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Independent research

Too Early to Call

I reread a set of early core update reports from past projects against Google's official rollout dates. The early reports usually spotted the right pages. They were less reliable about which update did it, and why.

Archive review · Sites anonymized

WHEN EACH EARLY REPORT MEASURED (MINT) VS. THE FULL ROLLOUT (VIOLET)



Rollout dates from the Google Search Status Dashboard. Early reports from past projects, 2022 to 2024, sites anonymized.

3
core updates reviewed

Most
early reports measured mid-rollout

6
updates in one autumn 2023 window

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About this study

Early reports, official dates, one question

This is a look back at core update reporting from projects I worked on, across several affiliate sites in regulated niches.

1

What it is

A **retrospective review** of a small archive: early reports on three core updates, and one **three-month follow-up**.

2

The goal

Check each report against **Google's official rollout dates** and ask: was the measurement window right, was the update named correctly, and did the later data agree?

3

What I compared

Report dates, comparison windows, how results were rated and which page types were blamed, against the **Search Status Dashboard** history.

4

How it's reported

These were working documents, not studies. **Site names and site-level figures are withheld.** The focus is timing and method, which are what transfer to other sites.

Why it matters now

Every core update still produces a rush of day-two reports. This archive shows what those early reads tend to get right, and the three ways they go wrong.

The short version

What the archive shows

Most	**early reports measured before the rollout ended.** One compared three days with three days, on day 3 of what became a **45-day** rollout.
6 updates	**overlapped a window labelled with just one.** A three-month follow-up compared Sep 1 to Nov 26 with the summer. That window held the August core, September helpful content, October core and spam, and November core and reviews updates.
Opposite	**answers from two rank trackers, same site, same dates.** One tracker showed more first-page keywords, the other fewer, while a third visibility metric fell.
Clusters	**not whole sites, explained most losses.** On one site, a few **reference guides** lost far more clicks than all of its review pages combined.
Mixed	**results across one portfolio, same three days.** One site gained, one was flat, one fell. The comments pointed at **page types**, not whole sites.

What it means

Early reports were good at **spotting which pages moved**. They were weak on **timing and attribution**: they measured too early, named the wrong update, and treated one tool's number as the answer.

Finding 1

Most early reports measured mid-rollout

Each report used a short before/after window. Two of the three were written while Google was still rolling the update out.

Update	Window used	Official rollout	Share of rollout seen
May 2022 core update	May 22 vs May 28	May 25 to Jun 9 (15 days)	**First 3 days**
August 2023 core update	Aug 22 vs Sep 8	Aug 22 to Sep 7 (16 days)	**Full rollout**
March 2024 core update	Mar 5–7 vs Mar 2–4	Mar 5 to Apr 19 (45 days)	**First 3 days**

The March 2024 report knew it was early

Google said the rollout "may take up to a month." The report flagged that it was very early, and that one site's drop might be **one high day returning to normal**. That's the right instinct. The rollout ran 45 days in the end.

Why three days misleads

A three-day window catches **daily noise, weekday patterns and the start of a rollout**. Testing page changes during the update itself makes the later result even harder to attribute.

Finding 2

Which update was it?

One report labelled "HCU" used **August 22 to September 8** as its window. That's the August 2023 core update. The helpful content update didn't start until September 14.

Google update (2023)	Rollout	Inside the Sep 1 to Nov 26 window?
August core update	Aug 22 to Sep 7	Final week
September helpful content update	Sep 14 to Sep 27	**Yes, fully**
October spam update	Oct 4 to Oct 19	**Yes, fully**
October core update	Oct 5 to Oct 19	**Yes, fully**
November core update	Nov 2 to Nov 27	Almost fully
November reviews update	Nov 8 to Dec 7	First 18 days

What the follow-up got right

Three months on, the analysis compared **Sep 1 to Nov 26 with Jun 6 to Aug 31** in Search Console and named the pages and queries that lost clicks. That's far more useful than a two-week snapshot.

What it couldn't claim

Six updates landed in that window. Calling the loss "the HCU" is **one hypothesis, not a finding**. Summer to autumn seasonality wasn't controlled either. The honest label is "autumn 2023 update period."

Finding 3

Two tools, two answers

One report put two rank trackers side by side and noted a large discrepancy. The template then forced one rating: Good, Flat or Bad, with **no middle option**.

Three numbers, three stories

On one site, **both trackers showed more first-page keywords**, by very different amounts.
Tracked visibility for the same site **fell sharply**.
The rating followed the visibility metric. The note explained why: the drop came mostly from **one page**.

What I'd change

Allow a **"Too early / mixed"** rating.
Report tool disagreement as a **finding**, not a footnote.
Lead with first-party **Search Console clicks by page group**, with third-party tools as context.

Why tools disagree

Rank trackers use different keyword sets, locations and update schedules. During a rollout, those differences are amplified. **One tool's number is a sample, not the answer.**

Finding 4

Losses followed page types, not whole sites

Across the archive, the pages that moved were **clusters with a shared job**, not whole sites.

Page type	What happened
Reference guides (charts, rankings, quick lookups)	**Lost the most clicks** on one site in autumn 2023. The lost queries were lookups a chart or short list answers
Review and listing pages, same site	Small losses, **a fraction** of the reference guides' combined drop
"Best of" comparison pages (2022, another site)	Fell from the second page of results to several pages deeper
Coupon pages	Dropped
Blog posts that circled a topic indirectly (2024)	Dropped, along with thin promotional pages

Where to start an investigation

Look at **what the lost queries ask for**. If a chart or a short list answers them, ask whether your page is the best answer, or whether it's padded around the answer.

Not a conclusion

Page-type patterns tell you **where to look first**. They don't prove why a page dropped. That needs the full rollout, a year-over-year check and the page itself.

What I'd do now

A core update reading protocol

Six habits that would have made every report in this archive more reliable.

1

Wait for the end date

Check the **Search Status Dashboard**. Treat anything before completion as an early read and label it that way.

2

Log the overlaps

List **every update** that touches your comparison window. If there's more than one, say so in the title.

3

Compare like with like

Use equal-length windows and a **year-over-year** check for seasonal pages.

4

Lead with first-party data

Search Console clicks **by page group**. Use rank trackers as context, and report when they disagree.

5

Allow "too early"

Good/Flat/Bad with no middle option pushes people to **over-call** a result.

6

Revisit at three months

The follow-up was the most useful document in the archive. **Schedule it** when you write the first report.

Where this connects

This is the measurement side of my *Content Review Decisions* playbook: before you keep, update, merge or remove a page that dropped, make sure you know **which period** it dropped in.

Limits and sources

What this review can and can’t say

Scope

A small, non-random archive of early reports on several affiliate sites in regulated niches, 2022 to 2024. The patterns are observations, not rates you can apply to other sites.

Anonymized and generalized

Site names, niches and site-level figures are withheld. Only **public rollout dates** are given exactly.

No causal claims

Nothing here proves why a page lost traffic. Overlapping updates, seasonality and site changes during the period weren't controlled.

Rollout dates

From the Google Search Status Dashboard ranking-update history, in US Pacific time. End dates are derived from the listed durations except March 2024, which Google confirmed.

01 **Google Search Status Dashboard: ranking updates history**
Start dates and durations for each update.
status.search.google.com/products/rGHU1u87FJnkP6W2GwMi/history

02 **Google Search Status Dashboard: March 2024 core update**
"The rollout may take up to a month"; completed April 19, 2024.
status.search.google.com/incidents/1jW2F89qC2NxJBWGiKxE

03 **Early update reports from past projects**
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By Ameneh Saeednia, seogirl.ca, prepared with AI assistance. Sites and niches anonymized.