is important to be aware of the upcoming changes and how to best prepare for them.

#1 Page experience as a ranking factor on Google [May 2021]

As of May 2021, you should expect what Google dubs as “page experience signals” to be a ranking factor. The page experience refers to the way the visitors feel as they interact with the web page. It is determined by a multitude of attributes from mobile-friendliness, safe browsing, HTTPS, and the others. These were already ranking factors previously, but they’ve been more institutionalized and work within the “page experience” framework. Furthermore, Google is introducing Core Web Vitals as part of ‘page experience’. They’re considered to be user-centric metrics that try to determine the quality of the user experience. These user-centric metrics will measure the loading speed (Largest Contentful Paint), interactivity (First Input Delay), and visual stability (Cumulative Layout Shift). The first two items that go into Core Web Vitals seem quite self-evident, so it doesn’t seem like a good idea to spend more time explaining them in this article.

Although, the third item might confuse some people. Visual stability refers to how much the layout shifts and jumps around. For example, imagine if a button tracks your mouse and jumps around whenever you get close to it, this is quite a self-evidently bad user experience, and this variable aims to capture this. The self-advertised purpose of adding an explicit page experience ranking factor is so that Google can provide higher-quality, more engaging content to its users. Considering the variables that it takes account of, a website with a high page experience score will load faster, be more interactive, more stable, more secure, more mobile-friendly, and much more. These all combined, admittedly, will lead to a superior experience.

Get featured in top stories without AMP

Another purpose of the introduction of the new page experience ranking framework is to make non-AMP content eligible to appear in the Top Stories feature for mobile phones. It is one of the main ways websites drive traffic to their content from mobile, so this could be a significant change that would disrupt the rankings of many websites on mobile. This change will also roll out in May of 2021, which makes May a hell of a busy month for SEO specialists.

We need to be ready for all the drastic changes this change in the algorithm can bring. We can't possibly ascertain its impact at this stage.

#2 Mobile-first indexing for all websites on Google [March 2021]

Mobile-first indexing is certainly not new, Google has been using it for more than several years. It was first introduced as an answer to a widespread problem: more and more people are using their phones to look up stuff and browse the net. The problem is that the mobile and desktop versions of websites don't always match up in content, and Google usually only indexes one version, which traditionally was the PC version. This creates a mismatch between the rankings on mobile and the content on these pages. To alleviate this mismatch as it was becoming a growing problem due to the increasing popularity of mobile, Google decided to implement mobile-first indexing. Mobile-first indexing refers to the practice of indexing the mobile version of the website first in Google's databases instead of the desktop version. This would accurately gauge the amount of content on mobile sites and their relevance before displaying the results.

Going from an entirely desktop-first indexing scheme to an entirely mobile-first one would've been a massive step, however, and this is why Google has been taking years

implementing this change. It started by allowing the option to webmasters to change their website indexing to mobile-first. It was followed by making mobile-first the default option for crawling new websites. The final and latest update is going to come in March 2021 when Google will start making mobile-first indexing the default option for all websites. This means that the way your website is indexed and the content that's considered might change in March. It is hard to determine how big of an impact this will make beforehand, but you should expect some instability.

Thankfully, Google has published a basic guideline to ensuring the transition to mobile-first indexing goes smoothly on your website:

- Make sure the content of your website is visible to Google crawlers and bots.
- Ensure you fill out all the relevant meta tags on both the mobile and the desktop

versions of your landing pages.

- Ensure that your mobile website loads quickly by enabling lazy loading.
- Ensure that you are not blocking any relevant mobile-specific URLs in your robots.txt file.
- Although it is hard to ensure identical content, you should try to have at least identical primary content on both versions.
- Check the alt tags of both image and video embeds.

Wider SEO trends

Aside from specific updates to algorithms, we have prior information about, some wider trends in the sector that are going to change how we engage with SEO. Some of these trends have been going on for years and only just accelerating and others are new. Below, we'll cover the most prominent ones.

#1 Voice search is becoming more and more prominent

Voice search was virtually non-existent just five years ago. Still, the development and proliferation of Alexa, Google Assistant, and a multitude of other voice assistants over the last few years have popularized voice search beyond our wildest dreams. According to data, voice search revenue will more than quadruple from 2017 to 2022 from just 2 billion to 40 billion dollars. This explosion in popularity presents opportunities and challenges to traditional SEO approaches. Just as an example, in voice searches, getting the first position is much more important than it is in traditional text searches. That's why you need different approaches to capitalize on this new, emerging SEO arena fully.

#2 Feature snippets and microdata

Google is trying to introduce more and more types of featured snippets to its home page. These range from recipes to news and tutorials. These snippets aim to make searching faster for users and keep traffic on Google's website. It is nevertheless beneficial for websites to implement it because you have a chance to be featured, which would drive a lot of traffic to your website.

Of course, getting featured doesn't always mean you'll see exponential growth in traffic, but data from Ahrefs shows it matters a lot! On average, getting featured means you'll get, on average, around 8,6% CTR while the top 'natural result' will get 19,6% of the traffic. This is extremely impressive and shows that the featured snippet steals a substantial amount of clicks from the top position, which would get around 26% CTR in SERPs without a featured snippet. Although, you have to be careful about how Google features you. You should monitor your ranking and readjust your snippet and optimize it for more clicks.

#3 Non-textual content

As we move into the next year, we're seeing an Internet saturated with blogs and landing pages. and it is becoming increasingly difficult to rank for noteworthy keywords with decent traffic. That's why many SEO agencies are trying to expand their reach by diversifying the type of content they produce and publish. Infographics are one of the easier ways to create engagement and rank higher. Although, even they've been overused in recent years. A much more promising frontier for 2021 seems to be videos. These could be uploaded to Youtube as standalone content or embedded in your website too. It'll help you gain more traffic from Youtube views, which seems way less saturated than Google's traditional search engine currently. This doesn't mean it is any less important. YouTube generates 15 billion dollars for Google each year. It is a platform you can't afford to ignore.

It is also worth mentioning that there are specific video snippets on SERPs that you can only rank for through video content, and these video snippets are really prominent on search queries beginning with "how-to", asking for tutorials, and other forms of educational content. They are prime real estate that you can potentially rank for with a reasonably produced video.

#4 UX SEO

The days where SEO was just about meta-tags and titles have long gone. Nowadays, SEO is an intricate subject that combines expertise from many different fields from marketing to software engineering and creative writing to achieve the best result. A recent trend in SEO that is gaining more and more stream is the UX SEO framework.

UX SEO refers to the practice of optimizing the user experience of a website to achieve better conversion rates and engagement. It isn't only important that your site gets

regular visitors, but it is also equally important to ensure that these visitors engage with your website. UX redesign success stories are almost limitless, for example, ESPN found out that just a homepage redesign increased their revenues by 35%. There is no reason why UX optimization could not be an integral part of your SEO strategy, and UX SEO gives you a framework to achieve this.

Conclusion

Each year, Google introduces more than 3600 small changes to their algorithms, and each year, trends emerge in this volatile sector that nobody has been able to predict. You need to continually keep up with the news to be on top of your SEO game, reading an article on the trends in the upcoming year isn't enough. Nevertheless, I tried to make this article as comprehensive as possible, and you should be moderately prepared for the challenges ahead if you pay attention to all the trends that I've featured here.

Adrian Kempiake is CTO at Neadoo Digital – SEO agency. Adrian is a tech enthusiast, in the SEO industry for over 9 years. Consultations and audits for businesses from various markets. Responsible for running both worldwide SEO campaigns for ecommerce stores and local SEO for businesses worldwide (UK, USA, Australia, Spain, and much more).

More about:

What to expect from SEO in 2021?