



Google Hummingbird:

The Marketer's Guide to
Google's New Algorithm

INCLUDES: 8 ways to think like
Hummingbird and
optimize a web site

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Introducing Hummingbird

No sky diving, no packed convention floor, no slick promotional video. Google was prepared to let the time and place speak for themselves.

On September 26, 2013, marking their 15th anniversary, Google invited a small group of journalists and bloggers back to the garage where the company was born. There they told them about 'Hummingbird', the most significant update to their search engine in over a decade.

Hummingbird is not a change to an existing algorithm like Panda or Penguin. Those updates specifically targeted low quality content and links; they affected somewhere between 3-12% of all queries, and were viewed as a punishment of sites that Google felt were gaming the system.

Hummingbird impacts 90% of queries of all types. It is a complete rewrite of the search algorithm (although some components of the previous version were apparently ported over). It is the first rewrite since Caffeine in 2010, but Hummingbird is pointed in an entirely different direction. Caffeine was designed to create a faster index of the rich media and social connections that were changing web content. Hummingbird faces the users, speaking to them in a language that goes beyond keywords and it doesn't assume that they are using a keyboard. Caffeine changed what Google did after it interpreted a query; Hummingbird changed **how** Google interprets a query.

Google chose the name Hummingbird because it is 'fast and precise', but the changes it will bring may be long lasting and somewhat unpredictable.

"Google search chief Amit Singhal told me that perhaps 2001, when he first joined the company, was the last time the algorithm was so dramatically rewritten."

[Danny Sullivan](#)
[Search Engine Land](#)



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What Hummingbird Does

Hummingbird is a significant step in the evolution of human-computer dialog away from cryptic 'keywords' and towards more natural human speech.

Smart mobile devices and speech recognition have changed user expectations of what a computer should be able to understand. Meanwhile, GPS and other technologies provide additional contexts that search engines can use to provide relevant results. Users who might have previously searched for *'thai restaurants san francisco'* are now more likely to ask *'where can I find good pad thai around here'*.

Hummingbird attempts to understand a query holistically, looking at the entire phrase rather than hunting for specific key words.

Practitioners of this type of semantic search like to say that they are looking for 'things', not 'strings'.

Emboldened by this improved understanding, or perhaps merely interested in keeping the user on a Google page, Hummingbird increasingly attempts to return direct answers before providing a set of links for the user to follow. Even before Hummingbird went live, a query like *'calories in sugar'* would directly provide the answer along with a brief bit of information on sugar (usually from Wikipedia).

Hummingbird takes this practice a step further by offering comparisons. Users can now query *'sugar vs salt'* to get a side by side nutritional comparison without ever visiting one of the sites that had hoped to gain search traffic by offering such information.

"People communicate with each other by conversation, not by typing keywords"

[Amit Singhal](#),
SVP, Google Search



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Hummingbird's effect on search results

Penguin and Panda targeted specific types of content providers and had dramatic effects on a limited number, even putting some out of business. Hummingbird affects a much wider number of sites but is starting out to be far more subtle. In fact it was in use for a month before the garage announcement and nobody even noticed.

Google has been typically tight lipped about the actual mechanics of Hummingbird but most SEO bloggers feel that it will have a primary impact on long tail searches, the 20%+ of queries requesting highly specific information. This is the area where many niche marketers live, and the common thinking is that Hummingbird's semantic parsing of queries will help to level the playing field. A small bank or broker that was too small to rank for mortgage related keywords might have a better chance now if they publish content answering the question *"What are the benefits of a 5/1 Adjustable Rate Mortgage?"*

Advertising is still Google's primary revenue stream and they no doubt believe that better search results will eventually translate into better advertising opportunities. **There is also an early indication showing that Hummingbird is having an immediate impact on paid search.**

[Adobe's Digital Marketing Blog](#) has observed:

"Not only is this affecting organic search, but also paid search. In some broad match search marketing campaigns, we've seen a 14% increase in clicks and a 50% increase in impressions on how-to related queries in the last 30 days versus two months ago. In this new search algorithm, we've also discovered that pages can rank for keywords other than what SEO has optimized for - there is more semantic intent in the search results."

"I think Google struggles with this a little bit. They struggle from an advertising perspective because they'd like to be able to serve up great ads targeting those long-tail phrases"

[Rand Fishkin,](#)
[Moz](#)



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Working with semantic search

Semantic search is an effort to parse a query, understand the relationship between its words, determine the context of the search and then estimate the user's intent. Simply put, a search engine must first determine the subject and then understand the information request. If the query contains the words 'find' and 'bass' the user might be looking for a restaurant, a lake or a musical instrument depending on the context of the query.

Hummingbird remembers the subject of previous searches. You can ask (using voice on Chrome) *'Who is Barack Obama's wife?'* and get the answer; if you then ask *'Does she have children?'* Hummingbird will read you the names of Michele Obama's daughters.

Google doesn't disclose operational details but two intrepid search bloggers have provided likely scenarios on its semantic efforts.

[Bill Slawski](#) has researched recent Google patents for practices that may be supporting Hummingbird. One covers rules for [query term substitutions](#). The terms *'auto'* and *'car'* might be interchangeable if the context is personal transportation but the relationship breaks down if the subject is railroads. Slawski found a second, related patent that covered rules for [determining synonyms](#) and using them to expand search results.

[Barbara Starr](#) has uncovered a patent on ['Interactive query completion templates'](#) indicating that [Google is using a form based template](#) that becomes readily understandable once subject and intent is determined.

"However, as consumers rapidly abandon notebooks, desktops, and traditional computing platforms, the capability to provide short, easily understood answers to complicated search queries could become very important in the mobile world.

[Geoff Duncan](#)

[Digital Trends](#)



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8 Ways to think like Hummingbird and optimize a web site

"We're proud of our first baby step—the Knowledge Graph—which will enable us to make search more intelligent, moving us closer to the "Star Trek computer" that I've always dreamt of building. "

[Amit Singhal](#)
[Official Google Blog](#)



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- 1) **Keep up the good work.** If you are satisfied with your current efforts to gain organic visibility on Google then keep on doing them. Every indication is that the switch to Hummingbird did not rework the 200+ factors that Google uses to rank a page. If you use keywords realistically, if you have reviewed your link profile in light of Panda and Penguin, then you should be in a good position to work with Hummingbird.
- 2) **Learn the Knowledge Graph.** Launched in May of 2012, [the Knowledge Graph](#) is Google's virtual encyclopedia of 570+ million 'things' and is a cornerstone of its semantic strategy. The Knowledge Graph contains Google's best guess as to what subjects people will be searching for and what they will want to know about them. The Knowledge Graph entry for Abraham Lincoln includes his height. For Ulysses S. Grant the entry omits height but includes Grant's well known New York City tomb. It may be difficult or impossible to earn a Knowledge Graph entry, but marketers can still use it to see which 'things' Google considers to be important and what searchers are asking about them. Results generated from Knowledge Graph are also named 'Cards'.
- 3) **Think like Hummingbird thinking like a user.** Attempts to out think Google rarely end well for a web site, but the effort to think **like** Google can yield extremely positive results. To think like Hummingbird a web site should first brainstorm and *(continued)*

"With schema.org, site owners can improve how their sites appear in search results not only on Google, but on Bing, Yahoo! and potentially other search engines as well in the future."

Kavi Goel, Pravir Gupta
[Google Webmaster Central](#)



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research the [buyer personas](#) that they would like to engage. Then, thinking semantically, envision the topics that would interest these visitors and the questions that they are most likely to have. Your own site search can provide great clues as to what is on the minds of your best sales prospects. Provide content that answers these questions, but be realistic and offer solutions that will please and not frustrate the visitors. Hummingbird will be attracted by satisfied web visitors, and only by satisfied visitors.

4) **Be a good, structured semantic citizen.**

Google and Bing support and prefer [Schema.org](#) as a structured semantic markup system. Schema.org provides a vocabulary of machine readable tags that tell search engines the subject of a piece of content, identifying key attributes and relationships. The tags can tell search engines, for example, if the content is about a person, place or event. In the case of an event the tags can provide location, dates, products that might be for sale, pricing, and reviews.

SEO's have been using Schema.org for years in the hopes of earning 'rich snippets' of real estate on search result pages highlighting reviews or ratings of their products.

Google has indicated that, while they encourage Schema.org markups, web sites should not expect to see a direct correlation to search visibility. Not enough sites have correctly (and honestly) installed the markups. Directionally, however, getting onboard with Schema.org will align a site with the major search engine objectives.

"Building links to less-than-amazing content will fail. Google will notice high bounce rates, the lack of natural social sharing, and a variety of other quality signals no matter how many links you build — probably even faster with Hummingbird.. "

[Nate Dame](#)
[Search Engine Land](#)



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5) Be properly social. Google will continue to look for 'social signals' indicating that content is popular and valuable. Their favorite social network is the one that they own and control – Google+. They won't (and can't) say that they emphasize Google+ over bigger networks like Facebook and Twitter but CEO Larry Page called it Google's 'social spine' during a 2012 earnings call. Google+ speaks directly in Google's ear with signals including content shared, Circles in, communities active in and even Hangouts attended.

6) Take pride of Authorship. The word 'relationships' occurs frequently in every post on Hummingbird. One of the most important relationships is structured via Google's 'rel="author"' tag. The Author tag links content to a Google+ profile. The benefits are still emerging but appear to be significant. In some cases information (and the profile picture) from Google+ can appear in search results. Specifically in regard to Hummingbird Google might give priority to content by an author that the user is already familiar with.

7) Stay mobile. Local, voice assisted search is one of the main reason that Hummingbird exists. Knowledge of the habits and preferences of the mobile user remains an extremely valuable commodity.

8) Keep in touch. Hummingbird is a work in progress. Keep up to date looking for clues and find new ways to gain its valuable traffic.

Who's Blogging What

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Who's Blogging What is a weekly (every Thursday) newsletter read by over 20,000 social media and web marketing professionals. It monitors posts from over 1,100 relevant blogs and other key sources to provide news, strategies, tactics and trends as they emerge for web marketers. [New readers can subscribe for free here.](#)