

Google and content: Still dating after all these years

 By [Catherine Black](#)

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Back in the late 90s, when Dolly the sheep was being cloned and The Spice Girls were still Botox-free, Google was just a child. Because of this, its relationships with websites were simple prepubescent crushes: all you had to do was chuck a few keywords into your website, get a couple of links pointing back to it and high search results were yours.

This year, Google turns 18. Like any teenager, relationships are a bit more complicated now, and many marketers feel overwhelmed thinking about everything that goes into search engine optimisation. But at a high level, there's a simple truth to ranking well that hasn't changed and probably never will: build a solid brand online. And, one of the key ways to do this is to create great content. In celebration of our favourite search engine coming of age, here's a look back at Google's relationship with content over the years:

1997 - The very beginning

Google was still a newborn, and there were only a handful (relatively speaking) of websites on the internet - and even fewer that search engines knew about. Even if your content was mediocre, all you had to do was add a popular keyword to your metadata and perhaps a link or two back from someone else. Job done.

2000 - A new millennium and new languages

At just three years old, Google was now toddling around on its chubby toddler legs. It launched its search engine in 10 different languages (how's that for a gifted child?) meaning that it now cared about where its searchers were located, because this would influence their search experience. As a website owner, this was a strong signal to start thinking about your local audience if you wanted to rank well.



Image via [123RF](#)

2004 - The Brandy update

Google starts stealing from its parents' booze cabinet. The Brandy update involved a significant expansion to Google's index, as well as an improved ability to understand thematic word relationships that come so naturally to the human brain (like knowing that "Jeep" is similar to "off-road" is similar to "4x4"). For content creators, this was good news: you could write more naturally, and Google would be much better at understanding what you were saying.

2006/7 - Google buys YouTube; Universal Search is introduced

With Google now the proud new owner of YouTube, it began incorporating video results into its normal results pages, along with news, images, local and other verticals - acknowledging that content can take many different forms beside text. While the written word can certainly still be impactful (a well thought out blog post; a [brilliantly worded product page](#)), you can also reach people through other types of content too, whether it's a memorable [Slideshare presentation](#), or a video of your core offering. What mattered from now on was not what form the content took, but what resonated with audiences the most.

2009 - Search goes real time

Google was now 12 and getting smarter by the day, as it began integrating newly indexed content along with other sources like Twitter and Google News. Your five-year-old website with stale content gathering dust in the corner? No longer a winner.

2010/2011- Let's get social

Like any teenager, Google was developing a social life. It officially started taking social signals into account when determining search relevance, which now meant that a mention on Twitter or a share on Facebook would help your visibility. Translated: if you wanted to get good rankings, your content would need to be shareable. This meant you'd need to be part of the conversation your target market was having, so that they'd tweet about you, and reblog you, and comment on your Facebook post.

2011 - Pandas don't like content farms

Of all the Google updates, Panda was the most focused on content. Specifically, this one cracked down on sites with "thin" content - that is, sites that were content farms, or that had high ad-to-content ratios, or that had content simply created for rankings rather than to add real value to the user.

2014 - And then they got pigeons

The Pigeon update centred on improving local search results. This meant that where you were searching from in the world would have much more of an influence on the results that you saw, with local websites heavily favoured. As a web owner, content for local audiences would now have much more of an impact.

2015 - Mobilegeddon is here

Google is now 18, and like any teenager is obsessed with the smartphone. From April, you'll get better mobile rankings if your site offers a good user experience for mobile users. For content marketers, it's crucial to create content that's clear and concise, and easy to consume.

Google has remained the king of the pile because of its ability to adapt. As it's grown from a squawking newborn to a confident toddler into a precocious teenager, its algorithm changes have been a crucial ingredient in its success. As a

content marketer, you've got to roll with the changes as our favourite search engine grows up. Fail to do this, and you'll be just another grey-haired member of the old generation.

ABOUT CATHERINE BLACK

Catherine is a search engine optimisation (SEO) specialist, digital strategist and web copywriter. She is a co-founder of Black Mountain www.black-mountain.co.za, and has over 12 years experience in paid and organic search marketing. Catherine convened GetSmarter's flagship Internet Marketing course and co-wrote their Copywriting for Online Marketing course, and is the author of "301 Ways to Use Social Media To Boost Your Marketing" (McGraw Hill, 2010).

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