




Beyond Mobilegeddon

a 3-phase approach to weathering google's
next big algorithm change



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- **Organic search traffic accounted for 51% of all visitors to B2B and B2C websites in 2014.** That's more than all other channels combined (paid search, social, display, email and referred), according to BrightEdge's DataCube study of billions of pieces of content.

Google is moving faster than ever with algorithm updates, small and large, rolling out on a seemingly monthly basis. Of which, some are announced publicly, like Google's recent mobile algorithm update that rolled out on April 21st 2015, and some are not, like the February 4th Mystery Update which registered as one the highest search result fluctuations of the first half of 2015.

This white paper will focus on what we can control and give you the processes and know-how to make sure your site **will not be severely impacted by Google's next announced algorithm update.**



about fathom

Fathom is a full-service digital marketing agency that helps brands create engagement with their customers. Fathom is committed to growing audiences, increasing their loyalty, and ultimately transforming businesses through content strategy, communications and sales/analytics consulting. Its greater purpose is to inspire transformation in clients, partners, employees and the world-at-large.

BRIGHTEDGE

about brightedge

BrightEdge is the essential content marketing platform for modern business. It transforms online content into tangible business results, such as traffic, revenue, and engagement. BrightEdge's S3 platform is powered by a sophisticated big data analysis engine and is the only company capable of web-wide, real-time measurement of content engagement across all digital channels, including search, social, and mobile. BrightEdge's 1,200+ global customers include leaders like 3M, Microsoft, Netflix and Nike. The company is based in San Mateo, CA with offices across the world.



prepare your team for google's next announced algorithm update

Google's algorithm is updating at an extremely fast pace, with the goal of providing the best possible search experience. With more than 50% of B2B and B2C websites' traffic coming from organic search, you should be aware of these changes. Minor algorithm updates are happening constantly, and it isn't this paper's goal to prepare for those—you should be doing that already.

You will learn a proven strategy to prepare for and respond to Google's next major announced algorithm update, as this is something that your team can systematically accommodate.

We will examine pre-, mid-, and post-algorithm update strategies that will provide your team a proven plan to make sure everything is accounted for.

■ pre-update preparation

This is the most important part of the process. As Abraham Lincoln said, "Give me six hours to chop down a tree, and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe."

First, we'll go through each point that your team will need to answer, and then we'll walk through how Fathom handled the mobile algorithm update using these same steps.





The 3-Phrase Approach to crushing Google's Algorithm

phase 1 - research & evaluate

Once Google has announced an algorithm update, you will need to first answer the following questions:

- 1) What elements will the new algorithm update be evaluating?
- 2) Is this a technical back-end, front-facing site element, an offsite aspect or a combination?
- 3) Does this algorithm update pose a potential risk for your site?
- 4) Will your team be able to make the necessary changes or will you need IT assistance?
- 5) How much time is required to request/implement this sort of task?
- 6) What tools are available to help you evaluate/resolve the affected elements?
- 7) Are there any reputable resources that have thoroughly examined the topic/task?
- 8) Compare this to past algorithm updates: How is this similar/different? Are there any strategies/learning that you can incorporate from past updates?

Next, you need to envision the perfect post-update scenario for your site so you have a roadmap of where you're trying to go.

- What does your ideal post-update site look like?
- What does the second-best option look like?

Finally, you will need to develop a strategy that will:

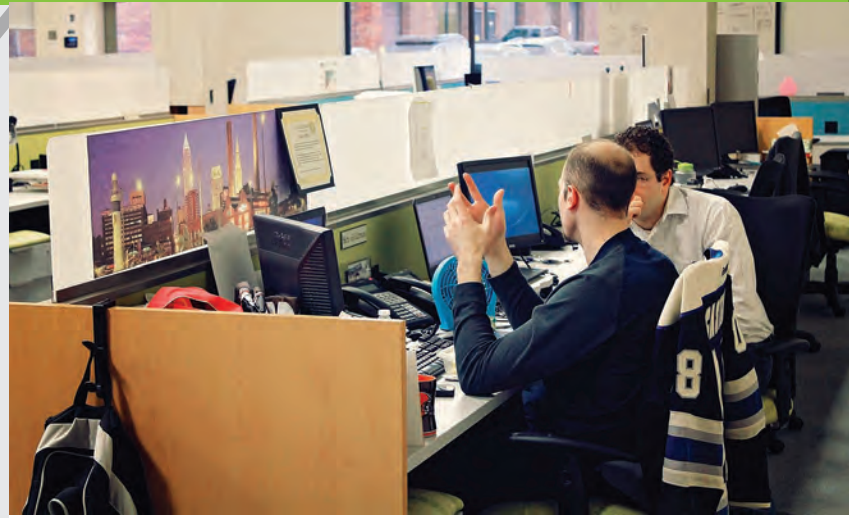
- 1) Identify the specific elements of the site that need to be updated.
- 2) Define the end goal of exactly what the elements should be after being updated.
- 3) Define who will need to make the change (marketing or IT) and the timeframe it should be completed by (in a perfect world).



the approach

Here is how Fathom approached the research phase of Google's mobile algorithm update that went live on April 21st.

- 1) Google's mobile algorithm update is evaluating whether or not a site is mobile-friendly on a page-by-page basis in realtime.
- 2) This update involves a combination of technical back-end and front-end aspects of a site.
- 3) The mobile algorithm would impact the majority of our clients' sites.
- 4) Assuming that the client site was not already mobile-friendly, the update required significant technical updates, which required collaboration with IT.
- 5) The execution time depends heavily on the size/structure of the site. Updating a site to be mobile-friendly could take up to 6 months, so speed in starting the implementation is paramount.
- 6) Google provided a couple of different website testing tools to specify how it would be evaluating mobile-friendliness. These tools allowed quick and accurate evaluation.



- 7) By the time Google had announced the pending update, it had built a comprehensive walk-through of its expectations and how to meet them.

the perfect post-update scenario

The ideal updated site structure was for each client to have a mobile-responsive design that was structurally optimized for each popular mobile/tablet device.

The second-best option was for a client to have a mobile subdomain to provide a solid mobile device experience. This would allow us to comply with Google's mobile-friendliness requirement, but it wasn't ideal from an SEO perspective.

A temporary solution was to focus only on making high-priority pages mobile-responsive first. Google stated that the mobile algorithm would operate on a page-by-page basis, and each page would be checked for mobile-friendliness in real time, which means we could prioritize our most important pages first and roll out lower priority pages next.

assess the site & create a game plan

First, we needed to perform a risk assessment on each client's site to determine impact from the algorithm update. If the site was already mobile-friendly, then we needed to verify that everything was working 100% correctly from Google's perspective.

If a site wasn't mobile-friendly, we needed to develop custom recommendations for each client based on its IT team's capabilities, resources, and agility.

Next, we defined the goal of making sure each client's site was mobile-friendly, whether through a responsive design or mobile subdomain.

Finally, since this was a technical matter, we provided our client with site design recommendations, along with supporting reasons, details, and step-by-step instructions to gain buy-in from the necessary stakeholders in a timely matter.





phase 2 - reporting

First, you will need to identify what analytics, tracking, and reporting tools you need. Fathom uses a combination of Google Analytics and BrightEdge.

Once you have identified the tool set to use, you will need to establish general and algorithm-specific baseline reports. These reports help determine exactly where you were prior to the algorithm update and provide the ability to accurately evaluate impact on your site.

Automatically updating these reports on a weekly basis ensures an accurate snapshot of site performance.

general baseline reports

These are reports that your team should already be providing you. Some of the metric dashboards you should have access to include:

- Organic traffic breakout (with non-branded branded traffic extrapolations)
- Traffic by channel
- Traffic by device type (desktop/smartphone/tablet)
- Overall/category keyword rankings
- Market share compared to tracked/non-tracked competitors
- Number of backlinks compared to tracked/non-tracked competitors
- Revenue, transactions and goal completions
- Conversion rates (site-wide, category-level, page-level, etc.)
- Time on site, pageviews, avg. pages per session, etc.

The longer the time frame, the better. Fathom dashboards typically show the last 3 years of data for a significant snapshot of trends.

algorithm-specific reports

This report will be built specifically around the metrics that may be impacted by the upcoming algorithm update. It will dive deeper into the high-level metrics of a general baseline report.

For example, prior to the mobile algorithm update you would have wanted to build out some dashboards including the following:

- Organic traffic breakout (desktop/smartphone/tablet)
- Organic keyword rankings (desktop vs. smartphone)
 - Page 1 (positions 1-3, 4-6, and 7-10)
 - Page 2, 3, and 4-10
- Organic rankings vs. competitors (desktop vs. smartphone)
- Organic market share (desktop vs. mobile)
- Organic revenue/transactions/completions (desktop vs. mobile)



algorithm-specific reports

Fathom uses BrightEdge for the majority of its organic tracking and reporting. BrightEdge's tools provide us with the ability to create in-depth weekly reports for all aspects of organic search.

weekly reporting

In addition to extensive monthly reports, we provided weekly site-wide organic reports that focused on high-level items such as rankings, traffic, organic market share, and the competitive landscape.

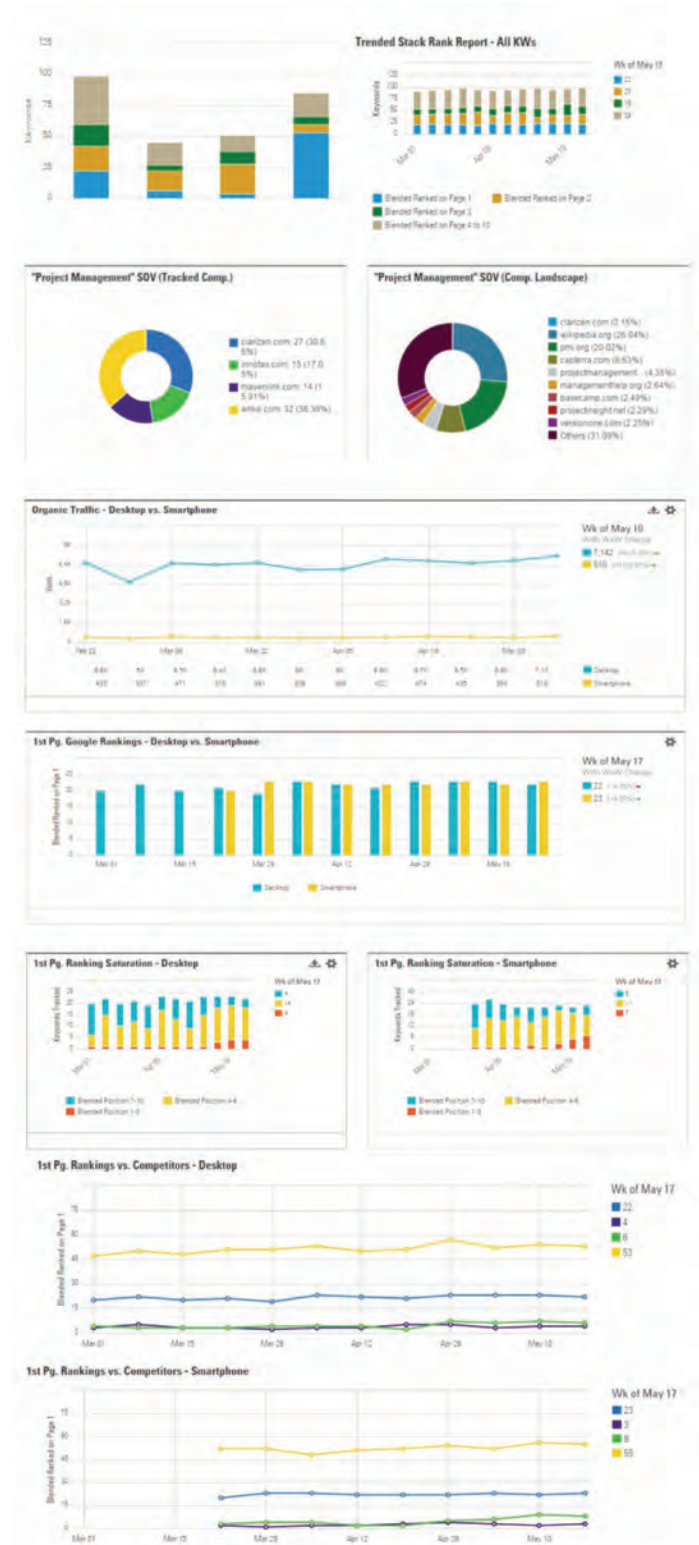
These weekly reports offer ongoing insight into potential problems, site growth, possible algorithm tweaks, and competitor metrics, among other things.

Next, we developed algorithm-specific reports that enabled us to analyze hyper-specific aspects of each client's desktop/smartphone site performance before, during, and after the mobile algorithm update. These algorithm-specific reports provided us clear visibility into the impact of the update.

The reports focused specifically on:

- Organic traffic (desktop vs. smartphone)
- Organic keyword rankings (desktop vs. smartphone)
- Organic rankings vs. competitors (desktop vs. smartphone)
- Organic market share (desktop vs. mobile)

Below are some example graphs from the weekly general and algorithm-specific reports we analyzed:





phase 3 - execute

The final step is to actually execute on the steps and recommendations your team has provided. For most marketing managers, this will require guiding key stakeholders through why exactly they should take action on your recommendations.

Following the steps above, you should have **analyzed the available information** about the upcoming algorithm update, **envisioned the perfect scenario** for your site, **created a strategic game plan** for moving forward, and **established algorithm-specific reporting processes**.

The goal of this comprehensive research and in-depth reporting is to have the necessary ammunition to get buy-in from internal stakeholders.

Whether you're attempting to execute a difficult/lengthy project such as migrating your company's website to a mobile-responsive design or a project as simple as correcting "over-optimization," the previous research and reporting phases should allow marketing managers to enable key stakeholders to take action on the recommendations.

Stakeholders will likely need the following:

- Background on the algorithm update
- The costs and consequences of inaction
- Specific instructions on what needs to change and the ideal site scenario
- Exactly what is needed to proceed: approval, buy-in, and/or resources
- The ideal timeframe to avoid rankings/traffic damage



our approach

Here are a couple examples of what Fathom clients were able to do prior to the update:

- Work with IT teams to notify them of the severe negative impact that could result if they maintained their current mobile user experience. Provide potential platform options and assist them with step-by-step platform migration instructions and execution support.
- Focus on high-priority pages first and then work with their IT team to roll out the full mobile-responsive site experience at a later date. Working within their IT team's current resource availability allowed them to maintain strong mobile rankings for important pages while focusing on the site's long-term strategy.

during the algorithm update

This time period is 2 weeks to a month following the algorithm launch date.

Following this process, most of the work has been front-loaded in the pre-update research and planning phase, and recommendations, at the very least, should be in the process of implementation.

At this point, weekly/monthly reports are the most important asset. You will be analyzing these each time they're updated so you can keep up-to-date on everything that's happening. Keep an eye out for odd changes in your site's metrics such as large increases/drops in traffic, rankings, market share, etc. Also, spend a little time evaluating your competitor analysis reports: Were changes made to their sites for the update? Are their rankings growing/dropping?

Finally, you will want to stay on top of algorithm-related news. Did Google release any more feedback about the algorithm? Has anyone created new before/after case studies of the algorithm's impact? Did anyone report new findings that might change your priorities or strategy?



post-algorithm update

This time period begins roughly 1 month after the algorithm has gone live.

The algorithm-specific recommendations should be implemented, and the main focus is now to evaluate how your site was impacted.

Also, for the next couple of months you should consistently analyze your reports to get a sense of how your site performs over the long term.

Next, answer these questions:

- When did your recommendations actually go live on the site relative to the algorithm update?
- How was your site affected by the algorithm update?
- Did your rankings rise, fall, or stay about the same? What do you attribute this change to?
- Do you need to make any updates to your weekly reports?
- What are your next steps?

Once you have answered these questions, you should have a relatively good idea of how your site performed after the algorithm update.





conclusion

The goal of this white paper was to provide a high-level step-by-step process to deal with any Google-announced search algorithm update.

We've walked through how to gather and analyze the available information about an upcoming algorithm update, envision the perfect post-algorithm scenario for your site, develop a strategic plan for moving forward, and create processes around algorithm-specific reporting.

We hope that you now feel comfortable enough to be able to confidently lead your team through the next announced update.

about the author



Curtis Rummel is a senior SEO specialist for Fathom's consumer brands segment. He has been building websites, understanding analytics, and crushing SEO since 2008.