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Google Gives Boost to Mobile-Friendly Sites

Google tweaks search algorithm to favor sites that look good on smartphone screens

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Google Inc. began shuffling its rankings for mobile websites Tuesday, potentially benefiting sites like job board Indeed.com and real-estate company Zillow Group Inc., and hurting others like retailer Zumiez Inc. and IRS.gov.

Google said it tweaked its algorithm for mobile searches to favor sites that look good on smartphone screens, and penalize sites with content that is too wide for a phone screen and text and links that are too small.

Given Google's importance in driving traffic to websites, some in the industry dubbed the change "mobilegeddon." Google updates its algorithm frequently, but this is considered by some experts to be its most significant change in years. In an unprecedented move, Google warned website operators in February that the change was coming, and gave them tips on how to prepare.

"A lot of sites have been racing to beat the clock on this issue," said Mark Ballard, director of research at Merkle RKG, a search-marketing firm. The change is also important for Google. A company executive said at a conference last year that searches from mobile devices were poised to surpass searches on personal computers.

But advertisers typically pay less for clicks from phones, because they don't lead to sales as often. Encouraging developers to tailor sites to look good on smartphones should lead to more sales and consequently higher prices for Google's mobile ads, said Matt Ackley, chief marketing officer of Marin Software, an advertising technology firm. Advertising accounted for 90% of



Google's \$66 billion in revenue in 2014.

Google also wants more users to surf the Web on their phones instead of using mobile apps. Google sells ads that point to websites, but generally cannot direct searches to content inside apps. Some companies, including India e-commerce giant Flipkart, have dumped their mobile websites and told visitors to use their mobile apps instead. "As people increasingly search on their mobile devices, we want to make sure they can find content that's not only relevant and timely, but also easy to read and interact with on smaller mobile screens," a Google spokeswoman said.

In a blog post Tuesday, Google said it had seen a 5 percentage point increase in the proportion of sites that are "mobile friendly" since its February announcement. The spokeswoman declined to specify the percentage of sites that are mobile friendly.

The change isn't simple for sites to roll out, since they must change all of their website's pages to optimize them for smartphone screens.

Failing the test doesn't mean sites will automatically fall out of Google's rankings on smartphones, notes Rand Fishkin, founder of Moz, which makes software to help site operators improve their search rankings. Mobile-friendliness is just one of over 200 different "signals" that Google uses for ranking its results, the company said.