

A Changing Standard for SEO Spam:

Google Penguin, Link Penalties & Declining Leniency

Overview

If you own a small or medium-sized business, you've likely hired an outside vendor to build external links to your company's website. More links, any SEO will tell you, means higher Google rankings. It's time to sit your SEO agency down and find out exactly what they've been doing. If you don't, you could be facing stiff penalties from Google.

Since Google started cracking down on websites that attained high rankings through "artificial" or "unnatural" inbound link acquisition, too many businesses have been blindsided with penalties because they assumed their search marketing firm was following the rules — or they didn't care because they were seeing great traffic. But over the past year, Google has started holding businesses responsible for the tactics of their SEOs.

The Google algorithm update that started the crackdown in April 2012, called Penguin, automatically pushes a site down in rankings for specific phrases if the site appears to have obtained external links purely to manipulate search results. Google also instituted global, manual penalties for the worst offenders.

Since then, SEO experts and digital marketers have been trying to figure out what "unnatural" means.



What's the threshold for a Penguin penalty? We were curious, too.

To better determine how businesses have been faring against Penguin, the Portent team analyzed the link profiles of the top 50 websites on the Inc. 5000 list. We wanted to see if, and how much, they rely on spam links to boost search rankings. And we wanted to see whether Google is catching them. While our study did provide insights into the SEO practices of the companies on the prestigious list, we also made an unexpected discovery with huge implications for business owners:

Google is tightening its standard for manipulative linking, putting more companies at risk of being penalized with every Penguin update.

In other words, clean up your link profile now — before it's too late.

Initial Findings

The Portent analysis found strong evidence that Google is steadily lowering the bar for what it considers spam link profiles. We looked at tens of thousands of links pointing at the top 50 websites on the Inc. 5000 list, crawling each URL and using a proprietary Portent tool to score them on likelihood of being spam.

We found that the majority of websites — 36 out of 50 — have “clean” profiles with less than 10 percent of their links coming from questionable sources. A fifth of the sites are pushing their luck with 11 to 39 percent of their links likely being spam. And four websites are clearly at risk of being penalized with at least 40 percent of their links coming from suspicious pages.

We then analyzed the four sites with highly suspicious profiles in more detail to see whether and how they are being penalized by Google. Two of them stood out in particular and gave us grounds for our theory on Google’s tightening noose for spam.

A construction website with a link profile consisting of a whopping 80 percent suspicious links lost much of its search rankings in April 2012 when Penguin was first rolled out. It has since partially recovered and ranks in the top 10 for most target phrases. The company is not under manual penalty, but it may be under algorithmic penalties for specific search phrases.

On the other hand, a lead sales and pay-per-click network with 42 percent suspicious links doesn’t show any evidence of being penalized in organic search traffic or unique phrases. So why hasn’t this site been penalized? It’s not a subtle case, with clear evidence of manipulative linking. Did Google just miss this website?

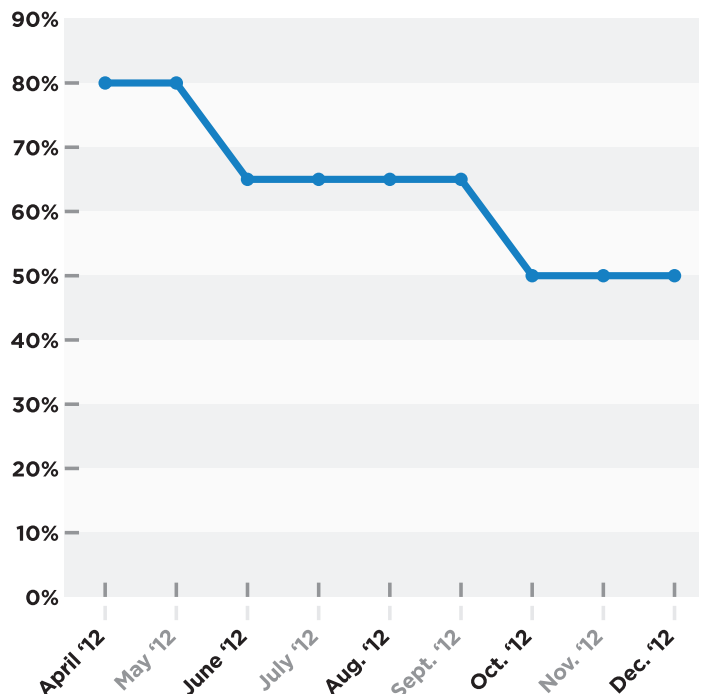
No. The search giant is simply prioritizing.

Digging Deeper

At Portent, we’ve consulted with about 20 companies penalized by Google Penguin. We’ve reviewed several hundred sites. We dug into that library of penalized sites, reviewing their link profiles and when they were penalized. In total, we looked at an additional 250,000 links pointing at penalized sites and 250,000 links pointing at “clean,” non-penalized sites.

We discovered Google has been applying a stricter standard over time. In the initial Penguin update, the only sites we saw penalized had link profiles comprised of more than 80 percent manipulative links. Within two months, Google lowered the bar to 65 percent. Then in October 2012, the net got much wider. Google began automatically and manually penalizing sites with 50 percent manipulative links.

Percentage of spam links (by month)



Clearly, Google is losing its patience with manipulative linking. The company isn't accidentally missing major spammers; it's steadily cleaning up the worst link graph manipulators first and working its way down.

We don't know what the "floor" is for Google's spam tolerance, so don't assume that just because your business hasn't been caught yet, you won't be penalized.

So What Now?

If you're working with an SEO firm, find out what links they're building for you and how. Get a list of links they've acquired or tried to acquire. Log into Google Webmaster Tools and download a list of the links pointing to your site.

Review the list and remove any links that come from:

- **Key phrases in press releases:** Don't throw in key phrase-rich links unless you can honestly say readers will find them useful. Stick to links for your company name, URL, terms that require definition and content that adds value to the press release.
- **Article directories:** Any website with thousands of pages of barely readable drivel on random subjects ranging from STDs to outdoor patio furniture screams spam. These sites provide no real value to anyone, and they will hurt your ranking.
- **Poorly written blogs:** If a blog has huge numbers of poorly written articles covering an absurd range of topics, it's going to get you in trouble.
- **Link lists:** Unless the list is focused and highly relevant to your business, avoid these pages. If the links in the list are completely unrelated, it's a dead spam giveaway.

- **Random forums:** Unless you're participating in a conversation in a meaningful way, dumping a link into a discussion board will hurt you in the long run.
- **Bookmarking sites:** These links have value — unless you've been clicking away like a fiend just to boost search results. Again, share content with value, but don't go overboard.
- **Anything that looks or feels suspicious:** Even if a page is legitimate, a collection of links from the same type of page may be spam in aggregate. Be careful about acquiring any link that might look manipulative when lumped in with other pages.

Here's the bottom line: **If your business didn't get a link through real marketing, take it down.**

Links that genuinely add value are good. Links obtained purely to build rankings are bad.

Start pruning the link tree a little bit at a time. You might lose some quality links and authority in the process, but you can rebuild your rankings with legitimate marketing. On the other hand, a Penguin penalty will knock you down so far in search results that it will be much more difficult — and costly — to recover.

Conclusion

Google's declining leniency means the days of overnight success for search visibility are over. Marketers can no longer find loopholes to boost their page rankings; they must develop a long-term strategy focused on quality content and sound SEO tactics. Instead of expediency, businesses should focus building their online reputation and contributing in meaningful ways to conversations about their brand, industry and products.

Search authority and links are the outcome of good marketing, not the tactics to get there.

If you acquired a link solely to boost page rankings for your business, or you have to justify it as legitimate in your own mind, then it doesn't belong in your link profile. Google doesn't care why or how you acquired unnatural links — it just wants them gone. That's a scary thought for many small and medium-sized businesses, but Google's increasingly strict standard for spam means it's time to stop taking shortcuts and start marketing the right way.

What If It's Too Late?

If you've been penalized by Google, either manually or under Penguin, you need to cut deep or you won't recover. Use the Google disavow tool and remove all links you obtained by:

- **Paying someone other than a charity or foundation**
- **Using any tool with "amazing," "super," "crusher" or any other superlative reference in the name**
- **Begging someone for a link that adds no value to their site**
- **Trading**
- **Writing the same article 100,000 times**

If you're using Google disavow, use the domain and command generously. Otherwise, you can miss a lot of spam links, or they can sneak back in later.

Methodology

To research this report, the team at Portent conducted the following analysis:

1. We fetched a maximum of 10,000 links pointing at each of top 50 sites on the 2012 Inc. 5000 list. We found 85,000 links to start. Then, we verified which links still exist. That left us with 33,000 links for analysis.
2. We obtained SEOMOZ and Majestic SEO data for each incoming link, including SEOMOZ “MozTrust,” SEOMOZ domain authority, and Majestic SEO citation and trust flow. We also obtained the ahrefs score.
3. We crawled each linking page and used a machine-learning-based algorithm to find pages fitting the profile of a link “spam” page. Each page received a 0-1 score based on this algorithm, with a higher score meaning a higher likelihood of spam.
4. We collected data on more than 250,000 links pointing at penalized sites, and 250,000 links pointing at non-penalized sites, to determine their percentage of suspicious links and when they were penalized by Google. We used this to estimate Google’s threshold for what it considers a spam link profile.

About Portent Inc.

Portent Inc. is a Seattle-based, full-service Internet marketing company. Founded in 1995, Portent has grown into one of the nation’s premier Internet marketing firms, helping businesses in the realms of SEO (search engine optimization), paid search, copywriting, social media, web development and more. Portent’s approach has succeeded in industries ranging from technology to travel, for B2B, B2C and B2G companies.

