

SEO In 2013 – Five Takeaways, and a Look to the Future

Since its inception, Search Engine Optimisation has always been a faced-paced industry. It's little wonder why: it's part of the broader rapidly changing digital landscape, and it's also an industry that is basically a never-ending race.

To get sites found in the search engines, SEO experts need to know the key factors involved in ranking highly. Sometimes, it can seem like the whole industry is about frantically keeping up with Google and the other engines: changes there can mean SEO tactics and strategies must quickly evolve to stay effective.

2013 saw some of the biggest shifts in the industry to date. Here are five takeaways learned this year, and what we see as some trends for the future of SEO.

Keyword Sniping is Dead! No More Organic Search Keyword Data

It's been a long time coming. Finally, Google made a massive change to their keyword tool – by hiding a big chunk of the data. Their keyword tool no longer reports search volumes, which means we have no way of knowing how many searches per month a given keyword receives.

Although there are other tools that estimate keyword search volume, SEOs are no longer privy to exact and accurate information from Google. The implications are huge – no longer is it possible to build a SEO strategy based on solid predictions of expected traffic.

SEO consultants now have to make educated guesses about which keywords to target, which means having a greater understanding of individual markets. Consultants who specialise in SEO for a particular sector and have accumulated industry know-how now have a real advantage.

It also makes website analytics all the more important. Website owners and SEOs will build their own custom keyword volume data, and those that can use analytics to generate actionable insights for future SEO efforts will come out on top in the long run.

The Potential End of Pagerank Updates

Pagerank is Google's signature measure of authority of any given webpage. They've published Pagerank data for every indexed page on the web for over a decade, and they've updated it several times a year without fail.

However, Pagerank appears to be a thing of the past. It hasn't been updated since February 4, and Google's Matt Cutts says there'll be no more this year.

The result for SEO? If this is the end of Pagerank, then there's no longer one neat little number that acts as a proxy for the authority of a webpage. As such it's become much harder to judge the value of a link.

The change comes as no surprise: Google and other engines would love to put a stop to the buying and selling of backlinks to boost rankings. This means that SEOs will have to judge the value of a link via more indirect means. And they'll need to move towards methods that are guaranteed to garner quality links naturally, such as premium content marketing.

As an aside, the end of Pagerank updates doesn't mean Google won't use Pagerank to rank sites – after all, their innovative search algorithms are built on it. But it does mean that businesses and SEO experts won't have access to current Pagerank data.

Conversational Search – Google's "Hummingbird" Update

In August 2013, the big G rolled out perhaps its most important change to the inner plumbing of its search engine to date – the Hummingbird algorithm update.

Hummingbird fundamentally changes search. It's really several different changes, but the most significant one is this: now, the results you see no longer depend exclusively on the phrase you've typed in the search box, but potentially also on what you've entered for previous searches.

Hummingbird is Google's attempt to make search *conversational* – if consecutive searches relate to the same topic, Hummingbird will notice, and return relevant results.

This makes search more closely tied to user intent than the literal words typed in to the search box.

How does this affect SEO? Well this update is sophisticated, and the consequence nuanced. It's too early to tell how SEO will need to change, but Hummingbird will likely prove to be another force that drives SEO away from keyword-based tactics to a more holistic content strategy approach.

The Knowledge Graph

This year Google rolled out a fascinating new search feature. The Knowledge Graph is its attempt to deliver data in a way that directly answers search queries from the search page itself – for example, snippets of tables of data, and Wikipedia-like entries in the right hand sidebar. Bing has closely followed suit, with a similar feature called "Snapshots".

Knowledge Graph fundamentally changes the structure of Search Engine Results Pages. Effective SEO now needs to ensure that website information appears as Knowledge Graph entries, which means paying attention to things like rich snippets and structured data. Content needs to be correctly "marked" so that it appears in searches that produce Knowledge Graph results.

Mobile Reaches Critical Mass

It's been building steam for some time now, but 2013 will be seen as the year in which mobile search optimisation went from 'nice-to-have' to necessity.

By mid-year, over half of internet users in the US were regularly accessing online resources through both mobile and PC.

In line with the growing mobile usage, Google announced that sites with mobile-friendly versions will receive higher rankings. It's pretty clear now that any business worth its salt needs to have a mobile-friendly version of its site to maximise SEO results.

The Future of SEO

Google leads the pack in search, with around two thirds of all US searches flowing through its servers. When it changes algorithms or search policy, the SEO goalposts shift, and service providers scramble to adapt.

2013 saw changes that gave some strong clues as to what we can expect from search engines in future: namely, increasingly relevant results, which are more closely tied to searcher intent.

The 2013 changes show that successful SEO is fast becoming about hyper-relevant, useful content, and far less about link networks, paid links and keyword sniping. Manipulation or "gaming" the rankings is being aggressively phased out – Google's omission of search data is a prime example.

Another trend to watch out for is the importance of social signals in ranking algorithms. We expect to see this trend continue, with Likes, Tweets and Comments playing an increasingly large role in the ranking algorithms. SEO may one day become as much about putting businesses at the heart of the online conversation as about on-site optimisation and garnering quality links.

It's been said that search engines would prefer the SEO industry to not exist at all. While this is patently untrue - Google's own Matt Cutts himself has given advice on how businesses can do their best to rank for relevant searches - they're clearly seeking to wipe out all but the whitest of white-hat SEO techniques.

The bottom line is this: engines thrive on quality search results with laser-targeted relevancy, and they despise ranking manipulation tactics. SEO practitioners will need to heed that fact more seriously in the coming years if they're to be successful.