



SEO: WHEN BAND-AIDS WON'T WORK

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How do you know when your website needs a redevelopment to get the best SEO results? The answer is simple: You've tried everything and your potential customers still can't find your website. You've worked hard to adjust your content and have incorporated SEO best practices and you are still not seeing the results that you're looking for. This means that you may have structural barriers to SEO that band-aids won't fix. Structural barriers can be defined as your current site architecture, your Content Management System, or the technology used to build your site.

Although a redevelopment can often be time-consuming, if your website is not findable and functioning as a business generating tool, you may be losing potential customers.

SEO rules have changed throughout the years and placing a few key words on key pages will not yield the results of the past. Search engines soon realized the needs of their users and began the process of perfecting their algorithms (still in process). Now search results are based on content relevancy, popularity and proper structure. Google can assess how relevant your content is to a user's search based on things in your control (popular and interesting content, page titles, user-defined key terms, user-friendly URLs, h1-h3 tags, etc.), things out of your control like domain age, and things that can be accomplished through redevelopment such as an up-to-date Content Management System that allows you to create friendly URL's that are easy for Google to see therefore making your page more visible.

The good news is that SEO rules are easy to accomplish during a redevelopment and they are compatible with good usability rules. Making your site user friendly will make both users and search engines happy!

Unfortunately, SEO is too often irresponsibly applied to websites that are so in need of a redevelopment that no quick fixes will help. There is no switch that an SEO specialist can flip to magically "optimize" an existing website if the website has major barriers to SEO best practices. A site redevelopment may often be time consuming but if SEO is applied properly, your website can function better as a powerful business and lead generating tool. Often, companies will hire an SEO firm to "optimize" their website rather than go through a redevelopment. However, these companies are only able to make content change recommendations and

some minor structural changes to optimize the website. Unfortunately, they are all too often limited in making major structural changes that would increase the chances of findability and customer conversion. Thus, these efforts would result in little new business.

Here are some examples of barriers to search even if your content and some structural elements have been optimized:

1. The website is built in Flash
2. The website is built in Frames
3. The website has no point of conversion.
4. The website is mostly images (alt tags do not carry that much SEO weight)
5. The website is more than 3 years old

1. Flash: To a lot of viewers, Flash is visually appealing. The problem is that search engines still can't see it. Despite recent partnerships between Adobe and Google to read textual content and URLs, most Flash videos still don't have visible content for search engine spiders to crawl. For now, Flash is better utilized on a website as a complementary element.

2. Frames: If your website is built in frames, it has obviously been a while since it has been updated. Frames are a barrier to SEO.

3. Not User Friendly: Although this is not a major SEO issue, it's a usability issue. If your potential customers happen to find your website and it's not user friendly, they will bounce back off before you know it. If you're viewing your analytics and see an 80% bounce rate, that means that a lot of users are leaving your website immediately due to its structure. For example, if you have 10,000 visitors per month but an 80% bounce rate, that's 8,000 potential customers you've lost!

4. No Conversions: Once again, this isn't an SEO issue but relates to general structure. If your potential customers are able to find your website, what are they going to do? If you have no point of conversion such as a store, forms or some other action, how are your potential customers supposed to use your website? Most likely, they will use your website as a means to gather research and buy from your competitor because they have made it easy for them to do so.

5. Images: If your website is all images, Google can't see content to index it. Like Flash content, images are a barrier to search. Even if you see text, if that text is embedded in an image, Google will only be able to read the alt tags, assuming alt tags are present. In addition, images can often create longer downloading time making it difficult for users with a slower internet connection to view the content on that page.

6. Your website is old: Like dog years, tech years are accelerated. In fact, the new technology that you've recently invested in will probably be improved upon next year. Thus, the technology used to build your website has probably been updated or outdated within the past few years. Often, older technology, such as Frames, is not considered by search engines when they improve their algorithms.

You may be saying, "duh!" However, many of your colleagues are not. For example, six months prior to this article, I was reviewing a website built in frames with all text embedded in images. When I argued that the website lacked content, I was met with a request to simply add white text to the white background. Of course, I added that would probably not be the best approach. As most businesses specialize in the reason they started their businesses to begin with, intimate knowledge of the inner workings of websites may not be their forte and that's ok. It's ok if you still like your 2 minute Flash splash page! It can be incorporated into a site redesign as a play option video with captioning!

In conclusion, SEO and good usability are elements necessary for your website to succeed as a business tool. Once you've realized that you may end up spending more over a longer period to band-aid your website than to just invest in a redevelopment, you are on the right track. Although SEO in a redevelopment is necessary, it's not the only step that you should take. While redeveloping your website with search in mind, also keep your eye on the prize- the conversion that you would like to accomplish. Keeping these goals in mind will keep you and your web development vendor on task to make it easy for your potential customers to convert after they find your website.

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