

SEO and Web Design

When we talk about the relationship between SEO and web design, it's usually the technical part of the website design art that's relevant, not the visual part (though certain aspects of visual design have their impact on SEO/SEM, as will be shown below).

One of the latest trends in the SEO industry is to put more and more emphasis on quality web design in the overall SEO process. If you aim at a long term success online, you need to know exactly how design and SEO integrate.

Make Your Design Work For You

Good website design is like a foundation for the building of your future SEO success. The more aspects you think about before you start working on your site, the fewer obstacles you will meet later when you start looking into SEO, web promotion, ROI and other important aspects of your web presence.

Good website design includes such things as internal linking structure (i.e. navigation), folder structure, URL generation and naming conventions, coding, page download time, Usability and a lot more. If your website is interactive and uses additional dynamic functionality and tools (e.g. a newsletter subscription form with built-in verification and unsubscribe features, or e-commerce functionality), you will need to make sure that all of your client-side and server-side scripts work flawlessly and are not open to abuse of any sort. And of course, the back-end of the website (content management) should be well thought out prior to starting.

If You Are Going To Redesign Your Site

If you need to redesign an existing site (as opposed to building a new one from scratch), you will encounter even more problems and you will need to take these into account to ensure success.

One of the most important decisions you will have to make is whether to keep the old URLs or to restructure the site and move to new, more SE-friendly, URLs.

Of course, if the URLs in your old site are already SE-friendly, the decision is simple: you need to preserve them. This way, you won't waste the fruits of your previous achievements; indeed, the improvements you make to your site during the redesign will eventually help you to enhance them.

But what do you do if your old URLs are dynamic with a lot of parameters in the query strings and are unreadable and confusing from a usability point of view, adding nothing to your SEO? Your pages may still have rankings in the SEs, which you would certainly like to preserve. If you reproduce the same ugly URLs in the new version of the site, you'll achieve this, but make further progress impossible. If you move to better URLs (and then 301-redirect old pages to new ones on a per-page basis), you will probably lose your rankings for a short period of time, but benefit in the long run.

The answer, in this case, is no longer so obvious. It will require a lot of statistical analysis, followed by brainstorming sessions involving your company and, if relevant, your client. All interested parties should be well informed of the existing options, as well as the benefits and the complications (risks) each of those options involves.

Notice though that if most of your search engine traffic is directed to your home page, then you have nothing to lose and should stick to the second option.

Another question that arises when a website is about to be redesigned is the choice of a content management system (CMS).

Of course, if the site is relatively small (with less than, say, 1,000 pages), and you are ready to support it using manual coding and an FTP client, you won't need a CMS at all. The only automation necessary in this case is either PHP (ASP, JSP) includes or SSI (if supported). They will save you a lot of time when you need to edit a repeated block of code (like a navigation menu bar). A change made once will be reflected

on all pages automatically.

But if the site is large and requires complicated dynamic functionality (like newsletters, an automatically updated RSS feed, a shopping cart or customised data tracking), or if your client doesn't have any HTML knowledge but needs to update the content regularly, then a CMS is the only way to go.

What is a SE-friendly CMS?

In order to be SE-friendly, a CMS should at the very least comply with the following criteria.

- URL-generation flexibility. You need to be able to choose how your URLs will look, including file and folder names, file name extensions and conventions. A CMS that forces you to use dynamic URLs is definitely a bad one. Also, a good CMS won't generate session IDs for guest users and search engine spiders.
- Title and meta information management. You should be able to assign a unique title tag and unique description and keyword meta tags to every single page, or set up a pattern that will generate this information dynamically.
- HTML management. The code generated by the CMS should be valid, or the software should at least provide opportunities to make it valid, if you have the necessary knowledge. For example, if the HTML editor used in the CMS converts all HTML tags into capital letters or removes quotation marks in attributes, you will never be able to validate your code for XHTML 1.0 or XHTML 1.1, which are now preferred coding standards.
- CSS management. The CMS should provide a CSS editor to professional web designers who know how to write CSS styles, and a smart CSS generator to those who can't handle the task manually.
- Robots.txt management. You should be able to edit your robots.txt file without an FTP client. If there is a default text for the robots.txt, it should be a valid default robots.txt, not some gibberish.

The best choice for the valid default robots.txt should be this:

User-agent: *

Disallow:

This file defines what the bots are allowed to crawl and what they should stay away from, and provides yet another reason to use static URLs rather than dynamic. When your URLs don't contain dynamic parameters in the query string, it is much easier to control them in the robots.txt file on a per-page basis. If your site has dynamic URLs, you might want to look into mod_rewrite to make them static.

Things to Avoid

Yet another important consideration is knowing what to avoid. If you keep the following rules in mind when you design your site from scratch or redesign it, life will be much easier for you, but if you ignore them, your web presence will be affected detrimentally.

Over-bloated code. The more HTML tags and other stuff you have in your code, the longer it will take for each page to load up in the browser - and the harder it will be for a search engine to extract the useful (content) part of it.

JavaScript redirects and JavaScript-based navigation. JavaScript is not parsed by most search engines. There are rumours around that Google is starting to follow JavaScript links, but that's probably just one of their newest experiments that will never turn into anything serious (like their earlier attempts at reading text embedded in Flash). If you want your navigation links to be spiderable, use plain text links with "href" attributes.

JavaScript redirects is a technique loved by doorway creators, so if you use it you can inadvertently get yourself banned, or at best make your site utterly SE-unfriendly, especially if you redirect the home page. Incidentally, your home page's URL should always end with a "/"; for other purposes, the only option is the 301 redirect.

Disallowing the whole site via an incorrect robots.txt or using an invalid robots.txt file. Remember:

User-agent: *
Disallow:

is the correct code if you wish to allow all pages to be crawled by all spiders and bots, but using

User-agent: *
Disallow: /

means they will ignore your whole site. When your whole site is dropped, re-indexing can give you a headache, as the engines sometimes have problems with crawling sites quickly. The Net grows daily, and even Google (which used to be the fastest at crawling websites) has seemed to behave oddly since the start of the Bigdaddy update.

Google is also very sensitive to invalid robots.txt files. If your robots.txt is incorrectly written, it can get your site partially or even completely de-listed.

Too much graphical content. Graphics (especially when animated) and Flash slow down the page's download significantly. That's more of a usability issue than an SEO issue, but usability is a part of SEM, as it affects ROI and conversions. So do test your pages on a slow dial-up connection, and if it takes too much time to download, lighten it. Believe it or not, a lot of people around the world still have no option but to use a slow dial-up connection.

Making your site worse than it was. This of course only applies if you are redesigning a site. If your previous version successfully validated for W3C standards, don't break it; better still, try moving from HTML 4.01 to XHTML, or from table-based coding to CSS-based positioning (if you feel able, of course, otherwise it can be a frustrating experience). If your navigation was handy and intuitive, don't make it more confusing in the new version; better still, add more navigation options that the previous version lacked. In other words, let your redesign be a step forwards, not a step backwards.

Visual Design and SEO

As stated above, SEO is more than a technical discipline; the visual design has its implications, too. Too often, visual design and SEO are perceived as a mutual sacrifice. Graphic designers often think websites exist to demonstrate their artistic abilities, and don't care much about content. SEOs, on the contrary, would prefer to keep graphics to a minimum, thus increasing the SE-friendliness of the pages and minimising the code bloat. Visual designers prefer to create menus in images, so they can use some fashionable "blurred" font or whatever; it won't be long before an SEO then comes along and yells: "What have you done? I need text here!"

"Your content spoils the look of my design" seems to be an unwinnable argument in our industry. Sooner or later, the parties usually find a solution that suits them both, but too often the compromise leaves everyone unhappy. And yet there is no need for any sacrifice at all if the designer and the SEO are ready to cooperate from the start.

It makes me happy to see more and more websites that are both good looking and 100% SE-friendly. Three years ago, a common question in the SEO forums was: "Why do you SEOs all have such ugly websites?" But it's no longer an issue, as people are starting to realise that there is no need to sacrifice the look of a site for the sake of search engine friendliness, or vice versa.

Actually, the visual design is just as important a part of Internet marketing as are SEO and usability. It may seem like an obvious statement, but websites that are pleasing to the eye convert better than do ugly ones. Of course, it's impossible to please everyone when it comes to visual design, as some people love minimalism, and others prefer a lot of funky, flashy graphics - but as the concept of SE-friendly design is gradually becoming more familiar to web users, overloaded designs are going out of fashion and minimalism is now viewed as elegance. For a website representing a serious, trustworthy business, elegant minimalism is now a must.

The Harmony of the Web

Summarising the whole article, I would like to repeat once more that all aspects of an online presence are slowly finding a new type of harmony. Harmony means quality. Quality means success. SEO and web design are just two important parts of this harmony. - *Irina Ponomareva*

