

GO MOBILE OR GO HOME

BY NAREN ARULRAJAH

If your mobile website isn't user-friendly, you're already losing potential patients—and now you could lose your hard-won search rankings, too.

Google has long shown a preference for mobile friendly search engine optimization (SEO). Previous algorithm updates included elements to improve the search experience for mobile users, but the desktop versions of websites have traditionally been the primary source for relevancy in search rankings.

Last fall, Google announced a plan to implement Mobile First indexing. This marks a major shift in direction for Google.

Most websites will see little to no change in rankings, at least for now. Dynamic and responsive websites with equivalent markup across desktop and mobile versions should see no change in rankings, according to the official Google information release. If, however, your mobile and full version websites are separate, and do not have equivalent markup, you may see start to see some changes soon (if you have not already).

You can preserve your rankings and even use Mobile First to your advantage. Here's how:

- *Get involved.* Ask your digital marketing company or webmaster about your mobile site.
- *Check it.* Visit your own site. Does it load well on mobile devices? Are all buttons usable? Are all features easy to find?
- *Make use of the tools that Google offers.* There is a mobile-friendly test tool (search.google.com/search-console/mobile-friendly; for checking site usability), a robot.txt testing tool (support.google.com/webmasters/answer/6062598; to ensure Googlebot accessibility), and a Structured Data Testing Tool (search.google.com/structured-data/testing-tool; for comparing structure between site versions), among others. You can delve into Google Analytics (analytics.google.com/analytics/web/provision/?authuser=0#provision/SignUp/) for information about your site performance, bounce rate, and much more.
- *Get to work.* If you only have a verified desktop site in your search console, you will need to add and verify a mobile version. While it is advisable to do this soon, don't compromise quality. An optimized desktop-oriented site, even when viewed on a mobile device, is often better than a broken or incomplete mobile site.
- *Think local.* Going forward, we can expect to see algorithm changes increasingly targeted toward the needs and browsing habits of on-the-go mobile users. Expect increasing focus on conversational search terms, app integration, and interactive functionality. Optimizing for local searches will

be more important than ever, because GPS-enabled mobile devices are inherently location-oriented.

IS YOUR MOBILE SITE BUILT FOR SPEED?

Google considered desktop page loading time as a factor in search ranking since 2010, and the search giant has confirmed that mobile loading speed will be considered, and likely given emphasis in future indexing. The average Internet access speed nearly doubled in three years, going from 8 MBPS in 2013 to over 15 MBPS in 2016, but the average mobile Internet access speed in 2016 came in under 7 MBPS, putting a strong spotlight back on loading times, according to Statista.

Speed up your mobile site by:

- Streamlining your design by using CSS (a computer language) rather than images, and consolidating into a single style sheet.
- Placing JavaScript files at the end of your document. This will help prevent parallel downloading, and can slow down your entire page if loaded first.
- Compressing large files using a method such as gzip to reduce size by as much as 70 percent.
- Considering the creation of a mobile app designed for your practice. You can add information, special offers, appointment scheduling and even a billing portal. (Be sure that your developer understands HIPAA guidelines if you want to use the app for any kind of patient communications.)

Your rankings may improve if your mobile website is faster and more functional than the desktop version. On the other hand, if it is incomplete, slow to load, lacks functionality or content, your Google ranking could plummet in a Mobile First index. Considering the skyrocketing number of patients who are using mobile technology, optimizing for these devices is likely to improve your marketing ROI as well as your Google rankings. ■



Naren Arulrajah is President and CEO of Ekwa Marketing, a complete Internet marketing company which focuses on SEO, social media, marketing education and the online reputations of Dermatologists and Plastic Surgeons. With a team of 140+ full time marketers, www.ekwa.com helps doctors who know where they want to go get there by dominating their market and growing their business significantly year after year. If you have questions about marketing your practice online, call 855-598-3320 to speak one-on-one with Naren.