How to migrate your website to the .eus domain

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Introduction

With the creation of the .eus domain, a new domain has been added to the collection of domain extensions previously available. As it is a domain that expresses Euskara (Basque) and the participation of the Basque community, it has sparked people's interest in the short space of time it has been up and running. However, this interest has also raised concern among some users: the work involved in changing one's domain and the effect of that domain change. In this document we will be endeavouring to allay this concern by showing that it is easy to start using the .eus domain and that migrating is not detrimental. This guide explains in a general way what migration is, because each website is different, but the steps should offer appropriate guidelines for all websites.

In general, starting to use the .eus domain is rapid and straightforward, but if you want to maintain the positioning your website has in the search engines, there are a number of steps that need to be taken into consideration so that the change is accomplished properly. The above-mentioned positioning is this: it is the positioning your website will have in the results when a search is made linked to the activity of your website in a search engine like Google. In other words, the placing that your website will have within the list of results. To have a good positioning, it is essential to get as much juice as possible out of the websites you have in the Internet; for example, if you have more than one domain for the same website, it would be advisable to channel all the visits the domains receive towards a single domain.

Steps

To start using the .eus domain, it would be enough just to place the files of your current website in the server that will be used to host this domain and to channel to your server those trying to access your domain through the DNS[1] settings (in most cases the registrars will undertake to prepare the DNS settings). However, that would not be the best step if you want your positioning to be taken into consideration.

Before anything else, remember that when migrations take place, it is best to make as few changes as possible simultaneously. In other words, it would not be advisable to change the domain and website at the same time, because in that case the change will be more complicated. It is a good idea to make just one change at a time; that way the change can be checked more easily, and the things that may go wrong can be spotted more easily.

Furthermore, before carrying out the migration, it is advisable for the updated sitemap.xml[2] file indicating the structure of the website to be accessible for a time on the server; it is also a good idea to inform the search engines about the

file (through Google Webmaster Tools[3], for example). That way, the search engines will be informed about the website's new structure, and that will be helpful when it comes to indexing the pages of the old domain[4] . This work will ensure that when migrating to the .eus domain, the positioning will be retained more easily. In addition, it should be remembered that migration is a process that needs to be carried out with calm, without any hurry and by paying attention to each step so that it is carried out properly. That way, the time that needs to be spent correcting any errors that may arise in the migration will be reduced.

The steps that need to be followed to carry out the migration are explained below. At the end of this document, a number of terms referred to in the steps to carry out the migration are explained (in the *Terminology* section); there is also supplementary information on the actions referred to in these steps (in the sections *Helpful Links* and *Further Information*).

1. Document the structure of your website so that its sections, pages and files (audio, video, etc.) are known. That way, when the migration has been accomplished, you will have a reference to check whether everything has taken place as it should.

2. Using tools such as Google Webmaster Tools and Google Analytics[5], gather the following information:

   • What your most visited pages are

   • Which page the links go to when they go to your website from other websites

   • The link through which the majority of visits from other websites come to your website

   • The indexed pages you have

   • The classification you have in Key words[6].

3. During the migration, 404 type errors (Not Found)[7] will occur. Create the personalised page (so that the predetermined error message created by the server does not appear), which needs to appear when 404 errors occur. The purpose is to inform the visitor about the errors and, what is more important, to offer links to go to other sections of your website. That way, the visitor will be able to continue using the website until the problem has been solved.

4. Up to this point we won't have made any changes whatsoever to the domain.

Before proceeding to make any changes, make a backup of your website so that you can go back if anything happens.

5. In the place where the new domain is positioned, add a robots.txt[8] file, so that the search engines will not display the website in their results. Keep that file there until the migration has been completed, so that the search engines will not take into account the changes that will be made until these changes have become permanent. The robots.txt file will be put in the root of the positioning in which the files of the website are. With this content we prevent the search engines from displaying the new domain in their results:

> User-agent: *
>
> Disallow: /

6. Configure Google Analytics for the new domain. The best option is to use the same tracking code used in the old domain in the new one; that way you will be able to compare the data of both domains. Likewise, add the code, which is necessary to enable Google Analytics to carry out the tracking, to the personalised page that has to be displayed when the 404 error occurs. That way, whenever this page is displayed to a user through Google Analytics, you will be able to analyse when the error occurred and which link caused it, and that way you can spot the problem more easily.

7. When using an absolute link to go to a section of the website in the website code (for example, to access the *albisteak* (news) section, instead of putting albisteak, put www.mydomain.com/albisteak), change these links and put a relative link (/albisteak). If this is not possible, update these absolute links in the new domain.

8. Set up the 301 redirect[9] from the old domain to the new one. Insofar as it is possible, it is advisable for the redirects to have a 1:1 ratio, in other words, each page of the old domain should be redirected to a page in the new one, but if this is not possible, to a page with a similar content. In other words, it is not a good idea to direct all the pages of the old domain to the home page of the new domain. At the same time, if you can, it would be a good idea to do the redirects little by little, to see whether any error occurs, rather than setting up all the redirects at the same time. There are several ways of doing the 301 redirects, but in this guide we will do it by means of an .htaccess file. This file has to be in the root of the folder in which the files of the old domain are located (the file may have been created already). To do the redirect, this content will have to be added to the .htaccess file, so that when an address of the old domain is accessed, it is accessed in the new domain:

> RewriteEngine on

RewriteCond %{HTTP_HOST} ^www.yourolddomain.com [NC,OR]

RewriteCond %{HTTP_HOST} ^yourolddomain.com [NC]

RewriteRule (.*) http://www.yournewdomain.eus/$1 [R=301,L]

9. Once you are sure that the 301 redirects have been properly set up, that Google Analytics is gathering information about the new domain, and that the website is behaving correctly, you can inform the search engines through Google Webmaster Tools or similar tools that you have changed your domain.

10. Delete the robots.txt file that you added. That way, the search engines can start indexing the new domain.

11. Upload the sitemap.xml file that describes the structure of your website to the server, and inform the search engines about this by means of Google Webmaster Tools or similar.

Now the visitors that go to the old domain will be redirected to the .eus domain, and the search engines will be informed about your new domain. From now on, the search engines will start to index your new domain. To facilitate this, it is advisable to update the information appearing on other websites so that the search engines and visitors will have your .eus domain as the reference domain instead of the old domain.

12. Update the address you have in your social network profiles and establish the new domain. At the same time, take the opportunity to inform the people who follow you on the social networks about the new domain. Make sure that the new and not the old domain appears in email signatures, corporate documents and in the information that appears in similar formats. Finally, if you are running a marketing campaign over the Internet, update the address you have in it by means of Google Adwords, for example.

13. Look at the links in the external websites that redirect to your website (the information gathered in the second step) and in as many cases as possible inform these website managers to update these links. That way, the visitors who click on the link will go straight to your new domain. To make these changes there could be many people who need to be contacted; so if you do not have the intention/time to get in touch with all of them, prioritise the managers of the websites that attract the most traffic and the managers you have the closest relationship with. Changing the former will be very helpful in providing the new domain with referentiality. As you have a close relationship with the latter, it will be easier to ask them to make this change as a favour. With respect to the links you cannot change, make sure that

through these links the visitor will arrive at the new domain, in other words, that there will be no errors.

Through these steps migration to the .eus domain will have been completed.

After migrating

Once the migration has been completed, it is necessary to monitor the behaviour of the website to ensure that it is functioning normally. As a general rule, the number of indexed pages of the old domain will fall, and the number of the new domain will increase. When the change has been completed, the indexed data of the new domain should be on a par with those the old one had before migrating.

Once the migration has been completed, any 404 errors occurring in the website need to be checked using Google Webmaster Tools and, if possible, remedied. By using the above-mentioned steps, the migration should have been accomplished properly; however, if anything has gone wrong, the indicators are as follows: a dramatic fall in the traffic received by the website, a reduction in the number of indexed pages, a fall in the key-word ranking, the frequent occurrence of 404 errors, and the new domain not being indexed. To deal with this, review the above steps, and make sure the redirects are working properly and that the search engines are authorised to enter the website.

Finally, it is advisable to go on using the old domain for a time (despite the fact that it is being redirected to the .eus domain). Firstly, so that visitors have time to notice which the new domain is, and even if they get confused, to provide the chance of accessing the website; and secondly, to allow time for the indexed pages and positioning of the previous domain to be transferred to the new domain. The advice is to keep the old domain going for at least 6 months (after that time has elapsed it is not obligatory to cancel the domain), but that period may vary depending on the size of the website.

Terminology

(1) _DNS:_ The _Domain Name System_ is a kind of index of domain names. Each domain has its DNS settings and they specify the server in which the domain can be accessed, whether it has a sub-domain, which server manages the domain mail (if it has mail), etc. These settings are necessary, because otherwise the domain cannot be used.

(2) _Sitemap.xml:_ This is an XML format file that describes the structure of a website. It mentions all the pages a website consists of. The search engines use this file as a reference when indexing the website.

(3) *Google Webmaster Tools:* This is a free service that provides us with information about our website. It gives a perspective of Google robots. Through this service we can find out how the robots see our website (whether there are any errors, the indexing level, etc.) and how frequently they come to carry out the indexing. In addition to this, they offer us the possibility, among other things, of uploading the sitemap.xml file to improve the indexing, and to check whether the robots.txt file is working properly. To start using this service, all that needs to be done is register with the service (it is a free service) and add our domain. The Google Webmaster Tools will help us inspect and improve the performance the website has in Google. To be able to see the performance we have in other search engines, we would need to use the tool offered by these search engines (e.g. we would have to use Bing Webmaster Tools if we want to improve in the Bing search engine).

(4) *Indexing:* Search engines use robots to get to know the websites spread throughout the Internet and to report on their content. To do this, they index website content and include it in one of their lists (like an index). Whenever searches are run, this index is used to obtain the results. For that reason, it is advisable for the search engines to have the website pages indexed; otherwise, they will not appear in the results.

(5) *Google Analytics:* This is a service offered by Google to monitor the behaviour of the visitors that a website receives. Through it, it is possible to know which pages are visited by the visitors, how much time is spent on each page, the number of visits the website receives, etc. To be able to gather this information, apart from registering with the service (it is a free service), we would need to add a piece of code to each page in our website.

(6) *Key Words:* The words that coincide with the activity of a website. For example, the key words of a shop selling bicycles could be BH, Orbea (bicycle brands), bicycle and bicycle parts. It is important when searching for one of these key words that the website is properly positioned in the results provided by the search engines.

(7) *404 Not Found error:* This is the error that occurs with a non-existent website or when an attempt is made to visit a page that cannot be found. It is quite a common error; particularly when a mistake is made when writing an address from memory. If there is an incorrect redirect when the migration has been done, the 404 error will appear.

(8) *Robots.txt:* By means of this file we can tell the robots that are indexing the websites not to index the whole website or a section of it. This restriction can be applied to a single robot (e.g. the Googlebot used by Google) or it can be applied to all the robots. They will then decide whether or not to take any notice of our instructions, but the search robots normally obey.

(9) _301 redirects:_ On Apache servers, they are used to redirect the visitor trying to access a specific website or page to another address (to the same domain or to a different one). If your server is not an Apache one, you will need to use a similar redirect used in the server. The 301 redirects are regarded as permanent, and because of that, the search engines will take them into consideration; in their results, instead of the address that the visitor is trying to access, they will bear in mind the address accessed after the redirect.

Helpful links

- Creating a Sitemap.xml file

- Google Analytics

- Setting up Google Analytics

- Obtaining traffic information through Google Analytics

- Google Webmaster Tools

- Guidelines to learn to use Google Webmaster Tools

- Guidelines for producing one's own 404 error page

- To create a Robots.txt file

- The second step explained in the guide to make 301 redirects

- To inform Google Webmaster Tools that you have changed your domain

Further information

- http://moz.com/blog/web-site-migration-guide-tips-for-seos

- http://www.tentacleinbound.com/articles/website-domain-migration-guide

- http://searchenginewatch.com/sew/news/2067216/the-step-site-migration-process