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SEO STRATEGY PLANNING

FOR A NEW WEBSITE BUILD OR REDESIGN



CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| INTRODUCTION | 3 |
| SOME QUESTIONS YOU NEED TO ANSWER | 4 |
| HOW MANY PAGES WILL BE REQUIRED?..... | 4 |
| HOW WILL YOUR SITE DESIGN TRANSLATE TO VARIOUS SCREEN SIZES/ RESOLUTIONS..... | 4 |
| WILL THERE BE MULTIPLE USERS - AND WHAT ACCESS WILL THEY NEED?..... | 5 |
| DO YOU HAVE ANY PREFERENCE FOR YOUR CONTENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM (CMS)?..... | 5 |
| HOW WILL YOUR SITE INTEGRATE WITH YOUR EMAIL AUTOMATION SOFTWARE?..... | 5 |
| HAVE YOU CONDUCTED A CONTENT AUDIT?..... | 5 |
| STEP ONE - HAVE A CUNNING PLAN | 6 |
| STEP TWO - WHAT GOES WHERE AND WIREFRAMES | 7 |
| WIREFRAMES..... | 7 |
| STEP THREE - GETTING TECHNICAL | 8 |
| STEP FOUR - TEST, TEST AND TEST AGAIN | 10 |
| PHASE ONE: PRE-LAUNCH..... | 10 |
| PHASE TWO: LAUNCH..... | 10 |
| SPOT CHECKS | 11 |
| CONCLUSION | 12 |
| CHECKLISTS | 13 |
| PRE-LAUNCH..... | 13 |
| POST-LAUNCH..... | 14 |

INTRODUCTION

There are as many different reasons to design or redesign a website as there are websites (1,805,260,010 according to Netcraft – who currently hold the rich result for the query for ‘how many websites are there’). It could be that you’re rebranding, that the site relies on outdated technology, that you’re moving domains, you want a refresh, or any other of the remaining 1,805,260,006 reasons; however, one thing that remains constant for any brand is that there should be both design and SEO strategies in place before the first line of code is written.

While this eBook will deal with the SEO part of the strategy planning, there should be little major conflict between a well-planned website aesthetic and the underlying SEO plan for ensuring its visibility.

SOME QUESTIONS YOU NEED TO ANSWER

While not exhaustive – the following is a list of questions you will need to answer at the inception of the project:

HOW MANY PAGE TYPES WILL BE REQUIRED?

While the header and footer may remain the same to provide a consistent user experience (UX), there will be a definitive number of page ‘types’ that you’ll need to make your site work as intended – just by virtue of the way content will need to be or will be expected to be presented.

Some page types:

- Contact page
- Legal/privacy page
- Blog category page
- Blog page
- Category page
- Product page
- Cart/checkout pages

HOW WILL YOUR SITE DESIGN TRANSLATE TO VARIOUS SCREEN SIZES/ RESOLUTIONS?

While it’s great to have a wonderful desktop site – and there are various bootstrapping sites like WordPress that allow you to build from various well designed templates – will you have control over how it translates to tablet and mobile screens? Increasingly, your site is being judged on its mobile presence (and all compatible sites are now part of the Mobile First experience), so you need to ensure that you are as confident in the mobile version as you are the desktop.

This will mean considering @media queries for various CSS selectors that will increase text size for calls to action (CTAs) and content for mobile devices, that will make your menus easy to navigate from smaller screens, that will trim some of the ‘nice to have’, but speed sapping JavaScript effects and much more besides.

WILL THERE BE MULTIPLE USERS - AND WHAT ACCESS WILL THEY NEED?

Whether or not you're working with a web development company or not, you will need to plan in advance whether you will need access to various parts of your site for – for example – bloggers, whether you will have test site access for future changes, whether there will be different levels of access and what will be permitted for the various levels? This will require creation of secure log in pages and back end dashboards.

DO YOU HAVE ANY PREFERENCE FOR YOUR CONTENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM (CMS)?

Following on from the last point about various dashboards for blog authors and other content contributors, your choice of CMS can play a big part in this. Is your present CMS working well for you? Is familiarity with your current platform worth putting up with any elements you are not satisfied with? While migration to another CMS isn't overly difficult, it is a further layer of complexity in a long list and bears thinking about in detail before the site build.

HOW WILL YOUR SITE INTEGRATE WITH YOUR EMAIL AUTOMATION SOFTWARE?

Typically, forms filled out on your site will generate a confirmation email, and may also push through details of the consumer to your email platform. You will need to ensure that your site is built with a long-term email platform in mind to ensure the best possible integration of forms.

HAVE YOU CONDUCTED A CONTENT AUDIT?

While it can be tempting to transfer your site in its entirety, the design of a new site, or redesign of an existing one is a perfect opportunity to conduct an in-depth content audit to allow you to better judge the necessity of that six year old blog post that no longer generates traffic. It can also allow you to look at whether your content is pushing users in the right directions, and plan what content should point where to better serve the customer journey.

STEP ONE - HAVE A CUNNING PLAN

While, as stated previously, there are no two web-builds alike, we tend to recommend an eight point list to aid in preparation for your build or revamp. These are as follows:

1. Break down each task into its components (subtasks) so that nothing is missed
2. Describe each task in detail to ensure clarity
3. Assign an owner to each task to ensure accountability
4. Highlight tasks which rely upon the completion of others to identify roadblocks
5. Make sure the plan is accessible and shared with all involved
6. Save a copy of the plan, just in case
7. Build contingency time into your schedule to allow for slippage
8. Assign a project manager (or two) who will be responsible for keeping the project on track and holding team members accountable for their duties

STEP TWO – WHAT GOES WHERE AND WIREFRAMES

Once you have answered the fundamental questions and have a plan in place, the next thing to consider is what will go where on your site – and how will the consumer find it. While the home page is still arguably the most important page on your site, it is ever less frequent for it to be the first page a new consumer will encounter.

This means that you need to have an idea of your consumer journey from each level of depth on your site and on each page as well as an eye for indexing potential and user experience (UX). For example, while design may dictate that the better aesthetic appearance of a page requires various sliders, button expands or tabs, incorrect code can lead to this being hidden from crawlers, meaning that while your consumers may be searching for your exact content, they would be unable to find it.

Similarly, if a consumer lands on a specific product or service and wishes to check out other similar options, it is vital that the right breadcrumbs are in place to allow ease of navigation to a page higher in the hierarchy, and that your menu is easy to navigate.

For this reason, site structure, XML sitemaps and internal linking should at the very least be sketched out early on to ensure that there is a map in place for site progress.

WIREFRAMES

The development of wireframes (mocked up designs of the various page types) can serve as an early warning system for SEO issues. By ensuring that SEO is at the core of design efforts, you can save yourself time and costly redesigns.

STEP THREE – GETTING TECHNICAL

Building on step two, this step requires the solidification of the sites technical requirements. This is a document that will need to be passed to the web developer as a guide not to why you need them but what you need and how to implement it.

The minimum you'll need to include is:

- **URL structure** – this is how your URLs will extend related to depth, so will determine whether certain elements are to present with dynamic URLs, as subpages, directories etc.
- **Meta data (including dynamically generated default values)** – metadata, literally data about the data, is the information your page is reporting to crawlers and which ultimately pulls through to search engines. This needs to be accessible for changes as new pages are added, but equally needs to be researched for top level pages to ensure you are pitching at the right keywords.
- **Structured data** – this is vital for any new site as it's going to play a big role in the future of search. Structured data is among the primary aspects of information architecture that allows for many of the rich results you now see in search engine results pages (SERPs) and will play a major role in the coming voice and digital assistance revolution.
- **Canonicals** – simply, this is standardisation. Issues occur when the same page is available from multiple URLs, therefore variations of the same URL should all be canonicalised to a single URL.
- **Copy and headings** – you need to ensure that your copy is primed to target the terms you're looking to rank for, this includes your landing page copy, but also your title tags and, where possible, speakable sections (descriptions etc.) marked up with appropriate schema.
- **Internal linking** – relevant, useful internal links should be included in your on-page copy to pass authority and aid crawlers in navigating your site quickly. They also guide users along the path to conversion and keep them engaged on your site, lowering bounce rates.
- **Pagination** – any category pages that are subject to pagination should be marked as requiring the use of rel="next" and rel="prev" to ensure that your main category page is the one building authority over time.
- **XML sitemap(s)** – this is a necessity for sites, not only because it will need to be submitted to Google Search Console, but because the additional information you can provide allows search engines to crawl your site with a little more intelligence. You should also have one for any video.
- **HTML sitemap** – barring pages you have marked for inclusion as 'noindex', gated pages and any other you don't want to be accessed without invitation, the HTML sitemap should be a bulleted (clickable) list of every other page.
- **Hreflang (if there are international sites)** – while there has been a lot of recent chatter regarding the right way to execute hreflang, but the main advice is to limit complexity – using only the languages necessary for where your brand operates.



John
@JohnMu

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TBH hreflang is one of the most complex aspects of SEO (if not the most complex one). Feels as easy as a meta-tag, but it gets really hard quickly.

8:44 AM - 19 Feb 2018

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- **Mobile setup (including AMP, PWA etc.)** – is there anything you can do to further improve the mobile experience? This can include the use of accelerated mobile pages (AMP), and progressive web apps (PWAs) which are intended to reduce load times and allow, in the latter case, access to certain aspects of the site offline.
- **Redirects (301 and 302s, other types to be avoided)** – if you’re migrating your site to https or to a new domain name, you’ll need to ensure that every page redirects appropriately to replicated content on the new site, or to the nearest applicable content. Not only does this better serve the user, it also maintains any SEO gains you have made with the previous site.
- **Custom 404 page** – you want your brand to be best represented by each and every page, even the page that says there is no page. By adding a custom 404, you can improve the user experience, retain the consumer by providing useful links and maintain your branding site wide.
- **JavaScript, CSS, and image files** – ensure that briefs include instructions to limit the number of libraries your site will need to call prior to loading, that JS which isn’t necessary is either dropped or asynched, that CSS effects (such as shadows and gradients) are used instead of relying on images for the same purpose, and that images will be uploaded in speed and zoom friendly formats like SVG and JPEG-XR.
- **Target page loading times (for desktop and mobile)** – a rapid load time is now simply a necessity, with the time a consumer is prepared to wait for the first contentful paint decreasing all the time.
- **Addition of Google Analytics tracking code prior to </head> and set up of events and goals** – while this is not really within the remit of the web developer, it can be handled in conjunction with them. By ensuring the tracking code is there prior to launch, the SEO responsible can ensure that eCommerce tracking, filters, dashboards, reporting and more are in place from the start. If the site is a replacement or part of a migration, they can also add a notation to the account at the point of launch to allow you to better track the date of the switch over. This is also a good time to update or create new accounts for the site in Google Ads and Search Console.

STEP FOUR – TEST, TEST AND TEST AGAIN

Testing your site will happen in three phases – pre-launch, launch and post-launch. While it's desirable to think that all issues can be identified prior to launching a site, even the best developers and SEOs can occasionally miss something.

PHASE ONE: PRE-LAUNCH

The first phase is essentially testing that the SEO brief has been followed while the site is still in the staging environment (which should not be able to be indexed by search engines, so you'll need to ensure you add the following to your robots.txt file while testing (and ensure you remove it when transferring to the live site):

```
User-agent: *  
Disallow: /
```

Or otherwise block the indexing of the test pages by either marking the site as only available to a limited number of IP addresses, or by password protection.

PHASE TWO: LAUNCH

While a new site can be launched at any time, if it is set to replace an existing one in any way, the launch should be carried out during a period of typically low traffic (late night/early morning – or whenever your site experiences a significant traffic drop) as there will be a transition period during which your old site goes down and its replacement goes live.

Try to make sure the site, while down, features an informative holding page returning a 503 status code. Failure to return the 503 'server unavailable' status can negatively impact rankings if a crawl happens to take place during downtime.

SPOT CHECKS

As soon as the new site has gone live, take a quick look at:

1. The /robots.txt file to make sure search engines are not blocked from crawling
2. Priority pages redirect (try accessing the old URLs to check this)
3. Priority pages have the correct canonical tags
4. Priority pages show a 200 server response code
5. Are there unintentional noindex/nofollow directives?

These spot checks need to be carried out across both the mobile and desktop sites, unless the site is fully responsive.

PHASE THREE: POST-LAUNCH

Phase three is mainly about double and triple checking the elements mentioned previously while also conducting maintenance of the site by conducting checks that are only possible post launch, but which should be scheduled at least monthly.

- **Check crawls stats** – while using log file analysers like Screaming Frog is the most thorough way to check for crawl problems (along with a lot of other great troubleshooting options), but if you don't have access, you can get at least your 404 error issues in Google Search Console.
- **Check GSC regularly** – there are a host of issue identification options in Google Search Console (GSC) including, but not limited to, a 'Mobile Usability' error report, a 'Structured Data' analyser as well as the previously mentioned error log.
- **Site speed** – as mentioned earlier, site speed is incredibly important to a brand's online presence. You can regularly test this with any number of site speed checkers, but among the best is Google's Lighthouse.

CONCLUSION

While this cannot be an exhaustive breakdown of the process due to the different requirements of each brand, but by ensuring you have everything covered from the earlier chapters (there are checklists you can use if need be), it should be possible to have your site ready for the search marketing space – if not at the point of launch, then certainly soon after.

Technical SEO can seem like a constant battle against the Google algorithm, but if you have been monitoring search marketing trends over the last few years, it's easy to see the trends you need to be prepared for – things like voice search and digital assistance, mobile, AR and VR, and while some of them may be further off than others, there are schema forums and various other online forums that are pushing markup styles and coding varieties that will pave the way – all of which it is possible to lay the ground for now.

CHECKLISTS

In line with the information in the eBook, the following are two checklists to help you keep track of your efforts.

PRE-LAUNCH

- Set up rank monitoring
- Benchmark KPIs and important metrics (rankings, pagespeed score, DA etc.)
- Assess the new test site for technical SEO compliance, including:
 - identify crawl-time issues
 - undertake cloaking checks
 - review JavaScript crawling
 - check mobile set-up
 - review structured data
 - review pagination
 - set up a custom 404 page
 - review XML sitemap(s)
 - review HTML sitemap
 - review HREFLANG tags (if applicable)
 - conduct site speed checks on test site
- Review site content, including:
 - all traffic-driving legacy pages have been retained
 - pages with duplicate, similar or thin content
 - check for pages with missing or unoptimised page titles, meta descriptions, headings and copy
 - check all images have SEO-friendly file names and alt text is optimised and that any legacy traffic-driving images or videos are available on the new site.
- Review placement and destination of internal links
- Review placement and destination of external links (social media icons, etc.)
- Prepare a 301 redirect file
- Take a copy of your sites existing sitemap
- Set up Google Analytics and Search Console for the new site

POST-LAUNCH

- Check search engine crawling by looking at:
 - the /robots.txt file for any major crawling issues
 - server responses across desktop and mobile for key pages
 - canonical tags for errors
 - unintentional noindex or nofollow directives
 - whether search engines and users are treated in the same way (i.e. there are no cloaking issues).
- Check page content and meta information
- Check that old site URLs correctly redirect to the new site, including:
 - old URLs redirect correctly to the new site
 - redirects are implemented as 301 (permanent redirects)
 - legacy redirects haven't been lost
 - no redirect chains
 - redirect rules work as expected for...
 - www vs non-www URL requests
 - http vs https URL requests
 - lower case vs upper case URL requests
 - requests for any legacy mobile sites
- Update Google Analytics Tracking (goals, funnels etc.)
- Complete the following actions in Google Search Console:
 - use the 'Blocked Resources' report to check for critical issues
 - use 'Fetch as Google' on every single page type (i.e. homepage, a category page, a product page) across desktop and mobile
 - set the targeted country in 'International Targeting' (if applicable)
 - test each sitemap for errors and submit it for crawling
 - upload a separate sitemap (or just a list of URLs in a text file) with the old site's indexable pages to help search engines discover the redirects that are in place
 - configure the URL parameters to deal with duplicate content issues
 - upload the disavow file (if applicable)
- Update offsite assets which include references to your site (social media, email campaigns, third party services, directory listings etc.)

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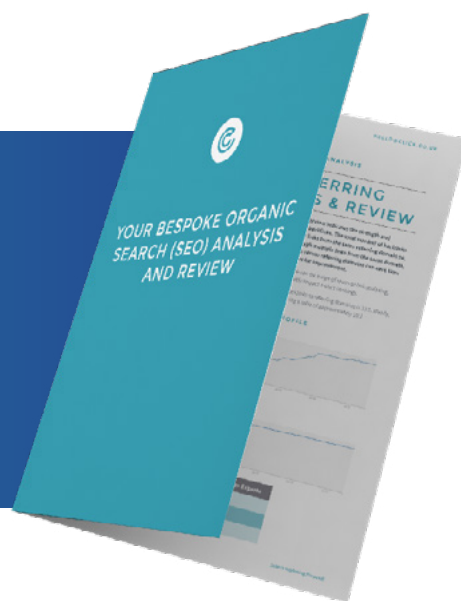
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Located in North West England, Click Consult is a multi award-winning search marketing agency with a focus on organic (SEO) and paid search (PPC), with over 70 professionals employed and with a portfolio of over 60 clients from across the UK, Europe, Americas and Australia.

Click was named Search Agency of the Year 2018, adding to its long list of other awards and accolades, and also ranks within both RAR's and Econsultancy's 'Top 100 Digital Agencies', and Prolific North's 'Top 50 Digital Agencies'.

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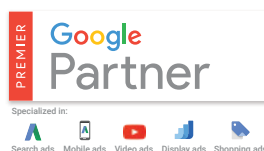
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