

5 Steps to Diagnosing and Repairing Search Engine Penalties

In my nearly 20 years of experience in the search engine optimization field, I've seen one universal constant - the ongoing struggle between the popular engines and SEO experts to shape the natural search results. Through testing and experience, SEO professionals uncover loopholes that allow them to rank highly in the SERPs – only to be shot down by search engine engineers whose top priority is the quality of the search listings.

Recently, in the wake of both the dramatic Google Panda and Penguin updates, the scope and frequency with which these algorithm changes occur seems to be increasing – and there are no signs of this shift slowing down any time soon!

For SEO-aware webmasters, this makes the ability to identify and diagnose search engine penalties a critical skill that's necessary to quickly recover future lost traffic. Ideally, by staying on top of the latest SEO news and paying attention to the resulting changes in best practices, you'll be able to easily and effectively repair the damages caused to your site by the latest rounds of updates.

However, considering the secrecy with which the search engines operate – as well as the influence their decisions can have on your Internet business's success – you'll ultimately find that it's much better to be prepared to deal with potential future penalties than to scramble around aimlessly should the worst occur.

Here's what you need to know about diagnosing search engine penalties...

Step #1 – Examine your web stats

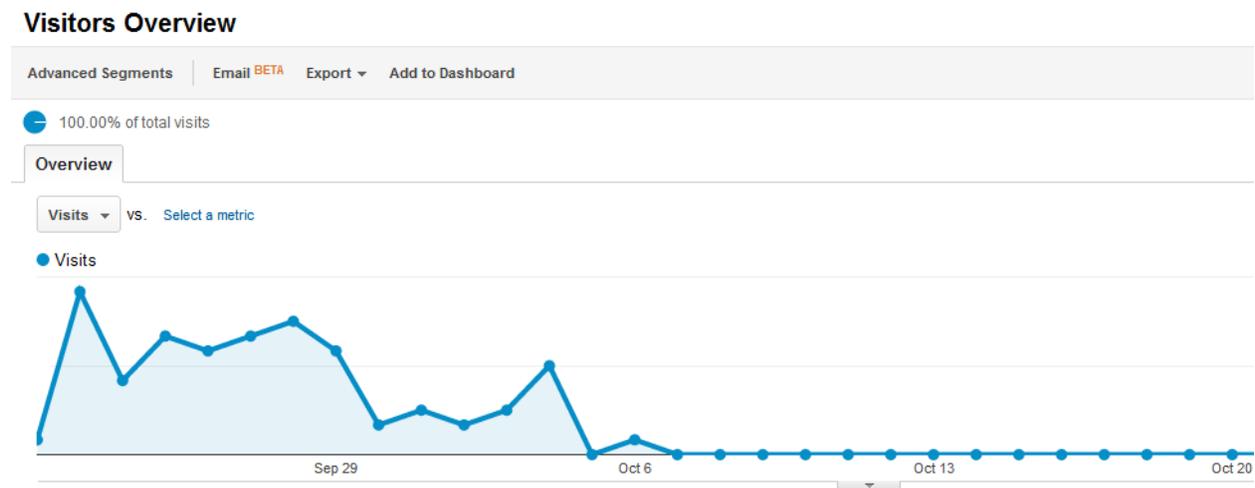
The first step in the process of diagnosing search engine penalties is to determine conclusively that you've experienced one in the first place!

Really, no matter how many awful reports you've heard about Google's latest algorithm changes or how many websites you see being incorrectly impacted by an update, you've only been affected yourself if you see a corresponding drop in traffic, rankings or both.

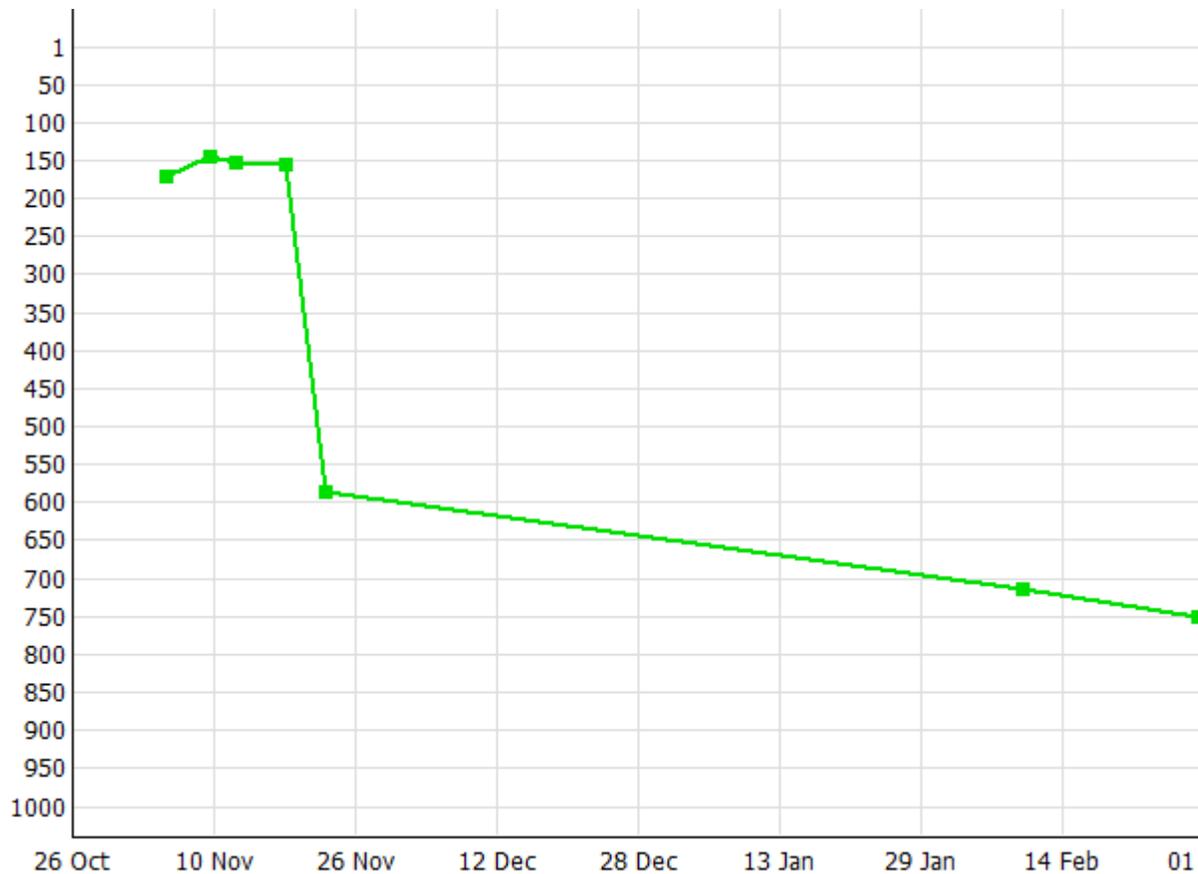
So don't panic just because you see news articles talking about the devastating impact of the latest algorithm update. Wait until you can ascertain whether or not you've actually been hit before determining whether or not you need to take action!

To find out if your site was affected, log in to your web stats provider (whether you use Google Analytics, Omniture, Unica, Coremetrics or any other program) and try to identify any significant decreases in web traffic. Typically, if you've been affected by a search engine penalty, you'll see a substantial decline on a single day, followed by traffic numbers that are consistently lower than usual following the drop.

As an example, the following traffic chart indicates what the "Visitors Overview" display within Google Analytics could look like after a search engine penalty or algorithm change hits a site:



Alternatively, take a look at your search engine results page rankings, which can be tracked using programs from SEOBook or SEOMoz. If you see a sudden, unexplainable drop in your rankings for several of your target keywords (as pictured in the following example), it's possible that the results you're experiencing are attributable to changes within the search engine algorithms.



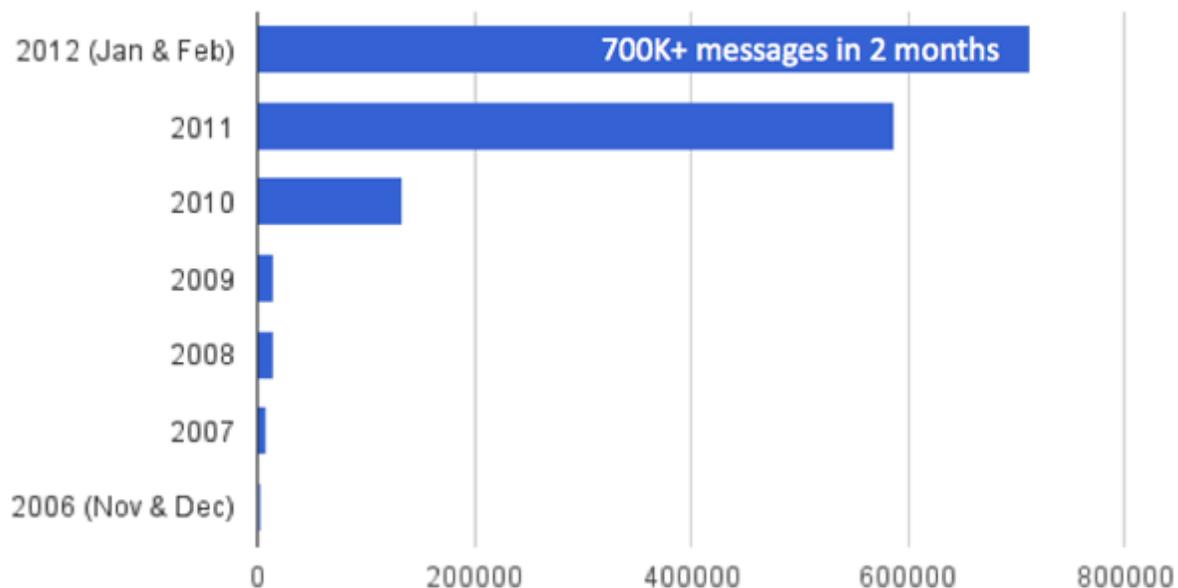
If you don't see a decline in your traffic or rankings (or, if you experienced a decline followed by a rebound in your web metrics), congratulations! You're safe from the most recent round of search engine algorithm changes and penalties, although you'll be wise to monitor these stats regularly to detect any future issues that arise.

Step #2 – Check Google Webmaster Tools

On the other hand, if you've established that your site has suffered a search engine penalty, your first stop should be your Google Webmaster Tools account (assuming your site has already been signed up for this service) – specifically, the "Messages" section.

Although Google can't possibly notify every single site that's negatively impacted by its algorithm changes, the search giant has recently started sending out more messages than ever to the webmasters it believes are abusing Google's stated quality guidelines.

According to data compiled by Barry Schwartz on industry website [Search Engine Roundtable](#), Google sent out more webmaster notifications via Webmaster Tools in early 2012 than it did from 2006-2010 combined, by a pretty large margin:



Among the most common notifications webmasters report receiving as a result of this push include:

- Notice of detected unnatural links
- Notice of low-quality content pages
- Notice of traffic changes for top URLs
- Notice of techniques that violate the Google Webmaster Guidelines

In some ways, receiving an error message is a good thing, as this will give you clues about the specific elements that caused your penalty – and, consequently, a road map for how you can recover your site’s former traffic and rankings.

However, it’s important to note that Google doesn’t send out these notifications to every webmaster who’s impacted by its changes. Certainly, if your site receives a manual penalty, you’ll receive a message (though these are actually issued much less frequently than most webmasters believe), but in no other circumstance are you guaranteed a notification.

This is one of the reasons why it’s so important to understand the difference between search engine algorithm changes and penalties. Though both changes have the potential to affect your site’s SERPs placements, the mechanisms by

which they reorganize the search results are very difference.

Penalties are handed out to sites that are in clear violation of something within the search engines' terms of service or webmaster guidelines. They may be manually applied to individual sites that have been convicted of egregious errors, or they may be automatically passed on to groups of sites that have been detected engaging in illicit activities.

Algorithm updates, on the other hand, indicate that Google and the other search engines have modified the complex calculations they use to rank websites in the SERPs – meaning that different criteria are now being used to judge who should come out on top. If an algorithm update occurs, your site may lose rankings because it no longer meets these new criteria as well as other sites, leading to lower SERPs placements even though no specific rule violations have occurred.

But, long story short... If you receive a manual penalty or if your site is detected engaging in behaviors that violate the search engines' guidelines, you may receive a notification in your Google Webmaster Tools account. If, conversely, you've suffered as the result of an algorithm change, you likely won't receive a message, as Google has no idea that your unique site has been affected by its updates.

If you aren't issued a Google Webmaster Tools notification, there are other steps you'll need to take to determine the severity of your penalty:

Step #3 – Look for your site in the Google index

Since the presence or absence of a warning message in your Google Webmaster Tools account isn't conclusive evidence of a search engine penalty or algorithm change, your next step should be to confirm that your site is still listed in Google's index.

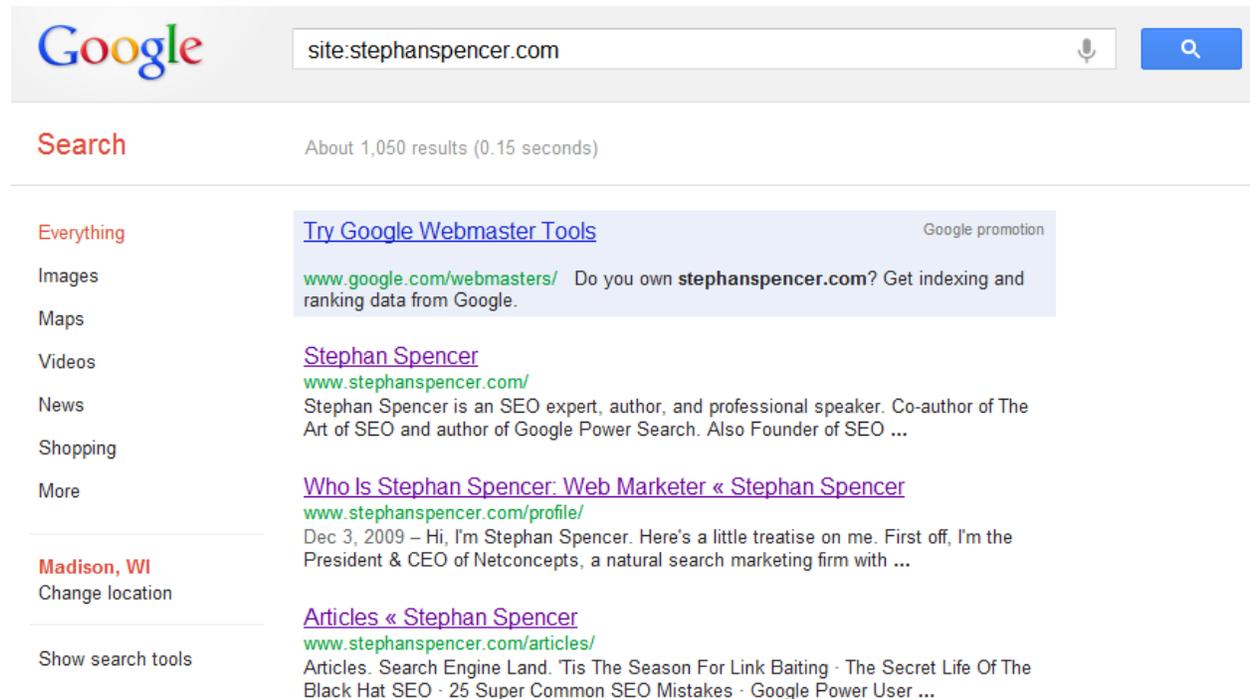
Overall, the harshest penalty Google can issue is a total ban, in which your entire site is removed from Google's index. Total bans can be permanent or temporary – though they're generally bad news in either case!

To check your site's indexation, go to Google and enter the following string of characters into the search bar:

site:yourdomain.com

Replace “yourdomain.com” with your own web address (leaving the “http://www” code off) and be sure to eliminate spaces between the word “site” and your domain.

If your site is still in the Google index (indicating that you haven’t been temporarily or permanently banned), a listing for each of the pages associated with your name in the index will be displayed, as in the following example:



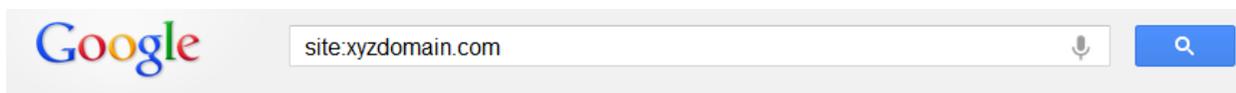
The screenshot shows a Google search interface. The search bar contains the text "site:stephanspencer.com". Below the search bar, the word "Search" is displayed in red, followed by "About 1,050 results (0.15 seconds)". On the left side, there is a vertical menu with options: "Everything", "Images", "Maps", "Videos", "News", "Shopping", "More", "Madison, WI", "Change location", and "Show search tools". The main search results area contains three items:

- [Try Google Webmaster Tools](#) (Google promotion)
- www.google.com/webmasters/ Do you own **stephanspencer.com**? Get indexing and ranking data from Google.
- [Stephan Spencer](http://www.stephanspencer.com/)
www.stephanspencer.com/
Stephan Spencer is an SEO expert, author, and professional speaker. Co-author of The Art of SEO and author of Google Power Search. Also Founder of SEO ...

Below these, there are two more search results:

- [Who Is Stephan Spencer: Web Marketer « Stephan Spencer](#)
www.stephanspencer.com/profile/
Dec 3, 2009 – Hi, I'm Stephan Spencer. Here's a little treatise on me. First off, I'm the President & CEO of Netconcepts, a natural search marketing firm with ...
- [Articles « Stephan Spencer](#)
www.stephanspencer.com/articles/
Articles. Search Engine Land. 'Tis The Season For Link Baiting - The Secret Life Of The Black Hat SEO · 25 Super Common SEO Mistakes · Google Power User ...

Alternatively, if your site has been penalized with removal from the index, you’ll see an error message indicating that no records have been found:



Search

Everything

Images

Maps

Videos

News

Shopping

More

[Try Google Webmaster Tools](#)

Google promotion

www.google.com/webmasters/ Do you own xyzdomain.com? Get indexing and ranking data from Google.

Your search - **site:xyzdomain.com** - did not match any documents.

Suggestions:

- Make sure all words are spelled correctly.
- Try different keywords.
- Try more general keywords.

If your site is still listed in the Google index, but you've experienced an as-of-yet unexplained decrease in traffic or rankings, your next step should be to rule out normal search engine behavior. Some of these processes may mimic algorithm updates or penalties, so it's important to determine whether the changes your site has experienced can be expected or whether they're cause for alarm.

Step #4 – Rule out normal search behavior

When it comes to normal search behaviors, you'll specifically want to rule out the "Google Dance" when identifying the cause of your diminished traffic.

The "Google Dance" refers to the normal movement between SERPs placements that typically occurs as the result of new website creation or an increase in marketing campaigns. When sites are launched or when they receive extra attention via marketing campaigns, it often takes the Googlebots some time to determine where in the SERPs they should fall.

For this reason, it's not uncommon to see wild swings of dozens or hundreds of SERPs placements following site launches, major link building campaigns or major content expansions. Generally, these fluctuations even out within 1-2 weeks without any necessary effort on your part, so if you see this type of movement immediately after making changes to your site, don't automatically assume that your lost rankings are due to a penalty.

So if you've experienced a decrease in traffic or rankings after either launching your new site or implementing new marketing campaigns, it's possible that the results you're experiencing are due to normal search behaviors that aren't cause

for concern.

Step #5 – Check SEO news websites

If, at this point, you've been able to establish that your loss in traffic or SERPs rankings can't be attributed to normal search behaviors, but you also haven't received any notification from Google regarding potential penalties, your final step should be to check the SEO news websites for messages from other webmasters who are experiencing the same thing.

Often, when new algorithm changes or search engine penalties are rolled out, the first people to start discussing what they are and what implications they carry are the search engine optimization news blogs. Checking any of the following pages should give you a better idea as to whether you're experiencing an isolated issue, or whether you've been affected by a widespread search engine penalty or algorithm update:

- [SEOMoz](#)
- [Search Engine Watch](#)
- [Search Engine Land](#)
- [SEOBook](#)
- [Search Engine Journal](#)
- [Official Google Webmaster Central Blog](#)
- [Matt Cutts Blog](#)

These sites represent some of the top names in the SEO industry, so rest assured that if they post about a potential search engine change, it isn't because a single, inexperienced SEO blogger is crying wolf over a personal site issue.

If you do see news articles referencing a potential search penalty or change on one of these sites, stay tuned to their surely-forthcoming updates on what specific variables have been targeted, as well as what recovery actions should be taken to regain lost traffic and rankings.

In addition, you'll want to follow the guidelines discussed in my "5 Ways to Recover from a Search Engine Penalty" email series (which you'll have received automatically in the weeks following your download of this report). You may also find Chapter 14 in the full version of [The Art of SEO](#) useful in terms of understanding how to manage the evolving world of search engine optimization.

Again, I sincerely hope you never have to put this advice into practice, and that the information you find here is something you'll only ever need to use on a "good to know" basis.

However, in this frequently changing world of SEO, the odds are good that you'll experience at least some negative impact on your website's performance at some point in its life. If you do find yourself in this situation, try not to panic. Search engine penalties and algorithm changes may be frustrating to deal with, but ultimately, they may challenge you to improve your site in a way that benefits not just the search engines, but your users as well.

Reframing these inconvenient experiences as part of the learning and growing process, and following the tips found in this free report will go a long way towards keeping your business thriving over time.

To your success!

Stephan Spencer

[The Art of SEO](#)