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# MINUTE MARKETER

## How to Use SEO in a Site Design/Redesign

11 tactics for getting the best  
search rankings for your site

# 30-Minute Marketer: How to Use SEO in a Site Design/Redesign

11 tactics for getting the best search rankings for your site

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# TACTICS YOU CAN LEARN OVER LUNCH

Welcome to *30-Minute Marketer*— a resource from MarketingSherpa featuring bite-sized tips for busy marketers.

In this report, we focus on how you can effectively incorporate search engine optimization (SEO) tactics when designing or redesigning your website.

SEO helps marketers achieve a number of important goals. [MarketingSherpa research](#) shows marketers consider SEO an important tactic in boosting Web traffic, increasing lead generation, and improving brand awareness or reputation, among other goals.

Your team invests a lot of time, money and effort into building and maintaining your website, but those efforts are wasted if you barely get any visitors. SEO is a critical tool in helping drive traffic to your site—but it's not something that happens by random chance or dumb luck.

In this report, we'll show you:

- Why a carefully planned process is important
- The pitfalls of leaving SEO to the last-minute
- How to minimize SEO fallout from a redesign
- Tips for avoiding Google penalties

We know you're in a hurry, so let's get started. You don't want to wait to become SEO savvy!

Bobbi Dempsey  
Editor, *30-Minute Marketer*

## **About *30-Minute Marketer***

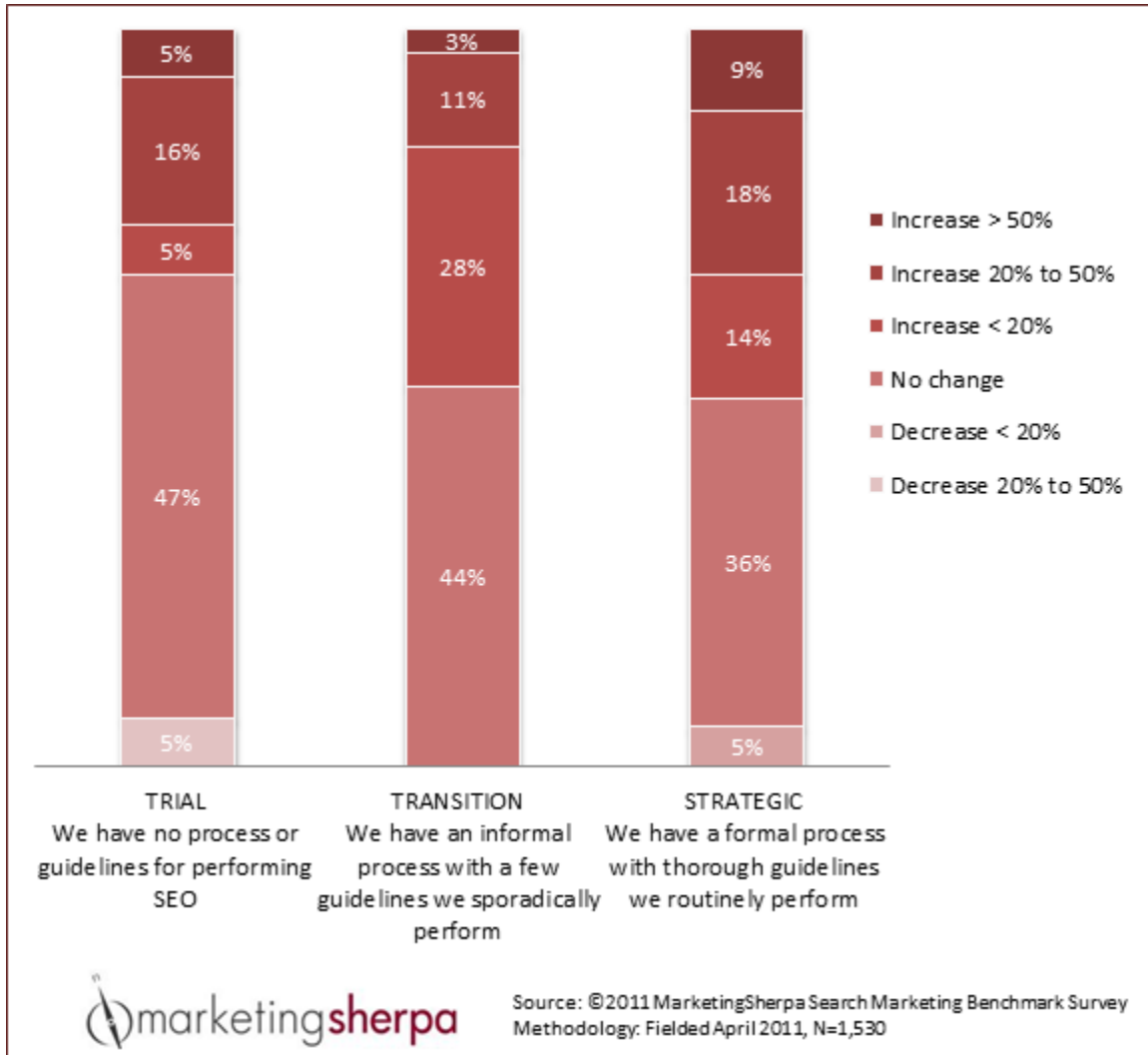
MarketingSherpa's *30-Minute Marketer* is designed with you, the busy marketer, in mind. We know you have a lot to do and not a lot of time in which to do it. You need quick, simple tips that you can put into action right away.

For each *30-Minute Marketer*, we scour the vast MECLABS library of marketing research, from MarketingSherpa case studies and benchmark reports, to MarketingExperiments optimization tests, and edit the research down into one actionable piece for helping you improve your marketing performance right now...or, at least, by the time you're done with lunch.

We probably don't need to convince you that SEO is important. Most marketers today realize good search rankings are critical to driving traffic to their sites, and they are investing resources toward those efforts. As this chart from the [2011 MarketingSherpa Search Marketing Benchmark Report](#) shows, the majority of marketers plan to spend more or the same on SEO in 2012 as they did in the past year.

**Chart: Marketers maintaining or increasing SEO budgets for 2012**

**Q. How much do you expect your organization's SEO budget to change in the next 12 months?**



But good rankings don't usually just happen by accident. It takes planning and thought, especially when you are designing (or redesigning) your site. Here are some tactics to help ensure your site design offers maximum SEO benefits.

### **Tactic #1: Have a plan**

While many marketers realize that SEO is important, they often don't have an actual SEO process in place. This is a costly mistake, because SEO is much more likely to pay off if it is well-planned. In the MarketingSherpa blog post, "[Search Marketing: The importance of an SEO process](#)," Kaci Bower, MarketingSherpa Research Analyst, points out that marketers with a formalized SEO process found it to be a much more effective strategy for lead generation than those without.

What are the elements of a successful SEO process? In her post, Bower says the system you develop should ensure that you consistently:

- Scan the marketplace
- Review your capabilities
- Define objectives
- Assess alternative courses of action
- Measure progress
- And make adjustments based on all of this business intelligence

### **Tactic #2: Consider the domain name (but don't make it your entire strategy)**

Obviously, your domain name can be prime SEO real estate. It's certainly helpful if you can have a high-value keyword right in your URL. However, as Aaron Rosenthal points out in the MarketingSherpa blog post, "[Search Engine Optimization: The SEO value \(or lack thereof\) of domain name keywords](#)," a domain name is just one small piece of the puzzle. Rosenthal says other factors, such as relevant content and valuable back links, are also very important.

### **Tactic #3: Start far in advance of important dates**

SEO isn't a switch you can flip to see overnight results. It's a gradual process that takes time to build. So, if you have a major event when you want to have a lot of traffic—say, a big site launch/redesign, or a peak period—be sure to start implementing your SEO strategies well in advance. In the MarketingSherpa article, "[Search Marketing: Capture future seasonal traffic lifts by preparing today with these 4 SEO factors](#)," Become.com, a product price comparison service, explained how they started preparing SEO tactics six months in advance of the site's busiest shopping day, Cyber Monday.

### **Tactic #4: Test search engine accessibility**

All the keywords in the world won't do you any good if search engines can't find your pages. In their initial SEO planning efforts, the Become.com team used webmaster tools (such as [those offered by Google](#)) to discover problems with some of their listings, including pages that had:

- Not been indexed
- Gone missing
- Listed nearly identical content to another page
- Listed outdated meta information

Once problems were identified, marketers worked to repair smaller problems individually and connected with Become.com's engineers to fix larger problems. Again, these were issues that can take time to identify and correct—which is why lots of advance planning and a generous timeline are essential.

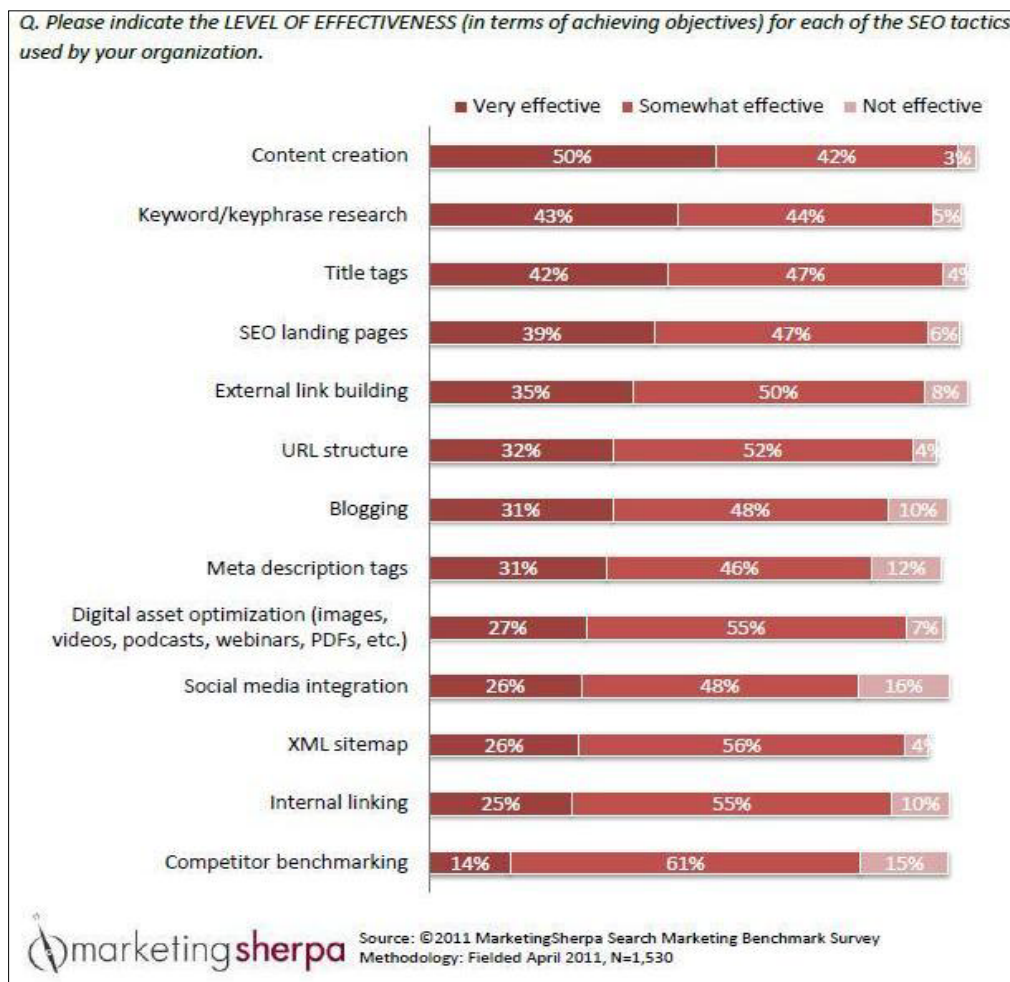
**Tactic #5: Avoid duplicate pages**

If you have several pages that spotlight similar products or services, they may essentially be competing against each other for search rankings. Not to mention, visitors may not end up on the most complete or up-to-date pages. In the MarketingSherpa article, “[SEO: How to launch a website redesign without hurting search rankings and traffic](#),” a pair of SEO experts said duplicate pages will force search engines to pick which page to feature and ignore the others. Since they do not always pick your best page, this can hurt your rankings and traffic.

Analyze your individual pages, and consider deleting those that are repetitive or outdated—especially if those pages don’t generate a lot of traffic or conversions. You want to drive traffic to high-value pages with your newest or most popular products. If you must have duplicate pages with identical or similar content, the experts recommend using a process called [canonicalization](#) to signal which page you want search engines to index.

**Tactic #6: Provide content for important topics**

If there are certain topics that are very important to your customers, those are the keywords they are likely to use. Make sure you have content available related to those keywords. The chart below from the [MarketingSherpa 2012 Search Marketing Benchmark Report—SEO Edition](#) shows that marketers ranked content creation as the most effective tactic for achieving SEO objectives.



In preparation for Cyber Monday, the marketers at Become.com analyzed search behavior on its site as well as keyword data from search engines. They used this information to identify topics on which Become.com could provide more information to attract and satisfy more visitors.

The marketers looked for opportunities, such as a high number of searches for relevant content that Become.com did not provide. They then created content focusing on the searches' keywords and added it to the site's blog, product pages and other areas. The team also conducted competitive research to identify topics on which Become.com might be able to provide more value than other websites to attract more visitors.

**Tip:** Use [Google's keyword tool](#) to help identify the most effective keywords related to your content or products.

#### **Tactic #7: Ensure links come from reputable sites**

As part of their SEO audit, the Become.com team analyzed inbound links to determine whether they were helping or hurting the site's search rankings. ArpanaTiwari, the company's SEO Senior Manager, said they did not want to receive links from websites that were irrelevant or looked "spammy" (such as a site with more advertising than content).

After identifying a questionable link, Tiwari's team reached out to the site's owner and cordially asked for it to be removed. Reaching site owners can be difficult and time consuming, Tiwari says, so prepare to be persistent.

One common type of problem link the team encountered involved "blogs gone bad." These are sites that once published high-quality, relevant content, but are no longer desirable because they focused on completely different topics, have become neglected and stale, or were taken over by spammers.

They also discovered another source of bad links: content scrapers. These sites copy your content and paste it onto their sites. This "borrowed" content is often the only thing they offer on their sites, aside from advertising. Links from these sites will not be helpful, and may even have a negative impact on your site.

#### **Tactic #8: Protect high-priority pages in a redesign**

In the MarketingSherpa article mentioned in Tactic #5, the experts say that when preparing for a redesign, you must research the natural search traffic coming to your site and identify which assets need protecting. Dig into your analytics to see which pages get a lot of search traffic. You should prioritize these pages in the redesign.

For example, a site's top-level pages, such as its key category pages, are often linked directly from the homepage, and have a lot of internal link value. Categories that receive a high amount of traffic should remain top-level and not be sub-categorized under another topic. Burying these pages can hurt their performance.

#### **Tactic #9: Redirect old URLs to new ones**

If you do a redesign of your site or just update some sections, you run the risk of negatively affecting inbound links—a big problem since these links are one of the most important factors in your site's search rankings.

If you change the URL of a page, the inbound links to that page now have the wrong URL. You must redirect your old URLs to the new ones. Otherwise, anyone clicking the links will receive an error message, and search engines

will not know where to attribute the value of the links. "It is a big mistake that I see often, and a big cause of lost traffic," says Jill Whalen, CEO, High Rankings, in the MarketingSherpa article, "[SEO: How to launch a website redesign without hurting search rankings and traffic.](#)"

URLs often change when a site is redesigned, such as when content is reorganized, or when its content management system is switched. If you change the URLs of your pages, then you need to tell the search engines with a [301 redirect](#).

Permanent 301 redirects can be easily created by your resident developer and essentially forward all traffic from the old URL to the new one. Anyone clicking an old link will arrive on the new page, and any search engine scanning an old link will attribute its value to the new page.

#### **Tactic #10: Beware of penalties for "keyword stuffing" and other missteps**

Some companies have reported suffering lowering search rankings as a penalty for "keyword stuffing," which Google defines as "loading a webpage with keywords in an attempt to manipulate a site's ranking." This was a problem faced by Pegasus Lighting, an online lighting retailer, as explained in the MarketingSherpa article, "[SEO: Content-heavy pages can bring search traffic—and heavy penalties?](#)"

Pegasus has lots of text-heavy, content-filled pages on its site. While this is beneficial to consumers in providing lots of information about the company's products, it can also result in a backlash from Google, which assumes this is just an attempt to cram as many keywords as possible onto each page.

Some strategies Pegasus has used to combat this include substituting synonyms and pronouns for commonly used words, and focusing on very specific, low-volume terms instead of generic keywords.

*Tip:* There are a number of other "offenses" that can result in Google penalties. Several of them are discussed in the MarketingSherpa article, "[Search Marketing: How to avoid and remove Google penalties.](#)"

#### **Tactic #11: Minimize the risk of damaging organic ranking page during/after optimization**

A common concern with SEO is the risk that the testing and optimization process will have a negative impact on organic rankings, at least for a short period of time. This concern—and the ways to address it—are discussed in great detail in the MarketingExperiments Web clinic, "[SEO Landing Pages: How we achieved 548% more conversions without damaging organic rankings.](#)" Briefly, you should adopt a four-step strategy:

**Step 1: Prioritize objectives.** Determine the objective of the path on that particular page. In most cases, it boils down to maximizing profits. Realize that optimizing the page will help you achieve that goal, so don't be too obsessed with conversion rates or other metrics that don't directly involve the bottom line.

**Step 2: Understand the basics.** If you understand how Google ranks pages, you will see that the authority of the page trumps any content changes.

**Step 3: Assess the risk.** In assessing the possible risk to organic rankings in the test case from the MarketingExperiments Web clinic, Flint McLaughlin, Managing Director at MECLABS, asked three questions:



- What is the actual impact of your organic traffic?
- What is the potential gain from conversion optimization?
- What key elements drive the SEO rankings?

In the test case, results showed that authority (in the form of backlinks) drove the majority of the rankings. So it was obviously important to preserve that link structure while making changes to other parts of the page.

**Step 4: Minimize the impact.** Depending on your findings, there are a variety of tactics you can take to try and minimize the impact. Examples include segmentation to direct non-organic traffic channels to dedicated landing pages and emphasizing or de-emphasizing content on a page to minimize content changes.

**Useful Links and Resources:**

[Content Marketing: Four tactics that led to \\$2.5 million in annual contracts](#)

[Free Excerpt from the 2012 Search Marketing Benchmark Report – SEO Edition](#)

[Special Report: Social media’s impact on SEO](#)

[Webinar Replay: Cumulative effects of SEO Improvements](#)

[How to Optimize Video Content for SEO](#)

# About MarketingSherpa LLC

MarketingSherpa is a primary research facility, wholly-owned by MECLABS, dedicated to determining **what works in marketing** via exclusive case studies, surveys, and results data analysis. Then we publish what we learn so our community of marketers and weekly readers can improve their results and train their teams.

Praised by *The Economist*, Harvard Business School's Working Knowledge Site and Entrepreneur.com, MarketingSherpa is distinguished by offering **practical, results-based marketing** information researched and written by a staff of in-house reporters.

MarketingSherpa features:

- **Best Practices:** 1,000+ brand-side marketer case studies and 3,500+ Creative Samples
- **Research:** 2,000+ marketing and research abstracts
- **Instruction:** 800+ how-to articles
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## About MECLABS

MECLABS is a science lab that uses real-world research and training to **help business leaders get better use out of sales and marketing technology and resources**, including Internet marketing, website optimization, and lead management. We have been involved in direct research partnerships with companies throughout Europe and North America since 2001.

MECLABS deploys a rigorous methodology to conduct research. This research is compiled from:

- More than **10 years** of research partnership with our clients
- **1,300** experiments
- Over **1 billion** emails
- **10,000** landing pages tested
- **5 million** telephone call
- **500,000** decision maker conversations

MECLABS has consulted with companies like Cisco, Johnson & Johnson, *The New York Times*, 1-800-Flowers, and NetSuite to optimize sales and marketing processes and achieve triple-digit ROI gains.

Register for Summits and Workshops at [MECLABS.com/training](http://MECLABS.com/training) or contact:  
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## Get free case studies and how-to articles from our reporters

Join 237,000 weekly newsletter readers. Receive free, in-depth case studies and how-to articles based on hundreds of hour-long interviews with brand-side marketing VPs and directors in Inbound Marketing every year.

The screenshot shows the Inbound Marketing website. At the top, it says "View with Images | View Mobile Version". The main header features the "Inbound Marketing" logo with the tagline "Social media, SEO, and content marketing" and the "marketingsherpa" logo. Below the header is a navigation bar with links for "New Case Studies", "Members' Library", "Research", "Events", and "Training".

The main content area features an article titled "Social Media Marketing: Brand-powered social site is 4th-largest traffic source for nonprofit". The article text discusses the challenges of maintaining content for social networks and mentions a nonprofit organization with 23,000 users. A "Read more" link is provided, along with a note that access is open until August 28th.

A sponsored section for HubSpot is visible, featuring a quote about Facebook's popularity and a link to download a free ebook titled "Learn how to start using Facebook to achieve your business goals".

Below the article, there are "More Recent MarketingSherpa Headlines" with links to articles about event marketing and lead nurturing.

The right sidebar contains a "Connect with us:" section with social media icons for LinkedIn, Twitter, RSS, Facebook, and YouTube. Below that is a "Research:" section featuring a "Seating Now Limited" banner for the "B2B Summit 2011 Final Agenda". The banner lists dates for Boston (Sept. 26-27) and San Francisco (Oct. 24-25), and lists keynote speakers: Flint McLaughlin, Kristin Zhivago, and Jay Baer. A "Reserve Your Seat" button is at the bottom of the sidebar.

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