

INTERMEDIATE

HOW TO

# RECOVER FROM A GOOGLE PENALTY

BY TIM GRICE, BRANDED3



**SEO  
FROM THE  
EXPERTS  
SERIES**

A publication of

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# SEO FROM THE EXPERTS: HOW TO RECOVER FROM A GOOGLE PENALTY.

WRITTEN BY TIM GRICE

With over eight years' experience in SEO and Search Marketing, Tim is Branded3's Head of Search, leading the strategy across their search offerings. Tim oversees the development of search strategies for some of the biggest brands in the UK, helping each campaign deliver significant increases in visibility and ROI.



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# Introduction.

Since Google Panda and Google Penguin have been rolled out over the past two years, the SEO landscape has changed dramatically. At Branded3, we've worked with over 40 businesses suffering some form of a penalty, with the majority being manual penalties due to unnatural links. Over time, we were able to recover 95% of these business websites.

This brief guide will dive into our key takeaways and learnings from recovering these websites. By the end, you'll know how to recover from a Google penalty.



## What is Google Panda?

Google Panda hit the US market in February 2011, and rolled out globally in April of the same year. The attention was to lower the rankings of low quality or 'thin' websites, and it was an algorithm level, which hit sites at a domain, rather than a page level.

If you have been affected by a Google penalty, it's highly likely your traffic may look similar to this graph.



SEOMoz put together a [useful timeline](#), indicating when all historic Google updates have occurred. You can map this against your own traffic graph to diagnose a panda penalty.

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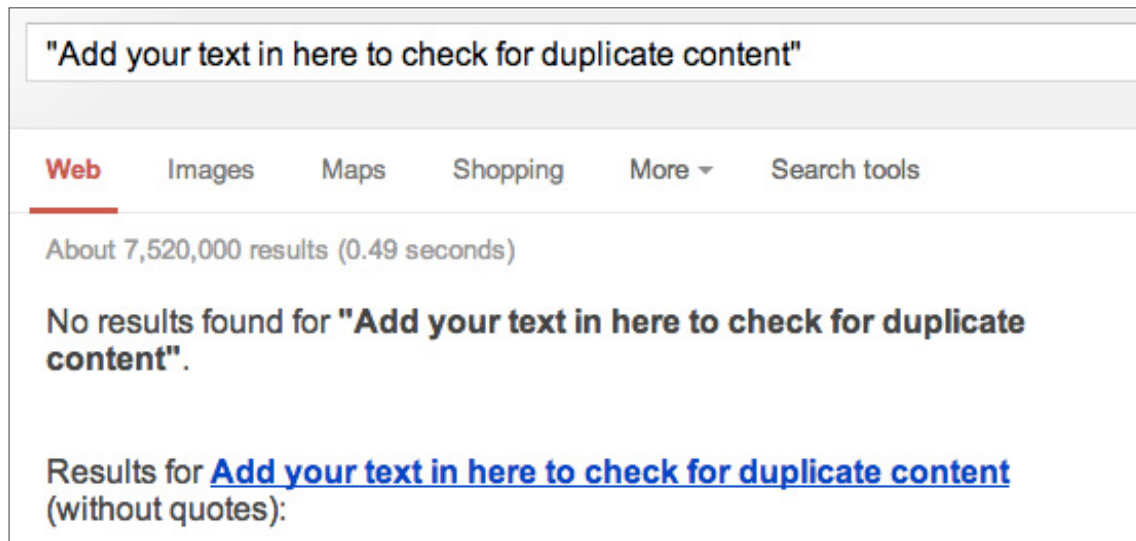


# How to Diagnose Your Penalty

Google Panda is fairly easy to diagnose, but one of the most difficult penalties to recover from. The first step in recovery is to identify the root cause of your Google Panda penalty. Here's how to do so:

## 1. Check for Duplicate Content

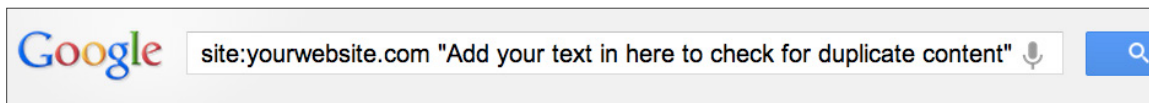
Depending on your business, the sample size of your customer base may not be large enough to be statistically significant. Generally speaking, a good rule of thumb for true data significance is 1000 records or more. If your data is between 100-1000, it should still have some significance. If your sample size is less than 100, it can be reviewed for overarching trends but should be rerun when the group grows to 100.



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This will return all results where your content has been duplicated, both on your own site and external sites. If you just wanted to check duplicate content that exists on your own site, you can amend the command as follows:



## TIP

If you have a lot of duplicate content on your site that's valuable to your users, you can use robots.txt to block this from Google and leave intact for your users. This will help avoid potential issues with Google Panda.

We'll look at a specific example of this in a brief case study on page 12.

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## 2. Are You Adding Value?

If you are confident you have no duplicate content, then you have to answer the following question honestly:

**“Does my site bring anything new to the table?”**

If you're simply another site selling exactly the same things as hundreds of other websites, then you need to look how you can add value. Here are some examples:

- ◉ User Reviews
- ◉ Engaging Content
- ◉ Useful Information
- ◉ Local Information
- ◉ Helpful Graphics
- ◉ Unique Insights

These are all examples of content you should be looking to produce. Remember that there are thousands of human evaluators looking at results and websites, and they rate websites on how relevant and useful they are. This all feeds into an artificial intelligence algorithm, and ultimately rolled out as a part of Google Panda. It's not just a technical issue, it's a usability issue.

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## Case Study: Panda Recovery

Below is an example of a website we recovered from Google Panda:



The issue with this particular example was that 90% of its pages had content duplicated from other parts of the site. FAQs, delivery information, and helpful advice was duplicated across thousands of pages.

In this particular case we decided that the content was actually good for the user, and chose to keep it all on the site. Since the content was duplicated for the sake of the user and not for the sake of easily landing in search, we chose to put the content into an iframe and block the iframe using robots.txt.

The site took around a month to be fully crawled again and it recovered after a Google Panda update almost three months subsequent to the fixes being implemented.

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## Unnatural Link Warnings

In February 2012, Google issued 70,000 unnatural link messages through webmaster tools. Three weeks after these messages were issued, a penalty was handed out to the sites in question.

Any low quality page on a site that had been developed solely for SEO purposes with over optimised link profiles were affected. For example, links from low quality blogs, SEO directories, articles directories, link farms, sites selling text links, spam forums, web 2.0 sites – all sites for the sake of SEO, not true content benefit – were all affected.

### TIP

If you have had a manual penalty, this means somebody at Google manually reviewed your link profile. When you send in a reconsideration request somebody at Google will review your profile. You have to remove any link that was built for nothing but SEO purposes, and be extremely critical of any links with aggressive anchor text.

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## What is Google Penguin?

In April 2012, Google Penguin was released. Its aim was to devalue websites that had been using blog networks, article spinning, blog spamming. Google Penguin is an algorithmic update, meaning you will have to wait until it is run to see if changes you have made help you recover from it. Recently there has been three Penguin updates:

- ◉ Penguin, 24 April 2012
- ◉ Penguin, 25 May 2012
- ◉ Penguin, 5 October 2012

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## How to Recover from Google Penguin and Unnatural Link Warning Links

There is no way out of Penguin or Unnatural links without removing and/or disavowing links. Disavowing links is the process of telling Google you don't want certain links associated with your website. This can happen when webmasters have engaged in link building techniques that have been classified as spam by Google.

Typically, the first thing a webmaster will do is attempt to remove all links they feel are breaking Google's rules. But often there are links webmasters simply cannot remove. To help, [Google released the disavow tool](#) to allow webmasters to upload a file of all links they feel are breaking Google's rules -- and have them disavowed. Here are some quick tips to help you use the tool and recover links.

- ◉ Upload a .txt file to the appropriate account.
- ◉ Compiling all link data will only give you 60% of what Google sees -- so keep refreshing the data every two weeks to find new links.
- ◉ When appropriate, disavow at domain level within the text file (e.g. "domain:spamsite.com")
- ◉ Check for white space at the end of lines within the file -- this will invalidate the file.

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## Submitting a Reconsideration Request

If you have a manual penalty, or you suspect you have a manual penalty, then you will have to go into webmaster tools and submit a reconsideration request. Do not worry about confessing guilt. If you have a penalty, Google already knows you are 'guilty,' and the only way out of it is through cooperation.

We have yet to see a website hurt their search rankings further by submitting a reconsideration. Some sites have had to submit 8 – 10 reconsiderations before recovering from a manual penalty. There are a few different responses you may get from Google:

### **1. You still have unnatural links that violate our guidelines.**

This means you have a manual penalty and need to continue with your clean up efforts.

### **2. No manual spam action present.**

You have no manual action against your site, so any drops in visibility relate to Panda or Penguin and you will need to proceed accordingly.

### **3. Manual spam action revoked.**

You have done enough to pass a manual review, you should recover accordingly.

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## TIPS

- If you have no links left after clean up, you will not recover. Time to start building good links!
- You may be suffering with an algorithmic penalty as well as a manual penalty (often a manual spam action will be revoked, but rankings won't return until Penguin has rerun).
- Remember an algorithmic penalty will only recover when Google has crawled everything and updated the algorithm accordingly. Manual penalties will only be removed after a reconsideration request.

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## Case Study: Unnatural Link Warnings

Here is an example of a site we recovered from an Unnatural Link.

**BACKGROUND:** The site in question had been purchasing text links for years, as well as using SEO companies in the UK that had commissioned comment spam, blog networks and article spinning. Out of 4,000 linking domains, Branded3 classified 70% as toxic.

**REMOVALS:** At the time of working with this site, there was no disavow tool available, so we recommended an aggressive removal strategy. We pooled all links from Open Site Explorer, Webmaster Tools, and Majestic SEO, and began contacting webmasters to remove links. We used the following strategy:

- a. We retrieved all contact information from sites where we wanted links to be removed.
- b. We then used these details to scrape who is information, so we could contact the site owner directly. Who is information provides all details for website owners including their personal contact details.
- c. Finally we pulled the web hosting information for all offending websites

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We then progressed with contacting the sites, starting with the site owner and moving onto the web hosting companies if we couldn't get anything removed. Yes, some site owners were offended to think we wanted to remove links. I would advise approaching link removals delicately, always being respectful and monitoring social platforms carefully.

Using this method, we were able to remove 70% of the links we had classified as toxic, and felt it was time to submit a reconsideration.

**RECONSIDERATION REQUEST:** Our first reconsideration request was denied, "You still have links that violate our guidelines." Despite advising that we were unable to contact certain websites, Google was still unwilling to take this into consideration. This led us to believe that reconsideration requests weren't read, and instead activated a manual review of your links. If you still had bad ones live, you weren't recovering.

**THE DISAVOW TOOL:** During our work with this site, we got access to the disavow tool in beta, and the first thing we did was input all the sites we couldn't contact. The file was uploaded and we sent in a new reconsideration request.

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Seven days later we received a 'Manual Spam Action Revoked Message,' three weeks after the message rankings were fully restored.

Tip: Keep building links through your recovery process. This website kept building throughout the process to ensure they had enough good links to support their rankings once recovery occurred.

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## Case Study: Penguin Recovery

Due to the nature of this update, we have only seen one Penguin recovery. This came after an aggressive link removal project which meant removing over 50% of the link profile. Luckily, the other 50% was natural and very authoritative. Therefore when Penguin updated, lots of core rankings came back.



As you can see, about a week after the Penguin update, rankings began to come back. If you want to recover from Penguin there is only one way: build great links to your site, remove and/or disavow to poor quality links, and wait for the next update.

Tip: Put all low quality links in the disavow tool, even the ones that have been removed or are 404-ing. Google doesn't de-classify a bad link until it has recrawled the page/link.

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# Conclusion.

Link building is still important, but it has changed significantly in the past 18 months. Links built for no reason other than SEO will be penalised. You have to build links in line with your broader marketing activity, ensuring each link has a valid reason for being placed – simply writing an article does not qualify you for a link.

It's time to stop manipulating the SERP's and instead treat SEO like the marketing channel it should have been all along.

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