

Live Chat

Changes you need to know to avoid being penalized in organic searches.

BY EMMA HANES

Live chat, a small pop-up box generated after a user visits a website offering the option to chat with someone in real time, can be incredibly helpful for small and solo law firms. The intake questions the chat service asks can be specified beforehand so that law firms receive the exact information they want from visitors using the live chat functionality. However, you may have noticed a change to your website's live chat and you might be concerned about it.

How Did Live Chat Change?

Previously, many live chat services utilized a pop-up box that appeared in the middle of the screen as a small square. This is the most common form across nearly all industries. A recent update, however, changed the small box in the middle of the screen into a bar at the top of the screen.

The live chat bar will no longer appear in the middle of the screen but on the top or bottom of the screen. Some law firms might see their square chat box moved from the middle of the screen to the corner.

Why Live Chat Changed

Pop-ups are what Google's search engine calls "interstitials." Basically, an interstitial is anything that gets in the way of a website, like pop-ups. Google does not like interstitials, referring to many of them as "intrusive interstitials," for a simple reason: users don't like them either. There are few things as irritating as landing on a webpage from search results only to be immediately accosted by pop-ups.

Google has long penalized websites for intrusive interstitials, but this really only hurt websites with multiple pop-ups. But in January 2017, Google announced an update to its algorithm that targets all types of intrusive interstitials.¹ Previously, law firm websites could use live chat intrusive interstitials, but Google's algorithm update now makes these pop-ups result in a penalty for the website.

When Google penalizes a site, it makes it much less likely that the site will appear in organic search results, which means a decrease in traffic and thus leads. To prevent live chat users from suffering this penalty, live chat services are beginning to update their designs to be less intrusive and to avoid picking up a Google penalty.

How the Live Chat Design Change Actually Helps

While some live chat clients have complained about the new designs, they are actually a good thing. Even though intrusive interstitials are only now hurting search engine optimization value, they have always been troublesome for the best user experience. Users search Google for answers to a question or a problem, then they review the results and click on the one they believe will answer their question or address their problem best. Imagine how irritating it would be to find the answer, but immediately have the content blocked by a pop-up.

Don't get me wrong, live chat is a useful and powerful conversion method, but it doesn't work for every user. The new designs still prominently display the chat option for users who are

interested, without annoying the users who aren't ready to convert. If a less eager user becomes ready to convert later on, the chat option still remains available at the top of the screen (or bottom if you specify).

Has Your Chat Not Changed?

Google's update penalizing intrusive interstitials is fairly new, so not all chat services have adapted to the change. If your live chat still populates in the middle of the screen, you need to immediately contact your live chat vendor and discuss options for making it less intrusive. This may seem like a small issue, but it can have profound implications for your law firm's website ranking.

The Change Is Here to Stay

Google has made it clear intrusive interstitials of any kind will not be tolerated. If your law firm website utilizes live chat, pop-up forms, or any other kind of interstitial, it's time to make some changes or suffer a decrease in organic traffic. Interstitials must be used non-intrusively to avoid penalties. If you're unsure whether or not your pop-ups are intrusive, you should consult a digital marketing expert. **TBJ**

Notes

1. Barry Schwartz, *Google confirms rolling out the mobile intrusive interstitials penalty yesterday*, Search Engine Land, (Jan. 11, 2017 8:40 AM), <https://searchengineland.com/google-confirms-rolling-mobile-intrusive-interstitials-penalty-yesterday-267408>.

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