

10 SEO MISTAKES TO AVOID DURING YOUR NEXT WEBSITE REDESIGN.

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Introduction.

Redesigning your website isn't just an exercise in aesthetics. Sure, the purely visual elements of your newly designed website will likely get the most attention, but remember: a great website redesign also requires that you consider (and improve) what's under the hood.

A flashy exterior doesn't help much if the actual machine fails to function. If people can't find your website via search, and if they can't intuitively navigate through your site's pages and easily understand what information those pages contain, it doesn't really matter how beautiful it looks.

When it comes to your website redesign, form and function need to be a package deal. So while you should absolutely add those new beautiful CTA buttons, and add that big beautiful hero image on your homepage, don't forget about what's happening behind the scenes.

In this guide, we'll cover one particular portion of the less glamorous side of website redesigns: search engine optimization. While the way we think about SEO is always evolving — with the focus now shifting toward optimizing content for the searchers themselves, as opposed to for the search engines — it's still something you can't afford to overlook. So without further ado, here are 10 SEO mistakes to avoid during your next website redesign.

1 Not thinking about SEO from the start

The glitz, the glam, the glorious design elements that make your website look like a million bucks ... When contemplating a website redesign, it's easy to focus only on those features that are appealing to the eye. But to ensure your new site will truly resonate with your target audience (and to save yourself from some major headaches down the road) you need SEO to be ingrained in your redesign strategy from the very beginning.

Think of it this way: you could spend all the money in the world on building a new, beautiful hotel with all the bells and whistles. But if no one knows how to find your hotel, you'll never do any business.

Don't build a hotel that no one can find! When planning out your redesign strategy, make sure to take discoverability and accessibility into account. (Not sure what that looks like from a practical, hands-on standpoint? Just keep reading!)

The biggest SEO mistake you can make during a website redesign is to not think about SEO until it's too late. If you don't have SEO in mind from the initial strategy session, you're going to lose what you took so much time and effort to build.

Everything from the structure of your website to the meta description of your website pages is important and should be taken into consideration.

1 Not thinking about SEO from the start

The most common SEO mistake that I see marketers make when redesigning their websites is not involving the SEO team early in the process.

All too often, when we're brought in for SEO work on a redesign, it's often late in the process, such as when the site is being coded or even totally complete. "Hey, we should probably have the SEO guy take a look at this before we launch," but by then, it's too late.

The advice that usually needs to be passed on at this point will most likely cost the company much more in design, coding, and more.

2 Not doing an audit of your existing site

Before you bust out the wrecking ball and start demolishing your soon-to-be-forgotten site, make sure you take the time to examine it to determine what's working and what isn't. Here are some key metrics you may want to consider when auditing your site:

- Number of visits/visitors/unique visitors (monthly average)
- Top performing keywords (in terms of rank, traffic, and lead generation)
- Number of inbound linking domains
- Total number of total pages indexed
- Total number of pages that receive traffic

Wish you had a master document where you could record all of these important metrics and track the progress of your website redesign?

Whenever doing a website redesign, I think it's so important to reassess the purpose of each page. If you don't learn anything from the page, neither will your viewers!

Building out a navigation map that takes SEO into consideration will save you a lot of heartache throughout your project!

2 Not doing an audit of your existing site

Important elements of a website redesign oftentimes get pushed to the side when timeframes are constrained. One of the most important components of a new design project is to take time at the beginning to analyze current traffic to ensure current visitors are not lost.

Review which pages on your website have incoming links, which have the best page-rank and what keywords on your pages drive traffic and conversions. Keep your website redevelopment team informed and make sure important pages are not removed or deleted with the new layout.

This is a critical first step that should not be overlooked, no matter how quickly the redesign process must be completed.

3 Failing to identify (and include) commonly searched keywords

It's a new era for SEO, an era where you can no longer keyword-stuff your way to search ranking success. Nowadays, if Google finds out that you are blatantly overusing (or hiding) keywords on your site, your credibility (and rankings) could take a serious hit. However, this doesn't mean that keywords are totally irrelevant. In fact, if you're doing what Google wants you to do (creating high-quality content), keywords will work their way naturally into your website's pages. To quote from Google directly,

“In creating a helpful, information-rich site, write pages that clearly and accurately describe your topic. Think about the words users would type to find your pages and include those words on your site.”

Common Mistake: Your website has been stuffed with awkward keywords. Google's Penguin algorithm launched in 2012 with extreme punishment for sites containing too many poorly placed keywords.

How to Correct: If you're concerned you might have this issue with your website it needs a full scrub. Your website needs to read well for humans first, search engines second. Read through every piece of content, asking yourself if this reads well for humans. Remove any keywords that don't fit naturally into the content. If any word doesn't contribute to the education of the visitor it likely doesn't fit.

Rule of Thumb: Each webpage should have a single focus keyword and be included 1-3 times naturally in the page content. Make sure it's also included in your page title, meta description, and H1 text assuming it fits within the parameters. If it doesn't fit well, work towards a more general keyword.

3 Failing to identify (and include) commonly searched keywords

One of the biggest lessons I've learned is that keywords can really keep web pages focused, which is important in SEO. We look at buyer persona behavior, industry trends, competitors and more to build a list of targeted terms, and then we focus on one term per page. In doing so, we can more easily provide value to our viewers.

Many marketers are so focused on building out site hierarchy, wireframing and design of the site that they lose site of content development. SEO is a huge part of content development, but when content becomes an afterthought during web redesign, and the focus is on getting the new site live ASAP, often times marketers will put the content together without deliberate thought to keyword inclusion and smart SEO content strategies.

The result is that post-go-live, marketers begin scrambling to re-write content that is already live to improve SEO. Marketers can reduce this additional effort by including an SEO keyword analysis at the front end of a web redesign project - during website strategy development, and then using the findings and recommendations from the keyword analysis to inform content development.

This, coupled with a deliberate focus on content development during the web redesign process (rather than as an afterthought) can help marketers make huge leaps regarding SEO without the post-go-live scramble.

4 Not setting up 301 redirects

A 301 redirect is a permanent redirect from one URL to another. Whether you're switching domain names, restructuring your URLs (more on that in the next section), or consolidating content as part of your website redesign, setting up 301 redirects is crucial to ensuring any "SEO juice" from your old URLs gets transferred to your new URLs.

Here's an example. Let's say your current site has a "Team" page (at [yoursite.com/team](#)), as well as a "Culture" page (at [yoursite.com/culture](#)). However, as part of your website redesign, you want to consolidate the content from those two pages into a single "About Us" page (at [yoursite.com/about](#)). To transfer the SEO authority of those pages to your new page, you'll want to set up 301 redirects so that [yoursite.com/team](#) and [yoursite.com/culture](#) both send folks to the new URL, [yoursite.com/about](#).

Failure to set up 301 redirects for pages you move or delete can result in a drop in rankings as well as an influx in 404 (a.k.a. "Page Not Found") error messages for your site's visitors.

Launching a new website without putting 301 redirects in place is literally committing SEO suicide. Not only will you lose all of your past SEO history, your rankings (and traffic!) will plummet.

Always, ALWAYS 301 redirect your old site pages to your new ones to let Google know where your new content can be found.

4 Not setting up 301 redirects

Before doing any 301 redirects, create a URL outline of your old site. Excel is a great, simple way to do it: create a tab for each of your main menu sections, and list all menu sub items with their corresponding URL in that tab.

Use this as a road map to creating all 301 redirects, marking off each URL you redirect without leaving any pages behind.

One of the biggest mistakes marketers make when redesigning websites is that they change their site architecture (create new pages to replace old ones) and do away with old website pages that they no longer want to include in their site. These “abandoned” pages might rank in search engine results pages or may have backlinks.

By getting rid of them, you are eliminating all of that SEO value that you’ve built up over time. Most firms don’t even realize the damage they’ve done until its too late and their search engine ranking plummets upon launching their new site.

The good news is that you don’t have to keep those old pages around forever. Just create a 301 redirect to let the search engines know where to find the new page you’re creating and your hard-won SEO will follow you to your new website!

5 Failing to consider your URL structure

If your site is littered with lengthy, indecipherable URLs that don't align well with the actual content of your site pages, restructuring your URLs should definitely be a priority during your next website redesign. Wondering where SEO comes into play here? While just like the searchers themselves, search engines prefer URLs that make it easy to understand what your page content is all about.

A general rule to follow when creating your new URLs: use dashes (-) between words instead of underscores (_). Google treats dashes as separators, which means it can return results when you search for a single word that appears in a URL and when you search for a group of words that appears in a URL. In contrast, Google treats underscores as connectors, which means it will only return results when you search for a group of connected words that appears in a URL. The bottom line: using dashes creates more opportunities for your pages to be discovered.

Redesigning your site gives you the perfect opportunity to make sure your URLs are optimized for UX and for search engines. Your URLs play a significant role in your SEO success. Your URLs must contain targeted and relevant keywords.

Your URL structure also needs to follow suit according to your site map. Keep the structure organized for the user experience. Subfolders add value to parent pages.

For instance, don't have a URL at `domain.com/services/` and a services category as `domain.com/category-1/`. A services category should support the parent services page and should look like `domain.com/services/category-1/`.

6 Leaving shady backlinks in place

We all know that getting backlinks (a.k.a. inbound links) from trusted websites is a great way to give your website's search rankings a boost. However, there's also a dark side to backlinks.

If Google suspects that there are spammy, low-quality sites linking to your site, your rankings could suffer. This is known as "negative SEO". (In some cases, spammers will purposely direct lots of low-quality links to your site in order to cause negative SEO.)

A website redesign presents the perfect opportunity for you to analyze your backlinks and remove the shady ones. If you use Google Webmaster Tools, you'll see a "manual penalty" appear if Google detects one of these low-quality links. You'll then have the option to make such links "no follows" so Google stops paying attention to them.

Common Mistake: Your SEO firm built hundreds of bad back links to your website. Google's Penguin algorithm update in 2012 included penalization for websites that built erroneous back links in an attempt to drive ranking. Site links from unrelated sources, micro-sites, and false sources do more harm than good post-Penguin.

How to Correct: There are several good software tools to help you identify bad links to your website. [Link Research Tools](#) is one we recommend, it provides detail on harmful links and helps you get them removed from you site quickly and efficiently.

6 Leaving shady backlinks in place

Most marketers focusing on SEO break down SEO into on-page efforts and off-page efforts. And when focusing on off-page efforts, a common SEO mistake marketers make is believing that their site will receive more SEO traffic if only they can find enough websites to build links on.

This is the mistake, a link-building mindset. Stop thinking about link-building. Start thinking about link-earning. Focus on making your content easy for your audience to consume, understand and share with their audience.

7 Not implementing responsive design

As Google's preferred configuration for mobile-optimized websites, responsive design is your best option for delivering a great search and browsing experience to mobile users.

With responsive design, all of your website's URLs are the same across all devices, and they all serve up the same HTML code. This isn't the case with other mobile configurations, like setting up a separate, mobile-only site (which requires a different set of URLs) or implementing dynamic serving (which uses the same URLs but serves up different HTML).

With responsive design, the only thing that changes across devices is the styling (which is controlled by CSS). This configuration makes it easier for Google to crawl your pages and retrieve your content. To quote Google, **“This improvement in crawling efficiency can indirectly help Google index more of the site's contents and keep it appropriately fresh.”**

8 Forgetting to unblock search engines from crawling your site

So there you are, ready to push the big green “LAUNCH” button on your newly designed website. The big moment comes and goes, and after hours of combing through the site, admiring its beauty, you stumble across something peculiar: your new, beautiful website isn’t showing up in Google’s search results!

Chances are that when your site was under construction, you had blocked the search engines from peaking under the hood until your site was 100% complete. When launching your website after a redesign, it’s important to double check that the search engines know where to find you.

A silly issue that causes huge problems -- and happens more often than you would think -- is that sometimes people forget to unblock robots from crawling and indexing the website after the website goes live.

This often happens when the site is in a dev environment and has robots.txt set to block all search robots, then the site is taken live with the all-exclusive robots.txt file still in place and the site’s search traffic suddenly grinds to a halt.

To avoid this one, make sure to check your robots.txt file once your site goes live. Double check it with Google Webmaster Tools to make sure your site is being indexed.

9 Forgetting to add analytics to your site

How are you going to benchmark your redesigned website against your old website if you aren't using analytics software? Answer: you aren't!

As soon as your new website is released into the wild, wild web, you should be collecting data on its performance. Did your content audit and keyword research pay off? Is that new URL structure making it easier for visitors to navigate through your pages? You'll never know if you aren't monitoring key metrics with analytics software.

I think one of the biggest and most egregious errors one can make when redesigning a website is to forget to paste the proper Google analytics code on the new website.

It's pretty difficult to track the success of a new site designed to have a higher conversion rate... without any conversion code or analytics tracking. We had a client hire a web design agency to redesign their website only to forget to paste the old code on the new site--and you can make sure the SEOs get blamed for everything.

We now make sure to have a website redesign checklist, whether our client uses an external agency or we handle it ourselves!

10 Failing to think like a human

With the [Hummingbird update of 2013](#), Google gained the ability to recognize full-sentence queries (in contrast to simply picking out the individual words that make up a query). As a result, search has become much more conversational.

Google doesn't want to deliver you "results" anymore, they want to deliver answers. And the best answers don't come from content farms, they come from websites that are crafted with their visitors -- human beings -- in mind.

SEO Rule #1 - Always Add Value. Add value in every blog post, blog comment, social media update and web page. Don't worry about backlinks or keyword rank. People will read and share your valuable content, and the rest will take care of itself.

SEO Rule #2 - Be Yourself. Write about what you know and make it a conversation with your readers. Keep it natural. People will find your content because they speak the same language and seek your advice.

As marketers I think we get a little over-obsessive about SEO. Remember that it's more than just the keywords people type in. It's in fact, a human, your future customer that is typing that information into Google. Think about what keywords your best customer would search and break that down into the different stages of the buying cycle.

The biggest mistake I've ever made was designing with SEO at the top of the priority list. It made the site awkward and ineffective.

The best way to fix this is to focus on creating value for your personas and delivering the user experience they would like. When you focus on those items, SEO takes care of itself.

ABOUT US

RPM Strategic is a digital consultancy that works with CXO's to develop and implement customer acquisition strategies that accelerate traffic, leads and sales. Our focus as trusted advisors and change-agents to the C-Suite is driving the evolution of digital business, innovation, and modern marketing for businesses eager to catch up with the consumer. We are a new breed of digital strategists, technologists, business model innovators and modern marketers. We are in the revenue generation business.

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