



GOOGLE'S MOBILE-FIRST INDEX: EVERYBODY READY?

July 2017



INTRODUCTION

Where SEO is concerned, Google's recommendations are always worth taking seriously. So when the search giant, now preparing to migrate its entire index into a new mobile-first version, recommends that brands and publishers adopt responsive web design in order to survive the shift, those are weighty words.

However, website crawling specialist DeepCrawl, reports that only 40% of prominent websites are responsive, and fewer than 8.5% have taken the alternative option of dynamic serving. Are enough of us listening to Google, which has consistently said search rankings won't change much with mobile-first, as long as websites adopt its recommended guidelines?

This Tug report examines the world's readiness for Google's new index, investigates whether responsive really is all, and details the measures brands need to adopt if they are to be ready in time.

Oh, and Google could begin the migration any minute. No time to lose, then.

Eoin O'Neill, Head of SEO, Tug

MOBILE-FIRST TIMELINE

17 February, 2010

Google's then-CEO Eric Schmidt declares that the company's developers are already mobile-first, and that the world will undoubtedly follow.

08 February, 2011

The FT reports smartphone sales overtook PC sales for the first time in Q4 of 2010

21 April, 2015

Google's mobile-friendly algorithm, which expands the use of mobile-friendliness as a ranking signal, goes live.

5 May, 2015

Google confirms that mobile search volumes have overtaken desktop and tablet in ten countries including the US and Japan.

7 October, 2015

Google announces Accelerated Mobile Pages, an open-source protocol to help publishers build lightweight versions of web pages for mobile use.

13 October, 2016

Google announces its intention to roll out its new mobile-first index, meaning that it will create its search rankings based on mobile content, rather than desktop. Testing begins the following month.



“DON’T FREAK OUT ABOUT MOBILE FIRST. UNLESS...”

The day Google goes mobile-first has officially been coming since 17 February 2010. Then-CEO Eric Schmidt told Barcelona’s Mobile World Congress that the search giant’s programmers already were mobile-first, prioritising mobile app development over old-fashioned desktop work.

Schmidt predicted that smartphone sales would soon exceed those of personal computers. The following year, they did - and on 5 May 2015, Google confirmed that mobile search volumes had overtaken desktop in ten countries including the US and Japan.

The day Google truly goes

mobile-first - when it switches its search index from one that evaluates desktop content to one driven by mobile content - is still on its way, but it’s not far off now. Google has been testing a mobile-first search index since November 2016 and the full roll-out, which will take some months, could in theory begin at any time.



SO WHAT DOES MOBILE-FIRST MEAN?

For website publishers, mobile-first indexing means that their organic Google ranking - historically based on the content, links, popularity, speed and accessibility of their desktop site - will now be based on the equivalent qualities of the mobile version. For those who only have a desktop site, Google will still crawl it and index it, but they needn't expect to be rewarded for their old-world ways.

Google has always taken a reassuring tone on the impact of mobile-first indexing, stressing that it wants to keep disruption and dramatic ranking shifts to a minimum. "Don't freak out," Google spokesman Gary Illyes told a conference in March. "Especially if you have a responsive site."

For those who have responsive sites - designed to adjust to the size of the screen on which they're being viewed - that seems to be definitive advice. But new research from DeepCrawl indicates that only 40% of prominent websites actually are responsive. Meanwhile, fewer than 8.5% have taken the alternative option of dynamic serving - where users are served different HTML, depending on their device.

Either approach ought to see a domain safely through the mobile-first shift. But on this evidence, most domains are still in the unprepared contingent. While the word from Google is to stay calm, there are many publishers out there who could probably afford to be freaking out a bit more.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MOBILE



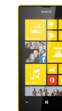
1999
WAP HTML



2007
Separate Mobile Pages (Mobile Site or Dynamic Delivery)



2009
Responsive Design



2014
Deep App Linking



2015
AMP and Progressive Web Apps



2017
Mobile-first Indexing



WHAT IS GOOGLE THINKING?

Google wants to keep pace with the world's ever-growing mobile habit, by effectively re-writing its search index to put the mobile experience at its heart.

"Today, most people are searching on Google using a mobile device," a Google product manager posted on its Webmaster Central blog in November 2016, announcing the beginning of mobile-first tests. "However, our ranking systems still typically look at the desktop version of a page's content to evaluate its relevance to the user."

When the mobile page has less content than the desktop version Google's crawlers have evaluated, that leaves mobile users stuck between Google's desktop-first result and the mobile reality.

Google has already taken great pains to standardise CPC rates between desktop and mobile. With ad business taken care of, the time has come to look at SEO, and to bring the index into line with a mobile world.



WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT MOBILE-FIRST?

The mobile roll-out is a major piece of engineering - the existing desktop index contains 55bn web pages.

When the mobile transition begins in earnest, it is likely to take six to nine months, and will probably quietly take place in batches.

“The team behind the mobile-first index wants it to launch this year,” Google’s Gary Illyes told the SMX West conference in March. “We’re still experimenting. We don’t have a timeline. It could be a few months or quarters, but it’s definitely not weeks [from now].”

In theory, the roll-out could take place any time, but the indications from Google are that they’re not there yet.

Reading between the lines, DeepCrawl chief growth officer Jon Myers guesses at a full roll-out starting late Q1 2018.

“They are not really giving an answer. They are talking about quarters rather than weeks. I could be completely wrong, but the way they tend to do things suggests early next year.”

“If you have a responsive site or a dynamic-serving site where the primary content and markup is equivalent across mobile and desktop, you shouldn’t have to change anything”

Google on its plans for a mobile-first index,
November 2016

Source: (7)

40%

of the top 100,000
websites are **responsive**

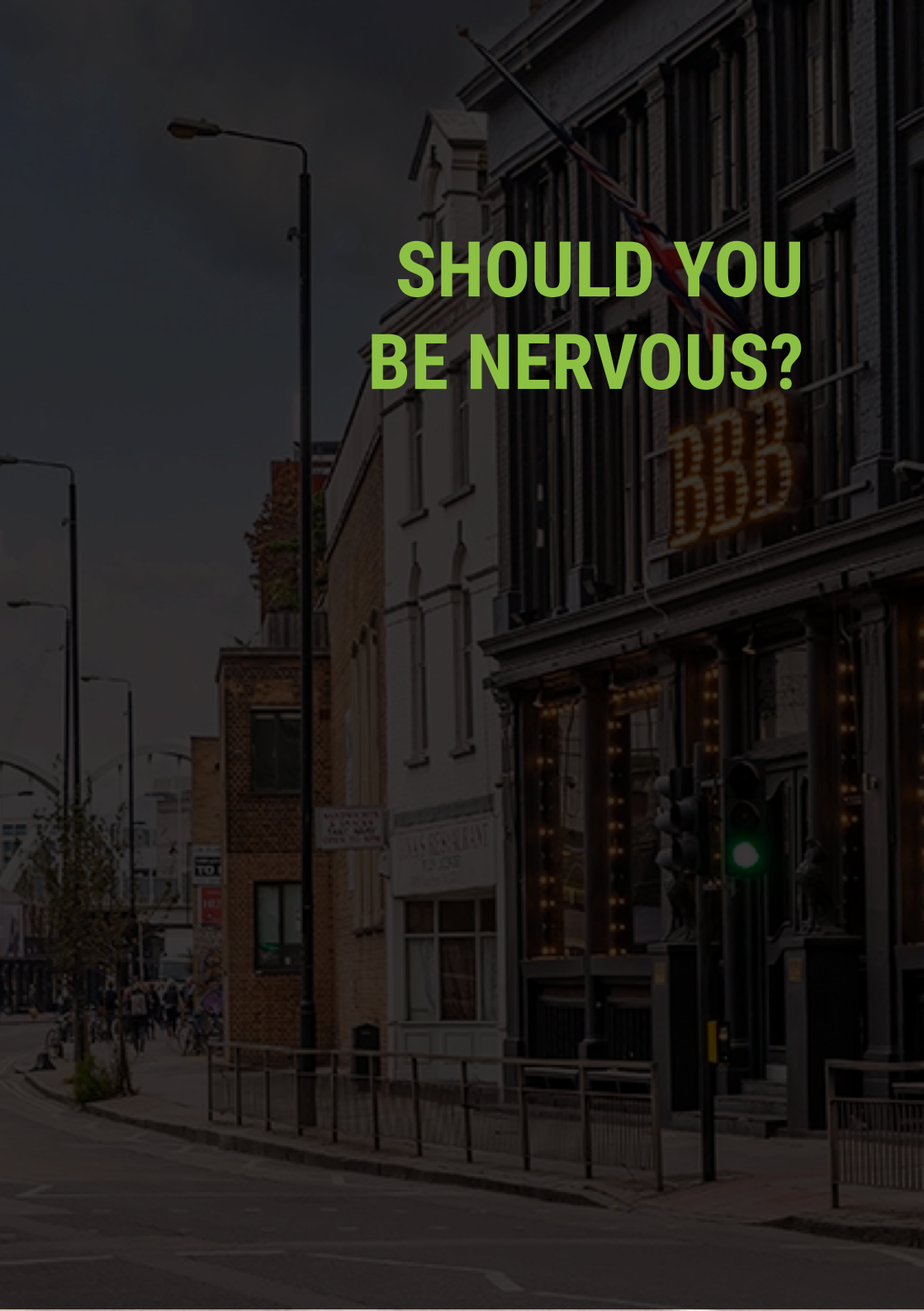
8.5%

are **dynamically served**

91%

of websites that redirect
to mobile don’t use Google’s
recommended HTTP Header

Source: DeepCrawl Study, 2017



SHOULD YOU BE NERVOUS?

Who needs to look at their mobile site design?

- Those without a responsive or dynamic-serving site
- Those whose mobile sites have significantly less content than their desktop sites, or lack structured data
- Those without a mobile site at all. Google will still rank them based on their desktop site, but Google's algorithm gives a boost to those with a mobile-friendly site

"One of the first things Google came out and said was not to worry - which obviously fills you full of fear and wonder," says DeepCrawl's Jon Myers. "But at the end of the day, what they want you to do is have a mobile site. People are saying, 'my mobile site has less content than my desktop one - should I be nervous?' The reality is, potentially yes."

The worst-case scenario

Google wants a seamless migration from desktop to mobile index. It's pushing mobile, but it isn't necessarily trying to catch anyone out. Google, publishers and marketers all desperately want to avoid a dramatic ranking upheaval as mobile indexing comes online.

"In all of this, the worst thing in the world for Google is the whole thing just falls apart for them: rankings bounce around all over the place, all the commercial sites drop out - which could cost Google an absolute fortune," says Myers.



HOW WILL GOOGLE'S RANKING METHODS CHANGE?

Mobile sites have far less metadata than desktop sites, so one of Google's challenges is to find ways of replicating the signals they are used to getting from desktop sites. SEOs need to pay close attention, and learn to tag content.

Always disdained by Google on desktop sites, expandable content will take on a new significance in the mobile-first index, according to the search giant: tabs, accordions and expandable boxes will come in handy.

Inbound links, which have always had a big influence on the desktop ranking in terms of quality and relevance, aren't as common in mobile. Google is working on somehow replicating the system, though they have made no definite announcements.

MOBILE-FIRST CHECKLIST

1. Go responsive

Mobile sites need to do everything the desktop site can do. The simplest way is to use a responsive design that allows one site to flex between devices.

Those with a responsive or dynamic-serving site, where the primary content and markup are the same across desktop and mobile versions, ought to deal with the indexing change with few issues.

"I wouldn't say that there are nasty surprises to come, but the main crux is you have to

look at a responsive approach," says Myers. "If you have got an unresponsive site, with static HTML, you could be looking at a car crash."

2. Synchronise content between desktop and mobile

If desktop and mobile sites are to remain separate, they need to feature entirely the same content. If there is any difference, it should be in favour of the mobile site, which is going to be the primary site from now on. Update the mobile site first to ensure it's as fresh as possible.

3. Crawl your own website

If your website is dynamic, run a web crawl and an analytics crawl. The first will compare the architecture, linking structure and crawlability of the desktop and mobile versions. The second will check if you have mobile equivalents for important desktop pages.

4. Work on speed

Page speed has been a ranking factor for Google since 2010, and under mobile-first, the onus will be on zippy mobile pages. Developers need to think of

clever ways to get that speed up, investing in AMP where appropriate - Google preloads AMP pages, images and scripts to force them to be fast - and likewise pre-loading content into CSS files for rapid access.

5. Go beyond responsive

Progressive Web Apps (PWAs) effectively provide an app-like experience on the mobile web, working on or offline and leaving behind many of the inherent limitations of the web. If you're planning for the future anyway, look into PWAs.



CONCLUSION

If the prospect of sweeping changes to Google's all-important index is faintly terrifying, there is comfort to be had. Tug's clients, if you happen to be one, are well set up for the shift. Most are responsive; those that aren't have good reasons not to be. Either way, all the necessary content, tags and headers are typically in place.

It's also worth remembering that in shifting to mobile-first, Google is simply moving into step with an already mobile-first world. Many brands have already reckoned with the boom in mobile web usage, and their housekeeping is up to date. Some websites, meanwhile - such as those with complex transactional functions - don't actually suit a responsive design. So although responsive may be Google's preference, a separate m.dot mobile domain, properly configured, may still be the best solution for particular publishers.

Certain industries, it should be noted, have been less attentive to shifting search habits than others. The hospitality industry, for instance, with its focus on real-world experiences, is often slow to update its content and technology online. Businesses that have fallen behind the times tend to know who they are, and now could be the moment they consider dragging their design and content into the present.

Ultimately, the issue - as Google inches towards its big migration - is not one of responsive = good, non-responsive = bad. Far more important is that brands ensure their mobile experience is a good one, and that the content and functionality of their mobile domain won't let them down when Google finally flips the switch.



CONTACT

To talk to Tug about how you can leverage the power of social media and content for your brands, call, email, tweet or meet us for a drink.

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