

## Google makes 'mobile-friendly' sites a must in search shake-up

Change billed as 'mobile-geddon' by some search experts

By Michael Liedtke, The Associated Press Posted: May 17, 2015 8:43 AM ET Last Updated: May 17, 2015 9:59 AM ET

Google is making changes to the machinery of its searches that will reward websites deemed mobile-friendly and penalize those that are not.

It's probably the most significant change that Google Inc. has ever made to its search rankings, according to Matt McGee, editor-in-chief for Search Engine Land, a trade publication that follows every tweak that the company makes to its closely guarded algorithms.

More often than before, people are searching and surfing the Web from mobile devices -- around 60 percent of online traffic is now generated by mobile devices, according to a report published in mid-2014 by research firm ComScore.

As such, websites need to ensure that their content can be easily viewed and navigated by mobile users. Through its new search algorithm, Google is offering a wake-up call to website owners. Sites penalized by Google for not being mobile-friendly could find a dip in users and a potentially a dip in sales.

"A lot of businesses are going to be really surprised that the number of visitors to their websites has dropped significantly," Ken Saunders, a Google search engine expert, told Business Insider. "This is going to affect millions of sites on the Web."

"This change will affect searches in all languages worldwide and will have a significant impact in our search results," Google said in a blog post.

The revised formula, scheduled to be released soon, will favor websites that Google defines as "mobile-friendly." Websites that don't fit the description will be demoted in Google's search results while those meeting the criteria will be more likely to appear at the top of the rankings — a prized position that can translate into more visitors and money.

Here are a few things to know about what's happening and why Google is doing it.

### Making mobile friends

To stay in Google's good graces, websites must be designed so they load quickly on mobile devices. Content must also be easily accessible by scrolling up and down — without having to also swipe to the left or right. It also helps if all buttons for making purchases or taking other actions on the website can be easily seen and touched on smaller screens.

If a website has been designed only with PC users in mind, the graphics take longer to load on mobile devices and the columns of text don't all fit on the smaller screens, to the aggravation of someone trying to read it.

Google has been urging websites to cater to mobile devices for years, mainly because that is where people are increasingly searching for information.

## Bracing for change

To minimize complaints, the company disclosed its plans nearly two months ago. It also created a step-by-step guide and a tool to test compliance with the new standards.

Google has faced uproar over past changes to its search formula. Two of the bigger revisions, done in 2011 and 2012, focused on an attempt to weed out misleading websites and other digital rubbish. Although that goal sounds reasonable, many websites still complained that Google's changes unfairly demoted them in the rankings, making their content more difficult to find.

## Still caught off guard

While most major merchants and big companies already have websites likely to meet Google's mobile standard, the new formula threatens to hurt millions of businesses that haven't had the money or incentive to adapt their sites for smartphones.

"A lot of small sites haven't really had a reason to be mobile friendly until now, and it's not going to be easy for them to make the changes," McGee said.

## Burying helpful content

Google's search formula weighs a variety of factors to determine the rankings of its results. One of the most important considerations has always been whether a site contains the most pertinent information sought by a search request.

But new pecking order in Google's search may relegate some sites to the back pages of the search results, even if their content is more relevant to a search request than other sites that happen to be easier to access on smartphones.

That will be an unfortunate consequence, but also justifiable because a person might not even bother to look at sites that take a long time to open or difficult to read on mobile devices, Gartner analyst Whit Andrews said.

"Availability is part of relevancy," Andrews said. "A lot of people aren't going to think something is relevant if they can't get it to appear on their iPhone."

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