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The Internet Marketing Year in Review: Four Lessons We Learned in 2015

By David Evans, PhD, MBA

It's that time of year when all of us reflect on all that we've seen, done, and accomplished—and, of course, plan for the future. From the growing reliance on WordPress to the epic fail dubbed Mobilegeddon and more, 2015 brought a host of changes that affect the way aesthetic practices sell themselves online.

Here are four lessons we learned in 2015, and what they can or should mean for your search engine marketing plan.

Lesson 1) WordPress is great if updated frequently and if you keep your plug-ins to a minimum.

Many aesthetic practices switched over to WordPress as a web platform in 2015. WordPress is an open-source, free software that is flexible and relatively easy to program—for some.

WordPress has versions, just like every other type of software. Plug-ins are available for virtually every purpose, from adding a slideshow to highlighting key messages and cropping images. But not all plug-ins are compatible with all versions of WordPress, and some plug-ins are not compatible with one another. When plug-ins are overused and improperly implemented, your site is in jeopardy. It may break or crash, and your load speeds will plummet. All of these factors will affect your rankings.

Ask your webmaster how many plug-ins are being used. If the answer is more than 10 to 15, scale back. Avoid plug-ins developed by individual webmasters. These are notorious for causing problems, particularly if the webmaster

moves on. Update the version of WordPress two to three (or more) times a year.

Lesson 2) Quality trumps quantity every time, so keep your content fresh and your links believable.

Google didn't create a catchy animal name for its May 2015 algorithm update, like Penguin, Panda, or Pigeon, so we simply dubbed it the "Quality" update. It's essentially a cross between Panda and Penguin, and ranks websites based on a combination of the content and the quality of your back links (other sites linking to your site).

To pass the quality test, content must be unique, credible, engaging, useful, and informative. Put another way: Your site must provide more value than other sites, and not be overly or overtly promotional. Links must come from credible sources, not link farms.

Do not place before-and-after photos of each case on a different page (URL) unless the description provides lengthy details and explanations.

Blogs should not be used to regurgitate procedural information or to constantly promote specials.

Lesson 3) Stack the deck in your favor with positive reviews and customization.

In August 2015, Google tinkered with its Local Pack, the list of local businesses that appear at the top of the search results and link to its map. It reduced the number from 7 to 3, which greatly impacted those who held the 4 to 7 slots.

Get back in the game by customizing your primary Google Places page, and amping up your efforts to accrue more positive reviews. Also, consider adding a pay-per-click campaign or invest in top-tier directory listings to capture local traffic. There is no strategy that

can guarantee placement in the top three local spots, but these efforts will increase your chances and also help to convert patients who find the Google Local pages.

Lesson: 4) Google's mobile-friendly update was all bark, but mobile-friendliness still has merits.

Google's mobile-friendly algorithm update was all hype designed to encourage more website owners to create mobile-friendly websites. And it worked. The number of mobile sites jumped about 7% on the day the update hit (April 21, 2015). But there were no corresponding changes in rankings.

There's no downside to having a mobile-friendly website. Your prospective patients are searching on their phones during stolen downtime, and they will be turned off if the site is not mobile-friendly. See where your site stands via Google's Mobile-Friendly Test, or check the status of your entire site through Google's Mobile Usability Report in Google Analytics Webmaster Tools.

If your site isn't mobile-friendly yet, get it converted, but content still counts...a lot. Many non-mobile websites of plastic surgeons continue to rank above those that are mobile-friendly for highly competitive search terms, which tells us that mobile-friendliness is just one factor in Google's ranking algorithm.

Now on to 2016. See you in these pages next year.

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