

So, why do you think Google penalized Rap Genius, specifically, for doing what they were doing when, like they said, a lot of other lyric sites were doing similar things?

Actually, that's a good question. First of all, Google really liked getting the message out there that they don't want people doing this kind of link building. They don't want it to seem like you can game their system and get good rankings. So, anytime this kind of thing happens, and Google doesn't seem to do it too much, but it definitely happens to high profile websites. They get some kind of penalty. There's a lot of press and the end-result is that people get more and more scared to the kind of link-building that Google says you shouldn't do. But, the interesting thing, and like you said, a lot of websites claimed and, at least, Web Genius claimed that a lot of websites are doing this. I reached out at them the very second I heard about their penalty. I sent them an e-mail and I said, "Hey guys, if everyone else is doing bad stuff, I'd love to help you out. Let's go look at what your competitors are doing and I can write a blog post about this. I have a large audience and I've read about the, kind of, oddities in Google's search results already."

And, I didn't get a reply, unfortunately, but what I did do—even though they didn't get back to me, I really spent a lot of time looking into the back links of these other websites. So, I looked into—I don't know all the names off the top of my head, but basically just the biggest lyrics websites you can find in Google, that are ranking for Justin Bieber and Nicki Minaj, Drake, anything, any type of lyrics. And, I specifically looked at the ones, I believe they were Justin Bieber—that Rap Genius were trying to get those links for. And, specifically looked at the back links to the individual lyrics pages on those websites and I couldn't find them. So, I don't know if they're hiding it. I don't know if they're doing something very different, but I couldn't actually find any dirty links that these other websites are building. So, for

Google—first of all, all the other SEO's out there that really bitched about this on Inbound.org, they were blogging about it, so we got a bit of press that way. Obviously got on Matt Cutts's radar, and the other side of things is that Google gets a nice PR storm about making people a little bit more scared to do anything that doesn't fit into their guidelines.

So, it's kind of like making an example out of Rap Genius, you think?

Yeah, exactly.

Okay, and I was looking at their Quantcast traffic measurements and they were penalized for about 10 days and the traffic is still not back up to where it was, even though they've recently returned. So, I think it definitely cost them a lot of, probably, revenue and a lot of organic traffic to their site.

Possibly, yes, but to answer that I think they got a lot more--Aaron Wall of SEO Book did a good analysis on this. They basically got 10% of the backlinks they had already just in free press, like tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of dollars if you were to buy these links. I mean, they got the Reddit homepage, they got Wall Street Journal, New York Times, The Guardian—free press also by Rap Genius.

Like, I've heard of this website once, maybe a couple of years ago. I never thought about it again. And, now it's on my mind and I'm thinking about searching for lyrics. So, they may have lost traffic in the short term, but I think for the long term, this has probably been really good for their business.

Yeah, that's a good point. I guess there's no such thing as bad press.

Yeah.

So, do you think this penalty was warranted, at least, as severe as it was, to bump all of their traffic, even for searches for their brand name, down to page six?

Yeah, so—I think there's two real sides to it, too. I'll give you those two point of views. Yes, I think it was right to issue them a penalty. But, the way that it was gone about was absolutely ridiculous. So, for the first side of things, the right side of it was they were clearly doing something to manipulate search engine results. They were doing something even spammers wouldn't do.

I've been involved in building shady links doing a lot of SEO testing. I wouldn't even consider doing something like this. It's just so obvious. It's something that I can see would get so easily caught by doing this kind of tactic, just throwing all those links on there and every blog post that links to it, that I wouldn't even think of doing it.

So, as far as manipulating Google search results goes, and as far as Google's guidelines, which are clearly broken, it is Google's own website. So, it's up to them if they do want to penalize the website. So, for that side of things, I totally agree why their Google relationship should get penalized.

However, what is interesting, and I think the guy's called John Marber. This is the guy who, basically, found out that he got the e-mail from Rap Genius, saying, "Hey, will you insert all these links? With your being an affiliate, we'll Tweet out the post for you and so on."

What is interesting, is that this guy, now, please correct me if I'm wrong, because I've never been to this website before. I'm pretty sure that his audience was nothing. There's nothing there on Alexa. I looked at his last five blog posts. Not one of them has a single comment. Yet, he comes out with a blog post and he's suddenly the guy who can tell Google to go and ban some kind of website. First of all, I don't know who verified that e-mail. Like, that could have been a lie. I know that's a bit of a stretch, but all they had was the Facebook post to go on. There's absolutely no proof in that e-mail screenshot that that really was Rap Genius.

Now, I know it was, based on their admittance blog post and so on. But, if you think about it, there's no other proof that that was them. So, it's kind of interesting that a screen shot like that is enough for whoever noticed it first to Google to go and investigate their website. So, on one side of it, yes. I think the penalization was right. On the other side, it's really ridiculous how a blogger with previously zero audience can have such a big effect on Google's PR and search results for the company that receives, I think, \$60,000,000.00 in investment.

Right. So, do you think that maybe one reason they were penalized is because when this came out, I think through Hacker News, they basically admitted to doing that? I don't know if you saw that.

Yeah, I saw their admittance. I'm just not sure on the timeframe between the two things. So, I don't know how long it was. I think it was around 48 hours, I think, from the actual press going out there until they got effective. Do you know about that?

I sort of saw the story after it unfolded. But, I've seen several people comment that they were penalized, basically, for the

“apology” they wrote after this story came out on his blog and saying, “Alright, we did this. But, everyone else is doing bad things too.” That’s the point at which they were really penalized. That may not be right. It’s just what I’ve read.

Yeah, I was just checking, because the way I followed the story—I also got it a little bit late. It was that this guy blogged about it. The penalty got put in place and then I see the blog post with them saying, “We shouldn’t have been doing this. And, everything else is doing these bad things as well.” And, that is when I contacted them and tried to get more info on what they think other people are doing wrong.

Ah, yeah. That’s too bad they didn’t contact you. That would have been some good dirt, there.

So, what do you think about Google’s position of having to balance quality with this blatant spam. I don’t know. You said you visited the sites since the this penalty came out. A lot of people agree that they are probably one of the best resources or one of the most interesting resources for lyrics and now they do news and religion and all of these other subjects. But, they’re a quality site. It’s not some new site about dogs or scarves or something. They’re a quality site, so what do you think about Google’s position of having to balance a penalty with actual quality?

Glen: That’s a good question. I would say for all of the stink that people give Google, that really love to Tweet at Matt Cutts to be like, “Hey, what the hell’s going on? Why is this site ranking? Why is this happening?” Or, you’ll see the Google groups form like forums and they penalize and should be ranking better. So, for all of the stink and the hard time we give Google, I’m sure it is a very difficult job to, kind of, balance, like you said—to know how to penalize a website and what way.

For example, it's also going to be interesting to watch how Rap Genius comes back, because obviously their, like you said, traffic is down. I read an analysis by Barry Schwartz over at Search Engine Land and they pretty much haven't come back for a lot of their rankings. Their rankings are number one again for rap lyrics, which is one of their biggest terms. So, they got that ranking back. Obviously, their ranking again now, for Rap Genius, but they don't rank for all of the search terms that they used to. I believe one of them was Someone Like You by Adele or something like that. They had some lyrics that used to rank really well for them and now they're not there anymore. So, it's going to be really interesting to watch how, when or if those results can come back. And, like you said, if something's hard to balance—I think it is unfair, though, that the typical webmaster just has zero chance of this ever happening for that.

You mean, be allowed to work with Google to fix the penalty?

Yeah, exactly. And, not only that, but getting the penalty back—getting the position back within ten days. That's just crazy. Like, there's no chance you and I are going to get that.

And, I don't know if you heard about this, but one of the three founders of Rap Genius used to be a product manager at Google. So, that was something interesting that came out of, like, how did they get back so fast? Well, it helps that you used to work there. You probably have a lot of friends who are still calling to Google.

So, in SEO, it's who you know, maybe?

Yeah.

So, if they had, maybe, gotten your e-mail and contacted you, is there anything you would've suggested they do when this penalty did hit? I guess what I'm saying is, if this happened to me or someone else listening, what are our options if we don't know someone at Google? What could we do? What could we start doing?

In credit to Rap Genius, it's actually one of the blog posts about how they got reinstated. They put in how they got reinstated back in Google. And, basically they identified the kind of things they were doing wrong. They actually recommend for anyone to go over to their blog and look at their, kind of, apology that they put together after discussing it with Google. They have a lot of good insights there on the process that they followed.

What I would have said to them, is just what I would have said to any webmaster. So, first of all, clean up what you did wrong. Stop doing what you were doing. Don't do more Facebook updates about it. Don't say like, "F-U Google. I'm going to keep doing this. I'd like to see what you're going to do back to me." Stop doing that. Just a normal webmaster would go check in webmaster tools, right? See if we have any warning messages, any links that are suspected or suspicious, that we could disallow, that kind of thing. You can go to all the webmasters that are linking to you. The links that you know were not very legitimate that you built—you didn't build that "correct" all the way. So, go to those webmasters and say, "Hey, can you take down those links to me?"

So, pretty much, just the standard stuff. What I really wanted from them when I sent them an e-mail, was—I really wanted a, kind of, scoop on what their competitors were doing that someone else hasn't thought about. I think it would have been really interesting. I'm just going to do a Google search for literature. I want to remember the name. Yeah, so you've got

Metro Lyrics. That was a big one I really looked into. I believe LyricsMode.com might have been the other one. There were about three or four that I looked into in a lot of detail and I really wanted to find some shady stuff that they were doing. It would have made a great blog post. And, like I said earlier, what I did is I would type in certain lyrics. So, whether it's Boyfriend by Justin Bieber—see whose ranking number one, and look at the back links for those pages and I do this for a lot of systems and I just didn't really find anything illegitimate at all. So, I don't know if they were just saying that to kind of cover their bases. They're doing this. We might as well. But, yeah—I would have loved to have known what they thought other people were doing.

Okay, thanks. So, final question—what's the overall 30,000 foot view take away from this, as someone doing SEO? What do I come away with from this whole thing with Rap Genius?

There's a joke I made on Twitter the other day—that I can talk about SEO for hours, but there's only three things that you need—great content on your website, high quality back links and number three is a friend at Google. If you have that, you have no problems at all. I guess the 30,000 foot view is—know the risks involved in what you're doing. If you are not a huge brand doing stuff that isn't legitimate, be careful. Google can and will do whatever they want with the search results and who's ranking in them, so again, if you're doing anything a little sneaky, a little border line or even over the top black hat, then obviously you know the risks get higher based on what you're doing. What I recommend to anyone is, if you are going to do SEO experiments, then you do want to do them in your same niche because the companies that are doing dodgy stuff, just builds a new website. There's no point risking your brand that you've been working on and you've been building up. And, of course, just keep in mind the risks that are for whatever tactics you are going to be taking.

Thanks for your time. If you want to throw out a plug to your website or any products—where can we find you online?

It's a shame we didn't do this a little bit later. I'm actually working on—I have a private, invite only link building network. I'm not going to say the URL just yet, in case Matt is listening. But, what I am working on is, I'm working on a free video course under the same name and basically, we're going to be showing how a lot of people are building private, online empires. That's really the key about it. You don't need an audience to read your blog. You don't need an e-mail list. You don't need to rely on press mentions and I'm going to be sharing case study after case study for free—people who are making tens of thousands of dollars every single month without having to rely on an audience, and just basically relying on the work that they do themselves.

So, my website is ViperChill.com. I don't have a link to this video course yet, but it's hopefully something I'm going live with before the end of January.

Check out <http://www.visiblehq.com/episode-1> for the audio interview.

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