



Goin' Live

[Web Smart Newsletter](#) by Eric Holter, December 2006

Goin' Live

Last month we reviewed the new Newfangled website which had been in the works for over a year. Not all websites take that long to build-- in fact we've launched significant sites in a little less than a month (not all websites are built that fast). However long one works on a website, there comes the day when we "send the site live." It's a day of great anticipation and anxiety. Getting everything together, making last minute changes, testing everything for the umpteenth time, dealing with technical details, and finally pulling the trigger can be a momentous event.

This month's newsletter serves as a preparatory document for going live with a new site. Dotting all the I's and crossing all the T's before a site launch will make for a celebratory experience rather than a potentially fearful one.

The website "go live" date

Every website development project starts off with a target launch date. Rarely do sites actually go live by these preliminary dates. The culprit? Content. One of the benefits of Newfangled's approach to web development is that we include our [NewfangledCMS](#) for every project. Our technology, along with our [whitescreening process](#), enables our clients to enter content into their sites throughout the design and development stages. Nevertheless, if I were to identify one major contributor to launch dates slipping, it would be the underestimation of the time required for content creation, editing, and approval.

We've written a couple newsletters in the past ([Words Make the Web Work](#) and [Unleashing the Power of Words](#)) about writing for the web, but anyway you slice it, it's still hard work. And the more parties involved in reviewing, editing, and approving content, the longer it will take. A big warning sign for a site that's going to take longer than planned is hearing things like "the content will be adapted from existing content," from a client. Even when content is re-purposed from other sources, it will still need editing and adjustment to flow properly in the context of a website. This routinely takes longer than planned.

Those websites that do go live by their intended launch dates are characterized by project teams that proactively pour themselves into content development before and during the project. This, above any other factor, determines the final launch date of a new website.

New site or redesign?

There are different challenges and considerations for launching a brand new site versus launching a redesigned site. I'll point out the "go live" differences for new sites versus redesigns throughout this newsletter. As far as content development goes though, it's obviously a little easier for redesigns since not all the content is new. But there are other factors besides content that need to be carefully considered as a site's launch date approaches. Among these are images and links.

Checking Internal Images and Links

Images and internal links

As already mentioned a content management system like ours allows non-technical website content creators to add content directly into a site without coding. This process is pretty straightforward, especially when dealing with text. But unlike off-line content, web content commonly consists of images, links and other documents such as PDFs, Word, and Excel files. Under the hood, these elements require file references that tell a web page where the picture, file or link lives. When a site is in development, or when content is being entered from an existing website, these kinds of elements often need to have their file names and/or locations adjusted for the new site. If such details are

overlooked, when the site goes live, broken images and broken links can occur. This actually happens quite often, especially in redesigns. That's because content entered from an original site, which contain images and file links, will still function--while the existing site is still live. But once the new site takes its place, the images and links that had been working during development and pre-launch testing no longer work because they're no longer in the same place.

Suddenly, a site launch celebration turns to a frantic effort of fixing broken images and links before too many people see them. For example, there are hundreds of pages on the new Newfangled site and I missed a case just like this. On the [whitescreening](#) page I had originally copied the content from the old page including an image of the whitescreen screen. When the site went live and the old site was archived, including that particular image, the image stopped displaying. I actually consider this one oversight--among so many pages and images--a real content entry success. Such instances are common and mistakes happen even when great diligence is applied. So, even after checking over a site thoroughly before launch, it's always necessary to check it again after launch.

This particular problem is less common when building a new site, however it can still happen. This usually results from images or links being referred to by using what is technically called an absolute URL rather than a relative URL. Don't be confused by the jargon. A URL (Uniform Resource Location) is simply the place where a file lives. For example, website images are often placed in a website "images" folder. So the URL of a particular jpeg might be "www.newfangled.com/images/myjpeg.jpeg." An absolute URL just means that under the hood, the reference to this file uses the complete URL including the website's domain (www.newfangled.com for this example). A relative URL, on the other hand, refers to a file or link without using the domain part--which typically is the right way to do it. But a problem can occur if an image or link uses an absolute URL during the development of the site. That's because the development site's URL has to be different from the final live site's URL--something like siteindevelopmet.site.com. If this complete URL is used to refer to images or links, the reverse problem occurs. When the site goes live and the images and pages now live under the final website address, the old development URL doesn't work, since the images and links are not there anymore. The new site will contain broken elements. Again, care when doing content entry and checking the site after launch are important to successful "go live" experiences.

Testing Website Forms

Testing forms and other data features

Some low level file reference issues also occur in site forms. Sometimes a web form, like a "contact us" page or newsletter sign up, is set to a temporary email address for testing. Usually settings like these are adjusted or automatically updated when a site goes live. But there is always room for human error or oversight. To be safe, always submit every website form before and after a site goes live to make sure that form content is making it to the final email address.

This can be a potentially major problem if not tested and confirmed after launch. Who wants to find out, a month after going live, that a website's contact form hasn't been working? What a waste! Keep in mind that while we at Newfangled do our best to check, double check, and triple check for bugs during development, we do occasionally miss one now and again. Compounding such (albeit rare) occurrences of human error is the problem that we cannot test the final functionality of a web form after a site goes live. That's because, in many cases, (especially when a form contains confidential information) we cannot include our testing email address in a live web form. Thus we cannot confirm that the form is delivering email to the right person. Only the person who receives these emails can confirm this. That means, if a site has lots of forms and multiple recipients for each form, there will need to be a coordinated effort of form testing during, and especially after, a site launch.

Forms aren't the only features that need careful review after a site goes live. Sites with lots of data, including user-submitted data like comments, blogs, e-commerce accounts, extranets, etc., will need to be carefully reviewed over the days and weeks following a new site launch. When developing such sites we are usually working with sample data. But sample data doesn't always reveal potential bugs or logical holes in a site's functionality. Remember in Jurassic Park when Jeff Goldblum's character, Dr. Ian Malcolm, was describing Chaos theory? He said, "life will find a way" to describe how given enough variables, even the best planned efforts will break down. Even the most well built sites will be vulnerable to unforeseen consequences and problems when real people interact with the live site.

Again, testing such complex sites can be tricky since real live data won't be there for testing until, well, it's there. And, again, sometimes the site's developers can't have direct access to live data (if it includes private information). So launching and testing a complex site that includes complex sets of data or user generated data needs extra special and longer term attention from the site's administrators.

Getting a New Website into Search Engines

Search engines, title tags and URLs

"Going live" with a new website can also affect search engine traffic. For brand new sites, every page will need to be indexed by the search engines. The only requirement for the site owner is patience. Sometimes significant patience. A brand new website with a brand new domain name can take upwards of six months to be indexed and included in search engine results. There is no way around this. Search engines have been forced, by the proliferation of spam content, to be very conservative about when they include new sites and new pages into their databases.

The launching of a site re-design, however, has many search engine factors to consider. But before mentioning these, there is one search engine facet of going live with any site, new or redesigned, that should be addressed before a launch - optimizing the site's title tags. We've covered what title tags are and how they work many times in the past. Suffice it to say, utilizing each web page's title tag is by far the easiest and most overlooked search engine optimization opportunity available. Watch our video [The Simple Secret of Search](#), or read our past newsletters ([Search Engine Optimization Strategy](#), [Who's Your Homepage?](#)) for more information about this. But in terms of site launch, in addition to editing and approving content, plan on giving thoughtful and strategic consideration to each page's title tag before going live so that when the search engines do index the new site, the optimized titles will be in place.

Website Domain Name Problems When Going Live

Website domains and Domain Name Servers (DNS)

Ah, the infamous website domain name. Domain names and the technical adjustments necessary to the DNS required for "going live" with a website can be very tricky. We wrote a lengthy newsletter called [Dealing with DNS](#) that explains what domain names and domain name servers are and how they work. As a site approaches its launch date, I would highly recommend reviewing that newsletter. In fact, I would suggest reviewing it at the beginning of a project since there can be significant issues preventing the modification or moving of domain names when going live. Overcoming these barriers can take days even sometimes even weeks. It's quite frustrating to work hard to get a site ready to go live only to find out at the last minute that there are problems with the domain name that prevent the site from launching. Believe me, it happens.

One of the technical aspects to launching a domain is making adjustments to the domain name records that point traffic to the new website. Making the change is actually very easy. Getting access to the domain name records can be very difficult. Also, misinformation, or simple human error in entering critical information can easily sabotage a website launch. Getting the web server administrator and the web site owner's technical resource in touch with each other is the best way to work out domain name issues. But sometimes, when a technical resource doesn't exist on the client's side, getting the right information is not so easy. So be prepared to give extra time for dealing with DNS well in advance of the launch date.

For site re-designs there are additional domain name questions that need to be answered. If the new site is going to change its domain name, or if there are multiple domain names that will all point to the same website, deciding how to set up the relationships between these domains is very important.

For example, if the domain name is changing to a brand new domain, the same issues noted above regarding search engine traffic for new sites apply. The old domain may have been enjoying significant search engine traffic, but by redesigning under a new domain this search traffic will stop until the new site gets indexed and included in the search engines, which could take months. Also, because search engines tend to favor older sites and older web pages (pages with history) the newer re-designed pages under the new domain may have lower ranking even after they get included. There are technical solutions to these problems. But changing domains requires critical decisions that will have a great impact on search engine traffic. Always discuss these issues with a project manager and settle on how domain name issues will work before the "go live" date arrives.

Administrative Details for Sending a Website Live

Administration

Going live with a website often involves a change in hosting providers. In our case we host almost all of the sites we develop. When a new

site goes live we begin hosting it on our servers. Newfangled, like almost all website hosting providers, requires a certain amount of administrative information to be in place before setting up a new site on our servers. Of course there are financial matters that need to be settled (everyone, after all, wants to get paid), but there are also important contact records that need to be in place. Websites are extremely vital systems that companies depended on 24x7x365. Yet every computer (including web servers) requires some amount of system level maintenance from time to time. Usually such maintenance does not affect the accessibility of website, but occasionally access has to be briefly turned off. We usually schedule this kind of maintenance for very low traffic times. And although such instances may only happen once or twice a year, because websites are globally accessible, what's low traffic for U.S. clients may be high traffic for European or Asian clients. So whenever server maintenance needs to be done, we send out announcements to all clients in advance of the downtime. After all, even if the downtime is just a few minutes late at night, it very well may be the very moment a prospect in Malaysia is trying to view the site!

Because of these matters, it's Newfangled's policy that before any site can go live on our servers, we must have client contact information on file. We have a client set up form we provide to gather the information we need at the beginning of each new project. Sometimes though, little details like paperwork fall through the cracks. Nevertheless, if we don't have this information on file we can't put a site live. So get those forms back and satisfy our voracious bureaucratic requirements so that after all the effort to get a site ready to go live, it isn't hindered by paperwork!

Lastly with regard to administrative details, once a site goes live, it's really considerate to inform the previous host that the site has been moved. Depending on DNS arrangements it's entirely possible for a re-designed site to launch without the previous host ever being informed. Aside from not getting billed from two parties for hosting, letting the other host know allows them to archive the old site and make room for new ones.

It's alive

Great effort has been spent developing and editing content. Links and images have been checked and rechecked. Content, forms and data have been tested on the live site. Page titles are perfect. A brilliant domain name strategy has been implemented. Nice job. The new site is live and right on time. Breathe a deep sigh of relief, take a gander at the finished product and enjoy.