

BROWN BEAR DIGITAL

Website Migration SEO Checklist

How to move a high-stakes website without losing what Google already trusts about it.

A site owner's guide | 2026 edition

By Bryan Passanisi, Founder, Brown Bear Digital

brownbear.digital

Contents

10 SECTIONS

01	The short answer The whole checklist in one page	3
02	Know your migration and your risk level What counts as a migration, and why high-stakes sites lose more	4
03	Benchmark everything first The before picture that proves what you had	5
04	The redirect map decides the outcome One-to-one 301s, tiered by priority	6
05	Staging QA before launch Prove parity before anyone flips a switch	7
06	Launch day and the 72-hour watchlist A six-step sequence, then checks by the hour	8
07	The first 90 days: recovery or emergency When to hold steady, and the diagnostic when you cannot	9
08	The printable launch checklist 12 checks across all four phases	10
09	Frequently asked questions Six questions site owners ask most	11
10	Next steps Scope, ownership, cost, about the author, and references	12

The short answer

01

A website migration is the highest-risk project in search marketing. One launch day can undo years of rankings. For a medical practice, a clinic, or any site Google holds to a higher standard, the fall is steeper and the climb back is slower. The fix is process, not luck: benchmark first, redirect everything that matters, then watch the first 72 hours closely.

The four moves that protect a migration:

1

Benchmark before anyone touches code.

The old site's data disappears when the old site does.

2

Build a one-to-one 301 redirect map.

Every old URL to its matching new page. Never everything to the homepage.

3

Prove parity on staging.

Crawl staging, diff it against the benchmark, and test every form.

4

Watch the first 72 hours by the clock.

Specific checks at specific hours, each with a normal and an emergency threshold.

WHAT AN INTACT CLUSTER IS WORTH

In a Brown Bear deep plane facelift content campaign, six interconnected pages grew a practice's organic traffic 520 percent, from 749 to 4,645 monthly visits, and lifted its Google AI Overview citations 10.5x between April 2025 and July 2026. That growth compounds only while the cluster stays intact. A migration that breaks its URLs or internal links resets the compounding clock.

Who this guide is for

Owners of any high-stakes website whose developer is pushing a redesign, a re-platform, or a new domain. Marketing leads steering a CMS change. And anyone who has already launched and watched organic traffic slide: the first 90 days section has a diagnostic.

Know your migration and your risk level

02

A migration is any change that alters your site's URLs, platform, content, or design at scale: a new domain, a re-platform, a redesign that changes every URL, even a template refresh that rewrites your headings. There is no such thing as changing a URL. You create a new page and abandon one Google already knows, and the redirect is the handoff document.

Migration type	Risk	Where to focus
Same domain, every URL kept	Lowest	→ Content parity and the staging QA stage
URLs changing, from a CMS move or a restructure	High	→ Every item in this checklist. The redirect map is your center of gravity.
Domain changing	Highest	→ Everything above, plus Google's change-of-address process. Expect the slowest recovery.

Why high-stakes sites have more to lose

Trust signals move at once

Google holds health and money pages to the highest standards. Bios, credential pages, reviews, galleries, and local signals are all at risk on the same day.

Standing is slow to rebuild

General sites lose traffic in a bad migration. High-stakes sites lose standing, and standing is slower to rebuild than traffic.

Third-party links break

Reviews, directories, and press shape how AI tools describe you. Break the URLs they link to and that layer erodes too.

WHAT THE STAKE LOOKS LIKE

Picture a two-surgeon practice in the top three for its main procedure plus its city, booking around 60 organic consultation requests a month. A botched migration knocks it to page two for eight weeks. At typical consult-to-surgery rates, that is a quarter of surgical bookings gone.

Benchmark everything first

03

You cannot prove a migration succeeded, or diagnose why it failed, without a before picture. Benchmark before the build starts, because the old site's data disappears when the old site does.

Export and archive	Why it matters
Search Console performance, queries and pages, full 16 months	→ Your traffic baseline for every comparison after launch
Analytics landing pages with conversions attached	→ Shows which pages earn business, not just sessions
Rankings for your money keywords in a rank tracker	→ What you spot-check at hours 48 to 72
A full crawl of the current site	→ Your URL inventory and your redirect map's left column
Your most-linked pages from a backlink tool	→ These URLs must redirect perfectly

The trust layer generalist checklists skip

- ◆ Screenshot your Google Business Profile and local signals, including which landing pages your listings point to.
- ◆ Inventory your structured data page by page.
- ◆ List every page carrying review widgets, provider bios, and credentials. The new build must carry them over intact.

Four actions before moving on:

- 1 Crawl the live site** and save the export as your URL inventory.
- 2 Export Search Console and analytics data** to files you own, off-platform.
- 3 Record current rankings** for the 20 to 50 keywords that drive business.
- 4 List your trust pages:** bios, credentials, reviews, galleries, and where your Business Profile points.

The redirect map decides the outcome

04

The single highest-leverage task in any migration is a one-to-one 301 redirect map: every old URL pointing to the new URL that best matches its content. Not the homepage, which Google treats roughly like a deleted page. Not a category page. The matching page. It is also the most time-consuming task, so budget real hours and build it in a spreadsheet: old URL, new URL, and priority tier.

Say your site has 412 URLs in the crawl. Sixty of them drive 95 percent of organic entrances, and a dozen hold most of your backlinks. Tier the work so the pages that matter get human eyes.

TIER 1**The pages that matter****WHICH PAGES**

The pages that drive most organic entrances and hold most backlinks.

HOW

Map each by hand. Test each by hand on launch day.

Human eyes on every URL.

TIER 2**Some traffic or links****WHICH PAGES**

Everything with some traffic or some links.

HOW

Map carefully. Spot-check after launch.

Careful map, spot checks.

TIER 3**The long tail****WHICH PAGES**

Everything else in the crawl.

HOW

Pattern-match with rewrite rules, then crawl to catch strays.

Rules plus a crawl.

Three rules for the map

- 1 Use 301s, not 302s, and avoid chains.** Old URL to final URL in one hop.
- 2 Update internal links** in the new build to point directly at new URLs. Do not lean on redirects internally.
- 3 Keep redirects live** for "generally at least 1 year," per Google's site-move documentation. For a high-stakes site, treat them as permanent.

Staging QA before launch

05

Build and test the new site on a staging environment that search engines cannot index. The QA job is parity: proving the new site keeps what the old site earned before anyone flips a switch.

Crawl staging and diff it against the benchmark

On-page

Titles, meta descriptions, H1s, and body content, page by page.

Technical

Canonicals, structured data, image alt text, and internal links.

Conversion

Every form and conversion path, tested end to end.

Every unexplained difference is a question for the build team. "The new template just does it that way" is not an answer. A migration that keeps rankings but breaks the consultation form still empties the calendar.

PICK A BUILD PARTNER WHO RUNS THE DIFF

A web design and development team that treats SEO parity as a launch requirement runs this diff themselves. If your developer has never heard of a parity crawl, add oversight now, not after launch.

Three more gates

- ◆ **Tracking on sensitive flows.** For medical practices, adding analytics, pixels, or session tools to appointment and contact flows is a compliance decision. HHS has warned that these tools can disclose protected health information, that vendors receiving it need business associate agreements, and that a cookie banner is not HIPAA authorization. A federal court narrowed parts of that guidance in June 2024. Read the HHS bulletin before the new tag plan ships.
- ◆ **The indexing block.** Confirm staging is blocked from indexing, and put "remove the block" at the top of the launch-day list. Staging sites that get indexed and launches that ship noindex to production are both common.
- ◆ **Render without JavaScript.** Most AI crawlers still do not render JavaScript the way Googlebot does. If AI visibility matters, add it to staging QA.

Launch day and the 72-hour watchlist

06

Launch day is a sequence, not a scramble. Run it in this order.

- 1 **Lower your DNS TTL** a day or two ahead so the switch propagates fast.
- 2 **Deploy, then remove staging blocks.** Check robots.txt and sweep for stray noindex tags.
- 3 **Enable the redirect map** and hand-test every tier-one URL.
- 4 **Submit the new XML sitemap** in Search Console. If the domain changed, run the change-of-address tool now.
- 5 **Crawl the live site** the same day and fix what it finds.
- 6 **Confirm analytics and conversion tracking** fire on the live site.

Keep the old hosting account alive until recovery is confirmed. It costs a few dollars a month and it is your rollback plan. Then work the watchlist: specific checks at specific hours, each with a threshold.

Hours	Check	Normal	Emergency
0 to 4	Hand-test tier-one redirects, robots.txt, and forms. Confirm analytics is collecting.	A handful of stray 404s in the long tail	→ Any tier-one page 404ing or any noindex in the live source. Fix within the hour.
4 to 24	Full crawl. Patch 404 gaps. Googlebot should hit old URLs and receive 301s.	Crawl activity spiking	→ Googlebot getting 200s on old URLs that should redirect, or 5xx errors at scale
24 to 48	Page-indexing report and sitemap processed. Branded searches still land on you.	Old URLs still in results. That resolves on its own.	→ Branded searches surfacing staging or old URLs that error instead of redirecting
48 to 72	Same-weekday traffic vs the benchmark. Spot-check money keywords.	Traffic down modestly, rankings wobbling	→ Traffic down by half or more, or money keywords gone from the top 50

The first 90 days: recovery or emergency

07

Some ranking fluctuation is expected, and Google says so: "a medium-sized website can take a few weeks for most pages to move in our index; larger sites can take longer." Community experience matches. Weeks to a couple of months is the honest window. Medical and other YMYL sites should plan for the slower end.

Hold steady

Traffic down less than about 20 percent, redirects test clean, and indexing progresses week over week. Changing things mid-recovery resets the clock.

You are in an incident

Traffic down by half, 404s accumulating, or money keywords gone from the top 50. Waiting is the wrong move. Run the diagnostic below.

The diagnostic, in order of frequency

- 1 A noindex tag or robots.txt block shipped to production.
- 2 Redirect gaps: old URLs returning 404 instead of 301.
- 3 302s or redirect chains where single-hop 301s should be.
- 4 Internal links still pointing at old URLs, or nav links broken in the new template.
- 5 Canonical tags pointing at staging, the old domain, or the wrong page.
- 6 The staging site indexed and competing with production.
- 7 Content that quietly changed: thinner pages, merged pages, rewritten titles.

FOUND BY CRAWLING, NOT GUESSING

Say you re-platformed in March and by week three organic is down 40 percent. A twenty-minute crawl finds it: the new template shipped noindex on 900 auto-generated service-area pages. Remove the tag, resubmit the sitemap, and recovery starts that week.

The printable launch checklist

08

Print this page and work it with your developer. Mark each item as you go.

Question	Done	In progress	Not started
BEFORE: BENCHMARK AND REDIRECT MAP			
Full crawl of the live site saved as the URL inventory	☐	☐	☐
16 months of Search Console data and landing-page conversions exported to files you own	☐	☐	☐
Rankings recorded for the 20 to 50 keywords that drive business	☐	☐	☐
Trust pages listed: bios, credentials, reviews, galleries, and where your Business Profile points	☐	☐	☐
One-to-one 301 map built, tiered, with no chains and nothing sent to the homepage	☐	☐	☐
DURING: STAGING QA			
Staging crawl diffed against the benchmark, every difference explained	☐	☐	☐
Every form and conversion path tested end to end, and new tracking on sensitive flows reviewed	☐	☐	☐
Staging confirmed blocked from indexing, with block removal first on the launch list	☐	☐	☐
LAUNCH DAY			
Staging blocks removed, redirects live, and every tier-one URL hand-tested	☐	☐	☐
New sitemap submitted, change of address run if the domain changed, and analytics confirmed firing	☐	☐	☐
AFTER: 72 HOURS AND 90 DAYS			
72-hour watchlist worked at each window, with thresholds checked	☐	☐	☐
Old hosting kept alive and redirects kept live for at least 1 year	☐	☐	☐

DONE

IN PROGRESS

NOT STARTED

Frequently asked questions

09

Q Does a redesign count as a migration if the domain stays the same?

Yes, if URLs, content, or code change at scale. A redesign that changes every URL, or even a template refresh that rewrites your heading structure, makes Google re-evaluate the site. Keeping every URL keeps your risk lowest.

Q Can I just redirect old pages to the homepage?

No. Google treats that roughly like a deleted page. Map every old URL to the new page that best matches its content, with a single-hop 301.

Q How long should redirects stay in place?

Google's site-move documentation says generally at least 1 year. For a high-stakes site, treat them as permanent.

Q How long does recovery take?

Google says a medium-sized site can take a few weeks for most pages to move in its index, and larger sites can take longer. Weeks to a couple of months is the honest window. YMYL sites should plan for the slower end.

Q When is a traffic drop an emergency?

When traffic is down by half, 404s are piling up, or money keywords have vanished from the top 50. Down less than about 20 percent with clean redirects and progressing indexing is normal. Hold steady.

Q Should I run the migration myself or hire help?

If your site is small, URLs and domain are not changing, and you are comfortable in Search Console, you can run this checklist yourself. If URLs or the domain are changing at scale, or organic search books a meaningful share of revenue, bring in someone who has done it before.

Next steps

10

Cost scales with four factors: URL count, whether URLs change, whether the platform changes, and how much custom functionality the site carries. The SEO protection work is a defined project on top of the build, not something a build quote includes by default. The expensive migrations are the ones where everyone assumed someone else owned the redirect map.

- 1 Get the URL count and change scope** from your developer in writing.
- 2 Ask who owns the redirect map.** If the answer is vague, that is your risk.
- 3 Price the SEO protection work** as its own line item and compare it to a month of organic-sourced revenue.

WORK WITH BROWN BEAR

A migration done right is invisible: the site changes, the rankings hold, and the phones keep ringing. If a redesign or re-platform is on your calendar, talk to us before the build starts, when protection is cheapest. brownbear.digital/contact | bryan@brownbear.digital



Bryan Passanisi

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bryan Passanisi is the founder of Brown Bear Digital. He has 15 years of experience across SEO, paid search, and AI search strategy, and won a 2025 Semrush AI/GEO award. He started Brown Bear to give businesses direct access to senior search expertise without the agency overhead.

References

1. Google Search Central. Site moves with URL changes. developers.google.com/search/docs/crawling-indexing/site-move-with-url-changes
2. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Use of Online Tracking Technologies by HIPAA Covered Entities and Business Associates. hhs.gov/hipaa/for-professionals/privacy/guidance/hipaa-online-tracking
3. Brown Bear Digital. (2026). Deep plane facelift content campaign case study. brownbear.digital/case-studies/facelift-marketing

For informational purposes only. This guide is not legal, technical, or professional advice, and results are not guaranteed.

Check privacy and health data rules that apply to your site before you add tracking to forms or appointment flows.