

# *Ultimate Guide to Merging Websites Together for SEO*



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There are certain scenarios that can lead you to a site migration. Maybe you've purchased a new website or want to rebrand your company. Either way, now you're faced with the concerns of losing website traffic if you merge the sites, or if you do it right, gaining traffic.

Over the years, the risk for traffic and ranking loss when merging sites has decreased, creating the potential for a significant traffic boost from the SEO benefits. Consolidating your websites is simpler than maintaining multiple sites. Not to mention, the two may compete with each other for ranking unless they have very distinct business lines and keywords. Multiple sites also can confuse customers because of inconsistent branding.



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Merging sites allows you to reap the SEO benefits while you funnel the link juice and consolidate promotional efforts for consistent branding. Although many SEOs are uncomfortable with moving sites because there's no way to know 100% in advance the potential gains or losses that will occur, in many cases, the rewards are worth the risk.

Moving a site is fairly straight forward with 301 redirects to map all of the original site's URLs to the new site. Then, it's a waiting game to see how Google crawls your URLs.

## Check Both Domains for Penalties

Before moving domains, check both sites for algorithm or manual penalties that may be passed from one domain to another through the 301 redirects. For example, if you're moving Site A to Site B, but Site A has penalties for unnatural links, Site B may end up undervalued. All penalties must be removed before merging the sites.

Take NutsOnline.com as an example, which moved to Nuts.com for rebranding purposes. Prior to the move, they took the right steps and had 98 percent of their current pages indexed. Within 2 weeks of the initial move, nearly all of the impressions and queries for NutsOnline.com had vanished, while those for Nuts.com increased.

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Everything was going smoothly, until 2 weeks after the merger the organic traffic for Nuts.com dropped by 70 percent and rankings began to fluctuate. During the 3<sup>rd</sup> week, the site began to recover and regained nearly half of the lost traffic, but a week later, traffic began to drop again. Top ranking keywords were no longer performing. In the end, they were hit by a penalty and lost thousands of dollars in revenue every day.

The Guardian successfully moved their site Guardian.co.uk site to Guardian.com to serve a wider audience. While there was a slight decrease in traffic at first, six months later the website reported record breaking traffic after using 301 HTTP status codes.

The plunder of the merger resulted from a former penalty on Nuts.com that had already been lifted, but the damage had been done. Google didn't view or rank the new site the same as it had the old, weakening the domain strength.

Just because a site had a penalty doesn't mean merging is out of the question. Take MOZ as an example. A couple of years ago, MOZ had the WMPU.org site that has been hit by Penguin. They worked hard to recover from the penalties, but eventually decided to merge the site with its sister site WPMU DEV. They expected to suffer a traffic hit due to the link dilution from the 301s, but they actually ended up with a 40 percent increase in organic visits.

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Make sure to run a complete penalty history on both sites before merging so you don't find yourself fighting an uphill battle after you've already put in the heavy lifting.

## Merging Websites

After running a history on the sites, the migrations process itself is pretty cut and dry. I am not going to share our company's entire migration checklist here, but I will give a few notes. To move sites, the steps include:

1. Create a site map of the old site.
2. Create content and information for the new domain (title, meta, design, etc.).
3. Set up the new domain and make it live.
4. Register and verify both the old and new domains in [Google Webmaster Tools](#).
5. Establish a custom 404 page for the old domain to suggest visitors head to the new domain.
6. Test the redirects of the old domain to the new domain.
7. 301 redirect the old domain to the new domain.
8. Submit your old site map to Google and Bing to notify the search engines of the change for indexing.
9. Complete change of address form in Google Webmaster Tools.
10. Create and submit a new site map to search engines.
11. Check for errors and monitor the new site.
12. Decide which content you are migrating and which content you are just redirecting.
13. Etc...

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## Merging Content to a New Site

Move all of the URLs for the content from the old site to the new site because if you leave the old content live on the original site, you're facing duplicate content and a penalty is looming in your future. Also, make sure no content is missing or it may not arrive to the new site when the merger is launched. Leaving pieces of the puzzle behind is a sure way to lose traffic.

Pull all content information with an online tool, such as Screaming Frog, to help you sort and organize the content you're moving. You may decide to exclude some pages from the original site that aren't relevant or hold a strong value. When moving the content, your main goal is to export only the top pages, like those with inbound links because they will hold the most link juice. All unique and authoritative pages will be redirected with 301s to pass the link equity. Do not use 302 links because that only signals a temporary move.

The New York Times made this mistake with their former site International Herald Tribune. Although they have the support of some of the most experienced SEOs, they decided to take the quick fix with 302 redirects. This caused serious SEO implications and readers to be directed to 404 errors.

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## Redirecting URLs with 301

With Matts Cutts reporting 301 redirects holding as much value as direct links, about 90-99 percent of link juice should pass over to the new site. 301 redirects will signal Google that a site has moved permanently, while a 302 redirect only temporarily redirects visitors and Google bots, leaving your link juice behind.

You can do this by either creating 301 redirects with the .htaccess file or with the PHP method. For minimal loss of link juice, redirect to relevant pages. The more relevant your page, the more link juice will transfer.

In 2013, 9<sup>th</sup> Sphere and Convergency went through rebranding to combine the two sites under the new 9<sup>th</sup>CO brand. There were concerns about loss of revenue, negative ranking, loss of link equity, and the potential for Google penalty. But, after the merger, they noticed the new site began to rank well within a few weeks and had a massive increase in traffic. The original domain authority passed to the new site, while the original site began to disappear from search results. While Google may not have caught the change right away, website visitors were taken to the correct site because of the 301 redirects.

## Follow Up

After redirecting URLs the job still isn't done. You need to submit new XML sitemaps and submit a change of address with Google and Bing.

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Monitor the merger with manual site spot-checks, data analysis, and a thorough site crawl. Don't rely on humans alone to check for errors. Use Google Analytics, Google Webmaster Tools, Bing Webmaster Tools, and a Website crawler to make mistakes easier to catch. If there's an issue, jump on it and fix it immediately.

## Don't Underestimate the Risks

If done correctly, the risks are minimal but the payoff is huge. The most common cause for migration and website merger failure is human error by someone without a full range of knowledge to plan and execute the transition. Don't handle the merger alone. Hire a migration team to take on the task to reduce the risk for any traffic loss for a seamless transition. Also, as one final point, when merging the sites together make sure you don't transfer over any content that is thin content, poor quality or just not worth the effort. When it comes down to merging websites, you want to bring the best of both worlds together into one site. Anything that was low quality, you can 404 the page or simply redirect the URL to a corresponding page on the new site, instead of bringing the content over.

- "When 2 Become 1: How Merging Two Domains Made us an SEO Killing" [Moz.com](#)
- "4 Reasons why Having Multiple Websites is Killing Your Business" [HubSpot](#)
- "How to Completely Ruin (or Save) Your Website with Redirects" [Moz.com](#)