

# FEED THE PANDA! OPTIMIZE CONTENT FOR 4.0 AND BEYOND

# EBOOK OUTLINE

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# INTRODUCTION

Content marketing is simple in theory: create relevant content, and search engines will rank your content at the top of the results. Online visitors will flock to your website to consume your content and in turn become new customers.

If only it were that easy.

Google is making algorithm updates every month and its search results page has changed significantly in the last few years. Sometimes a marketer does everything right for a long time, only to see a page's ranking plummet with the sudden release of a new algorithm update. All they can do is research the best they can, and roll that website back up the proverbial mountain.

This book will alleviate some of the frustration of the newest algorithm update, Panda 4.0. We'll touch on the history of algorithm updates, talk about Panda 4.0 and where it fits in Google's plan, and break down the state of today's content marketing and the emergent best practices.

## THE HISTORY OF GOOGLE SEO ALGORITHM CHANGES

Unbeknownst to the vast majority of Google users, there are hundreds of algorithm updates taking place each year that affect SEO and web page ranking. Some of these updates are shared with the wider public and given grand/cute titles, while most aren't publicized or given a name at all.

As most internet users over the age of 25 already know, Google wasn't always the go-to search engine for web surfers. Back in 2000, Google shared prominence with many search engines, including Excite, Yahoo!, Lycos, and Magellan. Where are these search engines now? Mostly dead or acquired (Bing and Yahoo!). Google has achieved – and so far maintained – the top spot among competitors (67% market share) largely because of its flexibility and constant updates to make its services better. In the past five years, there have been countless changes to the algorithm and visual layout that makes Google Search so effective. Here's a brief overview:

### APRIL 2010: GOOGLE PLACES

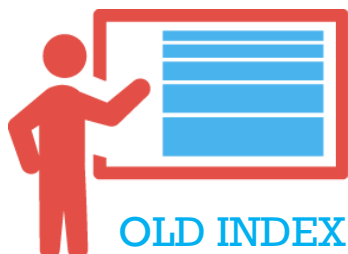


Google Places replaced the Google Local Business Center, and aligned the search results for place names more closely with local listings. The most important change that this algorithm update brought on was the ability of small local businesses to put themselves on Google Maps and have their websites listed much higher than before. Suddenly it became incredibly important for small businesses to embrace SEO techniques that included their location.

## JUNE 2010: GOOGLE CAFFEINE



Google released the new Caffeine algorithm with the future in mind. Content online was changing drastically, now including video, images, news, and real-time updates. At the time, Caffeine provided [50 percent fresher results](#) for web searches than their last index. With more content being published more often, Caffeine focused on analyzing the web faster and updating their search index on a continual basis. With proper SEO fundamentals, webmasters and marketers could be confident that new content would be indexed quickly and fresh content could play a larger role in search results.



OLD INDEX



CAFFEINE

## DECEMBER 2010: SOCIAL SIGNALS



The Social Signals algorithm change was long expected of Google in the face of the onslaught of social media. With this update, Google (as well as Bing) [stated](#) that Twitter and Facebook influence search results. In an [interview with Danny Sullivan](#), Bing said, “We do look at the social authority of a user.” Google also stated that they “compute and use author quality” and “use this as a signal.” Google+ and authorship will begin to become integrated in search marketing strategies.



## FEBRUARY 2011: PANDA ALGORITHM UPDATE

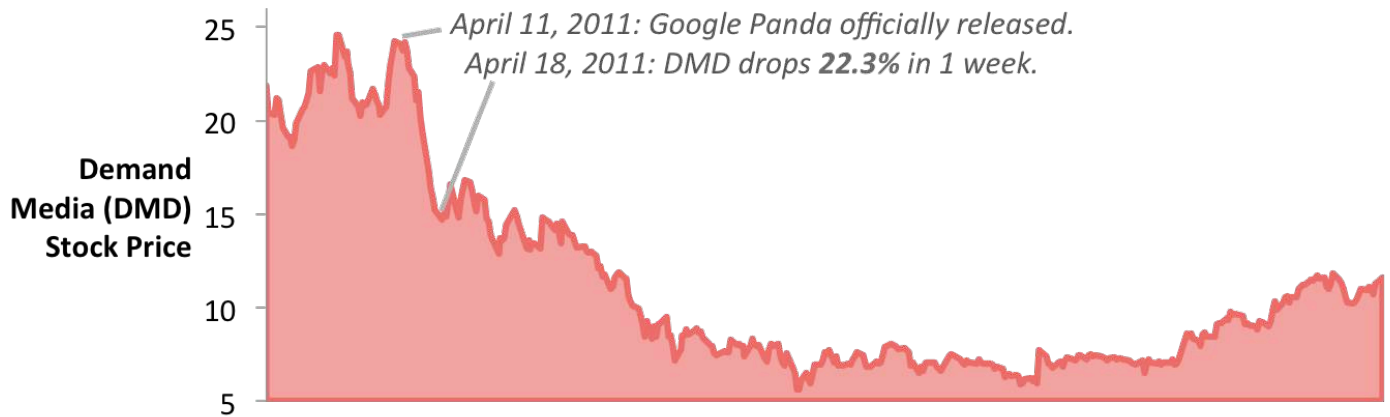
In February 2011, the first Panda algorithm update (also known back then as the Farmer update) turned SEO on its head, with its goal of penalizing websites with low-quality and spammy content. Without officially stating that this update was to target content farms, it is clear that the update penalized sites that [duplicate content](#).

Prior to this update, marketers could pay increasingly low rates to content farms that churned out hundreds of low-quality articles per day. So long as they peppered their work with keywords, Google would find it and rank it. The Panda update changed the focus on content from quantity to quality.

The update was expected to affect about [12 percent of the US search results](#); it rolled out worldwide in April, 2011 and it impacted many websites. Hubpages.com, launched in 2006, found that after the Panda update, their SEO visibility [dropped by 62 percent](#). Other sites found an even greater SEO visibility decrease. This chart from [SearchMetrics.com](#) outlines the biggest losers from the Panda update:

Domain	OPI_today	OPI_last	Difference	%
blippr.com	11,024	529,970	-518,946	-97.90%
suite101.com	19,874	263,529	-243,655	-92.50%
tradekey.com	2,970	38,237	-35,267	-92.20%
associatedcontent.com	23,687	281,343	-257,656	-91.60%
articlesbase.com	13,492	157,958	-144,466	-91.50%
helium.com	7,170	83,184	-76,014	-91.40%
faqs.org	15,971	140,951	-124,980	-88.70%
freedownloadscenter.com	23,216	192,128	-168,912	-87.90%
mahalo.com	56,305	442,563	-386,258	-87.30%
allbusiness.com	2,694	19,995	-17,301	-86.50%

Panda didn't just affect website traffic and SERP visibility; it also had a real impact on businesses' revenue and stock prices. Take a look at Demand Media's (eHow) stock price after the Panda update:



Panda continued to be reworked and updated throughout 2011 and beyond. Many of the updates were minor and impacted few sites.

## APRIL 2012: PENGUIN



Panda was – and continues to be – an upheaval in the old world of content farms. Google continued to fight against link and web spam, penalizing sites that used tactics such as:

- ▶ Link schemes
- ▶ Cloaking, “sneaky” redirects
- ▶ Spammy and overused anchor text phrases
- ▶ Spammy link profiles (quantity vs. quality)

Google stated that the Penguin update was expected to [impact about 3 percent](#) of English search queries.

## JULY 2013: THE KNOWLEDGE GRAPH EXPANSION

The Knowledge Graph is a Google application that attempts to find semantic meaning in a web search. The KG amasses information from many sources. In July 2013, the KG-assisted search results expanded by 50 percent with an unexpected algorithm update from Google. In terms of SEO, the context of a keyword became more vital.

## AUGUST 2013: HUMMINGBIRD

Hummingbird took its place in August as Google's new and largest algorithm, with Panda/Penguin being smaller algorithms incorporated within. With the Hummingbird update, Google sought to have its search engines work more effectively for mobile – specifically voice queries. The order of the words took on a more important role, as Google had discovered that people using voice browsers tended to form their query as a question. Hummingbird directly affected mobile-based SEO so that Google could work more effectively on smart phones and tablets.

Hummingbird's effect on desktop should not be underplayed; its emphasis on natural-sounding language is supplemented neatly by Panda, and together they shape how we've drafted content over the last year. It also incorporates entity relationship and semantic markup, the new wave of influence indicators that have gradually overtaken potentially spammy link profiles.

# PANDA 4.0 AND HOW IT FITS THE ALGORITHM ECOSYSTEM

In March 2013, Google said that there would be no further Panda update confirmations because “they’ll be incorporated into [the] overall algorithm.” Roughly translated, Google said they’d update Panda when they wanted to, without announcing that any changes have happened.

Most recently, Google [rolled out Panda 4.0 in May](#). It continues the Panda trend of fighting spammy and duplicate content with a focus on finding and rewarding authoritative content.

It’s hard to pin down the specific changes in any algorithm update (especially with Panda 4.0 due to Google also releasing the [Payday Loan 2.0 update](#) May 20th, 2014), but there are a few things that we know for sure about Panda 4.0:

1.

[Content-Based Topical Authority Sites](#) are rewarded and given more SERP visibility. These are more specialized websites that focus on creating a lot of valuable content around one topic, rather than generic websites highlighting all sorts of topics. eMedicine improved SEO visibility by 904 percent after the Panda 4.0 update, highlighted on [Cognitive SEO’s blog](#):



2.

Websites can’t rely on syndicated content or repurposing curated content. Websites that historically repurpose existing content do not provide authoritative value on a specific topic. The importance of [consistently publishing original, high-quality content](#) that is widely shared has never been more critical to success in today’s SEO landscape.

3.

According to Google’s Matt Cutts back in June 2013, Panda updates had been rolling out, first monthly and then in 10-day cycles, without any public proclamations. Yet less than a year later, Google alerted the world to Panda 4.0, which would seem to indicate that it’s different – and more significant – than its unpublished predecessors. This was the first noted Panda update and algorithm update post-Hummingbird; both focus on content and the end user.

4.

In the early days of Panda, with the quicker iterations, brands penalized by Panda could feasibly clean up their content and get rewarded in the next refresh. That cycle may have lengthened, which means brands should get their content in order before they’re penalized at all.

In addition to what we know, we have a couple of very well-informed guesses:

1.

In an internet real estate that focuses on entity relationships and natural-sounding language, Panda 4.0 will reward the same type of content food. Remember that Panda 4.0, unlike the original Panda, came after the incorporation of both Penguin and Hummingbird, meaning Panda 4.0 has surely been shaped by those updates as well.

2.

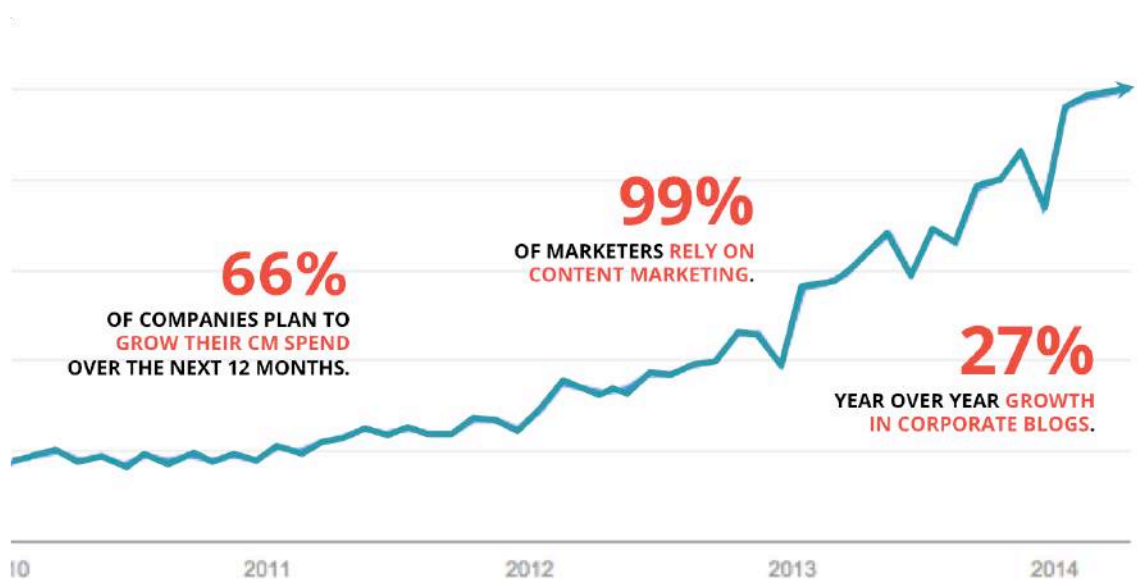
Panda 4.0 will prove to be a major algorithm update instead of a mere data refresh (meaning there'll be a difference in how Panda evaluates your on-site content).

## THE EVOLUTION OF CONTENT MARKETING AND INBOUND MARKETING

If there is one consistent theme among all the latest algorithm updates, it's that Google has made it clear that they value fresh, original, reader-friendly content.

At the heart of Panda is content. Content marketing has become a necessity to any marketing strategy. Consumers are seeking answers to questions across every vertical, and brands must now own original content if they hope to capture that demand. Their content must be valuable, engaging, and — most importantly — written by writers who have their fingers on the pulse of a company's respective industry.

It's no secret that content marketing is a trending strategy; just look at the search trend history, with some accompanying stats:





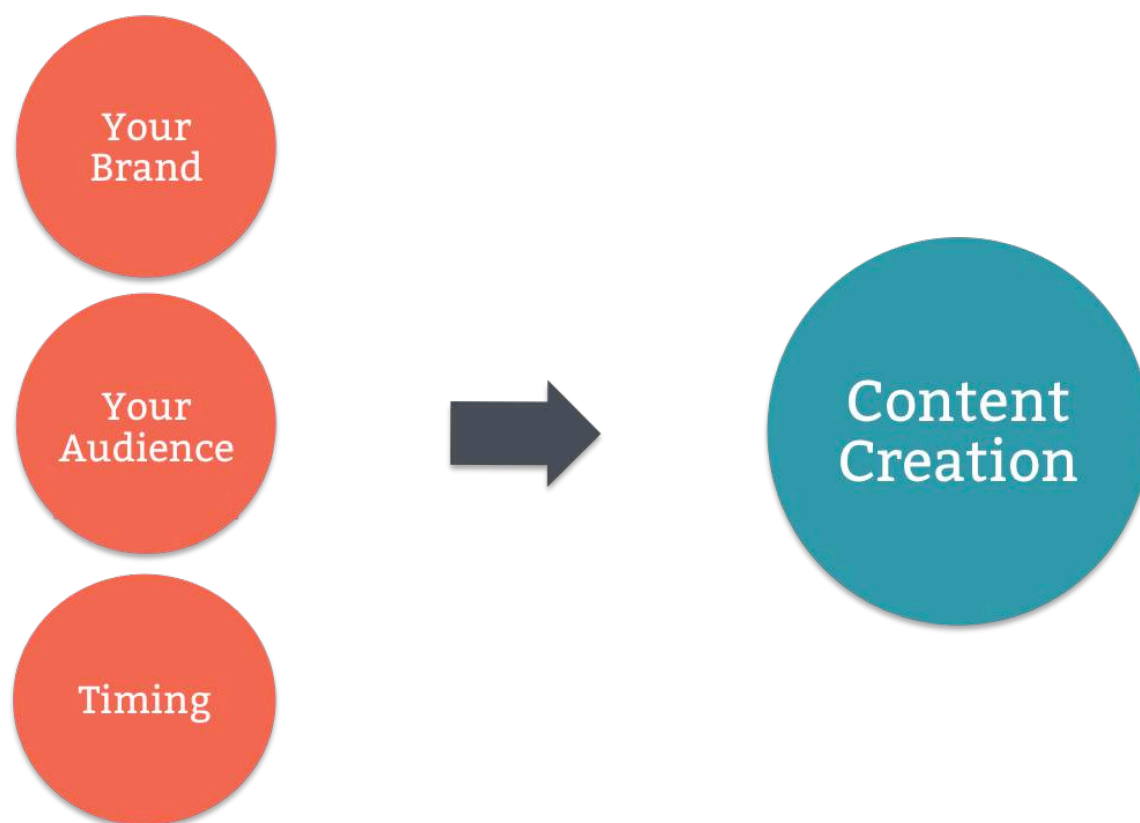
Content marketing and inbound marketing's philosophy are in line with Google's algorithm updates. Inbound marketing encourages brands and websites to answer customers' questions with high-quality original content, bringing customers to your site through your brand's authority rather than interrupting them with ad messaging.

As more brands begin to get into the world of content writing and publishing, many marketers are struggling to shift their digital marketing backgrounds to editorial strategies. Many marketers are turning to agencies and services to help with their content marketing strategy, but today's [content marketing landscape](#) can be quite confusing. There are content syndication companies, content curation companies, content creation companies, social media marketing agencies, content marketing agencies, SEO agencies, and marketing automation companies.

Whether or not you engage in working with one of these companies, here are some best practices when it comes to creating content. Effective content takes more than just mindless creation; brands must consider a few factors in producing good, algorithm-friendly content.

# 1

## **DON'T JUMP INTO CONTENT CREATION – UNDERSTAND YOUR AUDIENCE, BRAND, AND TIMELINE.**



Too often brands will publish an abundance of content and be surprised that their content isn't an instant marketing success. Create an editorial calendar with your marketing team where you decide on a consistent publishing schedule, theme, and target audience.

# 2

## SEGMENT CONTENT BASED ON A BUYER CYCLE

### Early Stage

Thought leadership and enjoyable content to build brand, awareness, and desire

Blog, e-books, research data, funny videos, curated lists, infographics, webinars

### Middle Stage

Tools that help buyers find you when they are looking for solutions

Buying guides, RFP templates, ROI calculators, definitive guides, analyst reports

### Late Stage

Company-specific information to help evaluate and reaffirm selection

Pricing, demos, services information, 3<sup>rd</sup> party reviews, customer case studies

Breaking your content into three different stages allows you to focus on different goals for each type of account, address more relevant topics, and stay organized.

# 3

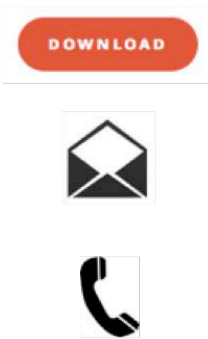
## DEFINE SUCCESS

As for measuring the impact of content marketing, that varies by business model and type of content.



Content marketing programs in the early stages should focus on engagement metrics such as traffic and social media shares. This content should mostly be early stage, and your marketing efforts should encourage engagement and sharing.

Middle-stage content should focus on bringing in leads. Middle-stage content is relevant to your company’s products and services, bringing in leads with gated content or newsletter subscription offers. Lastly, a mature content marketing strategy has revenue goals associated with various content types. Below, you can see that both pieces of content have different goals. On the left, a later-stage piece of content is measured on whitepaper downloads and qualified leads. On the right, the earlier-stage piece of content on the content marketing landscape is focused on engagement metrics.



## Qualified Leads



## Engagement

Here’s a basic breakdown of common [B2B and B2C content marketing goals](#):

- Web Traffic
- Sales Lead Quality
- Social Media Sharing
- Sales Lead Quantity
- SEO Ranking
- Time Spent on Site

## B2B

- Web Traffic
- Social Media Sharing
- Time Spent on Website
- Direct Sales
- Qualitative Feedback from Customers
- SEO Ranking

## B2C

So beyond “fresh,” “original,” and “useful,” what are some best on-page and content best practices? Let’s dive in.

# BEST PRACTICES IN OPTIMIZING CONTENT

There are staples when it comes to SEO best practices; however these are staples for *what* should be updated, not necessarily *how* they should be updated. And it goes without saying – right? – that we recommend using strictly white-hat practices across the board.

The below is a list of on-page elements that should always be optimized:

- ▶ Title tags
- ▶ URLs
- ▶ Heading tags
- ▶ Meta descriptions (while not ranking factors, we use them for enhanced click-through rates)
- ▶ Body copy (more on this in a bit)
- ▶ Image alt attributes
- ▶ Anchor text (create a diverse yet relevant anchor text profile; do not overuse any one term)

All of these play a part when talking about on-page content, but obviously what will be the largest signal for Panda to either help or hurt your site is going to be your **body copy**. There are a lot of factors in play here: length, keyword density, usefulness, and more.

## BODY COPY TIPS

As far as length goes, many Webmasters are saying that content *under 200 words* will be more likely pulled into the Panda evaluation process to trigger its algorithm flags. Others agree that a 300-word count will keep you safe and above any Panda threshold. And a [recent study](#) showed that the average word count of top-ranked searches came in at a whopping 2,416 words. Obviously nobody outside Google is privy to Google's exact algorithm, but these are useful numbers to keep in mind.

Our philosophy is that you shouldn't aim to write 300+ words simply to avoid a penalty. You should be writing not preemptively but to become more authoritative, visible, and helpful on a subject. If you wouldn't want to read it, don't write it.

## TIPS ON ANALYZING PANDA'S EFFECTS

At the time of writing this ebook, there has only been one month of data since the Panda 4.0 was released in May. The full effects of Panda may not yet be visible, but we have seen a few trends for multiple clients.

For some of our clients, [Searchmetrics SEO Visibility](#) shows a slight decrease after 4.0, yet organic traffic levels from Google show either a steady pace or normal seasonality. Likewise, we've seen traffic decreases for accounts that show SEO visibility increases.

The takeaway here is that you should leverage SEO tools in tandem with analytics. Let your tools be a discovery feature for you, with the hard analytical data to help you determine if you either were hit or benefited from an algorithm update like Panda 4.0. Remember, Panda is an update meant to affect your ranking visibility, which will very likely coincide with your organic traffic levels. Monitor your organic rankings via a tool like [Searchmetrics](#), and keep an eye on your organic traffic via your analytics platform of choice.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

More mobile-focused updates are expected to roll into the larger Hummingbird algorithm in the coming months. As in the past, Google headquarters will likely continue to update the search engine regularly without so much as a press release; the major changes that affect business and individual SEO content, however, will probably feature in the headlines of technology news as they have in prior years.

There are a lot of ways to keep up with the industry's evolution; we recommend reading [SearchEngineLand](#) and the [Scripted](#) and [3Q Digital](#) blogs, for starters. We also recommend that you drop us a line at [info@3QDigital.com](mailto:info@3QDigital.com) to talk about getting a site audit to make sure your site is set up to succeed through all manner of updates for years to come.

## EXTRA REFERENCES:

[The Moz Blog: Google Algorithm Change History](#)

[The Moz Blog: The Day the Knowledge Graph Exploded](#)

[Google Inside Search: Another step to reward high-quality sites](#)

[Mashable: Google Caffeine: A Detailed Test of the New Google](#)

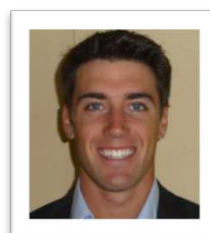
[Search Engine Watch: Where Are They Now?](#)

[Google Panda: Understanding the Technical Inner Workings](#)

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**THANK YOU**



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