

Are you SandBoxed by Google, How do you Escape it?

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What is the Google Sandbox Theory? There are several theories that attempt explain the Google Sandbox effect. Essentially, the problem is simple. Webmasters around the world began to notice that their new websites, optimized and chock full of inbound links, were not ranking well for their selected keywords.

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Before I start explaining what the Google Sandbox theory is, let me make a few things clear:

- The Google Sandbox theory is just that, a theory, and is without official confirmations from Google or the benefit of years of observation.
- The Google Sandbox theory has been floating around since summer 2004, and has only really gained steam after February 4, 2005 , after a major Google index update (something known as the old Google dance).
- Without being able to verify the existence of a Sandbox, much less its features, it becomes very hard to devise strategies to combat its effects.
- Almost everything that you will read on the Internet on the Google Sandbox theory is conjecture, pieced together from individual experiences and not from a widescale objective controlled experiment with hundreds of websites (something that would obviously help in determining the nature of the Sandbox, but is inherently impractical given the demand on resources).

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In fact, the most common scenario to be reported was that after being listed in the SERPS (search engine results pages) for a couple of weeks, pages were either dropped from the index or ranked extremely low for their most important keywords.

This pattern was tracked down to websites that were created (by created I mean that their domain name was purchased and the website was registered) around March 2004. All websites created around or after March 2004 were said to be suffering from the Sandbox effect.

Some outliers escaped it completely, but webmasters on a broad scale had to deal with their websites ranking poorly even for terms for which they had

optimized their websites to death.

Conspiracy theories grew exponentially after the February 2005 update, codenamed 'Allegra' (how these updates are named I have no clue), when webmasters began seeing vastly fluctuating results and fortunes. Well-ranked websites were losing their high SERPS positions, while previously low-ranking websites had gained ground to rank near the top for their keywords.

This was a major update to Google's search engine algorithm, but what was interesting was the apparent 'exodus' of websites from the Google Sandbox. This event gave the strongest evidence yet of the existence of a Google Sandbox, and allowed SEO experts to better understand what the Sandbox effect was about.

Possible explanations for the Google Sandbox Effect A common explanation offered for the Google Sandbox effect is the 'Time Delay' factor. Essentially, this theory suggests that Google releases websites from the Sandbox after a set period of time. Since many webmasters started feeling the effects of the Sandbox around March-April 2004 and a lot of those websites were 'released' in the 'Allegra' update, this 'website aging' theory has gained a lot of ground.

However, I don't find much truth in the 'Time Delay' factor because by itself, it's just an artificially imposed penalty on websites and does not improve relevancy (the Holy Grail for search engines). Since Google is the de facto leader of the search engine industry and is continuously making strides to improve relevancy in search results, tactics such as this do not fit in with what we know about Google.

Contrasting evidence from many websites has shown that some websites created before March 2004 were still not released from the Google Sandbox, whereas some websites created as late as July 2004 managed to escape the Google Sandbox effect during the 'Allegra' update. Along with shattering the 'Time Delay' theory, this also raises some interesting questions. This evidence has led some webmasters to suggest a 'link threshold' theory; once a website has accumulated a certain amount of quantity/quality inbound links, it is released from the Sandbox.

While this might be closer to the truth, this cannot be all there is to it. There has been evidence of websites who have escaped the Google Sandbox effect without massive linkbuilding campaigns. In my opinion, link-popularity is definitely a factor in determining when a website is released from the Sandbox but there is one more caveat attached to it.

This concept is known as 'link-aging'. Basically, this theory states that websites are released from the Sandbox based on the 'age' of their inbound links. While we only have limited data to analyze, this seems to be the most likely explanation for the Google Sandbox effect.

The link-ageing concept is something that confuses people, who usually consider that it is the website that has to age. While conceptually, a link to a website can only be as old as the website itself, yet if you don't have enough inbound links after one year, common experience has it that you will not be able to escape from the Google Sandbox. A quick hop around popular SEO forums (you do visit SEO forums, don't you?) will lead you to hundreds of threads discussing various results – some websites were launched in July 2004 and escaped by December 2004. Others were stuck in the Sandbox even after the 'Allegra' update.

How to find out if your website is sandboxed Finding out if your website is 'Sandboxed' is quite simple. If your website does not appear in any SERPS for your target list of keywords, or if your results are highly depressing (ranked somewhere on the 40 th page) even if you have lots of inbound links and almost perfect on-page optimization, then your website has been Sandboxed.

Issues such as the Google Sandbox theory tend to distract webmasters from the core 'good' SEO practices and inadvertently push them towards black-hat or quick-fix techniques to exploit the search engine's weaknesses. The problem with this approach is its short-sightedness. To explain what I'm talking about, let's take a small detour and discuss search engine theory.

Understanding search engines If you're looking to do some SEO, it would help if you tried to understand what search engines are trying to do. Search engines want to present the most relevant information to their users. There are two problems in this – the inaccurate search terms that people use and the information glut that is the Internet. To counteract, search engines have developed increasingly complex algorithms to deduce relevancy of content for different search terms.

How does this help us?

Well, as long as you keep producing highly-targeted, quality content that is relevant to the subject of your website (and acquire natural inbound links from related websites), you will stand a good chance for ranking high in SERPS. It sounds ridiculously simple, and in this case, it is. As search engine algorithms evolve, they will continue to do their jobs better, thus becoming better at filtering out trash and presenting the most relevant content to their users.

While each search engine will have different methods of determining search engine placement (Google values inbound links quite a lot, while Yahoo has recently placed additional value on Title tags and domain names), in the end all search engines aim to achieve the same goal, and by aiming to fulfill that goal you will always be able to ensure that your website can achieve a good ranking.

Escaping the sandbox... Now, from our discussion about the Sandbox theory above, you know that at best, the Google Sandbox is a filter on the search engine's algorithm that has a dampening influence on websites. While most SEO experts will tell you that this effect decreases after a certain period of time, they mistakenly accord it to website aging, or basically, when the website is first spidered by Googlebot. Actually, the Sandbox does 'holds back' new websites but more importantly, the effects reduce over time not on the basis of website aging, but on link aging.

This means that the time that you spend in the Google Sandbox is directly linked to when you start acquiring quality links for your website. Thus, if you do nothing, your website may not be released from the Google Sandbox.

However, if you keep your head down and keep up with a low-intensity, long-term link building plan and keep adding inbound links to your website, you will be released from the Google Sandbox after an indeterminate period of time (but within a year, probably six months). In other words, the filter will stop having such a massive effect on your website. As the 'Allegra' update showed,

websites that were constantly being optimized during the time that they were in the Sandbox began to rank quite high for targeted keywords after the Sandbox effect ended.

This and other observations of the Sandbox phenomenon – combined with an understanding of search engine philosophy – have lead me to pinpoint the following strategies for minimizing your website's 'Sandboxed' time.

SEO strategies to minimize your website's "sandboxed" time

Despite what some SEO experts might tell you, you don't need do anything different to escape from the Google Sandbox. In fact, if you follow the 'white hat' rules of search engine optimization and work on the principles I've mentioned many times in this course, you'll not only minimize your website's Sandboxed time but you will also ensure that your website ranks in the top 10 for your target keywords. Here's a list of SEO strategies you should make sure you use when starting out a new website:

- Start promoting your website the moment you create your website, not when your website is 'ready'. Don't make the mistake of waiting for your website to be 'perfect'. The motto is to get your product out on the market, as quickly as possible, and then worry about improving it. Otherwise, how will you ever start to make money?
- Establish a low-intensity, long-term link building plan and follow it religiously. For example, you can set yourself a target of acquiring 20 links per week, or maybe even a target of contacting 10 link partners a day (of course, with SEO Elite, link building is a snap). This will ensure that as you build your website, you also start acquiring inbound links and those links will age properly – so that by the time your website exits the Sandbox you would have both a high quantity of inbound links and a thriving website.
- Avoid black-hat techniques such as keyword stuffing or 'cloaking'. Google's search algorithm evolves almost daily, and penalties for reaking the rules may keep you stuck in the Sandbox longer than usual.
- Save your time by remembering the 20/80 rule: 80 percent of your optimization can be accomplished by just 20 percent of effort. After that, any tweaking left to be done is specific to current search engine tendencies and liable to become ineffective once a search engine updates its algorithm. Therefore don't waste your time in optimizing for each and every search engine – just get the basics right and move on to the next page.

Remember, you should always optimize with the end-user in mind, not the search engines.

Like I mentioned earlier, search engines are continuously optimizing their algorithms in order to improve on the key criteria: relevancy. By ensuring that your website content is targeted on a particular keyword, and is judged as 'good' content based on both on-page optimization (keyword density) and

off-page factors (lots of quality inbound links), you will also guarantee that your website will keep ranking highly for your search terms no matter what changes are brought into a search engine's algorithm, whether it's a dampening factor a la Sandbox or any other quirk the search engine industry throws up in the future.

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