What Is Site-Speed and Why Should I Care?

A Primer from Harry Roberts

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What Is Site-Speed?

Site-speed, also known as web-performance or page-speed, is a broad term that deals with **how fast your customers think your website is.**

Although it encompasses many technical considerations—from servers and infrastructure to network speeds and user devices—the ultimate goal is to make sure that your website provides a fast and reliable experience for your visitors, regardless of their situation.

Generally speaking, the faster a user's experience is, the happier they will be. This is crucial on the web where people are fickle and exhibit short attention spans. Site-speed could be the difference between missing and making a sale.

Why Fast Matters

There are many, many reasons to care about site-speed. The most important ones start with the customer: users prefer faster experiences. It's as simple as that. Their appreciation manifests itself in different ways—

they spend more money, they're far more engaged, and they're generally happier and more impressed by your website.

Beyond thinking about your customer, faster websites are cheaper to run. A key way to improve the customer experience is to reduce the size of your web pages; smaller web pages will reduce your hosting bills. Everyone's a winner!

Both of these combined spell good news for your business. Happier customers who are spending more money on your site that is cheaper to run. What's not to love?

How Does It Affect Me?

No matter what kind of site you run or the industry you operate in, site-speed impacts you in one way or another.

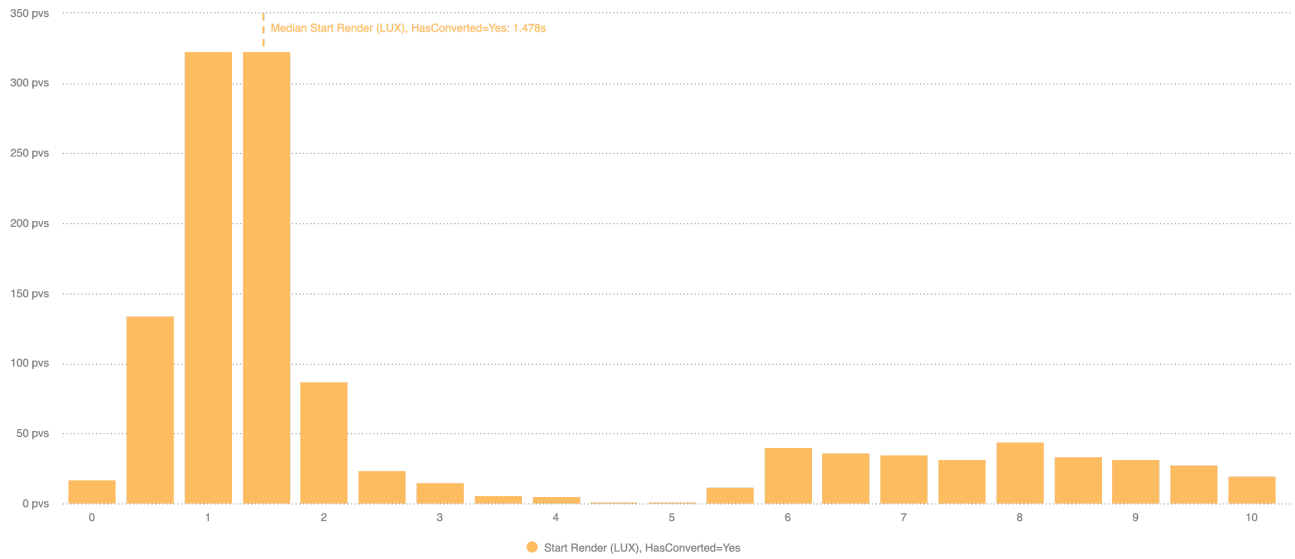

Fig. 1: Most sales happen when pages are faster.

Site-speed plays a huge role in **search engine optimisation**. With **Google's 2020 announcement** that they intend to take page speed into account when ranking your pages, your site needs to be fast.

For ecommerce, faster websites yield **higher conversions, higher average-order-value, and higher revenues**. Online shoppers have access to you and all of your competitors at the click of a finger—speed soon becomes a competitive advantage.

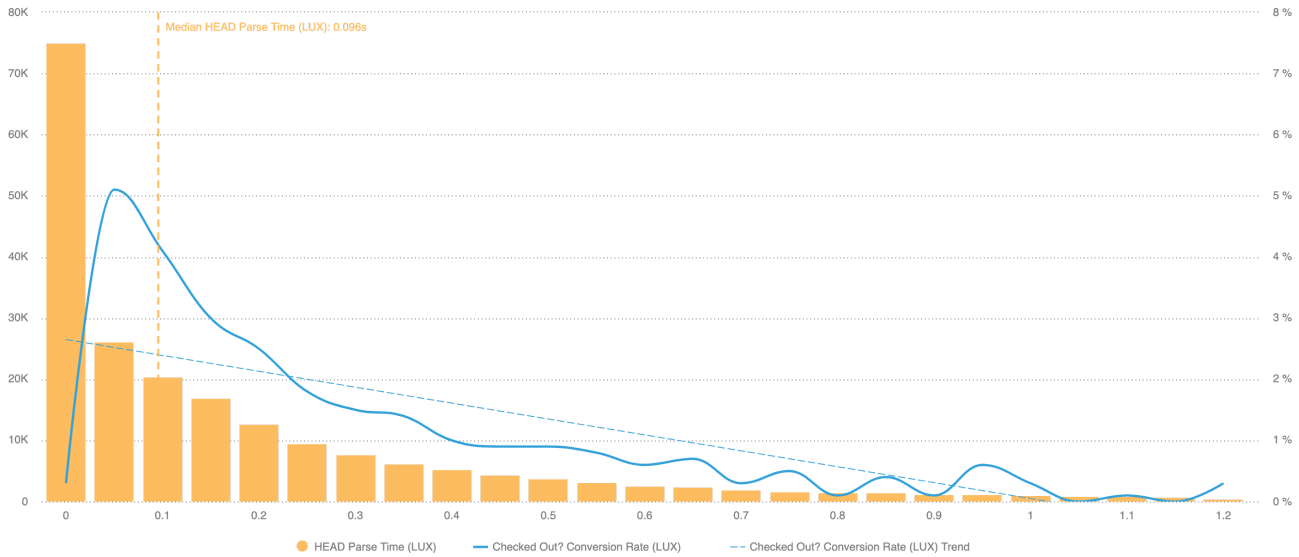

Fig. 2: Conversion rates drop as pages get slower.

For entertainment platforms, **site-speed means greater consumption**: if a viewer can find and stream content faster, they'll watch more of it.

Site-speed **is accessibility**. Users in regions of poor connectivity, visitors with capped data plans, or customers on lower-end devices are often shut out by slower websites. Accommodating to more people broadens your audience—it's that simple.

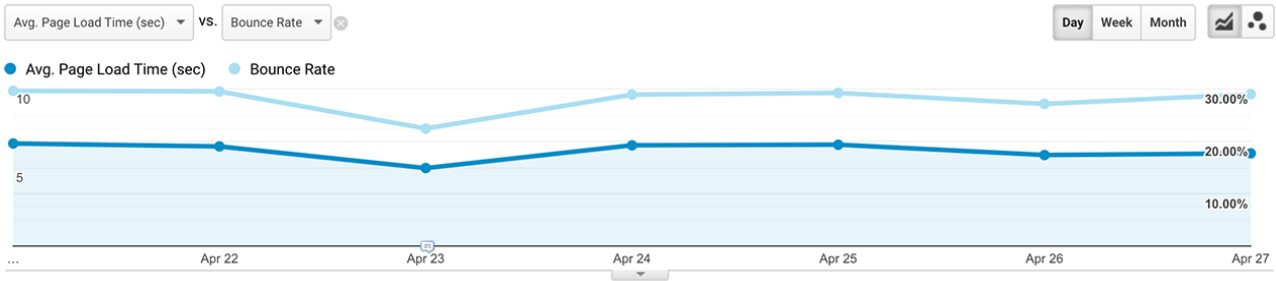

Fig. 3: Site-speed and bounce rate are closely correlated.

For publishers, site-speed means **higher engagement**. More time on site means more ad impressions; more ad impressions means more money.

For everyone, **site-speed means lower running costs**. Smaller, lighter web pages take up less storage and bandwidth for both the site owner and the visitor. Fewer resources means fewer liabilities.

For **the environment**, lighter websites consumer fewer resources—fewer resources means a greener web.

It's **the right thing to do**. Nobody wants a slow website—the user of the site, the owner of the site, Google, nobody. Being faster is just better.

Why Is It Such a Big Problem?

'It's easy to make a fast website, but it's hard to make a website fast.'

The web is fast by default, and simple pages perform well without intervention. As we add more features to our websites, our pages begin to grow heavier. As our pages grow heavier, they get slower. Without a deliberate focus on site-speed from the outset, it's all too easy to slip into dangerous territory. Nobody built a slow website on purpose, which is exactly why it goes unnoticed. It's usually a symptom and a side-effect.

Building site-speed into your process—building a *performance culture*—ensures your entire organisation is aware of what is at stake. Do your designers know what a bloated image does to average order value? Does your marketing team know what impact tracking scripts have on engagement levels? Do your C-level staff know what a one-second slowdown does to revenues?

They should.

The goal isn't to preoccupy your staff with site-speed considerations, but to make them aware of the cost and impact of their work. Can they make informed decisions? Do they have the confidence to design and release new features without having a negative impact on your KPIs?

They should.

A Silent Killer

Website slowdowns are more harmful to revenues than outages. While this may seem shocking at first, once you stop and consider the problem, it becomes quite clear: outages are short, concentrated bursts of negative impact, whereas website slowdowns often go undetected for weeks, months, maybe even years at a time.

Because outages are far more acute, they're solved with utmost urgency—you get the site back online **right now**. They're also far more noticeable—I mean, the site is down! It's hard to miss.

On the other hand, poor site-speed is a much more subversive assailant. It doesn't manifest itself in the same way at all, and its impact is usually much harder to detect as it's spread over time. In fact, if your site has always been running slowly, you

might never be able to detect it at all—after all, you don't have a fast version to compare it to!

Whereas an outage might take 50% off of a day's revenues, slowdowns might take 1% off of a year's revenues. And while outages appear more severe, they're usually over as soon as they came.

Core Web Vitals

One of the biggest recent shakeups in the site-speed industry was Google's introduction of *Core Web Vitals*. CWV is a three-pronged approach to quantify site-speed and page experience, and is now taken into account when ranking your web pages. The three Core Web Vitals are:

- **Largest Contentful Paint:** How soon does a user see something?
- **First Input Delay:** How smooth is interaction on the page?
- **Cumulative Layout Shift** How stable is the page as it loads—do elements move and jump around?

By passing each of these three Core Web Vitals, your pages will get a slight ranking boost compared to the pages of your competitors. And while failing these CWVs will not decrease your rankings, if your competitors pass and you do not, they will start to move ahead of you.

Core Web Vitals are especially important for companies who rely on search traffic, or who operate in a particularly competitive space.

How Can I Measure It?

There are many different tools, methods, and metrics to follow. Some are better than others, and some are more appropriate for different styles of website.

My recommendation as a site-speed consultant is to begin with Google's *PageSpeed Insights*. PSI will offer you two very useful bits of information:

1. **Core Web Vitals:** Does the page you are testing pass or fail the Core Web Vitals test? This is what Google will use when ranking your pages.
2. **Lighthouse:** A developer-facing score out of 100 that helps you benchmark yourself as you make performance improvements. This value has no influence on your rankings.

Go and **test your site right now**! I'll wait here for you.

How did you do?

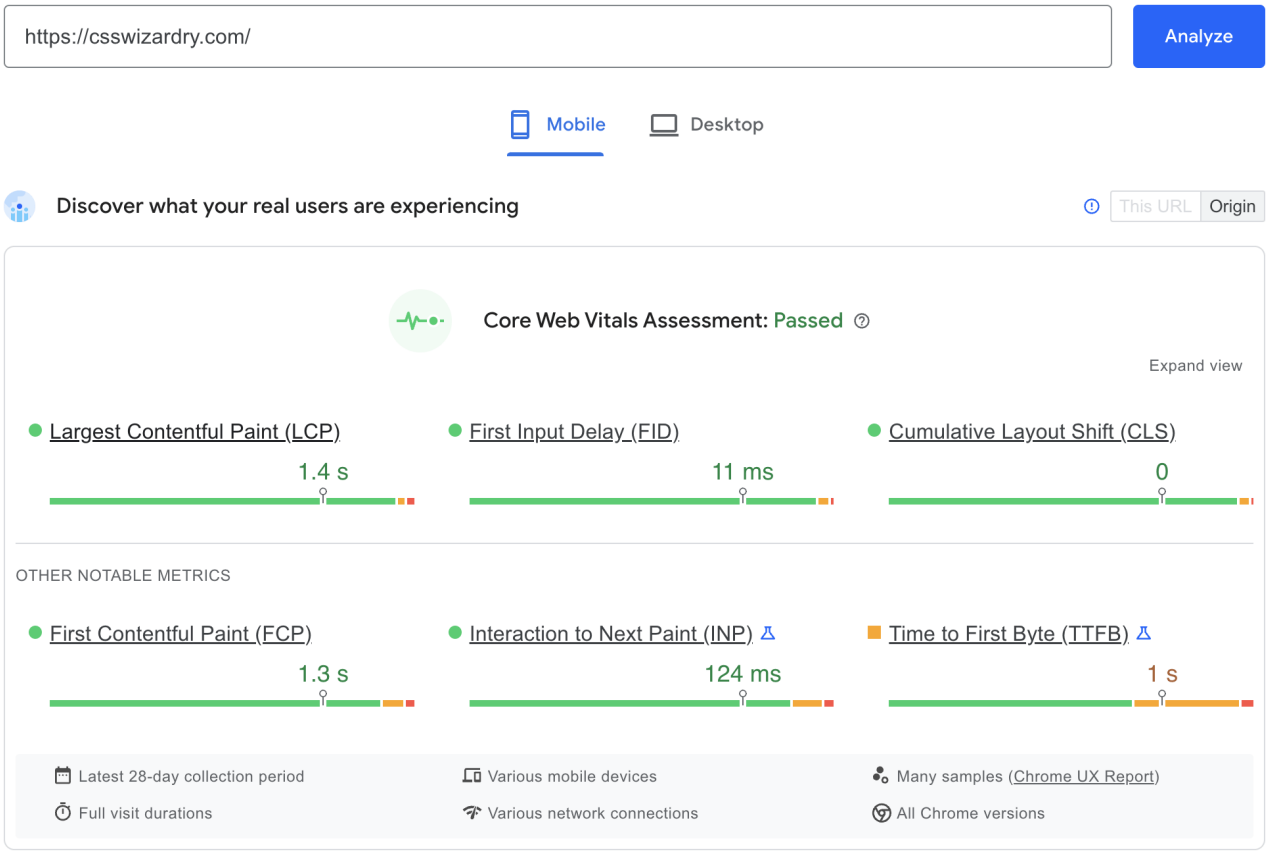

Fig. 4: The Core Web Vitals assessment for my own website.

PageSpeed Insights and Lighthouse do a great job of bridging the gap between technical insights—which are useful to your engineering team—and user experience metrics—which are more useful for the wider business. It is this simple mechanism that begins to democratise site-speed and move you away from purely technical solutions to cultural ones. **At last, site-speed can be owned by everyone.**

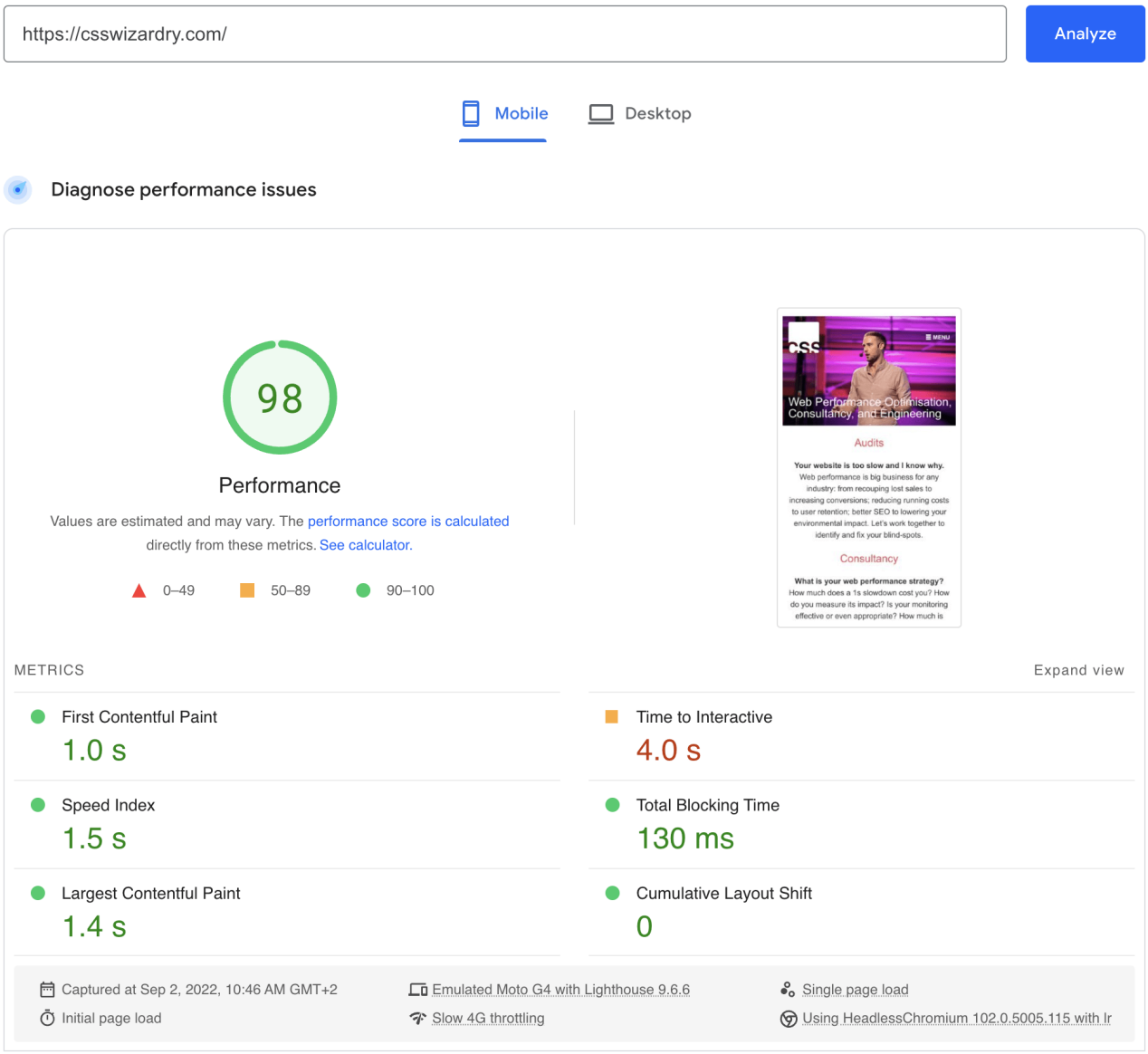

Fig. 5: My site's Lighthouse score.

Going Beyond PageSpeed Insights

PageSpeed Insights, as valuable as it is, only offers very high-level information about the current state of your pages—it doesn't make it particularly easy or clear what you should do next.

Further, Lighthouse is what I call an *off-the-shelf* metric. Make no mistake, it's an incredibly concise and actionable starting point, but every site has a Lighthouse score. Your site is unique. The ideal metric is the one that works specifically for you—a measure that correlates to your own goals and KPIs.

With a dedicated site-speed project, setting up these custom metrics becomes far easier.

How Fast Is Fast Enough?

Good question! All this talk of site-speed and we haven't yet looked at what we should be aiming for.

The definition of fast depends a lot on the site in question, but a good starting point is that you should be faster than your closest competitor. What is their Lighthouse score?

While there are some widely accepted site-speed thresholds that signal a good user experience, for you the correct answer is *whatever speed makes your site the most effective*. Are your users highly sensitive to site-speed issues? Does site-speed have a dramatic impact on conversion rates? These are all important things to know, and will help to answer the question *'how fast is fast enough?'*

Shouldn't We Be Doing This Already?

Yes. Probably. But it's not too late to start.

The best time to solve these problems was a year ago; the second best time is right now. While it is harder to make an existing website fast, it's certainly not impossible. I've built a career on it!

If you think site-speed may have been overlooked at your organisation, keep reading. I have a few pointers.

Want to act fast? **Contact me** to get started.

What Can I Do About It?

1. **Start off by running a few Lighthouse tests** against yourself and your competitors. What is your score? And is it better or worse than theirs?
2. **Speak to your engineering team** about what efforts they've undertaken so far. Don't be surprised or disappointed by inaction—they've had a lot of other things to focus on as well as site-speed.
3. **Hire an expert** if your engineering team is overstretched. Someone who lives and breathes site-speed optimisation will be able to find your problems in no time.
4. **Design a plan** to address the findings of the audit in a tactical and measurable way. Make sure progress is monitored and tracked so you know what works for you and what doesn't.
5. **Build a performance culture** to make sure site-speed is baked right into your process. It's much easier to stay fast if you try.

The Fast-Track to Fast

If you want to get fast *fast*, **drop me a line**. My area of expertise is high-returns, tactical improvements designed to cover a lot of ground quickly.

From audits to training, implementation to consultancy, I work closely with clients to find, fix, and improve site-speed issues. Together, we can address everything you've read in this ebook, and more. Then we'll foster and grow a performance culture that will leave you immune to these problems in future.

You'll be surprised just how quickly we can get it done.

About the Author

Fig. 6: Harry has spoken at over 100 conferences on five continents.

Harry Roberts is an independent site-speed consultant from Leeds, UK. He helps organisations of all shapes and sizes to better understand and solve their site-speed issues. He's available for hire, and he'd love to work with you.

He is a respected web-performance expert who has worked with some of the largest and most recognised organisations on the planet. He writes and speaks extensively on the technical aspects of site-speed optimisations, and is an invited *Google Developer Expert*. He knows a thing or two about making websites fast.

You can find him at **csswizardry.com**, or email him directly at **harry@csswizardry.com**.