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Google's Leak Reveals How Websites are Ranked in Search Listings: Here's What This Means for SEO

Google documentation leaked, giving unprecedented access to Google's search ranking algorithm. Here are key insights gleaned from the documentation so far.

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TL;DR: Recently leaked Google documentation reveals how they rank websites and pages in their search listings. The leaked information emphasizes the need for engaging, high-quality content and the relevance of timely, trustworthy information. In summary, here are the learnings: User engagement matters, fresh content is good (timely content is better), Domain Authority and backlinks really do mean something, and preferential treatment for government organizations, for example, is real.

Last week, Google documentation was leaked, providing unprecedented access to the interworkings of Google's search ranking algorithm. This collection details an elaborate system of 2,596 modules and 14,014 attributes that are used to evaluate indexed content for search rankings. While the specific weightings of these features remain undisclosed, the documents offer significant visibility into the different elements that influence Google's Organic Search results. With 14,000+ attributes, there are likely more insights to come, but here are some of the key insights initially gleaned from the documentation over the last week or so.

Insight #1: User Engagement Matters (duh!)

Historically, user engagement metrics have been "unconfirmed" factors within Google's ranking algorithm that were assumed to play some role in day-to-day rankings, but that role was never defined. Now, we have confirmed documentation that emphasizes the significance of user engagement metrics such as click-through rates (CTR), dwell time, and bounce rates.

These metrics ultimately help Google determine which pages are found to be "helpful" for users (resulting in higher engagement). For instance, attributes like `badClicks`, `goodClicks`, and `lastLongestClicks` track different types of clicks and user interactions as well as the quality of these interactions. Generally, high user engagement implies that users are finding solutions to their queries, which aligns directly with Google's goals for Organic Search.

As many SEOs are aware, Google has released a handful of core algorithm updates over the last three years with a focus on "helpful content." These recently leaked user engagement attributes may indicate that another way to measure the value of "helpful content" is through the

actual quality of engagement that content produces on the web.

Ultimately, creating content that attracts clicks and retains users' attention is now explicitly backed by Google's documentation. Google's emphasis on these metrics indicates that user satisfaction should be considered as a potential factor when working to improve search rankings.

Key Takeaways

Focus on creating engaging, high-quality content that fundamentally solves users' problems, even if that problem does not provide any immediate value to the brand publishing the content. Additionally, these attributes further emphasize the importance of developing site experiences that are intuitive and easily digestible, further encouraging time-on-site and content engagement.

Insight #2: Fresh Content Is Good, Timely Content Is Better

At this point, content freshness is an assumed ranking factor in most SEO programs. It intuitively makes sense—content from even 12 months ago is much more likely to be factually incorrect based on information and data available today.

The leaked documentation further confirms that content freshness is important, but the attributes used to measure “freshness” also provide additional insight into what Google defines as “fresh” content.

For example, attributes like `syntacticDate` and `semanticDate` extract dates from the content to determine its freshness. `syntacticDate` likely identifies the actual date of publishing or indexation whereas `semanticDate` would evaluate the content itself to identify if the information, sources, and data referenced are up-to-date with other similar information on the web.

Key Takeaways

Content freshness matters just as much as it did before the leak, but we now know that content freshness is measured by more than just having a recent publishing date. To ensure content is fresh, content strategies should not only look at publication dates but also at the actual information and data being shared with users - content with outdated data or that references studies from years prior is likely going to be considered “stale.”

Insight #3: Domain Authority Isn't Just SEO Jargon

For years, SEOs have been routinely told that Domain Authority, Site Authority, or other similar metrics found in tools like SEMRush and ahrefs are not used in Google search rankings. However, this documentation leak confirms years of suspicions: Google does utilize authority as a metric to assess Organic Search rankings.

In short, Google evaluates site authority and trust through backlink profiles, domain age, and historical performance. For example, the `siteAuthority` attribute represents the site's overall credibility, influenced by inbound links and historical reliability. Similarly, the `homePageInfo` attribute measures the topical authority of the homepage based on the correlation between backlink sources and the actual information contained on the homepage.

Key Takeaways

Backlinks still matter. Domain authority or other similar 3rd party

metrics, though likely not measured exactly in the way Google measures siteAuthority, is still a relevant litmus test for a site's authority in comparison to other domains on the web. In either case, tactics to grow authority ultimately have not changed based on this new information: brands should still focus on creating high-value, linkable content and growing a strong brand presence within their given industry.

Insight #4: Chrome Is Used To Measure Engagement

With 3.45 billion users, it comes as little surprise that Google utilizes Chrome to measure user engagement across the web. Essentially, Google appears to gather data from users browsing with Chrome to then inform metrics like on-site engagement, site speed and load times, and overall site usability. For example, the chromeInTotal attribute tracks site-level views from Chrome, providing insights into a website's real-world user engagement and experience-based performance.

Based on this information, Google may even be using Chrome browsers to test different search results rankings on logged-in users and then using those insights to adjust rankings in the canonical SERP (i.e. for users not logged into Chrome - we know some of you still use your iPhone's Safari browser!).

Key Takeaways

As we already know, user engagement matters. Additionally, we also now know that user engagement is measured beyond just search result interactions and is inclusive of on-site experiences as well as other metrics like site speed and accessibility. As a result, brands should consider utilizing heatmap tools and other on-site measurement tactics to identify how users may or may not be engaging with on-site experiences like the global navigation or homepage conversion elements.

Insight #5: Preferential Treatment is Real

During the peak of COVID-19 in 2020, Google and other platforms like YouTube began implementing experiences that provided preferential treatment to government organizations, such as the CDC, to ensure users were receiving up-to-date information about the pandemic.

This style of preferential treatment has become somewhat commonplace in Google's search results today, especially for health-related searches where .gov domains are frequently rewarded with position 1 rankings.

Ultimately, this leaked documentation confirms that certain domains do receive preferential treatment in search rankings, especially for critical topics like COVID-19 and elections. Attributes like isCovidLocalAuthority and isElectionAuthority indicate special treatment for authoritative sources in specific niches. It is unclear if these attributes are turned on and off during critical news cycles or if they are consistently used across search results today, but in either case, the attributes reaffirm that Google does utilize some level of preferential treatment to ensure that specific, authoritative information reaches users searching relevant queries.

Key Takeaways

Though a brand may not be able to outcompete domains already receiving preferential treatment, these attributes also indicate that a given brand could receive preferential treatment if that brand has high enough authority and expertise, full information transparency, and no conflicts of interest related to the topic.

The Bottom Line

The Google documentation leak is a big deal, but ultimately, the attributes and information available within the documentation reinforce current SEO strategies and ranking factors that are already best practices in most advanced SEO programs.

The core of these insights still leads back to the primary focus of any strong SEO program: the user. Advanced SEO programs will keep their focus on identifying the problems and issues their users have and solving them through products, evergreen and blog content, and other on-site experiences.

With this additional documentation, however, advanced programs should also now inform their strategies and tactics with the following:

User experience matters and is likely used as a way to measure content "helpfulness," so brands should start to include user engagement metrics when assessing content performance.

Fresh content is king, but fresh content is more than just a recent publishing date - brands should also consider referenced data, linked sources, and the content itself when evaluating "freshness."

Site authority goes beyond just backlinks. Brands with large backlink profiles but limited industry-specific backlinks are not going to see the same performance as brands that have established their brand name in their industry and received industry-specific backlinks.

Chrome measures usability and load experience and uses them in rankings. Brands should ensure that their real-time on-site engagement metrics reflect their vision for how users should interact with the site's content.

Preferential treatment is real. Brands with authority and expertise, information transparency, and no conflicts of interest are most likely to receive this preferential treatment, though not every topic or niche will be applicable.

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