

Questions for the Google Search Quality Team

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Amit, Thank you for giving this wonderful opportunity to interact with webmasters. All the inputs we get continue to help us learn what users would most like and how we can deliver that to them and we profusely thank you for partnering with us for this interview and helping us with our goal to have two-way communication between Google and its users.

Our team is located in offices around the globe, which means someone on the team is working on our search nearly around the clock. A few of our global team members were able to take some time to answer your questions, including John Mueller (Webmaster Trends Analyst from our Zurich office), Koteswara Ivaturi (Project Manager from our Hyderabad office) and Kaspar Szymanski (Strategist from our Dublin office). We also got Matt Cutts (Webspam Engineer from our Mountain View office) to chime in.

1: Google now considers loading speed as one of the many factors for ranking web pages. Does this mean I should switch my blog to a faster, and more expensive, web host or even consider using a CDN?

Zareen : If you are sure that switching your blog to a faster webhost or using a CDN will enhance your speed then I say go ahead my friend. Making your site faster will not go unnoticed by your users. Having said that, increasing server speed alone may not help in some cases. The most common problem is not the time for a page getting sent to the user, but the time it takes to deliver and render all page objects. It's always good advice to fine-tune your site and implement some options (compress your CSS, reduce the amount of JavaScript you need to load and also improve on the caching) to ensure faster loading.

There are lots of tools to help you identify ways to improve the speed of your site. Our official [blog post](#) gives lots of links, and some of the links lead to [other tools](#). But just to highlight a few, the [site performance tool](#) in Webmaster Tools shows the speed of your website as experienced by users around the world. In addition, various free-to-use tools offer things like [in-depth analysis of individual pages](#) . Google also provides an [entire speed-related mini-site](#) with tons of resources and videos about speeding up websites.

Please note , site speed is just one more signal (out of many) in larger picture of Google's search ranking , this is not a high -impact change and therefore better loading speed will not guarantee ranking .

2: Like most other blogs, I have tons of "archive pages" on my blog that don't have any content but merely group content by author, category or tags. Will these pages constitute "duplicated content" and should I block them from Googlebot?

John : Good question. Duplicate content within your site is generally not a problem, however it always makes sense to try to limit it to a reasonable amount to make it easier to recognize your preferred pages. There are [several methods to handle duplicate content](#), and when it comes to archive pages, one

simple solution might be to just show a snippet instead of the full article.

3. Over the years, my university has moved my Web site from server to server, and, as such, the URL has changed six times. They run IIS and use aliases to map all six to the same IP address, so my old links still work. But, Google considers it as six separate Web sites. The site has many years' worth of teaching and research material -- nearly 50,000 files, several entire courses, over 40 articles published in CACM, reports on Internet studies in many developing nations, etc. -- but it is under represented in search. (Unfortunately, I've not paid attention to any SEO things like meta tags, h1, etc.). Is there anything I can do to consolidate the six URLs?

John : One easy way to handle duplicate content across different websites is to use the [rel=canonical link element](#). Other possibilities are included in our [blog post about handling legitimate cross-domain duplicate content](#).

4: I was looking at my Google Webmaster Central report and under Sitemap, it says that the total number of URLs is 2,091 while the number indexed is only 1,501. What can I do to get more of my pages in the Google Index?

Zareen : Google uses a large number of factors to determine which pages to crawl and index. Two important elements to work on are:

- Make sure that it's easy to crawl your pages; try your site with JavaScript disabled and also check your crawl errors in Webmaster Tools.
- Make sure that your site provides unique and compelling content.

Hope that helps :)

5. We publish a lot of original content but there are scrapers who copy our content without giving any credit. The sad part is sometimes these sites, who copy our content, rank higher than the original content creator. How can we tackle this problem? Does Google Search take into account the timestamp when an article was published for search results rankings? Why does Google even index scrapers?

Koti : This is a popular question. At the outset, duplicate content due to scraping does not equate to a webmaster violation because we know that it is not the fault of the webmaster to not have control over who is scraping the content from his website. Google is very good at identifying the original source in such cases and so that takes care of the any potential negative effects that the original source may have. It is very rare that the scraped sites rank better than the original site in the search results; but if that happens you can follow the [instructions](#) .

6. For an image or media-rich website, what are best practices? Too often, the focus remains on written textual content - which of course is a major factor towards a website's relevance to search terms, but sometimes, artworks are also relevant to the search. Other than adding good ALT text and using descriptive file names for image, what can I do to improve my site's visibility in Google Image Search?

Koti : Image Search can be a great source for some additional traffic to your website. Adding the ALT text and using descriptive file names are a must when it comes to image- or media-centric websites. Beyond these, context for the image is going to really help the search engines understand the images much better. For example, if a page has an image of a flower the text or caption that describes the flower should be around or next to the image. Lastly, we recently announced that you can now submit information about your images while you submit your Sitemaps. You can find the announcement here: <http://googlewebmastercentral.blogspot.com/2010/04/adding-images-to-your-sitemaps.html>

7. I already have an XML Sitemap for my website. Should I also create an HTML sitemap? Also, should I include every single page of my blog in the Sitemap (including tag pages and the date-based archives) or just the important ones?

Matt Cutts : In general, HTML Sitemaps can be very handy for your human visitors, and it's a nice additional way to help search engines make sure that they know about all of your pages as well. If you have time or a script that can generate a pretty HTML Sitemap (e.g. for a blog, you could have one page for each year or month of your blog, depending on how much you write), that can work nicely. If you don't have the time or motivation to do that much work, you might consider creating a "Top 10 most popular posts" feature for your blog. I know that as a regular user, I love stumbling on a new blog and discovering that the site owner is pointing out some of their best or most popular posts.

John : It's always a good idea for your XML Sitemap file to include all pages which you want to have indexed. If you have pages such as tag or archive pages which you prefer not to have indexed, it's recommended to add a "noindex" [robots meta tag](#) to the pages (and of course, not to include them in the Sitemap file).

8. I have read on forums that domain expiration dates are a factor in Google rankings and domains that are due to expire soon may be penalized in some way. Is that correct? I have registered a domain through Google Apps and it won't let me renew the domain for more than a year.

Zareen : Matt Cutts addressed this issue in a [Webmaster Central video](#) recently and confirmed that the length of a domain name registration isn't a ranking factor.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y1_1NQWQJ2Q

Your initial domain registration is valid for one year. If subsequent registration renewal fails, you'll have several opportunities to change your billing information and renew your registration. If you purchased the domain through Google, you should make sure that you have the renew option checked in your Google Apps account and have a valid Google Checkout information.

You can find more detailed information here :

<http://www.google.com/support/a/bin/answer.py?answer=56904>

9. How does search quality team look at links from editorials? In recent times there have been incidents where leading editorials were selling paid content (which include links) on their website for brands & business interested in ranking well on search engines. Although they explain they only offer advertorials

with SEO benefits to agencies to promote brand content, doesn't this mean offering a paid content (links) to manipulate SERPs is a direct violation of Google's TOS?

This brings to the question how the Search Quality Team assess links from Newspaper Websites & Editorials? These sites indeed have a long reputation & trust but Google TOS should be same for all regardless of the brand or individual?

Matt Cutts: If you're talking about the recent incident in the UK, we saw that. Google's quality guidelines are clear on this point: paid links shouldn't pass PageRank. Whether the paid links are in an "advertorial" or somewhere else on the page, that would violate our quality guidelines and Google would take action on those violations, both so that the link buyers wouldn't benefit and so that the link sellers wouldn't be trusted in the future by Google.

10. I do have a couple of affiliate links on my website that point to Amazon.com and some other merchants. I am not getting paid to insert these links into my content but will get some commission on a sale. Should I use nofollow with such links?

Zareen : If linking is natural, based on relevancy of a site's content, I don't see a violation of any Google Webmaster Guidelines. While it is legitimate for a webmaster to monetize great content, in order to perform well in Google's search results it is important to take technical steps in order to prevent unnatural passing of PageRank through paid links, e.g. by either using the "nofollow" attribute or by creating a robots.txt file.

11. I have launched a new blog and it obviously won't rank in Google because none of the reputable blogs are currently linking to it. Therefore, I am actively writing guest posts on other blogs as that gives me a chance to get a link from them. Is Google fine with guest blogging and do links 'earned' from writing guest blogs matter?

John : Making and promoting a new site takes time and effort. In general I would recommend putting that work into your own site, instead of creating content for other people's sites. It's much better to create great content for your blog and to let other sites refer visitors to your site on their own. Good luck!

12. My site is all about movie reviews and now I am planning to expand it into food recipes. Should I use a sub-domain (food.example.com) or a sub-directory (example.com/food) for the new topic.

Zareen : When it comes to Google, there aren't major difference between the two, so when you're making that decision, do what works for you and your user. If you use Webmaster Tools (which we hope you do :)) you'll automatically be verified for deeper sub directories of any sites you've verified, but sub domains will need to be verified separately.

13. I have an active blog where I post anywhere between 10-15 articles in a week and Google indexes my new stories often within minutes of publishing them. I am however planning to take a break and won't be adding any new content to my site for a month or so. How will that impact my site as far as

indexing and rankings are concerned?

John : Your existing content will hopefully remain relevant in that time :-), so I wouldn't worry about Google's crawling, indexing or ranking during your break. Google will be ready to pick up your new content when you're back; you don't have to do anything special in a case like that.

One thing that you will want to do—if your site is self-hosted—is to make sure that it's running the most current version, is properly locked-down, secured against hacking and monitored accordingly during your break. We see many blogs get hacked nowadays, and that in turn can affect your site's standing in our search results if it's left in a hacked state for a longer period of time.

14. What's your take on articles submission websites? I do a lot of article marketing & distribution for my clients. These are original articles written and distributed through sites like eZineArticles and iSnare. Obviously besides the exposure my clients get as expert, I am also looking at the SEO benefit of earning backlinks from these posts. How do you treat multiple copies of the same article spread over different sites?

John : As mentioned in an earlier question, it generally makes much more sense to create great content for your own site, instead of giving it to a large number of other sites to publish. Personally, I would recommend not looking at it with regard to the links; think about how users will view the content and the people who created it. Having high-quality content on your own site will make it stand out much more than if that content is posted all over the web. If the content is unique and compelling, it will generally attract links naturally over time.

15. How do I know whether my site has been penalized in Google or not? I know Google Analytics reports can give me an idea but are there any other methods? Will Google inform me about the penalty through Webmaster Tools?

Zareen : Many webmasters worry about penalties when they see their site change in the rankings, and for most times, these changes can be attributed to the nature of the web itself. Google algorithms are constantly changing, to reflect the changing content of the web, and these changes can affect how your website is ranked in our search results. Working on improving your content and the user experience of your site should be your number one priority. In our Help Center we have an article with [suggestions for potential fixes](#), if you see your site's ranking change significantly.

Google uses the [Message Center](#) in your Webmaster Tools account to communicate important information to you regarding your Webmaster Tools account and the sites you manage. If we have noticed there is something wrong with your site, we may send you a message there, detailing some issues which you need to fix to bring your site into compliance with the [Webmaster Guidelines](#). Once you fix your site you can [submit your site for reconsideration](#). Please note, while not all of the messages in the Message Center are for issues involving our Webmaster Guidelines, it's strongly recommended that you make sure that these [messages are forwarded](#) to your email account, so that you are informed about changes or issues as quickly as possible.

16. I have seen different results when signed in to my Google Account vs not signed in, there are times I have searched for a 'query' and clicked on 'ads' which offered better content than one in natural listing. However when I tried the same keyword few days later the site that I clicked through 'ads' was listed in Natural Listing this time. I do understand that Google has personalized my result based on my click-through-data from previous history but would the future of SERPs based on Google Algorithm involve correlating large number of user clicks on 'ads' and adding them to natural result pages?

John : We work hard to provide high-quality search results. In many cases providing personalized search results can help to make them more relevant to you. Ads, however, are separate from natural search results, so I would assume that what you've seen here is a mere coincidence :-). Rest assured that ads do not affect our natural search results.

17. My website has a country specific extension (like example. in for India) but the content is of interest to a global audience. ? How do I ensure that my domain /site is visible in Google search results of other countries as well?

John : Any website can be relevant to users globally; it doesn't have to use a generic top-level domain (gTLD) for that. Using a country-code top-level domain (ccTLD) is fine if you want to create a website for users all around the world. If you're looking to target specific countries (instead of the whole world), you may want to review our recent [blog post on multi-regional websites](#) for more information.

18. I have two blogs – one is about food and other one is about movies. Will it be OK if cross-link the two sites even if the content is not related? I am worried that Google might consider that as a “paid link” even though I run both the websites.

Zareen : Before you begin cross-linking sites, consider the user's perspective and whether the crosslinks provide value. Ask yourself if you would place this link in a highly visible place on your page - if no, maybe it would make more sense to skip the link.

Cross-linking between dozens or hundreds of sites, however, probably doesn't provide value, and I would not recommend it.

19. Googlebot can read and execute JavaScript files but do you also pass any juice to the links that you may have discovered through the scripts?

Kaspar : It's true that we started crawling JavaScript. We don't recommend for webmasters to focus on linking; instead a much wiser way of spending your time is by enriching the site with great content and useful tools. However, if you are concerned about JavaScript links passing PageRank, feel free to use “no follow” attribute. Check out Matt's video on the same topic:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5ZTa9yeRgg>

20. Are all links on a page treated the same or does the order of links matter. For instance, will Google flow more juice to the links that are in the first para of the story vs. the ones in the page footer?

Zareen : Our link analysis is getting much more sophisticated than the original PageRank used to be. To answer your question, we may treat links across different areas in a different way, as some areas of a page might not be as relevant to the content of the page as others. Check out Matt's video where he talks about links in paragraphs : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D0fgh5RIHdE>

21. Some people call a portable computer as a notebook while others use the term 'laptop.' Similarly, a Flash Drive is known as a USB stick, a thumb drive and even a memory stick in some cases. Now if I am writing an article on say "10 best laptops," how can I also optimize it for "notebook" related queries?

Matt Cutts: When you're writing an article, it pays to think in advance about the words that regular users might type when searching for your content. If you identify 2-3 common terms before you start writing, it's not hard to incorporate those synonyms into the content of the post in a natural, non-spammy way. Don't keyword stuff in the article, but you might write "a flash drive (also sometimes called a USB drive or thumb drive) is a handy way to carry around data in your pocket." Or you could sometimes call it a flash drive and sometimes call it a USB stick. As long as you're doing it in a natural way, sometimes it can make the content even more readable than repeating the same term over and over again.

22. Is there any 'optimal' length that can recommend for the page URL and the title?

Kaspar : Not really; instead it's probably best to decide upon these things with the user experience in mind, rather than search engines. If you are interested in optimizing your snippets, feel free to have a look at our [blog post](#) on that topic:

23. I know that inbound links will help my site in Google results but is that true for outbound links as well? I always link to quality websites from my articles where my visitors can read more about a topic but do these outbound links aid search rankings as well?

Kaspar : No, they don't contribute directly towards your site's rankings; however they add value for your readership and they contribute to the community, so feel free to continue this good practice. On the other hand, being selective and preferring quality sites to link to might help in how Google perceives your site.

24. Do ads on a web page affect search rankings? All other factors remaining the same, will pages having 3 ads rank better than a page with say 5 ads?

Zareen : No, ads don't affect a page's rank in our natural search results.

25. Would you recommend any books on web search and SEO related topics?

Zareen : Given the dynamic and constantly changing nature of the web, it might not make sense to stick to a single book. But we have an entire page in our webmaster Help Centre about SEO including the [SEO starter guide](#) which I highly recommend :

<http://www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/answer.py?answer=35291>