

Google Hummingbird Update: What You Need to Know

What is It?

Simply put, the future. Hummingbird marks the most revolutionary update since the Caffeine update in 2010. There have been more recent updates since Caffeine, including the infamous Panda and Penguin Updates. However, Panda and Penguin are better explained as peripheral changes to the then current Google algorithm, while the Hummingbird update is a change to the core principles of the Google Search Idea.

Google updates their algorithm hundreds of times a year, but these changes are generally so subtle that they go unnoticed. Hummingbird, on the other hand, is huge. According to Amit Singhal, a senior vice president at Google, the redesign will affect the analysis of about 90 percent of the search requests that Google receives.

The whole idea behind Hummingbird is to make their search more human, facilitating continued conversation between the user and the SERP.

When it Happened

The update to the algorithm has been gradually happening over the past month, but the hummingbird update was announced yesterday (9/26/13) from Wojcicki's old Menlo Park house in California.

The announcement marked Google's 15-year anniversary. The Menlo Park House is where Google was housed during its very early years when CEO Larry Page and fellow co-founder Sergey Brin rented the garage and a room for \$1,700 a month. The company has come quite a way from such humble beginnings.

Changes Introduced

As mentioned, the Hummingbird update strives to make Google's search more human. With several updates made to Google's knowledge graph, the algorithm can now answer more questions, even those that don't have a simple answer.

Updated Knowledge Graph

- *Concepts vs. Keywords* – Google's Knowledge Graph was introduced last year as a way to better understand the relationship between concepts, instead of simply matching keywords. The data is organized so that information on a topic reaches into other related information that may not have been in the same document. For example, searching for Abraham Lincoln will bring up the knowledge graph on the results page listing basic information that is being pulled from several sources in the knowledge graph. Now with the update, the information can now be pulled from the billions of different websites. Hummingbird brings this one step further. Rather than simply focusing on keywords in the query, the search engine strives to understand the question the searcher presents, successfully linking concepts within the query. If you type, "Where are the nearest places to buy bikes" into your search the engine, it will no longer give you just results for the keywords "buy" and "bikes," but it will recognize that a "place" is a physical location that sells bicycles. Understanding this information and using the whole phrase goes far beyond returning keywords.

- **Comparisons** – Google now features comparisons in its results page as a card appearing on the top of the page in the knowledge graph. Examples include comparing butter with olive oil. The comparison card will show information for the two items organized directly across from each other making the comparison simple and easy. To demonstrate this idea, when we type into Google’s search bar “compare Neptune and Mars,” we receive the following card to the right.
- **Filters** – Google’s knowledge graph now adds a filter that is displayed on the top right of the results carousel. The filter allows the searcher to switch between similar results. This allows the user to learn more about the topic without having to leave the original content behind or type in another search query. Below is an example of this when searching for “impressionist painters.”
- **Conversation** – Google conversation has been around for a while, but it had only been reaching into the data that knowledge graph possessed. With the new update, Google can now apply the voice query to billions of webpages. With people also submitting search requests in spoken sentences using voice search, Google has improved their results to resemble an ongoing conversation. Using follow-up search questions, where answers refer back to previous questions, allows the conversation to flow naturally. If I asked how old LeBron James is, I would receive my answer in the card at the top of the page. If I then subsequently ask how tall he is Google will recognize “he” is LeBron James, and supply me the appropriate answer. Google is also moving beyond the past few searches into user history to better help them identify searches. If you enjoy watching the Giants play, Google will respond by automatically listing their play times on your mobile device.

Mobile Devices

- **Notifications** – Google’s search has been redesigned for mobile devices. Along with their own Android Software, Updated iOS systems will now support Google’s notifications. With the system operable across multiple devices you can leave yourself a reminder on your Nexus to buy bread at the store and when you later enter the store you will receive the reminder on your iPhone. Not only does the system provide the reminder based on your location but it can be done with a different OS.
- **Simpler and Cleaner** – In its blog post about the update, Google made note that the search results and ads on the phones and tables are cleaner and simpler, optimized for touch. The results are clustered in cards so you can focus on the answer you are looking for.

Its Effect on SEO

As noted, the update has occurred over the past month, and if you put your ear to the wind you will hear no cries from dying websites. This is because there is nothing new or different for SEOs to worry about. Google’s guidelines still remains the same. Have unique, high quality content on your site and avoid any black or grey hat techniques. Quality is still king. Hummingbird allows Google to process your content in different and hopefully better way as complex query searches are made simpler for the searcher.

Hummingbird has existed for over a month, and if you were going to have problems you would have had them by now. If you do have issues on your site, there is a good chance that it was not the Hummingbird update, but rather smaller updates that Google is continuously adding to their algorithm.

There has also been no negative backlash from Google users. People generally get very loud when there is something wrong, but are often silent when things go right. It looks like Google is continuing to do a great job in better producing the search results that their users crave.

When it comes to SEO, we may have feared and even loathed penguins and pandas, but hummingbirds are a whole different beast. Expect to see Google working more on predictive technologies and voice search in the future, as their results page moves further away from keyword matching and closer to user question matching.

To read directly from the source, visit [Google's announcement on their blog](#).