

Google penalty and how to avoid it

Sometimes SEO marketers get things wrong. If you use grey hat tactics, you might find that what once was ok, is no longer ok, and you might discover your site that used to rank well seems to fall out of google like a fat man climbing a thin tree. This is how it feels to get penalised by google. Sometimes rankings drop due to changes in the algorithm, and if you have stopped getting traffic, this is the first thing to consider. You have to do a lot to get penalised, and the more established a website it, the harder it is to get banned from the index, but it can and does happen to even large websites.

Google never penalise sites without a good reason. Generally it's because of over aggressive marketing, breaking the webmaster rules, or your site getting hacked.

Over aggressive marketing can occur if your site suddenly starts getting lots of backlinks. Any unnatural link growth can be seen as questionably, especially if the backlinks come from pages on different topics to your own site. You need to keep on top of your backlink monitoring to make sure you are not getting spammed. You can always disavow any links that you think are harmful in google webmaster tools.

Breaking the webmaster guidelines is also a good way to get a penalty, so read these and make sure your site does not break any of them (think of them as the internet equivalent of the 10 commandments).

Your website quality is also a factor. If you add or change content so that google thinks it looks spammy, this may get you penalised. It's unlikely unless you really go to town on your keyword spamming but it can happen. So the moral is, make sure your site is consistently good quality content and don't try to risk going too far into the dark side.

Duplicate content penalty

Copying content from another website is bad form. Google doesn't like it, and I'm sure that the person who wrote the copy won't like it either. Not only does it mean you are lazy and dishonest, but it also means that people reading your content won't be getting the best source of information.

If you steal your content, then at best, your web page will not show up in search engines at all. But if you have a lot of duplicated content on lots of pages on your site, you may find your domain name is shunned entirely. Generally duplicate content is created when automated programs called 'screen scrapers' as used to try to fool google into giving them equally high rankings to those pages that they stole the copy from. This used to work 10 years ago, but now does not. In general, if a site is already in google with the same copy, then the newly found page will not be included in the main index.

Duplicate content might also be mistakenly created on your website, for example, if you have two different urls that serve up the same content, then google might not know which page to include from the two and which is the original e.g. <http://www.mysite.com> is different from <http://mysite.com> . Sometimes you will get pages indexed from both domains but with lower trust

rankings. Other mistaken duplications might occur when using dynamic urls to get content. For example `mysite.com/index.php?page=2` is a different url to `mysite.com/index.php?page=2§ion=4`.

In order to prevent this, you can add `rel=canonical` tags in the `<head>` section of your webpage. Canonical tags look something like this:

```
<link rel="canonical" href="https://mysite.com/index.php?page=2" />
```

Another way of telling google about mirror urls is to set the preferred domain in Google Webmaster Tools. This is a much better way than using canonical tags because it helps with the link weighting on the page. All links from the non-preferred domain are counted as being from the preferred domain, so the linking power of the page is not diluted.

Incidentally, if you have both http and https versions of your site, its better to use https as the preferred domain (as long as the certificate is valid).

Payday loan penalty

In June 2013, Google published an algorithm update that specifically addressed those sites which heavily spammed queries such as 'payday loans', 'viagra', and 'penis enlargement' and some porn related keywords. Since then there have been a few updates to this algorithm which has improved its effectiveness.

It is difficult to accidentally get this type of penalty. Typically those sites that are affected are involved in link chain schemes, have very low quality content, and often include illegal activities like phishing scams.

EMD Penalty

EMD stands for Exact Matching Domain. This is when you have a website who's URL contains the keyword that you are targeting, such as 'buybikesonline.com'. Often this SEO setup also involves having a large number of backlinks to the site with the keyword as the link text.

Having keywords in your URL used to be a very good SEO strategy but now it's seen as spammy by google. Once you have been hit with this penalty it is very hard to fix it without changing your URL altogether and starting again from scratch.

Manual Penalties

In addition to the automated penalisation, Google also employ a number of people whose job it is to rate the quality of websites. If a site is flagged as suspicious by google, the quality raters manually check the site to see if it looks ok, and if it appears to them as bad, they have the ability to downgrade the site or even kick it out of google altogether. Sometimes, the manual reviewers revisit pages to see if they have cleaned up or removed malware. This happens when you submit a 'reconsideration request' following warnings of malware. According to Matt Cutts, there are 400,000 manual actions initiated every month (many more are automatically penalised by google and panda updates). Of these, only 20,000 webmasters ever submit a reconsideration request- about 5% of the total number of penalised sites.

If you receive a manual penalty, then you are sent a notification by google telling you what the issue is on your page. This notification will appear in your Google Webmaster Tools account or if you do not have an account, you might get a notification to the admin email address of the domain in question.

How to recover from Google Penalty

If you believe that you have been hit by a penalty, the first thing to do is check your Google Webmaster Account to see if there are any notifications in there. If there are no notifications, this means you have not incurred a manual penalty.

Next you need to check your site for malware, you might have been hacked so using an online website scanner will help you here.

Check your backlinks, and see if there is a sudden increase in number or if there are a lot that seem spammy. Use the 'disavow links' tool in Google Webmaster Tools to remove any bad links.

It's worth doing a bit of research at this point to see if the drop in rankings correspond with an algorithm update. For this you can check the Google Algorithm Change History page here <https://moz.com/google-algorithm-change>

If you find anything that might explain the penalisation, you should fix it as soon as possible, then send google a 'reconsideration request' (again, this is something that you can find in your Google Webmaster Tools account). If you have recently rebuild your website or purchased the domain, then a reconsideration request might help you here also.

Even if you don't find anything wrong with your site and backlinks, it is still worth checking and sending a reconsideration request in case something there was affecting your site is now no longer online e.g. temporary backlink spamming.