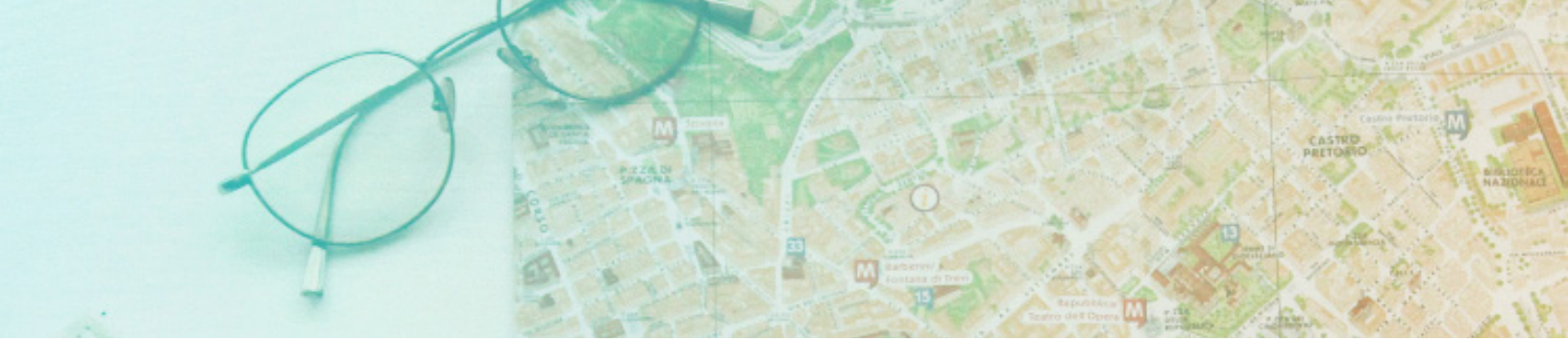# Technical SEO:
Making or breaking your site redesign or replatform

Redesign Your Website without Losing Millions in Revenue

Written By

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INTRODUCTION

Have you ever jumped off of a bluff into water? It's quick. It feels like a split second before you hit the water. But that climb back up is long and exhausting. The dive off of the proverbial organic traffic cliff after a redesign or replatform gone wrong. The damage to organic traffic happens quickly, but getting it built back up to where you were is a long, painful and expensive journey. And sometimes, you don't make it back to where you were at all.

Classy Llama continually speaks with companies who are feeling the pain of a site replatform and/or redesign where, after launch, they have lost a significant portion of their traffic and revenue and are desperate to regain the millions they have lost.

So, why is this? How can companies launch a site that on the surface looks cleaner, has a better user experience, stronger content and runs faster but loses traffic? The answer: Technical SEO.

Technical SEO determines how your site is crawled. If you make changes that alter the way Google and other search bots crawl your site, you may have lost your SEO value. You may also have to prove to Google that your new site is just as good, or better, and that takes time. But you can have it both ways: a new site AND no lost revenue. We've seen companies lose as much as 75% of their revenue by not following some very simple, but nearly always overlooked rules.

In this whitepaper, you will discover the difference between technical and content SEO, why it's so important, and how to ensure a great launch for your new site retaining your organic traffic and revenue.

TECHNICAL SEO

What is the difference between Technical and Content SEO?

Generally, when someone says "SEO", they are talking about content SEO. Yet, out of the 200+ ranking signals that Google uses, over 50% actually relate to technical SEO, not content based SEO. So what is the difference?

TECHNICAL SEO	CONTENT SEO
How Google Crawls Your Site	What Google Crawls on Your Site
Server Errors • 404, 503 • Too many 301s	Content Quality
Sitemap Errors	Use of Keywords
Site Architecture	Freshness of Content
URL Structure	Title Tags
Site Speed	Header Tags
Duplicate Content	Meta Descriptions
Pagination	

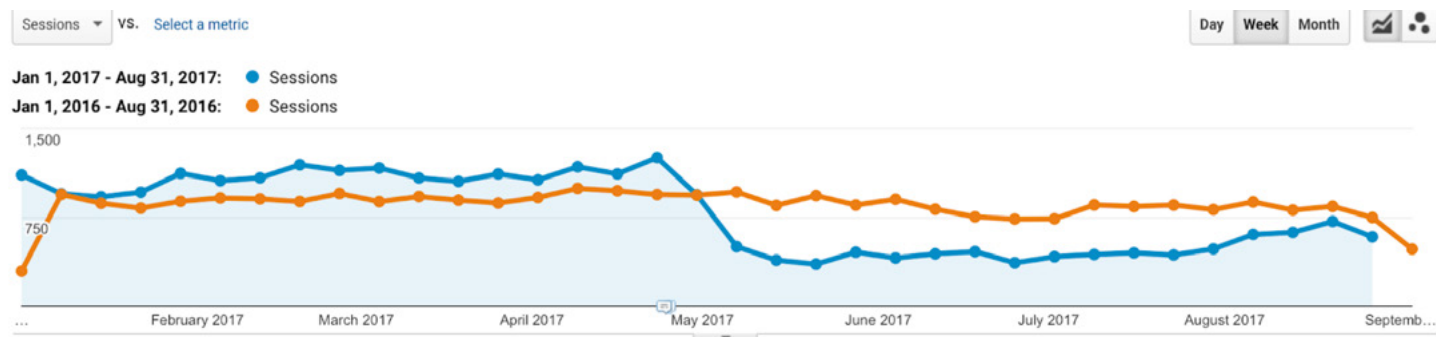## Why We Focus on Tehnical SEO

In a site redesign or replatform, most (if not all) aspects of technical SEO are modified in some way.

What Can Happen By Not Focusing on Technical SEO?

Significant Traffic Loss

The site above made only a slight change: The name of a major category, and the number of products that show on each page within that category. This seems very small. However, that category had the single highest organic entrances of any other page on their site, including the homepage. Those seemingly small changes altered the way Google crawled their site, and as a result they lost a large portion of their traffic. They slowly built up the traffic they had lost, but it took about 9 months. The revenue lost in that time was not regained.

More on content changes here.

The developers of this site changed their URL structure. However, they did not redirect (also called 301s) all of the URLs to the new URL. It has been nearly two years, and the traffic loss remains.

More on 301s here.

How to Prevent It

So far, the information may seem pretty doom and gloom. But good news is on the horizon! You can actually have your cake and eat it too. It does make your site redesign a bit more complicated than it already is, but it is well worth it.

Initial Data Review and KPIs

You have to know where you've been to know where you are going. Collecting important data before any planning for the new site begins is key. Through Google Analytics you can examine organic entrances on specific pages or collections of pages. High-value pages are those that have a significant percentage of organic traffic.

Determining High-Value Pages

What pages, or collections of pages, represent the highest value? Key pages are often major categories, top selling products, the homepage, resource pages (such as blog articles), etc. Hold off on changes to these pages (for now). More about this later.

Architecture and URL Structure

Site architecture refers to the planning and design of the technical, functional and visual components of a website - before it is designed, developed and deployed. Google passes value from one page to the next through internal links and based on where the pages are located in the hierarchy of the website, pages will receive more or less of this value.

Pages that are linked closer to important pages (such as the home page or main category pages) receive more value than those that are 3-4 clicks from these important pages. This means that category taxonomy changes (adding or removing subcategories, for instance) can have an impact on your SEO.

Websites can have a significant drop in traffic after a redesign due to a content gap being created. When a website is restructured without understanding the impact of removing pages, gaps in content sets and topics are created. This could happen if you decide to collapse several subcategory pages on your old site into a single category page on your new site or if you group multiple products into "parent" products with options (e.g., size and color). This gap causes previously earned rankings to disappear for the topics those pages were targeting, and traffic to drop.

Every page has a target topic that Google ranks it for. That topic receives a score to compete with other websites in the search results targeting that same topic. When a website changes how it is organized it can cause some pages to have fewer internal links, or be linked to pages that have been deemed of lesser value, which in turn lowers the score of the page, dropping it below the threshold needed to rank within the search results.

As mentioned above, it is best to analyze which pages are the most valuable. This will help you determine if making changes to where the page resides will ultimately affect your SEO.

Canonicalization

With a site full of content, products, and categories, it's pretty common for the same content to be on multiple URLs. That's where Canonical Tags (rel="canonical") come in. This tag tells Google what your preferred URL is so that search results will be more likely to show that URL in SERPs (Search Engine Results Pages). Without using canonical tags in these instances, you can suffer duplicate content issues. In addition, you are forcing Google to decide which page to give SEO value to, or splitting its value.

Canonical tags are kind of a hybrid of a NOINDEX tag and 301 redirects. You're basically telling Google – 1) Don't show the other pages with similar content in search results, and 2) Push ranking signals to this page. It also reduces a number of resources that Google Bots will spend crawling pages, so it's a win-win-win.

A HELPFUL TIP

Look out for the following when redesigning/replatforming your site.

Duplicate pages resolve to a single canonical URL:

> • Single case
>
> • Naked or www. *(or whatever your subdomain is)*
>
> • HTTP or HTTPS
>
> • Trailing slash or not
>
> • Pages contain self-referential rel="canonical" tags
>
> • Print pages contain rel="canonical" tags pointing to non-print versions
>
> • Ensure the Catalog and Product Canonical Meta Tag setting are set correctly. Most of the time we would want these set to "yes" but this may vary depending on the merchant's URL structure

Note: Magento handles canonicalization very differently. For more on this click here.

301 Redirects

Redirects are one of the most important things to consider when redesigning a website. They send users to the new improved page and tell search engines to rank the new page in place of the old one.

With a new site design, there's a good chance that URLs will change. If that happens, you have to inform search engines where those older URLs have moved to. If you do not set up redirects, frequent visitors & crawlers will start getting errors when they visit your site. These errors will tell the search engines that you have bad content, and negatively impact your site rankings. When you redirect pages, you could lose up to 30% of your link equity. However, you are still giving search engines the best opportunity of moving the old site's value to the new.

Look out for the following:

- Map old URLs to their closest counterpart new URLs
- We're going for as close to a 1-to-1 page match as possible.

   If the page you are redirecting to isn't almost exactly the same, it will Soft 404. This means that the user will still end up on the new page, but Google will not transfer the SEO value from one page to another. The reason for this is that those changes signal to Google they need to reassess the value of the new page.
- Server isn't defaulting 301s to 302s

   301s are permanent redirects, 302s are temporary.

Content Changes

This does not refer to minor grammatical changes but rather changes to the main and secondary topics of a page. In many instances, when a website is redesigned, the copy of the website also gets a refresh. Copy changes cause Google to re-evaluate the relevance of the page for the targeted topic. If priority keywords are removed from the key areas (title tag, header tags, body copy, alt text), the relevancy score will drop - rankings and traffic will follow.

WEBSITE IMPROVEMENTS

Getting the Website You Want

By now you are probably wondering, "If I can't change anything, how am I supposed to improve my site?". But don't worry - you can have your cake and eat it too! The key is to not change *everything* going into the launch.

What You Can Change

- The Design

    The look of the site doesn't matter for Technical SEO. Just make sure to keep a 1-to-1 match on things such as H1 tags, title tags, etc. The color and font for them doesn't matter, only what it says.

- Pages with an Insignificant Amount of Organic Traffic

Making Changes Post-Launch and Iteratively

If you do not make any significant changes you may still see a small dip (more about that [here](#)). This should level out in 30-60 days. At that point, you can start making changes to the more significant pages. Do this slowly. For example: make a change to the home page, wait 30 days or so, see how organic traffic responds. Then change your navigation, wait 30 days, and so on and so forth. Making changes means that dips are much lower. Making massive changes at once creates too significant of a drop and takes Google much longer to determine the new value of your pages.

You Will Still Probably Lose Some Traffic...

Even with the best site redesign or replatform, it is not unusual to see a dip in traffic from search engines after launch. This is because you have a new site structure that Google and the other search engines need to reindex. Search robots must examine your website's content and log it in their database. Depending on the content on the site you're replacing, this can take up to a few weeks. The average drop is around 5% but can be as much as 50%.

Process to Follow During Replatform or Redesign

Below is a simplified guide to follow during your redesign/replatform to maintain organic traffic.

Phase 1: Pre-Build

Overview

- Data collection, KPIs, and trends
- Determine deleted and changed content
    - Analyze these pages to determine their value

Timeline in the project: At kickoff, prior to any design or development

Information Needed

- Access to analytics and Google Search Console
- Changes
    - List of categories that will be changing or removed
    - List of content and product pages that will be changing or removed

Phase 2: Stage Site

Overview

- Crawl Stage Site

  - *Recommended Tools:* SEMRush or Screaming Frog

- Determine any errors on the stage site that need correction prior to launch.

  - Errors May Include:

    - Internal Broken Links

    - HTTP to HTTPS errors

    - Missing Content

Timeline in the project: 3-4 weeks prior to Soft Launch

Phase 3: Immediate Post-Launch

Overview

- Google Search Console (GSC) is added for the new property

- Sitemap.xml file is submitted to GSC

- Google Search Console is reviewed for errors such as: Broken Links, Server Errors, and Mobile Usability Errors

Timeline in the project: 1-2 days after Launch

## Phase 4: 30-Day Post-Launch

Overview

- Post-launch site crawl

- Metrics will be compared to benchmarks and KPIs gathered at the beginning of the project. This will help you determine the impact, and allow for the quickest response/recovery plan as possible.

Timeline in the project: 30 days after Launch

The Payoff

While all of this information can seem daunting and will add more work to an already large and complicated task, trust me, it's worth it. As the screenshots from Google Analytics above show, putting in the extra effort is worth it when removing the pain of traffic and revenue loss. Since discovering these tactics and implementing them on every single build we have done since, we know first hand the power in putting this as a focus. So dig in and get to know Google Analytics and Google Search Console, start your big project, and if you need a little help along the way you can always reach out to a friendly llama to guide you.
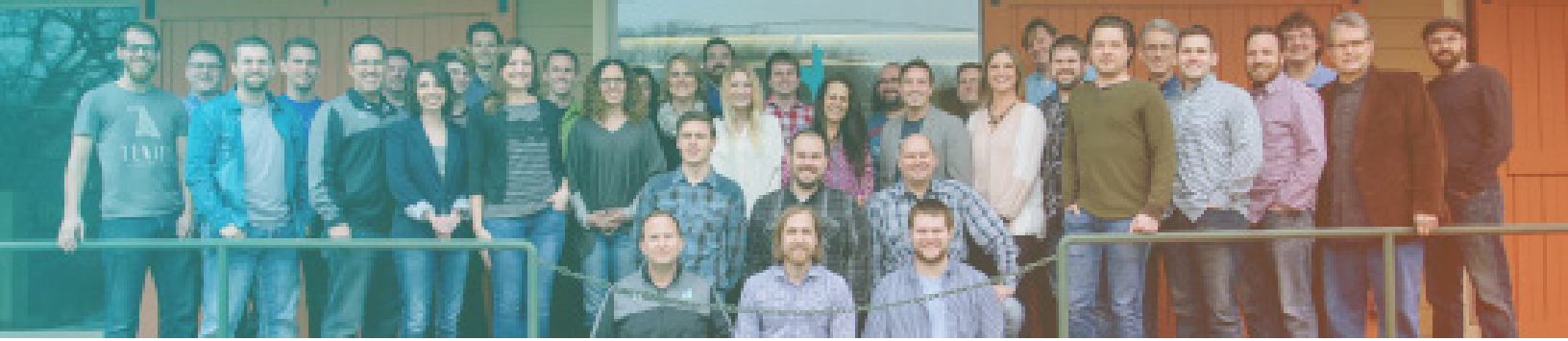
ABOUT CLASSY LLAMA

Classy Llama is an agency of a different breed. Despite our playful name, we could not be more serious about the level of integrity, excellence, and commitment we bring to our clients. Our passion is to help merchants leverage technology to sustainably grow and build their business. We serve our clients through digital commerce consulting, marketing, design, development, and support. With over 125 commerce sites and 400+ customizations and integrations under our belt, our team of commerce veterans has what it takes to create a great digital experience.

ABOUT MARKETING SERVICES

Digital marketing in eCommerce requires the proper combination of business acumen, creativity, strategy, and technical knowledge. At Classy Llama, our team of digital marketing professionals provides the full breadth of services needed to achieve your marketing goals. As a Google Premier Partner with all five Google specializations, you have access to a team of individuals certified across multiple areas in the digital marketing arena.

Through our years of supporting online merchant success, Classy Llama has built out offerings including Search Engine Optimization (SEO), email marketing, paid search management, social media strategy and execution, and marketing consultation.