

How to Switch Hosting Providers During Your Search Engine Campaign

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Search engine placement is a science and, like any scientific project a proper search engine campaign requires a controlled environment. Even in the best of circumstances an SEO has a myriad of variables to consider that may have a positive or negative effect on a search engine marketing campaign. For accurate research to take place, a controlled environment must be entirely free of any web site instability. A common cause of instability is the down-time that arises when a web site is inappropriately transferred to a new Web Hosting Provider (WHP).

Has your site ever been unavailable to the Internet because you were switching web hosting providers? This type of instability is entirely unnecessary and can be prevented with some basic technical expertise.

If you have had an online presence for a few years now you may have dealt with more than one hosting company as your web hosting needs grew or you simply decided to switch providers. With the number of hosting providers growing in leaps and bounds (host switching seems to be happening more and more as site owners actually change on a bi-annual basis while searching for the ultimate combination of service and price). Since many of these web sites may be in the midst of a search engine campaign it becomes very important to avoid down-time as a web site is transferred from server to server.

What NOT to do...

When less technical small businesses switch to a different WHP/ISP (Web Hosting Provider/Internet Service Provider) it is common to simply pay for a new account elsewhere, immediately shut-down the old hosting account, 'move' the company domain and once the domain is moved, upload a copy of their site and continue operations. The problem with this method is that while the domain is being switched to reflect the new hosting provider, the web site will not be available. Even once the domain is switched the problem continues because the web site has yet to be uploaded to the new hosting provider.

FACT: Domains often take between 12 and 24hrs to switch and problems can arise when installing a new web site, a site owner may experience up to 3 days of down-time if a switch is done in this manner. Should a search engine spider visit your site within this time you will likely lose any positive search engine placements you had previously achieved.

How to do it RIGHT...

Switching hosting providers can appear completely seamless to your web site visitors and search engines if it is done properly. If you deem it necessary to switch hosting providers it is important that you upload and test your web site on the new hosting company BEFORE formally initiating the change over. Any hosting provider that is worth 2 cents will provide you with a temporary access URL (or some option) to ftp into and test your web site. Testing is especially important if your site utilizes specific programming which may not be enabled or installed on the hosting package you purchased.

Once your new hosting account is completely configured (along with email setup and configuration) it is now possible to begin the transfer of your domain to its new home. During the transfer, parts of the world will still be pointing to your old host web site while the new domain settings are propagated across the Internet, while other areas will see the site at its new location. As long as the content is exactly the same at both web locations the switch will be seamless and your search engine listings will be left intact. In other words, during a transfer you must keep both web sites operating at peak efficiency (if possible).

The above instructions will need various levels of customization depending on the technology utilized within your web site. A database-driven site for example; if you were to follow the directions above you would find that you now have two separate databases being utilized since two different web sites are being run at once. This is not an ideal situation since inventory or affiliate click-throughs would be recorded on one system and not in the other. In such a case, it would be important to setup an S-Tunnel or secure (encrypted) synchronization link between the two databases so that they would update each other 'as one'. This way while the new domain information is being propagated you will not lose any important information if one database were to receive new data. This is a complicated process and requires the experience of a professional server administrator. StepForth's technical advisor, Thomas Bourree of itMeta.com had this to say about advanced server transfers:

"Moving from one hosting provider to another can end up being a company's worst nightmare if it isn't handled professionally. There are a lot of things to consider, especially when dealing with database powered websites, which if handled improperly can cause data loss during the switch. For complex systems it's crucial that you contract the services of a good administration company to handle your switch to ensure it goes as smoothly as possible."

In short, server down-time during a hosting transfer is not a situation that any companies need experience. Taking basic precautions during a server switch will maintain the necessary stability in your search engine marketing campaign as well as providing a stable online presence for your repeat traffic.