A site migration, or move, happens for a few reasons; some of the most common include when a business moves domains entirely, changes their content management system and/or redesigns their site.

Performing a site migration does not have to translate into significant Web traffic losses— but for those who don't plan carefully, that's exactly what can happen.

Both preparing for and executing a site migration with SEO best practices in mind will help ensure that the slight dip in keyword rankings and organic search traffic that can naturally occur is kept to a minimum.

The main challenge to effectively moving your site is making sure the preliminary SEO work is done beforehand. During the migration there are several SEO issues to monitor, and then afterwards it is recommended that your SEO professional go through your site with a fine-tooth comb to discover and correct any additional issues.

In this report we'll go over SEO best practices for each stage of a site migration: planning, execution, and follow-up. Many of the steps outlined for each stage are iterative, but all are key to success.

Before the Launch: An 8-Step Plan for SEO Success

Most of the real SEO work when migrating your site involves planning. A suggested checklist for preparation includes these eight steps:

1. **Conduct an SEO Site Audit**
   The purpose of an SEO site audit is to account for all on-site optimization factors currently in place and compare them against best practices for effective SEO. The site audit provides SEO specialists with the intimate knowledge of the site that they'll need for further reference during the site move. For example, running an audit before a site migration will help identify SEO gaps, like broken pages, pages with missing meta tags, and images with missing alt tags that may occur when new pages are created as well as minimize the potential decrease in keyword and site rankings after the migration is in full effect.

2. **Analyze Site Traffic Patterns**
   Perform a website analysis, look at your Google Webmaster Tools and Analytics to see if there has been a notable traffic or keyword drop in the past, accounting for seasonal variations, especially those found in e-commerce sites. Assuming you have stored traffic data from previous years, pull it for those months when you plan to move the site. Benchmark where your site stands in terms of these metrics, so you have a meaningful way to measure the impact of its migration.

3. Identify Crawl Errors

Look at the last 90-day crawl error data from your GWT account. Most of these errors are because of DNS, server connectivity and robots fetch.

Ascertain if there are any existing site crawlability issues and address them pre-launch. Among the most common crawl errors are faulty redirects and broken or defunct links.

4. Benchmark Current Keywords and Top Landing Pages

You're building a new site, so this is a prime opportunity to either add or remove keywords on your most important landing pages. Look at opportunity gaps for keywords and copy on landing pages. Here are a few steps to consider:

- **Keywords:** Collect a list of all historical keywords for which the site is getting traffic from your BrightEdge account or from Google Webmaster Tools for the site.

- **Keyword Rankings:** When you launch a new site, it's important to make sure the rankings for your keywords are not lost. So run a benchmark report for all ranking keywords. These keywords could also potentially fit in the new keyword portfolio for the new site.

- **Keywords to Content Writers:** Provide content writers the best keywords to use for the new site content specific to the pages.

- **Tracking:** Set up tracking to identify both keyword and landing page performance before and after the launch. Instead of keeping track using multiple tools, if you are currently a customer, you can track this data with the BrightEdge Date Cube.

- **Landing Pages:** Using Google Analytics or other analytical tools, run a performance report for the site's top landing pages. This list of landing page URLs can then be merged with any other crawl errors to generate 301 redirect recommendations as you don't want any loose hanging pages resulting in 404 errors.

- **Top-Linked Pages:** Inventory your site's most linked-to pages. These are the pages for which the site has a robust backlink profile and should be targeted for 301 redirects if you are changing the URLs, so that you don't lose any inbound link value. Crosscheck the URL mapping to make sure no important pages were overlooked.

- **Landing Pages to Keywords:** Once you've identified the site's top landing pages, you should determine what keywords are driving traffic to them with the new site launch, you'll want to make sure that you won't lose keyword-driven traffic for these crucial landing pages. This analysis will also provide a solid base for the on-page optimization of your new site. This data should also be migrated and tracked.

5. Map URLs and Redirects
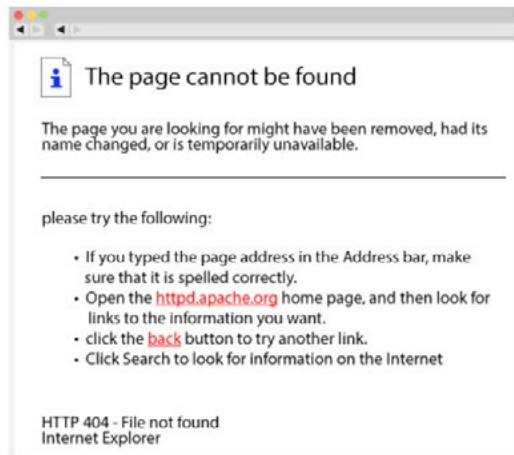
Using the data pulled from crawl errors and top-linked-to pages, review the proposed new URL structure, and then develop your redirect plan. These are important steps because search engines want to see a 301 permanent redirects to the most relevant new page. If there are no directly relevant pages, you can divide the links & redirect to diagonally relevant top-level pages not just to the homepage or any other single page.

6. Create XML Sitemap

Create and submit an XML Sitemap for the new site after the URL mapping is complete. It's a smart practice to have an updated "sitemap.html" as well.

7. Design a Custom Error Page (404)
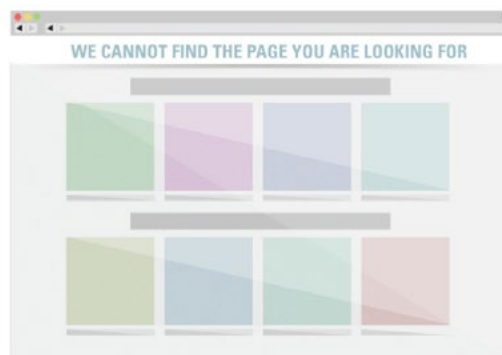
With the new site launch, there is a chance users might encounter some broken links. You'll want to create enticing, customized 404 error pages to divert users to a relevant page.

8. Check for Duplicate Meta Information

Pull all of the site's Meta information, page titles and corresponding descriptions, to check for duplicates. This is the time to correct these issues – before Google crawls your new site. Create a map of your new URL structure and proposed Page titles and Meta descriptions.

During the Launch: 6 Steps to Monitor Progress

1. Target and Correct Crawl Errors

On the day the site goes live, crawl the site with multiple crawlers to locate the obvious and most grievous errors that may have occurred during the migration. Look out for internal errors, server errors, 404 errors and others. Compare these to the amount and type of crawl errors that existed on the report you ran for the old site. Ideally, you should have fewer crawl errors on the new site as compared to the old site. If you discover new crawl errors, fix them before Google has a chance to crawl your site.

2. Make Sure the 301 Redirects Are Implemented Properly

Go to each site page slated for a 301 redirect and make sure that the 301 redirect is working properly. Check each URL and HTTP status code. Make sure that the www or non-www version of each page is redirecting properly as well.

3. **Double Check the XML Sitemap**
Check to see Google has accepted the Sitemap and compare the Google robot crawl ("Fetch as Googlebot" https://support.google.com/webmasters/answer/6066467?hl) of your site to your own sitemap to make sure Google is seeing—or not seeing—the pages you want indexed in the search engine results pages (SERPs).

4. **Monitor the Traffic from Organic and Referral Sources**
In Google Analytics—or the analytics platform of your choice—monitor your organic and referral source traffic and compare it to previous months and the previous year. This will give you hints on how much influence the migration is having on your site. This can also let you know if you are experiencing any decreases in rankings.

5. **Double Check for Duplicate Meta Information**
Again, check that your site's meta information was implemented correctly, and if there are duplicates in page titles and descriptions. If any mistakes occurred, correct them before Google crawls your new site.

6. **Make Sure the Custom 404 Page is Working**
Intentionally perform a search for a URL that doesn't exist to check that your 404 page is working and appears the way you'd intended.

After the Launch: 5 Steps to Ensure Success

1. **Conduct a Follow-Up SEO Audit**
Check the site's main landing pages again for best SEO practices. Double – and triple – check that the meta information and internal linking are correct and functional.

2. **Double Check 301 Redirects**
Check crawl errors in webmaster tools for any 404s you may have missed and check all the site's 301 pages again.

3. **Monitor Traffic in Google Analytics**
Continue to track the site's referral and organic traffic to alert you to any issues you may be missing.

4. **Submit a New XML Sitemap (3 Weeks After Launch)**
Generate and submit your Sitemap again three weeks after launch to make sure your new site pages are getting crawled and indexed.

5. **Compare Benchmarks**
Compare the information collected before the site migration with post-launch data sets as a final check that you are not missing anything. Do a comparative analysis of:

- Keywords
- Keyword ranks
- Landing pages
- Landing pages to keywords

Remember, most of the SEO work is done before migrating the site. Once the site is launched, most of your effort will be double-checking implementation and monitoring the site's performance to inform you of any issues you have may missed.

With the right steps in place, you should enjoy a smooth site migration. And after launch, you'll have a streamlined website with SEO best practices implemented well.

Here at BrightEdge, we help clients undertake informed site migrations through data analytics. If you would like to learn more about how large and small brands are using BrightEdge for SEO migration success, you can contact us or request a demo.

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