

Planning a Site Redesign? Please Read This First!

[Add to Favorites](#) | [Email to a Friend](#) | [NetProfit Archives](#)

Jun. 7, 2001

You've got an exciting new website in the works. It's redesigned, it's database driven, it has a cool flash intro. You're boldly surfing on the leading edge of web design and you can't wait to dump that old, tired site in cyber-oblivion.

Hold on thar Bubbalooey! Here's a little wrench to throw into the works. That old tired site has a physical presence on the Web that goes beyond the html files that sit on your hosting server. Its been indexed by search engines. It has links from other sites pointing to it. Pages have been bookmarked by previous visitors. It's your current address on the Web, and just like any other address, you can't pack up and leave without leaving a forwarding address.

There's just one problem. Every one of those pages has a different address. There's links from search engines and other sites that link deep within your site. Chances are a good portion of the traffic you have come from these existing links, and you don't want to lose that traffic. We've worked with a number of clients, optimizing their sites and building up search engine visibility just to watch it all go for not when the old site suddenly disappears and a shiny new one takes its place. Rankings disappear overnight. New visitor traffic drops off. Regular visitors get a 404 page not found error and assume either the server is down or your business has gone out of business. That's the bad news. The good news is that with a little foresight and planning, these problems can be minimized.

My advice is this: Indicate to your web designer or development team that this existing traffic is very important to you and you want to minimize the disruption. And if you're working with a SEO firm like ours, please, please, PLEASE let them (or us) know well in advance of the change so they can help you with this transition. We've worked with clients to help minimize the loss of visibility that can occur during a site redesign.

Here are some strategies to consider:

Hold a Page Popularity Contest

Before you change pages, delve into your server logs and see which of your current pages are drawing traffic to your site. If your server is set to capture information from the referrer field, you should be able to see which pages are the most popular entry points and which search engines are bringing traffic to those pages. For more on how to use your visitor logs to analyze site traffic, see [Log Hunting: Tracking Your Traffic Through the Referrer Field](#).

Create a Map of Your Current Site

Once you've analyzed current web traffic and seen which pages are the most popular entry points, map out your current site and indicate those pages on it. You want to be sure not to throw up a road block to this traffic. Later, we'll be looking at ways where you can still have a new site and use these existing pages to redirect traffic to it. For now, consider the possibility of keeping the old site intact, and giving the files of the new site separate and distinct names.

Don't Throw Away the Old Site

Whatever you do, don't arbitrarily toss the old site. Create a local back up copy before uploading any new files to the site. At a minimum, consider keeping your ten most popular current entry pages intact on the server and use them to redirect visitors to your new site.

Careful Use of Directories

If you carefully plan the structure of your site, it should be possible to keep the old site intact and place your revised site in a directory, allowing visitors to go directly from your home page into your new pride and joy. That way, your pages with established search engine rankings and other links to them won't disappear, leading potential customers to a online dead end.

Renovating Your Home Page

The one page from your old site that you won't be able to keep around will be the home page. This has to be updated with the new look and navigation structure. So, please remember that your home page is the single most important page on your site from a search engine perspective and treat it with the care it deserves. For a refresher course on home page does and don'ts, check out [Home Sweet Home Page](#).

Beware the Dynamic Site

If your site is an online storefront or you have large amounts of information available, chances are very good that your site redesign will involve dynamic content pulled from a database. The fact is that databases are a terrific way to handle large amounts of information or product without creating hundreds or thousands of individual pages. It also makes it much easier on you as the site owner to maintain and administer all that information.

Another, less attractive characteristic of database driven sites is that many search engines will ignore them (see [Exploring The Invisible Web](#)). If your site is going dynamic, there are work-a-rounds and keep your old, flat html site online as an entry point is one of the best I can think of.

Meta Refresh Tags

Okay, I've told you why you don't want to suddenly turf your old site. Fine, you say, but isn't the whole point of a new site to allow my visitors to see it? I don't want to keep sending them to pages from my old site.

You can use Meta Refresh tags to forward visitors to the right pages in your new sites. You have two options here.

You can set the meta-refresh rate to be almost instantaneous, so it's transparent to the user. As soon as somebody clicks through to an old page, they'll be instantly booted into the appropriate new page. The drawback to this is that many search engines don't handle meta refresh tags well. Generally, they'll just follow the refresh link and index the new page. If you're reasonably certain that your new pages are search engine friendly, content rich and well optimized; this shouldn't be a problem. In fact, it would be a great way of introducing these pages into a search engine's index. If, however; search engines won't treat your new pages kindly, you want to ensure that the old pages continue to be indexed so they'll "stick" in an engine. If this is the case, you'll probably want to opt

for option B.

With Option B, you can still use meta refresh tags, but set them to a longer period of time before they forward your visitor to the new page. You'd probably want to set it for a minimum of 30 seconds. This will allow many engines to index this page. To be absolutely certain, you can steer away from meta refresh tags altogether and just put a prominent link near the top of your page to the appropriate page in the new site.

For more on meta refresh tags, try http://www.global-positioning.com/meta_refresh/

Custom 404 Pages

You've followed all my advice and tried to catch every single dead end a visitor could encounter after the redesign of your site. But what if some pages slip through? What happens then?

If someone goes to a page that is no longer available, they get what's known as a 404 error. This will generate a generic error message in their browser that looks something like this.

The page cannot be found

The page you are looking for might have been removed, had its name changed, or is temporarily unavailable.

Please try the following:

- If you typed the page address in the Address bar, make sure that it is spelled correctly.
- Open the www.wheresmysite.com home page, and then look for links to the information you want.
- Click the [Back](#) button to try another link.

HTTP 404 - File not found

Internet Information Services

Technical Information (for support personnel)

- More information:
[Microsoft Support](#)

Not the most attractive or helpful message. Instead, you could load a custom 404 error message page that your visitors will get if they try to link to a missing page. This could give them a number of links to main topic areas of your site, rather than just one to the home page. You could even give them a site wide search tool on the page. For more information about custom 404 pages, try

<http://www.pageresource.com/zine/custom404.htm>

Recycle, Reuse, Reoptimize!

If pages on your current site have achieved good rankings, you might want to salvage key positioning elements like meta tags, title tags and alt tags, as well as keyword rich body text from the page. If the page has been well optimized, don't throw it away. Reuse it. And please, before you do anything with your new site, make sure those new pages are optimized for search engines. Again, if you're using a SEO firm, let them know well before the fact, and don't force them to try to pick up the pieces after. It will minimize headaches both for them and you.

Doorway Domains

Final strategy. If you've got a perfectly good site that you'll be replacing but it's achieved good rankings, you might want to consider reserving another domain for it and use it as a marketing site. This will allow you to resubmit to engines and directories (be aware that editors are usually on the lookout for obvious examples of marketing sites, but they've become much less picky since paid submissions have taken over). You can either use links or meta refresh tags to redirect visitors to your main site, or you might just leave it as a free standing site. For more on Doorway Domains, read the article [Doorway Domains](#).

Get Qualified Help

A final word from someone that deals with frustrated SEO consultants day in and day out. Please keep us in the loop! If you're planning a redesign, let us know well before the fact, and don't force us to try to pick up the pieces after. It will minimize headaches both for us and you!

Copyright 2001 - Searchengineposition Inc.

This article can be reproduced in it's entirety, if the author credit is retained and there is a prominent source link to www.searchengineposition.com.