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Planning a site redesign? Read this first!

By Rob Sullivan

I can't tell you how many sites I've consulted on where, without a word to the SEM team, the site owner re-launches with a brand new site. Sometimes it's a simple cosmetic change but more often than not it's a completely new site with new page naming conventions and new folder hierarchy. In this article I am going to try and explain how you can minimize the impact to your search engine rankings when performing a redesign.

A typical scenario

One I'm sure most SEM's are familiar with:

You receive a panicked phone call one day from a client. "My rankings are all gone, what have you done? My search engine traffic has dried up and I'm not getting any referrals!"

So the first thing I do is go to the site and guess what? It's different than it was just a few days ago. So I ask the client: "When did you do the redesign?"

"2 days ago. Why?"

"That's the problem. You redesigned without consulting me. You've essentially given the search engine a new website. That means the engine has to re-learn the site and how it works."

Mind you I haven't had to deal with this in a while, but I remember cases in the past where this has happened. So my first advice to someone planning such a redesign, no matter how minimal, is contact your local SEM or SEO professional and get their opinion.

Even a simple re-skinning of your site can have a huge impact on rankings.

How can even simple changes affect a site's rankings?

Let me explain why:

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First, let's look at Google. Earlier this year, they released a patent that basically illustrates how much "smarter" Google will be. But in making itself smarter, Google is making it harder for site owners to make any changes.

Basically any change over a given threshold (and no, no one outside of Google knows what that threshold is) will trigger a review of the site, which means it gets removed, or lowered in the index. You may be OK with a 5% or 10% total change site wide, but anything over that will likely trigger such a review.

Because engines like Google can't "see" the site, they have to compare the HTML to earlier cached versions to see if there's been changes. When Google crawls a site (or page) they assign a calculated value, based on hundreds of elements, to the page. This is a fairly unique computational value, similar to a CRC value.

When Google comes back to request the page again, they perform this same calculation on the page and compare the CRC values. If they are different, they know there's been a change and they need to revisit and re-cache the page. However, if there's been a significant enough change (again breaching that predefined threshold), then Google needs to take a closer look at the page or site.

Yahoo! and MSN work similarly, however MSN tends to react a little quicker than Google. When MSN notices a change, the page(s) drop for a few weeks until the new changes are "assimilated" by the engine.

Yahoo! on the other hand, will index the page, however you may not see a change in their results for some time. This is because the engine updates less frequently than Google or MSN. Therefore when Yahoo! does update, your previously cached pages will likely drop and NOT be replaced until the NEXT index update. Your site could drop out of the Yahoo! index for a month or more.

So how to you minimize the impact?

First, and I can't stress this enough, consult with your SEO/SEM consultant. If they tell you there won't be an impact then find another firm, because I can tell you from experience that even the most minor cosmetic changes will impact your site.

As such you must prepare for an impact. because it's no longer a matter of it may happen. However by following these simple steps you can minimize the impact.

Whenever possible, you should try and keep your old structure and naming conventions. This will help minimize the impact. Even if the page layout and look changes, if the crawlers can find the pages in the same location, this will make the re-indexing happen quicker, restoring the site to its previous rank sooner.

However, if you are doing a site wide reconstruction - that is new pages, new names, new folder structure. Be sure to keep the old site. Before you make any changes, you will want to check what rankings already exist and 301 those pages to the "new" pages. I say keep the old site because you

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can do this check and redirect on a page by page basis. If your pages are dynamic (PHP or ASP) you can insert redirect code on the pages. If the pages are static HTML you can use meta refresh code to redirect to the proper page.

Keep the old pages until you know they've been removed from the indexes of all the major engines, and then remove them. Be sure you have a custom 404 error page also in place in case some of these pages have been bookmarked, or otherwise referred to by visitors after they've been removed.

The alternative to keeping the entire site is to use software like a URL rewriter to perform the redirect. A URL rewriter intercepts page requests and forwards them to the "proper" page. While many people use re-writers to turn dynamic sites into static sites, they are also useful for these types of redirects.

Be sure to use services like the Google XML sitemap submission, or Yahoo's bulk submit feature to resubmit your "new" site. While you can wait for the crawler to find all the new pages, it's probably better to give them a little push in the right direction.

You should also know that if you are planning on adding a bunch of new content to existing sections of the site that new content will impact rankings. This is because the engines have to evaluate the new

content to see what impact it has on the rest of the site in terms of link inheritance and overall contribution to the theme of the site or section. This will delay your site's re-indexing.

Finally, prepare to pay for listings. Set aside some budget for a PPC campaign. It would be best if you could afford to pay for your high traffic general phrases, because these are likely the phrases that will take the longest to recover from a major site change. You shouldn't have to bid on branded phrases (such as your company name) because these rankings will likely return the quickest.

If, however, you have competitors or affiliates bidding on those terms you may also need to bid on them to keep your traffic up. You should already have an agreement in place which forces your affiliates to bid lower than you on these terms, so you should be able to keep your costs down on them.

You should have the budget to cover two to three months traffic. This is likely an extended duration as most sites are re-indexed fairly quickly but it is better to be prepared for it, in case something happens.

Your PPC campaign should also cover the major PPC engines - at this time they are Yahoo! and Google. You could also branch out to other smaller engines such as Ask Jeeves and Looksmart as they can sometimes send highly qualified traffic at a fraction of the cost of the larger providers.

As a side note, when you set up your PPC campaign, don't use broad matching. Try and keep your campaign as specific as possible - this will help you keep your costs down because you'll only be paying for those clicks, and they will likely be more qualified clicks.

If you follow these simple tips: planning for and minimizing changes as much as possible and preparing for the worst by planning a PPC campaign to offset your losses, then you should be able to maintain your traffic and recover your previous positions within a short period of time.

Rob Sullivan – SEO Specialist and Internet Marketing Consultant. Any reproduction of this article needs to have an html link pointing to

<http://www.textlinkbrokers.com>

Affiliates Need to 'Capture' the Email Address

By David McKenzie

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One of the secrets to a successful online home based business is capturing your visitors' email address so you can contact them again and again. The most effective way to capture email addresses is by offering a free newsletter, free email course or free ebook.

For affiliates, capturing the email address is a bit more difficult, but certainly no less important.

If you resell products or services on your web site this is done through affiliate links. Quite often your visitor comes to your site, clicks an affiliate link and leaves; perhaps never to return again.

You MISS capturing the email address!

So how can you ensure you get that email address?

While you will never capture everybody's email address there is a way to increase the number of email addresses you do capture.

You need to redesign your web site and change the focus away from affiliate programs and towards getting email addresses.

Here are 3 web design techniques you can use immediately:

1. Offer a free newsletter on your home page or entry page and make the sign up process really easy.
2. Offer a free email course on your home page or entry page.
3. Take the affiliate links OFF your home page. You are much better putting affiliate links in your newsletter or email course.

To have a better chance of getting the email address it comes down to offering your visitors something else before giving them access to your affiliate links.

The best offer' is something for free like a free newsletter, free email course or free ebook.

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Believe me, altering your web site like this does work. I used to have lots of affiliate links on my home page but not many sales.

Now, most of the people who purchase through my affiliate links are already subscribers to my newsletter or my email courses.

Do not underestimate the importance of this. Redesign your web site to capture your visitors' email addresses.

David McKenzie is offering a Free Email Course "5 Tips to Being Successful with Affiliate Programs"==> <http://www.1sthomebasedbusiness.com> Click now for your FREE course!



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