Seven Key SEO Implications When Migrating Your Website

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Migrating a website to a new location is a situation many enterprises, including online retailers, face from time to time. The reasons for such migration can be many. The pressing need to move from HTTP to the secure https:// domain, a shift from country-specific (.co.uk) top-level domain (TLD) to a .com version, or even a wider brand repositioning or overhauling strategy are some of the top reasons why enterprises may want to migrate to a new website.

Much of the traffic to a website depends on the equation developed within an entrenched ecosystem. A blind shift, focusing only on the web redesign or change of platform, would destroy such an ecosystem, and run a real risk of severe loss of traffic. Google's "brand bias" is for real, and the search engine is unlikely to automatically like the new brand as much as it liked the old brand.

As such, the search engine optimization (SEO) implications should be a focal point of any website transition for online retailers.

The migration of a website to a new virtual location is sure to descend into chaos if not done in a systematic and methodological way. The following are the top SEO considerations to follow when moving to a new site.

Retain Valuable Content

A site migration exercise is a good opportunity to do some housekeeping and get rid of stale content past its sell-by-date. However, the value of content is often underestimated. The Internet may rate content in entirely unpredictable ways. Content deemed as excellent or relevant by the content marketer may end up receiving poor traction, whereas content regarded as clutter, and marked for removal, may actually be the ones getting the site ranked high by Google. Content marketers need to take decisions on an informed basis, without going by assumptions or perception. Tools such as SEMRush test every piece of content for its worth in attracting traffic. Likewise, retain high ranking keywords in titles and body copy, regardless of the quality of surrounding content.

Making a comprehensive list of the content or pages to be migrated is the first step in a systematic web migration exercise. Familiarity with the old website is crucial for such a task. Having made the list, webmasters must refrain from taking knee-jerk or impulsive decisions with regards to eliminating content. Even when content has limited traffic, it could still deliver solid inbound links. Rather than throw away such content, the better option would be to make tweaks to such content, keeping the links intact.

Pay Attention to Usability Signals

Usability signals impact organic search engine rankings in a big way. Google rankings are no longer based on clicks alone. Google looks rather deeply into how web users interact with the content post-click. The search engine algorithm gauges if a user leaves a page immediately after clicking on it, and assigns a negative score to the web page for not offering accurate content or relevant results.

The online retailer would do well to go all-out in their efforts to ensure a user who enters the web page from a search listing remains on the page for a sufficiently long time and preferably does the required call-to-action.

Webmasters could use the website migration as an opportunity to analyze how users interact with the page, and make appropriate design and content changes to improve retention. However, a drastic change in design or content can be counter-productive and hurt usability metrics. Focus on enhancing the content, to make it more relevant, useful and engaging. As a pointer, pop-ups generally drive away user but infusing the content with engaging illustrations or videos help retention.

Optimize Categories with Caution

Most online retailers look to consolidate or cut down during a website transition to have better control over a chaotic situation. Such consolidation can, however, create many SEO problems. For instance, removing a category from the navigational bar would lead to the category page losing authority and falling off Google's search listings. Webmasters need to check Google Analytics upfront and make sure the categories marked for deletion or merging do not receive significant traffic from organic search engines. If the marked categories are attracting traffic, it is best to retain it as it is.

Adding new categories also require some thought. Webmasters should ideally gauge the user's intent and match content with it. For instance, consider a scenario where a category "Sat Nav Phones" on the category page attracts sizable traffic. The optimal approach in such an eventuality is to optimize the page for the keyword phrase "Sat Nav Phones," rather than change the category haphazardly.

Pay Attention to the Inbound Links

A core consideration during any website migration exercise is identifying the most authoritative links in the site's backlink profile. These links have to be switched to the new URLs, as soon as the new website is live, with as little delay as possible.

Site owners and webmasters need an action plan for contacting site owners where inbound links reside, and request a change so that the links now point to the new URLs. This is an underestimated and often ignored task. Unless done in a time bound manner, it can affect traffic adversely.

In many cases, especially when the website is large, and there are too many inbound links, it becomes practically impossible to migrate all inbound links in a time-bound manner. The right approach in such a situation is to prioritize on the basis of the traffic generated by the links. Webmasters need to tweak their action plan to rank links in terms of value, and contact site owners of the most valuable links first.

Simultaneously, webmasters need to monitor 404 errors, which pop up when website visitors click on links that still direct to the old address. Such 404 errors need to be fixed by supplying the new URL in double-quick time before Google finds it and penalizes the website.

Pay Attention to 301 Redirect Backlinks

Any website migration exercise is incomplete, and half-done, without a 301 redirect map.

A 301 redirect map is, in essence, an Excel sheet mapping all old URLs and their new 301 redirection address. Unless the old URLs are not

301 directed to the new URL structure, the authority of the backlinks pointing to the legacy URL drops off from the page. Backlinks are a critical factor determining search engine rankings, and drop-offs impact rankings adversely.

Many webmasters involved in the migration exercise fail to undertake a comprehensive 301 redirect of all URLs and confine the exercise to URLs they deem as important. This is a mistake. All backlinks invariably have links to attribute pages or other pages with canonical tags. Such tags would drop off unless there is a comprehensive 301 migration of all the URLs. Webmasters may use tools such as Google Webmaster Tools, Ahrefs, and Majestic SEO, to ease the process.

Webmasters also need to crawl the old URLs once or twice a week, post-migration, for up to a month or so, to ensure 301 redirects work without glitches.

Configure the New Website in Google Search Console

TTo effect the change of website, webmasters need to submit a change of address or a new set of XML sitemaps in Google Search Console (formerly Webmaster Tools). Tiered sitemaps are preferable for this purpose. Dividing the sitemap into logical sections makes it easier to diagnose the pages Google indexes and the pages which falter.

Another mistake made by webmasters is deleting old sitemaps as soon as the new ones are submitted. Unless Google can crawl the old URLs, it will not see and process the 301-redirects and other signals. As such, it is necessary to keep the old sitemaps and ensure legacy accounts stay open for at least a couple of months post-migration.

AdWords cannot redirect to a different domain in the final URL, and as such, changing the web address will require creating new ads. This raises the need to update tracking codes and make sure the URL matches the display URL.

Benchmark and Monitor the Traffic

Website migration is not a simple quick-fix. Getting the SEO right and rerouting traffic, let alone bettering it, requires a lot of tweaks. As a core exercise, webmasters need to benchmark the incumbent rankings and measure the progress of the new website throughout the migration exercise. Monitoring organic traffic to the new website at a detailed level, including visits, and conversions per page, help webmasters enforce great control over the migration process.

Webmasters also need to monitor the behavior of the new organic visitors, over and above the traffic volumes, to ensure the new website is still receiving traffic and users can navigate it without issues. Invest in a good analytic platform for the purpose.

Webmasters would do well to gather as many ranking keywords as possible, using tools such as Horizon, Searchmetrics for the purpose. They may also collect historic keyword data from Google Analytics and Webmaster Tools. Next, they need to check the position of the new website for these keywords as often as possible throughout the launch, to identify errors and take remedial measures instantly.

A best practice is to list out keywords attracting maximum organic traffic, and tweak the SEO strategy accordingly, as a follow-up to the monitoring and benchmarking exercise. Depending on the traffic levels, it may also be a good idea to prepare paid ads for such keywords.

Timing is all-important, yet underestimated in any web migration exercise. A migration exercise rarely executes like clockwork.

There would invariably be many glitches and errors. Restoring the traffic may take some time as well. As such, it is best to put off the migration exercise to a lean period, and not attempt it during peak seasons such as during the Christmas rush.

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