

Use 404 pages to your advantage

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A Promotion Guide <http://www.apromotionguide.com/>

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"Not found

The requested URL /file.html was not found on this server.

Apache/1.3.14 Server at www.yourdomain.com Port 80"

Does that look familiar? If you've ever accidentally tried to access a page that doesn't exist, possibly by following an outdated link or by misspelling the name of the page, you've probably seen something like the above appear on your screen. You might have attempted to correct the error by checking the URL for mistakes, but it is even more likely that you just clicked "Back" and returned where you came from, never visiting the site again.

For a surfer, encountering a "404 page" is a nuisance. For a webmaster, they can be far more problematic, causing a reduction in traffic which in turn means losing a part of the precious advertising revenues or sales the site's life depends on. You can minimize the amount of 404 errors by periodically checking your pages for broken links, but it is impossible to get completely rid of them. So, what can you do?

The solution - Custom 404 pages

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The best way to avoid losing visitors to 404's is to replace the standard and unfriendly error message with a custom page. Fortunately the task is relatively simple and can be performed by anyone who owns a site that has its own domain name.

As different server softwares handle things in their own ways,

there is no single method of creating a custom error page that works with every system. The following instructions can be applied by those who have sites hosted under Apache, which is a very widely used program. If you don't know what software your host is running, contact them and ask.

To start the process, use an FTP program such as CuteFTP to connect to your server. Search for a file named ".htaccess". Should you find it, download the file to your home computer for editing. If the file is not there, don't worry, you'll just have to create it yourself.

Grab a normal text editor and open the file, or if you don't have it, open up a blank file. Type the following into the first line of the file:

ErrorDocument 404 <http://www.yourdomain.com/404page.html>

After you're done, save the file as plain text and make sure that it is named ".htaccess", without quotes of course. The hard part is now over, all that is left is to create the custom 404 page (404page.html) that loads when a 404 error occurs.

What should my 404 page look like?

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Of course, you can put anything you want into it, but if your purpose is to encourage your visitors to click further into your site instead of leaving, the page should obey some basic principles.

1. Don't give users a reason to panic. Including a large heading that screams "ERROR" is likely to make the visitor feel that he/she has done something wrong or that your site is not working properly. A better approach is to first greet them with a warm welcome and then explain that the URL they were looking for could not be found, but should they browse around your site, they will surely find the information they need.
2. Make the page to look and feel similar to the rest of the pages on your site. Include your site's menu on the 404 page to give visitors a fast and easy way to continue exploring instead of clicking away. A well-designed 404 page with plenty of links is far more attractive than one that has just black text on a white background and a link to your homepage.
3. If you have the skills, consider adding a search feature on the page that allows people to search your site for matches. Often your navigation menu will provide a clue on how the user might reach the information he/she would like to see, but if it doesn't there is a great risk of losing the visit. Placing a search utility on the page increases the likelihood of the user

finding the desired page and thus remaining on your site.

After both the .htaccess file and the HTML page are ready, FTP to your server, upload the pages and enjoy your new custom 404 error page!

Lauri Harpf runs the A Promotion Guide website, where he offers free information about search engines, directories and other promotion methods. His site can be found at <http://www.apromotionguide.com/>

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