



## How “Fresh” is Your Hotel Website?

| By Sue Wiker and Will Jerome

In the wake of the most recent Google “Freshness Update”, HeBS Digital has taken a stance with a dedication to “fresh content”.

Every year, Google makes more than 500 updates to its search algorithm. The most significant update in 2011 was the Google Panda Update, now in version 2.5, which made most hotel websites obsolete by introducing very strict requirements for content, interactivity, and page download speeds. This required sites to generate engaging and unique website content (as opposed to bland, old and tired content) that would intrigue users and increase the site's "stickiness."

After frustrating hospitality digital marketers with the seemingly never-ending Panda update saga, Google went a step further by releasing the broadest, most-impactful algorithmic change to date, just to keep us all on our toes. Last week Google announced that they had rolled out an update now known as the "Freshness" update, which was said to affect 35% of total searches and would allow for more relevant, current information to be displayed for a bevy of high-volume search queries.

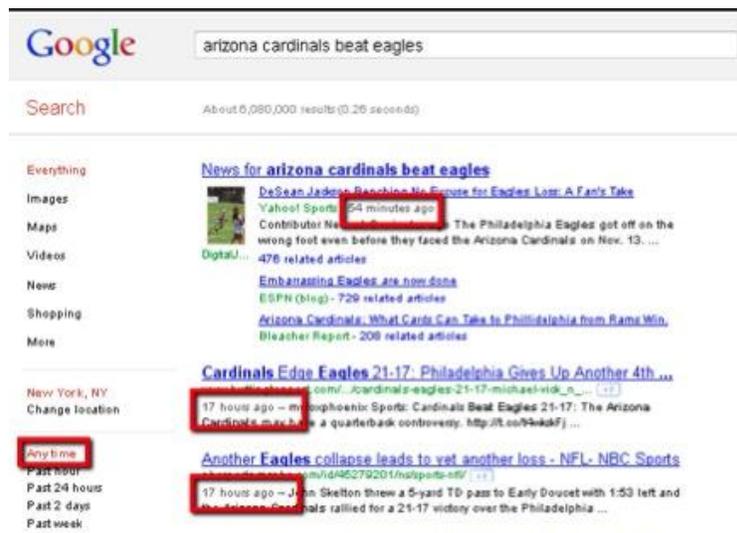
Why are these updates important for the hospitality industry? Between 50%-70% of hotel website visitors and website bookings originate as leads from the major search engines.

The update, essentially, is an amendment to the "Caffeine" update Google rolled out in 2010, whose sole purpose was to make general search queries 50 percent "fresher." So when you were searching for a sports score or who won last night's election, for example, you would be delivered the most up-to-date articles and commentary. Problem is, in only a year's time search queries have risen in number and the amount of online media continues to grow. Each story – each topical event – is being discussed, reported on, and dissected hundreds and thousands of times over, simply because the platform is available and the medium, the Internet, is effective. This is what spawned the rise of this new "freshness" update that has set off alarms from Palo Alto to the burgeoning tech hub that is New York.

### So who does this new "Freshness" Update affect?

Every online entity. No longer can we truly separate a blog, a news site and a content site that offers up-to-date "local news" in the form of local events, happenings or promotions such as a hotel website.

Let's use the news sites as a case study. Articles discussing political news, global news, sports news, celebrity news – things that change at the drop of a hat – will be refreshed within SERPs more than ever before. For example, the night before this blog post was written the Philadelphia Eagles lost to the Arizona Cardinals. Here is what the first page SERP looks like for the query "Arizona Cardinals beat Eagles":



As you can see, a search with no defined publish date (note: the search was set on “any time”) returned only results that were published within the last 24 hours, some as recent as an hour! And what makes this more amazing is that this isn’t the news feed, this is the organic listing as it appears. But, of course, this is a sports score, an intrinsically topical item with an extremely low shelf life.

### **How does this latest Google algorithm update apply to hotel queries?**

Traditionally, hotel websites are content rich vs. news rich, with descriptions and information featuring and explaining in detail every facet of the hotel business and service, from the bed linens to the capacity of a meeting room. The “static” content is there, but the “fresh” content is certainly lacking, and this is the main issue with current hotel websites after the latest Google algorithm updates.

So if hotel websites aren’t intrinsically fresh, then how do hoteliers respond to the latest Google “Freshness” Update?

### **Case Study: HeBS Digital CMS Plus and the Google Panda & “Freshness” Updates**

HeBS Digital’s proprietary website content management system ([HeBS Digital CMS Plus](#)) was specifically conceptualized and built to accommodate the stringent Google Panda and “Freshness” updates by allowing hotel marketers to maintain fresh content on the hotel website in the form of:

- Promotional landing pages for timely specials and packages (e.g. a March Madness package as opposed to an Advanced Purchase package valid for all of 2012)
- Event landing pages for events and happenings at the property and in the destination
- Promo tiles and banners on the website for featured specials and events
- Marketing and sales messages in the main image window on every page focusing on various aspects of the hotel product: room and dining promotions, complete meeting packages, wedding promotions, etc.
- New content pages on various topics: from seasonal and sports events, to local festivals and customer segment-specific content (family travel, seniors, weekend travel, romantic getaways, etc.)

Each local promotion or event page has “micro-formats” applied to it, which are rich snippets of data that signify to a search engine that these events are in fact stand-alone, current events, with exact starting and ending times associated. These ensure that all of our events are viewed as “current” rather than repetitive or stagnant.

Schemas codes are also incorporated on all time-sensitive landing pages: local promotions, special offers or events at the property and in the destination, as well as on a variety of pages site-wide: dining, accommodations, hotel services and amenities, etc.

The result? A typical single-property website has 40-60 pages of content indexed by Google. The HeBS Digital CMS allows clients to build a multitude of new landing pages and fresh content over time, and typically has over 2,500 -4,500 pages of relevant and deep content indexed by the search engines.

What else do we recommend hoteliers do?

### **Blog, Blog, Blog!**

Oftentimes, we incorporate a blog onto a hotel website. This serves as a section of the site that constantly and continually provides new content about both hotel-related information and regional

topics. It offers quality content – content people want to link to and share – for a website that is not in the content-creation business. Blogs allow hotels and restaurants to highlight specials and events as well as general hotel news. Talk about local events, highlight someone’s stay, discuss seasonal activities in the area, or feature infographics about your hotel or region that deeply engage users. Blogs allow hotels to spread a message they otherwise couldn’t, and spread it instantly. We recommend blogs to hospitality websites that are concerned about new content creation. There is simply no better platform.

### **Focus on Social Media Interaction**

We also recommend incorporating real-time Twitter feeds and Facebook interaction information in the hotel website to ensure that interaction is recorded, up-to-the-minute, and relevant. The transparency of our actions boosts our standing in accordance with the new standards in place from the “Freshness” update.

Having a strong presence on Twitter and Facebook are excellent steps to take to ensure that you are constantly broadcasting news about your brand, whether it’s new promotions and vacation packages, group travel deals, sweepstakes and giveaways, or upcoming events at the property or nearby. This type of topical messaging can generate frequent interaction with your business. This messaging should be deeply intertwined with your website, meaning your website should reflect your usage of social platforms, whether that’s a live Twitter feed, Facebook “like” buttons site-wide, or even Google+1 buttons. Interaction is certified fresh.

### **Make Sure Your XML Sitemap is Up to Date**

XML sitemaps are vital in allowing search engines to gauge the true depth of a given site and quickly crawl the pages that you are displaying. Oftentimes, however, sites can fall prey to the vicious affliction known as apathy: they don’t update their XML sitemaps when new pages are developed, new events are displayed, or new specials are pushed live. Make sure you stay on top of XML sitemap updates and Google will see only the freshest backend view of your site.

For every update we apply to a website we ensure this is reflected in the XML sitemap, so that when a search engine crawls our XML sitemap to gauge a site’s depth, there are no missing pieces or erroneous information. It will appear as up to date as the visible content suggests it is.

### **A Word About the Schema Code**

“What’s a schema?” Schema code is a relatively new code-based element that Google released at the end of June 2011. In simple terms, they can be viewed as augmented meta data. They allow you to describe, in depth, details about a given page, sale, or event that otherwise wouldn’t be included on the website. For every dining page, packages page, event page, our hotel page, and any other content-rich page on the site, Schema codes allow you to embed in the code exact information such as geographical location, start and end date, author or host, sale parameters, sources about a subject, and a litany of extra granular points of information. These back-end bits of code enhance each page from an informational standpoint, and allow search engines to better understand what a page is all about and what exactly the page is targeting. It’s all about context and intention, things that topical search queries are framed around.

### **Conclusion:**

- The Google Panda Update made most hotel websites obsolete. Bare, sparse copy stuffed with keywords can no longer sustain a respectable SERP ranking.

- The latest Freshness Update created the need to add fresh content to the website on an ongoing basis.
- In order to react to these two algorithmic updates, hoteliers need to re-evaluate their website re-design strategies and budget for website re-design or an optimization overhaul in early 2012.

Be proactive when dealing with your content and the various assets you own. Highlight what's great about you and make sure that whatever you're proud of is reflected on the back end of your website, on social media, and within blogs and press releases. Success will continue to come, especially if you stay ahead of the curve.

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