

## **Florida Update Plus One - The Year Google Grew Up**

It has been a full year since the infamous Florida Update rewrote Google's rankings with a massive pre-Christmas purge of previously well placed sites. The update, which caught virtually everyone by surprise is assumed by most to be the introduction of semantic contextualization software added to a variation of the Hilltop Expert Document Algorithm. It took Google about six to eight weeks to re-establish stable listings and they took a savage beating in the SEO press during that period. For a short time it looked like the shift was a failure with spammy sites and "big-box" stores dominating the Top listings but after a while Google's listings began to make sense again.

The inclusion of Hilltop added great weight to certain types of links and as Mike Banks Valentine points out in today's WebProNews, radically cut the value of reciprocal links. Incoming links were the meat and potatoes of PageRank but five years of commercialization had turned them into junk food. Googlebot needed a better diet and direct one way reference links from "credible" and relevant sites is considered much healthier spider-food than the junk peddled by fast-link dealers or cooked up in kitchen-sink sites between friends.

The Florida Update effected more than site rankings in the SEO industry. New businesses sprang up finding, buying and selling links as SEOs and site owners became obsessed with PageRank values and link-building. Savvy site designers and a few SEOs began producing instant expert sites, using them as "back-door leader-pages" designed to drive spiders rather than attract them. Websites with incoming links from "authority sites" such as news-sites, major forums and other high PageRank properties started to rank better than they had before, thus increasing the value and popularity of these authority sites.

Perhaps the greatest effect of the Florida Update was the sudden rise in the popularity of BLOGS. As explained in dozens of articles over the past two months, Blogs have become big, primarily because of their extraordinary effect on link-densities at Google. When a thousand bloggers rapidly create links to a specific website or Blog entry, that site or entry rapidly rises in the rankings. Proof of this phenomena is found in the results of both Google Ranking contests held earlier this year. The winner in both cases harnessed the power of keyword enriched anchor text-links from thousands of Blogs.

It is easy to speculate on Google's commercial interest in promoting incoming links from Blogs and news-sites. Google owns the biggest Blog software developer, Blogger, and has AdWords/AdSense being displayed across many "authority sites". Google also controls the world's most popular News-Search tools, Google-News. With the pressures of becoming a publicly traded company, Google needs to harness as many revenue sources as possible. When you control the environment, forcing a change in user behaviours may be simpler in the long run than waiting for change to happen organically. There may be some merit to this view. The people working for Google wouldn't be the geniuses they are if they didn't see the financial angles but after a year has passed, it

appears the shift was motivated by much more complex changes happening at the Googleplex.

Google has a number of interesting features and has been busy acquiring the means to develop others. Through direct purchase of software (and often the companies that make it), innovative in-house development and the massive infusion of energy spurred by the IPO, Google has raced ahead of its competition in the past three months and is seen to be leading in just about every facet of search. It is rumoured to be developing a proprietary browser and may even be working on a proprietary operating system. The introduction of a semantic/context driven algorithm that values links from established authoritative sites has improved Google's listings and provided the stability needed to integrate Google's various features into a branded base of products. That many of the most beneficial incoming links originate from websites already involved with Google in one way or another, (aside from their own listings), more likely stems from chasing the brand as opposed to chasing the buck. Once the brand is established, the bucks tend to follow.

Google has established one of the most popular brands that has ever existed but that brand, in most consumer's eyes, only extends to its search engine. Google's founders have always stated that information-flow was their major focus. Information, is a bigger word than search and requires a larger vision to articulate. One year after the biggest shake-up in search engine history, Google is positioning itself to surpass simple search and grow into branded information provision.