

# Google's new search formula results in some unhappy websites

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Google Inc. can give websites a lot of traffic. It can also take it away. That's what Valerie Whitmore found out recently.

Whitmore runs CDKitchen out of her Austin, Texas, home with husband Brent. She started the website as a hobby in 1995 and named it after her 100-pound Dalmatian, Chili Dog. With Google's help, the mom-and-pop shop grew into one of the most popular cooking sites on the Web.

But traffic to CDKitchen, which features free recipes and cooking columns, plunged 39 percent on Feb. 24, knocking it "into the abyss," Whitmore said. That's when [Google](#), which delivers 70 percent of the site's traffic, made a major change to how search results are ranked.

Google won plaudits for promoting original research and analysis and banishing pages littered with second-rate content or overloaded with advertising. But the revision to its secret [mathematical formula](#) that determines the best answers to a searcher's query also caused an uproar as hundreds of sites complained to Google that they had been unfairly lumped in with "content farms," which churn out articles with little useful information to drive more traffic to their sites.

Google won't discuss which websites it was targeting or how it revised its [algorithm](#). It says it's pleased with the results, even as it acknowledges that with the rapid evolution and vast expanse of the Web, it has to be constantly vigilant to make sure its search engine finds what users want.

"Our primary goal is to make sure we return the best websites we can," said Matt Cutts, who leads Google's spam-fighting efforts. "No algorithm can be 100 percent accurate."

Such a major change to its algorithm was a rare admission from the world's most powerful search engine that it was being flooded by spammers and hucksters who were manipulating Google to land in the top search results. Google became one of the most powerful Internet companies by sifting through billions of Web pages and, with just a few words as a clue, guiding millions of people to what they seek on the Web.

But in recent months it had taken heat for the quality of its search results. Google responded by tweaking its algorithm, which it said affects 1 in 8, or 12 percent, of search queries in the U.S. Google gets more than 1 billion search queries a day globally. Cutts said the change to its algorithm was a year in the making. He declined to say when Google would roll out the change worldwide.

Google engineers are constantly tweaking the search engine, making hundreds of changes a year to the algorithm, most of them minor and less noticeable. They keep the algorithm under wraps to prevent Web developers from getting around each revision Google makes. Google has even had to punish retailers including JCPenney for paying for links from unrelated sites to elevate their rankings in Google's search engine.

As part of its effort to zero in on troublemakers, Google created a software extension to its Chrome browser that lets users block sites. More than 100,000 users have installed the extension, giving Google the ability to study the top several dozen sites that users disliked so much they gave them the boot. About 84 percent of those sites were affected when Google tweaked its algorithm, Cutts said.

"The work of search is never done. No matter what we improve, there will be people trying to game search," he said.

It's a high-stakes effort: Google, which handles two-thirds of all searches in the U.S. and reaps billions from the ads it displays, can't afford to have consumers click away to competitors such as Microsoft Corp.'s Bing and a slew of innovative up-and-comers. Search-engine start up Blekko, for example, recently blocked 20 sites that its users flagged most often as spam.

Google, which earned kudos for working to improve the quality of information on the Web, does not claim to have solved the challenge of sorting content by the quality of the information. But Cutts said Google extensively tests any changes to its algorithm and rolls out substantial changes only if data show a jump in the quality of results. Cutts and his team are monitoring feedback from websites affected by the change to its algorithm to see how Google can continue to improve [search results](#). He said Google would not make changes to its search algorithm on behalf of individual websites.

One of the websites popping the Champagne is Britannica, which got a big lift from Google, appearing as the top Google search result 15 percent more often and in the top three results 18 percent more often. The change resulted in 40 percent more visits from Google users, said Gregory Barlow, chief marketing officer of Encyclopedia Britannica Group. For example, searches for German physicist Max Born jumped to seventh from eighth and searches for apapane, the Hawaiian bird, jumped to sixth from seventh.

"We are thrilled because we didn't do anything. All we did was to publish accurate, factual content," Barlow said.

Some search-engine marketing consultants, even those whose clients lost

as much as 50 percent of their traffic, applaud Google for encouraging websites to produce more useful, relevant content that can win over users, advertisers and Google.

But Vivek Wadhwa, a visiting scholar at the University of California-Berkeley, says he's disappointed in Google's effort, which he says falls short. Google wiped out some of the content farms and spammers, but it left many unscathed while inadvertently hitting a number of legitimate websites that were "innocent bystanders," he said.

Ram Prayaga, chief executive of Advizo, says his Woodland Hills, Calif., company, which runs a question-and-answer service with 800,000 registered members at [www.askmehelpdesk.com](http://www.askmehelpdesk.com), is one of those bystanders. Advizo had just hired its sixth employee when Google made the change to its algorithm, resulting in a 35 percent nose dive in visits from Google. Google used to send Ask Me Help Desk 80 percent of its traffic.

Prayaga said his company was determined to win back the traffic it lost. "To be considered a content farm by the world's most respected Internet organization seems very unfair," he said. "It's like being put on the do-not-fly list."

And if Google was trying to take out spammers, its aim was off, at least in some cases, Prayaga said.

For example, Ask Me Help Desk used to rank high in Google results for the somewhat obscure search query "turbotax login." After Google changed its algorithm, two of the top results linked to spammers who had figured out how to game Google, Prayaga said. After The Los Angeles Times alerted Google, its spam-fighting team reviewed the sites, found they violated the search engine's guidelines and removed them.

"It demonstrates the issues Google is dealing with," Prayaga said. "I don't expect them to fix everything, but by the same token they should tread more carefully in areas of determining content quality."

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