

Google's Shake Up: A View From the Beginning

by Jim Hedger, SEO Manager, [StepForth Search Engine Placement Inc.](#)

It has been exactly one month since Google introduced its infamous Florida Update. As the Florida Update has brought about the largest and most comprehensive shake-up of Google's listings ever, it has generated a great deal of interest around the world and genuine panic for the literally millions of webmasters who's sites have been adversely affected by the change. The following article is a compilation of our writings about the Florida Update since November 17th, the first Monday after the shift.

Monday November 17, 2003

Happy Monday Morning Folks... DON'T PANIC!

Have you taken a look at Google today? Yes, what you are seeing is real. Google is showing totally different listings on the search engine returns pages today. Actually, this weirdness started sometime on Friday night or Saturday morning. Most of our clients have not been affected and the only one we have seen effected has had his rankings rise dramatically. Our site has been affected though, rather badly at that. From the #6 spot under the phrase "Search Engine Placement", the happy-go-lucky StepForth site has dropped past the fifth page of returns.

I think this is a temporary thing. We last saw such a massive shake-up six months ago and the listings went back to normal after a few days. This sort of shake-up generally indicates that Google is re-ordering their entire database of spidered sites.

Something big is happening at Google but we're not sure what it is. What we do know is that since a major update of Google's database started on Friday night, the search returns have been extremely buggy with long-term Top10 pages dropping from existence, recorded back links decreasing or disappearing for many sites, and more than the usual amount of spam appearing in the Top10. We have also noted the disappearance of one of their major servers (www-sj.google.com).

Google has been delivering questionable returns for several months now with spam and duplicate listings often making it into the Top10. The last time their listings have been this upset was in October 2002 when Google tried introducing Blog entries and news releases into its general listings. Within two weeks, the listings had been restored to a shakey state of "normal" but that marked the beginning of strange and often spammy entries into the Top10. This month's update is being referred to in the SEO community as the "Florida Update" and has a lot of SEO practitioners scratching their heads. Our current advice is to wait it out for at least two weeks and see what Google does next.

December 3, 2003

Google's Florida Update

The impact of Google's Florida Update has not been fully realized yet, but it appears the damage will be extensive considering the reports we are getting from some clients. Literally hundreds of thousands, if not millions of websites have seemingly disappeared from Google's listings, most of whom enjoyed a Top10 placement before the massive update which started on November 16th. Like most retailers, ecommerce sites that have faded from the listings needed a good Christmas season to remain viable into the next year and many of them staked their sales plans on a their previously strong placements at Google. The fallout will be noticeable, particularly among small businesses where advertising options are limited by small business budgets. Small businesses, however, will not be the only companies facing an uncertain future because of the Florida Update. When the SEO community starts receiving calls from the mainstream media and people who are not clients, asking what is wrong with Google; one knows that Google itself has a problem that goes far beyond their data centers. As one of the pioneers of the web, Lee Roberts

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of The Web Doctor points out, "It was word-of-mouth that generated their popularity because people could find what they were looking for. Now, we only find sites with less quality content and less sites that offer what we want."

The Florida Update encompasses the most substantial changes to Google's famed ranking algorithm in the young company's history. There are several theories as to why Google forced this update. Some say that Google is trying to force small businesses to join their highly profitable AdWords program by making such a comprehensive update just before the Christmas shopping season. Others say that Google has always used the weeks around the US Thanksgiving holiday to make changes in the hopes that the sudden decrease in traffic over what is often a 4-day weekend will give their engineers enough time to introduce a new algorithm, (and fix any minor errors), without causing massive disruptions to their normal users. A third theory, (the one I lean towards), states that Google was simply tired of being gamed by the growing cadre of less ethical players in the SEO sector and has simply changed the rules overnight by applying this new algorithm. Whatever the reason, the damage is being done and now advertisers and web-users want to know what to expect next. Unfortunately, that is not an easy question to answer as Google does not comment on any changes to their algorithm, therefore the only thing we can do is offer experienced and educated guesses.

I suspect that the folks at Google know they have a major problem on their hands and are working to fix it. We have seen MAJOR spider activity from Google-Bot in the past 48-hours and see evidence that another Google-Dance is currently underway. We have seen updates to the algorithm in the past. The most recent happened earlier this summer and the one before that was in October 2002. Each time Google augmented its algorithm with a new feature or filter, massive dislocation was temporarily felt across the commercial web. Both times, however, Google began producing relevant results within a matter of weeks. The new filters added to this update were too comprehensive and penalized sites that Google couldn't have been targeting on purpose. Again, I suggest that Google's engineering staff knows this, and if they don't, their customer relations and PR departments are most certainly telling them. I expect to see parts of this filter retained and applied to the formula that eventually evolves into their new algorithm but I simply can't see Google keeping this algorithm, continuing to serving up spam, and throwing its hard-earned reputation out the window. Regardless of the number of MBAs they have on staff, Google's brain trust is simply too smart for that.

Google is not in the business of driving websites out of business. Google exists to make money by providing the most relevant listings possible, a goal they are clearly not achieving. As Lee Roberts stated above, Google was built on (and, implicitly can be brought down by), word-of-mouth advertising, a fact that cannot be lost on the management at Google. Google is not in the extortion business and has in fact, built its reputation on being above reproach in the separation of paid advertising (AdWords), and the general free listings. I have a difficult time accepting the theory that Google is simply trying to increase AdWords revenues, or increase its own perceived value before issuing the expected IPO next quarter. In reality, what I think we are seeing is Google trying to reclaim its power when it comes to choosing how it will rank websites. Think about this update as a pendulum. Before the update happened, the pendulum had swung to one extreme where, with enough hard work, some could make Google do almost anything they wanted it to. Now, with the application of the Florida Update, Google has pushed the pendulum back to the other extreme. Eventually, and based on past observation, the pendulum will find its way back to the middle. As for those of us adversely affected by the Florida Update, StepForth's best advice is to continue making minor changes to your site as normal. We do not advise a full reoptimization at this point, a task that would not likely produce strong results before the end of the purchasing season anyway, until the SEO sector has an honest handle on what is happening at Google. As a wise and wonderful person recently told me, "... you can't push a rope."

December 10, 2003

The Florida Update... Update

It is now almost four weeks since Google engineers applied the filter that has become known as the Florida Update. It has been a busy month for the SEO community and a very difficult month for businesses dependant on strong Google listings. It has also been an extremely good month for one of Google's main rivals, Yahoo! While there has not been a noticeable change in the Google listings, we have seen some limited movement at Google. Please note, this is only observation and limited analysis. Nobody in the SEO world can claim to really understand what is happening at Google until after the next major Google-Dance. What we can do is relay information and our observations as they come along and that is what is intended in this article.

For the past 24 days, the SEO community has been trying to analyze the Florida Update and make sense of what is happening at the Mountain View GooglePlex. We have read and heard opinions ranging from the profit motive, (forcing online retailers to sign up with AdWords), to the conspiratorial, (Google trying to delete SEO fueled campaigns). Our view continues to favour good intentions from Google as they have championed clean search results for years but, in light of the way Google has treated webmasters and SEO companies who followed Google's [guidelines](#), our faith in Google's best practices is quickly waning. To quickly reiterate, we believe that Google is trying to weed out sites that abused SEO techniques such as massive link-building campaigns and keyword enriching titles and anchor text. Google cast a net that was far too wide and caught a lot of completely innocent webmasters involved in business sectors that attract extremely aggressive marketers. In this case, it appears to be entire sectors being punished for the sins of a few.

Some sectors that were hit particularly hard include, real estate sites, travel and tourism sites, and, ironically, search engine placement sites. Along with the millions of others affected by the Florida Update, we saw our own listing slip from the #6 position on Google to somewhere below the #1000 position. We have since noticed our site bounce back to the #48 and #50 position on Google, where it currently sits. Recently, we've noted a major increase in Google spider activity and a good deal of "bounce" for listings across Google's various datacenters. We believe another Google-Dance is on right now and that the engineers at the GooglePlex are working to restore some sense of relevance to the listings. We have seen many sites that were injured by the Florida Update bounce back up and vanish again, often within the same 24-hour period. Clearly something is happening in the background that is at times flushing over into the foreground. Again, this is evidence that Google is trying to fix a broken tool... and they had better fix it soon! Search engine users are looking for other information sources and Google may see a decline in webmasters using its services if those users and webmasters do not have faith in Google's ranking technology. As stated before, Google's update hit some folks who were playing by the rules. This is likely the first time the phrase "collateral damage" can be used in a truly honest and meaningful way. As a measure of the impact of Florida Update, the [SCROOGLE](#) website from Daniel Brant (of GoogleWatch.Com fame) has placed #7 on Alexa's Movers & Shaker's list. I think this indicates how deeply people need to know what's happening on Google. Scroogle had a user increase of 710% over the past 7-days.

Many, if not most of the sites affected by the Florida Update meet the guidelines mentioned above. About fourteen months ago, Google announced it would begin a massive Spam deletion campaign, a factor leading to last year's October update. At that time, Google re-published its SEO guidelines, thus forcing a number of SEO firms, including StepForth to re-tool our promotion techniques to meet the new "rules" as spelled out by Google. When the world's largest search engine said it will take action against websites if they deviate from simple, written rules, SEO firms sat up and listened. The problem for us is, we and our clients changed to suit Google's rules but Google itself has not. Currently, the Top10 under almost any keyword phrase is bound to bring up some spam and several irrelevant results. We do not believe this would have happened if Google had enforced the rules it asked SEO's to follow.

Meanwhile, down the road in Sunnyvale California, Google's #1 rival, Yahoo! is reaping the benefits of the early Christmas gift Google has given them. Yahoo!, owner of (Overture, Alta Vista, AlltheWeb, and Inktomi), has recently

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surpassed Google as the world's most popular website, according to Alexa's popular monitoring service. With searchers starting to look for information at other search tools, Yahoo! appears to be a clear winner. Ironically, Yahoo! continues to draw much of its listings from Google but industry rumour has Yahoo! switching fully to Inktomi early in the New Year. Yahoo!'s stable of search tools, patents and technologies, and Overture's Content Match contextual distribution system, make Yahoo! an attractive option to Google.

As for businesses depending on Google, we are deeply concerned about the effect this update will have on their bottom lines, especially as Christmas sales are so important. Google will never be able to bring back lost time and it is doubtful that anything Google does at this point will help salvage the season for online retailers. Advertisers who NEED placement today should immediately consider using AdWords since Google is still the largest and most used search tool in the world. Regardless of the fact that it is not working properly, it still drives the vast majority of search engine traffic and is still an essential place to be listed and found.

Good luck to all advertisers on Google. We expect to have either firm answers by mid-January or to see Google revert to an algorithm that does not produce spam on almost every search.

December 16, 2003

The Florida Update... [View from Today](#)

Not much has changed in the past week. We have noticed that Google seemed to stabilize last week but this week, the returns pages seem to be bouncing all over the place again. A couple of developments have occurred that are worth noting though.

At last week's Search Engine Strategy Conference in Chicago, WebProNews Webmaster Garrett French elicited a brief acknowledgement and apology from Google's Senior Research Scientist, Craig Nevill-Manning. When pressed about the effect of Google's algorithm switch on small businesses, Nevill-Manning said, "I apologize for the roller coaster. We're aware that changes in the algorithm affect people's livelihoods. We don't make changes lightly." As Garrett said, "that's good to know", but if you think your post-Christmas expense bill will be a shock, imagine what the small online retailers will face in January and February.

Many of the sites that disappeared in mid-November have reappeared but not in the prominent placements they had enjoyed before Florida was applied. StepForth's site, for instance was oscillating between the #2 and #6 spot under the phrase "search engine placement". The site dropped out of the Top1000 shortly in mid-November and has since resurfaced at positions #42, 48 & 52 over the past week.

There is still a great deal of SPAM and irrelevant listings appearing in the Top10 under most commercial keyword phrases. We continue to see Top10 listings that break several anti-spam rules posted by Google. A search of various datacenters and ranking-servers shows that this trend is not expected to end in the coming two weeks.

Finally, we are starting to see search engine users moving away from Google. This is more than the wishful thinking that was floating about at the end of November; numbers from the website statistics company, Alexa show that both Yahoo and MSN are increasing in user popularity while Google is showing slight declines. We think this means that the users are perceiving problems in Google's listings, both out of personal frustration and because the "experts" are noting the problems at Google with increasing frequency. Whatever the cause, Page and Brin and Co, must be aware of the symptoms and should be feeling some disease as searchers, businesses and webmasters are suffering.