



Prevent SEO mishaps during website design projects

Some website design projects offer a chance to create a new site entirely from scratch. Perhaps a firm is just starting out with a new url, or maybe it has a relatively young or neglected website that is nowhere to be seen in search engine results. This gives designers and developers the chance to flesh out an information architecture, design and SEO strategy with what is basically a blank slate.

But most redesign projects do not offer that level of freedom. At this point, many firms own urls that are a decade old or more. Many are interested in creating a more modern look for a website that already has some sort of SEO and marketing strategy in place. In these cases, it is important that the process of refreshing a website's look does not negatively affect the site's SEO. No one wants to wake up with a great-looking site that nobody can see.

Website redesign projects must be undertaken with attention to the affects that design, programming, structure and content decisions will have on a site's SEO.

Make tactical decisions about information flow and architecture. A good website design cannot be separated from the information it is meant to convey. Making sure your website is structured in a way that focuses on ease of use is beneficial in multiple ways. One is the front-end user experience. When prospects visit your site, they should be able to easily find the information they want. If the design of your site helps with this, you are more likely to keep people on the site longer and have a higher conversion rate. Another is the way in which Google views your website. As a part of their ranking algorithm, Google is looking at a site's page hierarchy and trying to judge whether there is an obvious flow from main pages to subpages and an obvious assignment of relevance to the most important content on a site. A well-organized website helps with your site's performance.

Avoid duplicate content. Google has made highly publicized changes aimed, among other things, at punishing websites that publish duplicate content. This leads to the obvious precaution of making sure all content included on the new site is original and unique.

But a less obvious mistake is failing to hide development pages from search engines. From a user perspective, you do not want people stumbling across test pages in search results. But the SEO implications are much more damaging. If Google indexes your development urls and then sees the same content on your newly launched site, it will assume – since this content is the most recently published – that all of your content is duplicate content.

Search engines will see dozens if not hundreds of broken links associated with your site's url and will punish your ranking accordingly. All old urls should have a 301 permanent redirect to corresponding new urls.

Transfer analytics. Make sure any tracking code that was installed on the original site is transferred to the new site. If your firm is tracking conversion, make sure the conversion tracking code is installed on the appropriate pages. This will prevent your firm from unnecessarily losing valuable data.

Test for code validity. Code errors can both slow a website down and hinder its performance in search engine results. Users that come across a site that does not load quickly or that produces unexpected errors and functionality "quirks" are likely to lose patience quickly. In addition, search engines reward valid code. A smoothly running, error free site will keep users and Google happy.

A law firm website redesign can give you a boost with a fresh look and a website that is better targeted to prospective clients. But it can also cause unnecessary SEO stumbling blocks if done without attention to all aspects of the process. Make sure your project is on track to perform at maximum efficiency.

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