IS PAGE SPEED A RANKING FACTOR?

HYPOTHESIS

A page with faster page load time will outrank a page with slower page load time

BACKGROUND INFO

Obviously, the answer to the title question is yes, right? Google has been telling us since 2010 that page speed is a factor:

https://goo.gl/sVusvY

In that article, Google is a little vague on what it exactly means by 'page speed.' However, the article provides tools that you can use to test and subsequently improve your page speed. Looking at what these tools suggest should give us a good idea as to what Google means by 'page speed' by looking at what we should be focusing on to improve our page speed and thus our ranking. These tools are:

Yslow, PageSpeed, WebPageTest And site speed in webmaster tools (this in now its own thing as Google's PageSpeed Insights tool: https://developers.google.com/speed/pagespeed/insights/)

Very nicely, Google's PageSpeed Insights tool comes with explanation on what they are grading:

PageSpeed Insights measures how the page can improve its performance on:

▶ **Time to above-the-fold load:** Elapsed time from the moment a user requests a new page and to the moment the above-the-fold content is rendered by the browse.

▶ **Time to full page load:** Elapsed time from the moment a user requests a new page to the moment the page is fully rendered by the browser.

Seems pretty clear that they are talking about page load times as the standard for page speed. So in this test we will test page load time to verify that it is a ranking factor.

Test Setup

Test pages will be identical in structure except that the page designated as the 'slow' page will have a **jQuery script** on it which will be used to slow it down. The script adds a css class to all of the paragraph elements on the page and then removes them. The script does this 10,000 times which decreases the page load time by about 6s as compared to other 'regular speed' test pages.

Screenshot of the script

```
1 ▼ for (var i = 0; i < 10000; i++) {
2 ▼     jQuery("p").each(function () {
3           jQuery(this).addClass("foo");
4       });
5 ▼     jQuery("p").each(function () {
6           jQuery(this).removeClass("foo");
7       });
8   }
```

Test #1

Two identical pages were launched at the same time with one page, the 'slow' page, containing the script to slow down the page's load time.

Fast Page's Speed

Latest Performance Report for:
http://rocketbikemedia.com/speed/snarnstrodicks-iejdi-sowid/

Report generated: Tue, Jun 7, 2016, 1:43 PM -0700
Test Server Region: 🇨🇦 Vancouver, Canada
Using: Firefox (Desktop) 45.0.2, PageSpeed 1.12.16, YSlow 3.1.8

Looks like you're running WordPress
Have a look at our WP optimization tips »

Looks like you might not be using a CDN
Why should I use a CDN? »

Performance Scores

PageSpeed Score	YSlow Score	Page Load Time	Total Page Size	Requests
F (33%)	C (71%)	2.0s	1.92MB	36

Slow Page's Speed

Latest Performance Report for:
http://rocketbikemedia.com/speed/snarnstrodicks-paodp-wiadf/

Report generated: Tue, Jun 7, 2016, 1:44 PM -0700
Test Server Region: 🇨🇦 Vancouver, Canada
Using: Firefox (Desktop) 45.0.2, PageSpeed 1.12.16, YSlow 3.1.8

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Performance Scores

PageSpeed Score	YSlow Score	Page Load Time	Total Page Size	Requests
F (33%)	C (71%)	12.3s	1.92MB	36

You can see that the slow page is significantly slower.
Nevertheless, the slow page wins.

Slow Page
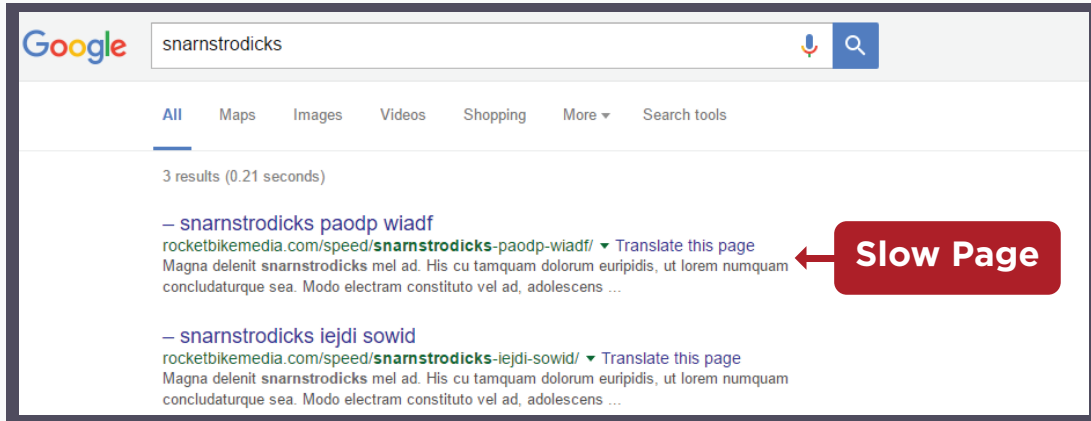
Test #2

In this test, five identical pages were launched and indexed. Identifying the #3 page, we then inserted our script to slow down the page load time of just that page. If page load time is a factor, that page should drop in rankings dropping below the faster pages.

Initial Indexing

Chose to increase page load time

Test Page's Initial Page Load Time

Page load time after script was put on test page

Pre-Script Speed

Page Load Time
2.2s

Post-Script Speed

Page Load Time
6.8s

All the test pages were then re-submitted to Google.

Current Ranking

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No change in ranking

As you can see there's been no impact on the rankings.

Analysis

Page load time, what is commonly referred to as page speed, is not a ranking factor. When doing the research for this test I found a MOZ contributor that did a correlational study almost three years ago. He reached the same conclusion, that page load time is not a ranking factor:

https://moz.com/blog/how-website-speed-actually-impacts-search-ranking

We're happy to report that we agree with MOZ for a change.

What's very interesting about the MOZ study is that while page load time does not affect rankings, the author found that Time To First Byte (TTFB) might. TTFB is the measurement of how long it takes to receive the first byte of information after a request for a page has been made. TTFB really has nothing to do with traditional 'page load' but is impacted by server and back-end configuration.

A ton of money is spent on improving page speed and page speed is its own cottage industry. However, it seems that most people are probably focusing on the wrong thing, page load time. This revelation on what actually matters (or in this case, what doesn't matter) to Google can not only give you a big edge on the competition but can potentially be a large money saver for your clients. You won't be directing your clients to waste resources on something that isn't going to improve rank.

In our next test, we're going to attempt to test TTFB and see if it is the 'page speed' ranking. Testing for TTFB won't be easy as just thinking about doing things on the server makes me break out in a cold sweat.

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Stay tuned.