How to Move Content & Preserve SEO in a Website Redesign

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Introduction

Redesigning your website or transferring to a new CMS is a huge undertaking, and it's easy for key elements to get overlooked in the process. For all too many companies one of those elements is SEO. Not taking content migration and SEO into account during your website redesign can result in a significant decrease in traffic to your new website after launch, possibly taking months or years to rebuild. For many companies, this loss of traffic translates directly into a loss of revenue.

Though creating and transferring high quality, optimized content might feel like an after-thought during the redesign process, it is ultimately responsible for getting robots onto your site–a necessity in order to perform a crawl, index your pages and help people find your business. If you don't take the necessary steps to correctly migrate that content while maintaining your SEO, or, if your existing content wasn't strategically created or implemented in the first place, you're setting yourself up for failure in the long run.

In situations like these spending thousands of dollars on an updated design but not attending to the underlying content issues will result in a new website that seriously misses the mark. If you care about getting the best ROI on your website redesign, content migration and SEO has to be a top priority.

In this paper, we'll cover the most critical steps you'll need to follow to maintain as much of your accrued SEO capital as possible during the strategy, development, pre-launch and post-launch phases of your website redesign and migration. While we won't be covering the process of actually creating search engine optimized copy, you'll leave with a solid understanding of what on-page and technical SEO and content work needs to be done to responsibly and successfully migrate your site. With this information, you'll be able to ask the right questions of your internal team, your SEO specialist, and your design/development agency to ensure you have the necessary resources in place to move forward.

Step One: Preparing for Migration

Before you can actually begin the migration and redesign process, there are two important pieces of information that you or your SEO specialist need to uncover. First, you'll need to identify any indexation issues your website may be experiencing–this might include duplicate content, blocked content or any Google penalties you may have incurred. Second, you'll need to develop an inventory of your current site's existing pages and posts. Even if you've decided you want to "start from scratch" and create entirely new content, it's not as simple as walking away from those existing pages and hoping for the best. In order to ensure your users aren't confronted by a slew of broken links and empty pages, you'll need to deal with that old content directly via redirects.

For both of these steps to happen, you'll have to first perform a manual crawl of your site and export the results to a spreadsheet. There are a number of tools available that can perform this work for you, but the most commonly recommended one is [Screaming Frog](). This crawl will pull out the data which will eventually be the basis for the redirect file you'll be generating and uploading to your new site. After you've organized the data by file type and/or extension, you'll be left with an account of all the unique pages and posts on your site–something that'll come in handy repeatedly over the course of the redesign and migration process.

Identifying indexation issues

Once you've performed the manual crawl of your site you can start working on identifying indexation issues. There are several different methods you can employ to determine whether your site is experiencing issues. One option to explore involves executing a site:search in Google to identify which pages on your domain Google has indexed. This is done by typing "site:" followed by your website domain in the Google search field in your browser. This query directs Google to pull search results for your site only. If Google has indexed a significantly lower number of pages than was included on your manual crawl, it's an indication that Google is having trouble accessing your website for some reason.

On the other hand, if you find that Google has indexed significantly more pages than your site actually contains, you may have a duplicate content problem on your hands. This can be a huge issue because if Google interprets your duplicate content as an intentional attempt to game the system for SEO ranking, they will penalize your site. Work with your SEO specialist and development partner to determine the cause of and solution for any potential indexing issues you may have encountered.

Developing an inventory of your site's existing content

The list that you pulled during the manual crawl can serve as the inventory of your site's existing content, however, you'll need to follow a few more steps to make it truly useful. First and foremost is a content audit. Performing a content audit will help you make strategic, data-driven decisions about what should stay and and what should go when your site is migrated.

There are a multitude of factors that go into making smart content audit decisions, but by using Google Analytics, backlink checking tools, and qualitative review you can get a pretty informed start. Consider asking yourself the following questions to kickoff the process:

- Is this a popular page on my website?
- Is it a page that inbounds a lot of users to my website?
- Are other websites, especially well-respected websites with high authority, linking to this page?
- Is the content on the page accurate and relevant?

Additionally, Google Search Console (formerly Google Webmaster Tools) can provide highly useful information about your existing website that can help guide your content strategy when performing a content audit. This includes which search terms your website displayed for in search results (impressions), the average position your pages displayed in search results, and the click through rate and number of clicks for certain terms and pages. If you want to use this information to optimize your content on your new website, you will need to sync Google Search Console to your website's Google Analytics.

Creating a functional sitemap

Now that you've completed a content audit and pulled a variety of SEO data from your site, you'll need to start organizing it all in one place. A functional sitemap spreadsheet includes information that will help your SEO specialist, developer, and copywriter complete the content migration. The final document is typically built in stages throughout the redesign process.

Functional sitemaps may vary depending on the type of project, but they commonly include the following information for each page that will be included on your new site:

- **Page ID** - Unique identifier for each page, which also illustrates menu structure
- **Page Name** - Name of the page for the WordPress Admin and menus
- **New URL** - New URL for the page
- **Old URL** - Existing page URL
- **Wireframe Designation** - Which page layout will be applied to this page
- **Primary Keyword** - Designated primary keyword that the page content will be optimized for
- **Supporting Keywords** - Additional related words that will support the primary keyword and provide context for the topic, including latent semantic indexing keywords and synonyms
- **Notes to the Developer** - Includes any relevant information for the developer such as iFrame code or references to other links or functionality that should be on the page
- **Notes to the Writer** - Includes any relevant notes to the copywriter
- **Meta Title** - The final meta title for the page as written and optimized by the copywriter/SEO specialist
- **Meta Description** - The final meta description for the page as written and optimized by the copywriter/SEO specialist
- **Rel=Canonical link** - Indicates what, if any, other page should be attributed as the canonical for the page's content and lists that page's URL
- **No Index?** - Indicates if the page's URL should be set as meta no-index so that the search engine does not include it in the index

Dealing with redirects

Once you've audited your content and finalized the list of the pages that your new site will contain, you can start dealing with redirects. Redirects are a critical component of maintaining your SEO and web traffic. The redirect points both human users and spiders to the correct location of a page when it moves. Not implementing the redirect will cause Google to return a 404 response code when it goes to recrawl a previously crawled and indexed page, causing both user experience and bot problems.

A handful of 404s on your site for pages that you actually want to disappear isn't a problem. After returning a 404 a few times, Googlebot will eventually understand that the page was intentionally dropped and they'll remove it from their index. But if, after launch, almost all of the pages on your site result in 404 errors for several weeks, that could harm your domain authority and result in a significant drop in organic ranking over an extended period of time. In addition to bot problems, 404s also create user experience problems. Any person that might have the old page bookmarked on their browser or Pinterest board will experience this 404 error. When a redirect is implemented, both the bot and the user are automatically navigated to the new URL.

The "New URL" and "Old URL" columns in your sitemap spreadsheet comprise the redirect file for the site. Simply copy/pasting them to a fresh spreadsheet without the other sitemap information will generate a file that can be uploaded to a redirect plugin implemented on your Wordpress website. If your site has so many pages it's not feasible to map every single one, review your top 50 visited pages in Google Analytics and make sure you redirect those or work with your developer to generate rewrite rules.

Tip: Don't redirect everything to the homepage!

Mapping redirects can be tedious, but it's important not to shortcut it and simply redirect everything to the homepage. Because redirects provide a relatively seamless experience, it can be disorienting and confusing for a user to get redirected to a page they weren't expecting. For example, if someone clicks on a link to a specific product and is instead sent to the homepage, they'll be much more likely to click the back button or even go to a competitor's website to find what they're looking for instead. On the search engine side, bulk redirects to the homepage can signal spam and Google might flag your site.
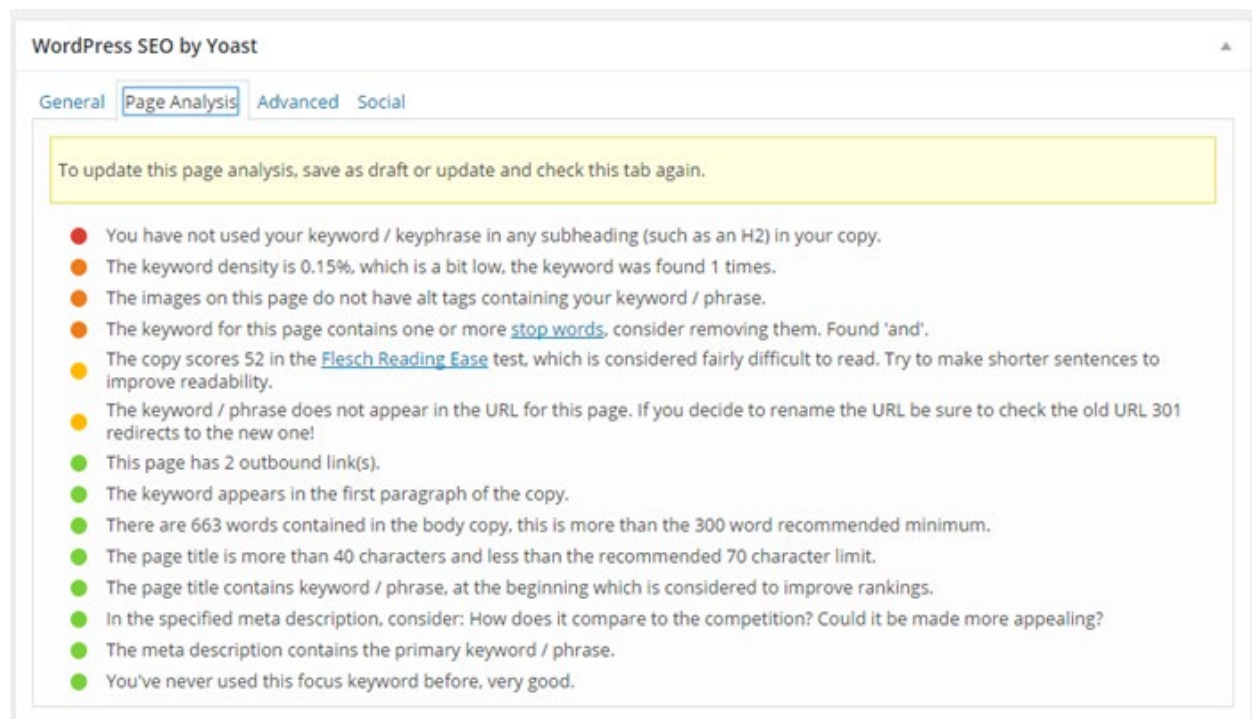
Step Two: Migrating Content to Your New Site

Now that you've done the necessary legwork to prepare for your migration or site redesign, it's time to get your content into your CMS. You can either manually transfer the content by creating each new page and post, copy/pasting and formatting the text, and uploading and adding your images, or, you can work with your developer to execute a bulk content import. If you choose to go with the bulk import option, you'll likely still want to manually review each page afterward to verify everything looks right.

Implementing meta content and setting directives

In addition to transferring page content, you'll also need to update and implement your pages' meta content (e.g., description and title) and URL directives (e.g., meta no-index, canonical links). SEO Yoast is a highly recommended and commonly used SEO plugin that makes it easy to write custom meta titles and descriptions, and even understand how well optimized those pages are based on a "focus" keyword of your choice.

Yoast also makes it easy to set directives for the page, which are special instructions designed to provide search engines with information about how you'd like certain pages to be treated. For example, it's a good policy to set the meta no-index tag for your website's privacy policy page, because you don't want that page displaying in search results and vying for position with other, more important pages on your site.

WordPress SEO by Yoast

General **Page Analysis** Advanced Social

> To update this page analysis, save as draft or update and check this tab again.

- 🔴 You have not used your keyword / keyphrase in any subheading (such as an H2) in your copy.
- 🟠 The keyword density is 0.15%, which is a bit low, the keyword was found 1 times.
- 🟠 The images on this page do not have alt tags containing your keyword / phrase.
- 🟠 The keyword for this page contains one or more stop words, consider removing them. Found 'and'.
- 🟡 The copy scores 52 in the Flesch Reading Ease test, which is considered fairly difficult to read. Try to make shorter sentences to improve readability.
- 🟡 The keyword / phrase does not appear in the URL for this page. If you decide to rename the URL be sure to check the old URL 301 redirects to the new one!
- 🟢 This page has 2 outbound link(s).
- 🟢 The keyword appears in the first paragraph of the copy.
- 🟢 There are 663 words contained in the body copy, this is more than the 300 word recommended minimum.
- 🟢 The page title is more than 40 characters and less than the recommended 70 character limit.
- 🟢 The page title contains keyword / phrase, at the beginning which is considered to improve rankings.
- 🟢 In the specified meta description, consider: How does it compare to the competition? Could it be made more appealing?
- 🟢 The meta description contains the primary keyword / phrase.
- 🟢 You've never used this focus keyword before, very good.

Optimizing images

One important, but often overlooked, step in effectively migrating your content is image optimization. Images can provide important context to your content, improve your SEO, and serve as an essential element in your redesign, but if done incorrectly they can also weigh down your site. Large image files can bloat the size of the page and slow down load time, so it's important to have your designer or developer review your images to make sure they're properly sized, compressed, and uploaded as the right file type.

The only way Google knows what an image is is by reading text associated with it. Your images can either help improve relevancy signals to Google, or they can just take up bandwidth. Optimizing images for search engines also optimizes for accessibility, since visually impaired website users rely on text cues to be able to "see" images on a page.

Some image optimization practices that will improve your SEO include:

- Writing appropriate image alt. text for each image. This is easily done in the Wordpress Media library or within the img.tag itself by keying in the description at the "alt=" attribute.

- Using a descriptive and easily readable file name for your images.

- Including a keyword optimized caption when appropriate.

- Ensuring images are in <img> html tags on your html/content pages and include height= and width= attributes in the tag (this helps the browser identify the necessary space for the image before actually loading the it, which can facilitate a faster "doc complete" time).
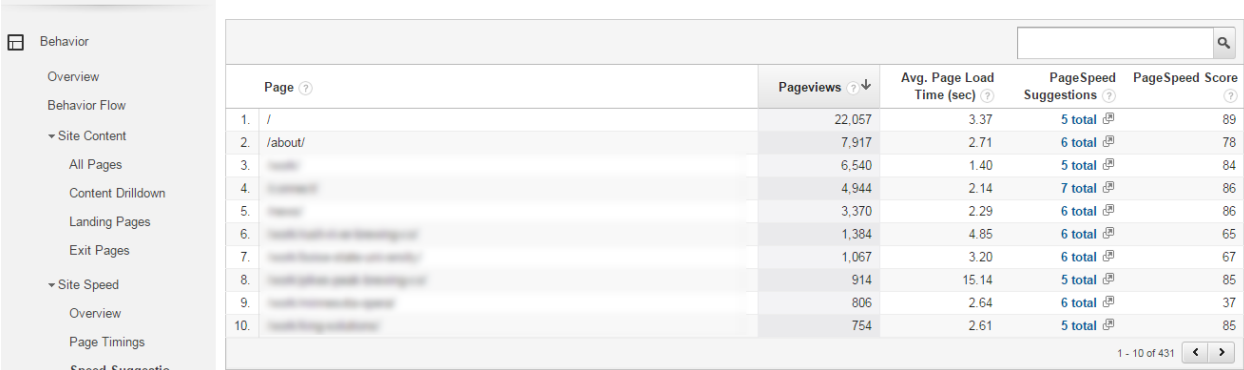
Step Three: Addressing Technical On-Page SEO Factors and Post-Launch Details

Once you've migrated your content, there are a number of other factors you'll need to address that are essential to maintaining your SEO, making sure your site is functioning properly, and improving user experience. While some of these can only be done after the site has already gone live, they shouldn't be overlooked.

Testing and improving page speed

Another important SEO metric to take into consideration for your site redesign is page speed. Google uses page speed as a ranking factor in large part because it's so closely tied to user experience. Faster pages will rank higher in the search results because Google knows there's a better chance a user will be able to access that content successfully.

Generally speaking, the goal when migrating your site is to aim for a page load time of three seconds or less. You can view your current page speed in Google Analytics at Behavior > Site Speed > Speed Suggestions (shown below).

	Page ⑦	Pageviews ⑦ ↓	Avg. Page Load Time (sec) ⑦	PageSpeed Suggestions ⑦	PageSpeed Score ⑦
1.	/	22,057	3.37	5 total	89
2.	/about/	7,917	2.71	6 total	78
3.		6,540	1.40	5 total	84
4.		4,944	2.14	7 total	86
5.		3,370	2.29	6 total	86
6.		1,384	4.85	6 total	65
7.		1,067	3.20	6 total	67
8.		914	15.14	5 total	85
9.		806	2.64	6 total	37
10.		754	2.61	5 total	85

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Behavior
Overview
Behavior Flow
▾ Site Content
All Pages
Content Drilldown
Landing Pages
Exit Pages
▾ Site Speed
Overview
Page Timings
Speed Suggestio

You can also use free online pagespeed tools to run manual tests and get more information about what may be impacting your page speed. We suggest Sucuri Load Time Tester, Pingdom, or Web Page Test. To get an accurate measurement, make sure to do the page speed testing once content has been migrated (including images) and on the installation of your website on your chosen host as opposed to temporary staging or testing environments on local or production servers.
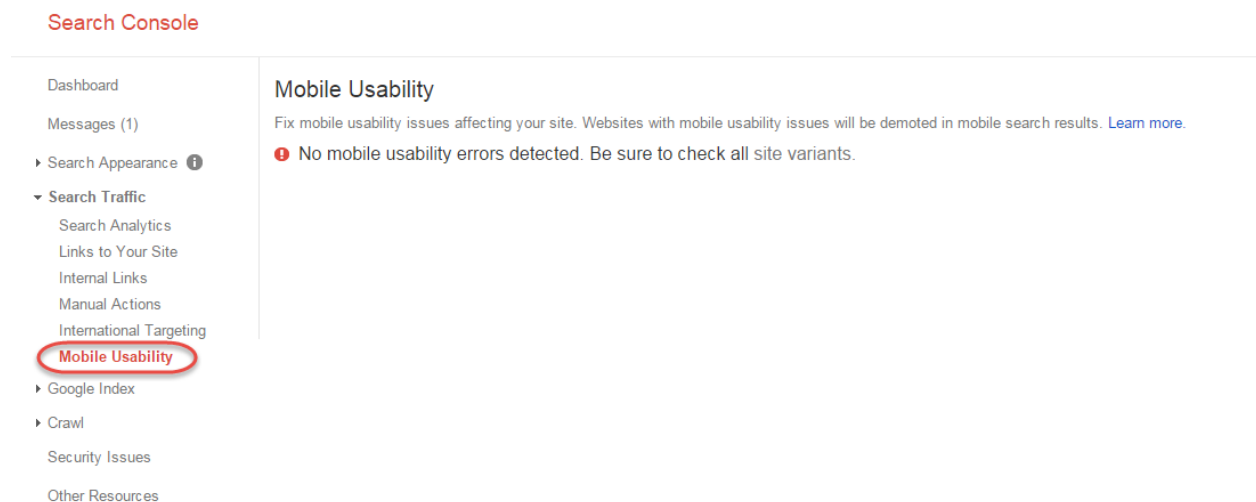
Making your site mobile-friendly

Since Google announced major changes to how it ranks websites earlier this year, having a mobile friendly or responsive website is now one of the most critical factors in maintaining your SEO–and might be the primary reason you're embarking on a site redesign in the first place.

All websites need to either be responsive or have a separate mobile website domain that is optimized for displaying correctly on mobile devices, or they will be actively penalized by Google. Though you should have already addressed this early on in the design process, you'll also need to make sure that your website's mobile friendly design, once implemented, meets Google's criteria.

For existing sites or sites with Google Search Console/Webmaster Tools installed, this information can be obtained via the Search Traffic > Mobile Usability report (shown below).
You may also access Google's "mobile friendly" test to run manually on your page URLs by going to https://www.google.com/webmasters/tools/mobile-friendly/.

Search Console

Dashboard	**Mobile Usability**
Messages (1)	Fix mobile usability issues affecting your site. Websites with mobile usability issues will be demoted in mobile search results. Learn more.
▸ Search Appearance ⓘ	❶ No mobile usability errors detected. Be sure to check all site variants.
▾ **Search Traffic**	
Search Analytics	
Links to Your Site	
Internal Links	
Manual Actions	
International Targeting	
Mobile Usability	
▸ Google Index	
▸ Crawl	
Security Issues	
Other Resources	

Checking your XML sitemap

The primary purpose of your site's XML sitemap is to provide a link inventory to spiders to help the browser locate content on your site. For this reason, it's important to ensure that:

- Your website has an xml sitemap (or sitemaps)

- The links listed on your sitemap(s) don't include duplicate content.

The SEO Yoast plugin provides a convenient way to create and manage XML sitemaps. To verify if your site has an XML sitemap, add "/sitemap.xml" after your website's domain (this is the most common sitemap extension, though variations do exist.)
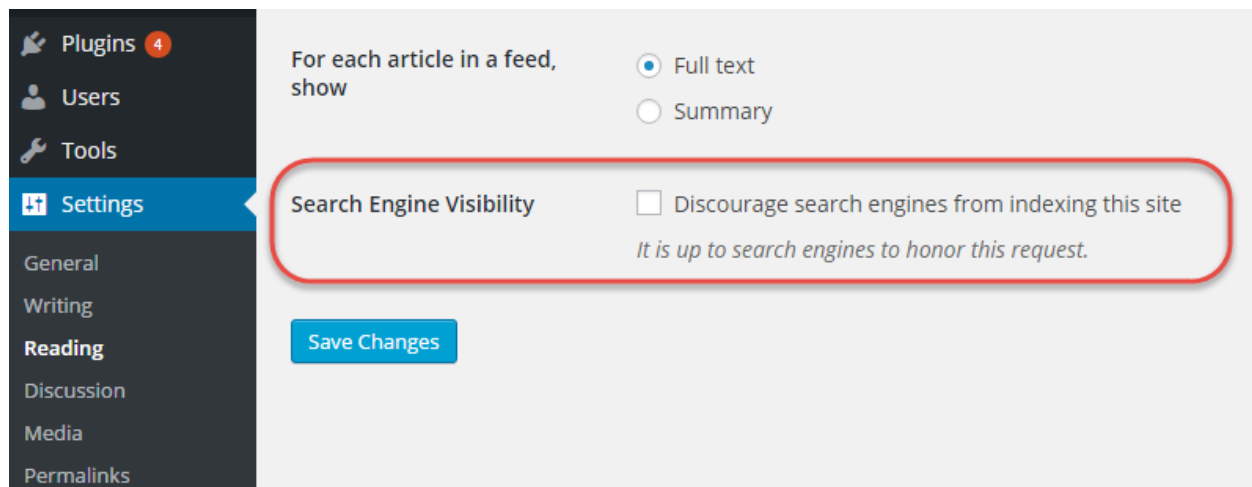
You can generate any number of XML sitemaps based on the taxonomy used on the site. For example, if your website has a blog, the posts are likely sorted into categories. Make sure that your XML sitemap files do no include both a "categories" sitemap and a "posts" sitemap, because the exact same blog posts will be captured on both sitemaps but at different URLs and will result in duplicate content. Ensure your pages and posts only live in one place within your XML sitemap framework.

While you can migrate and launch your site without manually submitting your XML sitemap to the search engines, submitting your sitemap can be a good way to get Google to come back and crawl your site earlier. For Google, sitemaps are submitted in the Search Console, Crawl > Sitemaps. Use the Add/Test Sitemap button in the upper right corner (shown below).

Ensuring your site isn't being blocked and links are working correctly

It is important to note that Wordpress has a "Search Engine Visibility" checkbox to block search engines from accessing the site. This is typically implemented during development and website testing to ensure that test content isn't accidentally crawled and indexed. It's important to make sure this checkbox is deselected once the site is officially launched!

Tip: Most websites have a robots.txt file. This is viewable by appending "/robots.txt" to the end of your domain. This file suggests that spiders avoid certain parts of your website that you've designated. However, because of the availability of meta-directives (developed after the robots exclusion protocol was created) and because robots.txt is an optional protocol, many people choose to not use robots.txt for its intended purpose.

If that is the case for your website, it's still important to ensure that it's not accidentally blocking a reputable spider, like Googlebot, from crawling your site. To determine if your site is being blocked by robots.txt you can view the file (note which folders are listed after the "Disallow" directive) or check the robots.txt error report in Google Search Console. One tip-off that robots.txt may be blocking your site is if none of your pages show up in the search results.

Finally, you should always perform a post launch broken link check. It's not uncommon for a move from a production or staging environment to the live environment to break a few links. Online Broken Link Checker is a great free tool that can easily identify broken links that need to be fixed.

Conclusion

Migrating content to a new website without damaging your SEO or user experience can seem like an overwhelming process, but if you follow the steps outlined above and work with your SEO specialist and developer along the way, you'll be able to launch your site on solid footing. It's important to remember, however, that launching your site is only the first step. Preserving your SEO ranking and improving your site for the long-term requires regular, ongoing review and maintenance.

A quality CMS like Wordpress makes it incredibly easy to manage your SEO and content, often without requiring help from a developer. If you'd like more information about the other benefits of working with WordPress or want to learn more about any of the topics covered in this paper, contact us at hello@ westwerk.com.

Westwerk is a Minneapolis-based agency
that specializes in digital solutions
through inspired design and expert
development. Design is our passion,
WordPress development is our expertise,
and these qualities combined with sound
strategy and branding services are
what set us apart within the industry.

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