

The 10 Step Site Migration Process

by Simon Heseltine

A site begins with such fresh hopes -- that it's going to conquer its niche, or at least provide enough income to make its existence worthwhile. But what happens when it doesn't, or when it proves so worthwhile that it ends up being purchased by a competitor? How do you handle closing down, migrating, or merging a site?

We've been dealing with this issue over the past month. As regular SEW readers know, AOL closed down Propeller.com. Also, the World of Warcraft site migrated from WOW.com to Joystiq. Here are some lessons search engine optimization (SEO) teams can learn from our experiences.

Migrating a Site to Another Domain

This can be the simplest form of moving a site. If the only thing that changes is the main domain, then all you have to do is a domain level 301 (permanent) redirect. However, if there are other changes, such as moving from one content management system (CMS) to another, or changes to the permalink structures, then it becomes more complicated.

Changing CMS; Merging With Another Site

You'll have to map out the redirects at whatever level is necessary -- potentially at the page level. Is it necessary to redirect every page? Possibly not, but it really depends. Think about:

- Which pages drive traffic?
- Which pages drive conversions?
- Which pages have external links?
- Which pages drive the greatest level of engagement?

Last year, AOL purchased MMAFighting.com, which was on a different platform to AOL's other sports properties (AOL uses a proprietary CMS). So, in order to be able to support this new site, AOL had to move it over to its CMS.

This meant that developers had to pull all of the legacy posts out of the old CMS, migrate them to AOL's CMS, and set up a mapping for each page from the old style URLs to AOL's standard ones. There were certain sections of legacy content that were identified as not worth the effort, based on the above criteria, so that didn't get moved.

Closing Down a Site

When Propeller.com closed down, part of that process involved identifying the appropriate locations to redirect the main pages, as well as pages that were driving decent amounts of traffic. For example, the sports section of Propeller now redirects to FanHouse.com.

One term that was generating nice levels of recurring traffic was around the topic of women's health. This particular page was over 2 years old, but was still ranking number one for that particular term, so naturally we wanted to retain as much of that traffic as possible.

We identified a page on the network (AOL Health) that would deliver a good user experience, and not make a person clicking wonder why the heck they were there. Hopefully, as time goes by that AOL Health page will retain that ranking and traffic, but without placing a 301 there we'd just be throwing the traffic away.

The 10 Step Migration Process

Regardless of the reasons for migrating a site, we follow a simple 10 step process:

1. Tell someone from the SEO team your plans before rolling any changes into production to help preserve as much traffic as possible.
2. *Do not* implement a blanket redirect of all page URLs to only one page, section, or URL of the new site.
3. Implement a page-to-page 301 redirect to salvage as much traffic as possible.
4. Test one section of a site before rolling out changes to the entire site. You should only move your entire site when sure new pages from the test are appearing in search results as expected.
5. Use a permanent 301 redirect to point each old or changed page URL to the new corresponding page URL.
6. Consider keeping the same directory structure to make it easier to redirect links when changing a domain name.
7. Check both internal and external links. To the greatest extent possible, update any legacy links that point to the old site.
8. Retain control of the old site domain for at least 180 days and maintain 301 redirects for the same time period.
9. Create 404 error pages so that when errors occur, visitors receive a message helping them navigate to the new page.
10. Keep both the old and new sites verified in Webmaster Tools and review crawl errors regularly to ensure 301 redirects are working properly.

By following processes such as these, the idea is that we'll mitigate our losses due to migrations, which means that we won't spend the first few months post-migration chasing our own tail to get back to the prior traffic levels.

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