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Maintaining your search engine ranking and site traffic through a new website launch

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Every so often, it's time to create a whole new website for your nonprofit. As someone who has been designing websites for nearly thirty years, I've also had the "privilege" of leading website design projects here at NCN a couple times now. As you undertake such a project, you may feel the same excitement I've felt about the possibilities a fresh design and streamlined navigation can offer.

You may also be nervous that the website transition might cause your website to lose search engine rankings and website traffic. Many nonprofits – and businesses – see their rankings and traffic dip after a new site launch, and it can take a while to recover. A dip in traffic can mean fewer potential clients, donors, journalists, and other community members finding your nonprofit. So, how can your nonprofit avoid a site transition SEO hangover? Here are some tips that proved useful to us.

Step 1: Catalog and audit your current content

Before embarking on any website transition, conduct a comprehensive audit of your existing site. What content is evergreen and can be migrated as-is? What content will need some updating? And what content is no longer relevant and should be left behind after the transition?

As you think about those things, make sure you're looking at your current site traffic. A page you may not feel is relevant anymore may be one of your most popular, leading you to reconsider whether to leave it behind or update it.

Step 2: Plan a slow phase-out of outdated content

In auditing your current content, you will likely identify several (maybe even many) pages that do not need to come along to your new website. One of the biggest mistakes many organizations make is to simply leave those pages behind when the switch is flipped on their new site, thus making dozens (or more) pages seem like they disappeared overnight. That often leads to lower rankings and decreased traffic.

If you can identify the content that you'll be leaving behind far enough in advance, you can come up with a phased approach to removing a few of those pages each week over the course of several months. Sometimes the content from those pages is no longer needed, and that's fine. If, however, it is content that was duplicative or where people searching for the page you are removing can find similar information on a page you will maintain, consider setting up "redirects." A redirect automatically forwards people who click the link of the page you are removing to that other page.

Step 3: Create redirects, if applicable

Many times, when redesigning a site and its architecture, you will decide to change the naming convention for the URLs on your site. Maybe you are changing from `yoursite.org/blog/title-of-page` to `yoursite.org/articles/title-of-page`. If the link to a particular page is changing at all, you will want to set up redirects, called 301 redirects. That code 301 tells a web browser (or a search engine crawler) that a page has been relocated permanently and what its new address is. Pointing search engines to the new home for a page makes it easier for their database to update seamlessly, rather than thinking that the original page disappeared and having to discover the new one.

Step 4: Test, test, and test again

Before making the new website live, thoroughly test all functionality, including forms, navigation, and load times. [PageSpeed Insights](#) or [GTmetrix](#) can test your site's load time performance, which is a key factor in search engine optimization, and point out items that can be improved or fixed. A slow or malfunctioning website can lead to people leaving your site faster and lower search engine rankings. It's also good to ask people who are not part of your organization, such as friends or family members, to test out navigating the new site. Having them attempt to find certain content, or even click randomly around the site, can help surface issues that you may miss by knowing the content too well. Testing prior to launch allows for fixes and improvements before you go live, so your site visitors (and those search engine crawlers) can have a positive experience from day one.

Step 5: Go live! Then, test again

It's launch day. Once you flip the switch on the new site, it's time to repeat Step 4. Moving from your development environment to a live environment may surface different issues, such as links still pointing to the development site. Services like [Dr. Link Check](#) can help quickly identify those broken links so they can be fixed. Re-run those tests to be sure everything is performing as it should.

Ongoing: Utilize the tools provided by the search engines for regular monitoring

Utilize the tools in [Google Search Console](#) and [Bing Webmaster Tools](#) before, during, and after the transition. These tools provide insights into any crawl errors, indexing issues, and other technical glitches that might arise during the transition. Address these issues promptly to ensure your rankings and traffic stay steady – or grow!

A website transition is a big project, but with careful planning, it can be an opportunity to enhance your nonprofit's online presence. You worked hard to build your site's search engine reputation, and good planning can help you maintain it through the site transition process. Consistency, planning, a phased approach, and a focus on user experience are key to a successful website transition that will keep both search engines and your audience happy.

Additional Resources:

- While you're in the planning process, don't forget to focus on accessibility for visually-impaired visitors to your new website. See our article, "[How One Life-Changing Moment Made Digital Accessibility My Inspired Mission](#)," for guidance.