

RESEARCH

Mobile search practices evolve in Mobilegeddon's aftermath: report

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Mobile search is evolving

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Key differences have emerged this year between mobile and desktop search marketing regarding user experience, content and technical best practices, according to a new report from Searchmetrics.

With more searches taking place on mobile than on desktop these days, the report, "Mobile Ranking Factors," takes a close look at how search marketing has evolved since Google started devaluing pages that do not follow its mobile guidelines earlier this year. In the aftermath of what is widely referred to as Mobilegeddon, Searchmetrics has documented several key trends, such as the use of fewer backlinks and fewer ads on mobile-friendly URLs.

"What's really surprising is the actual difference in numbers between some factors comparing desktop and mobile," said Daniel Furch, head of content marketing at Searchmetrics. "As regards content, mobile search results feature fewer words than desktop, fewer and smaller images, as well as fewer internal links, but at the same time, there are more often structured elements like bullet lists on a page but less advertising.

"Conventional wisdom might suggest, it's surprising that five percent of the top 10 mobile search results still integrate Flash in their landing pages," he said. "But considering the massive market share of Android, it might be a rational choice for some websites to keep Flash elements, even if iOS devices do not support this content."

Better mobile search

Google has been focused for several years on improving the mobile search experience. The biggest change came in April of this year, when Google started devaluing pages that do not follow its guidelines for mobile search, with the visibility of some sites impacted as a result.

Marketers are clearly trying to address the growing importance of mobile search, with the percentage of mobile-friendly sites in the top 30 mobile search results on an upward trajectory since the beginning of 2015, according to the report.

Prior to Google's mobile-friendly update, 68 percent of ranking URLs were mobile-friendly. Afterwards, the number increased to 71 percent.

Searchmetrics also found an increase in the number of mobile-friendly home pages among the top 100 sites. Prior to Mobilegeddon, 80 percent of the top 100 sites had mobile-friendly home pages. By September 2015, the number

had grown to 90 percent.

Some sites have disregarded their mobile visibility and have seen a drop in their mobile rankings as a result.

Others that launched a dedicated mobile site for the first time were able to quickly gain visibility.

"From the top 30 search results on desktop, an average 10.8 sites just don't show up for the exact same search term on mobile," Mr. Furch said. "At the same time, the proportion of mobile-friendly URLs in search results is increasing continually.

"To be successful in mobile search, marketers need to develop a separate mobile-specific online strategy now," he said.

Keyword search volume

Searchmetrics also took a look at keyword search volume by device type.

Using the example of "Timberland Boots," Searchmetrics found that 65 percent of the approximately 370,000 monthly searches for this term take place on smartphones, 25 percent on desktop and 10 percent on tablets.

While the majority of conversions, in general, take place on desktop computers, the data shows that many customers like to research their purchases from a smartphone first.

Taking a closer look at mobile search experiences, Searchmetrics unearthed a few trends.

The average file size was less in all mobile ranking positions compared with desktop, resulting in pages that load more quickly.

The use of Flash elements has continued to decrease.

The percentage of keyword domains is lower in the mobile results while longer average URL names were found in mobile results.

Larger font size

In terms of user experience, the average font size is much larger above the fold for mobile results compared to desktop. In mobile results, structural and interactive page elements appears less frequently with the exception of text structural elements such as unordered lists, which appear more frequently.

Mobile optimized URLs also have fewer ads, images and internal links.

While the average number of images per page is around nine in the desktop top 30, less than four images are found in mobile search results on average.

Search metrics also found that ranking URLs in mobile search results are using slightly more proof terms and relevant terms than in the past.

Mobile search results also exhibited significantly fewer backlinks than desktop results. However, the importance of backlinks continues to decrease, as content on mobile is shared socially or recommended rather than linked.

"Content needs to be structured differently for mobile; and technical requirements like maintaining fast loading times or providing a mobile-friendly user experience across all devices and screen sizes are absolutely obligatory," Mr. Furch said.

"What's also obvious is that local parameters are massively important in mobile search," he said. "If you rank well in searches performed in New York doesn't mean you rank well in Seattle, too.

"Furthermore, marketers need to be aware of the distribution of keyword search volume by device type. Actually, there are many ecommerce keywords which have a higher search volume on smartphones than on desktop."

Final Take

Chantal Tode is senior editor on Mobile Marketer, New York