

SEO Myths About Duplicate Content



Issues around duplicate content can be surprisingly complex.

BY NAREN ARULRAJAH

>> If you use content marketing to promote your dermatology practice (and who doesn't?), then you have probably heard of duplicate content issues. Yes, it is a real and surprisingly common problem. However, it may not be a problem for the reasons you think. Below are four of the most common duplicate content issues, explained.

Myth 1: There is a Google penalty for duplicate content

Google has repeatedly attempted to put this rumor to rest, asserting that there is, in fact, no penalty for simply having duplicate content on your website. Yet, this widespread misconception persists. Why? The reason is that duplicate content can and often does have SEO consequences.

The source of this confusion lies in technicalities. Many people loosely interpret any negative result as a penalty. However, a Google penalty refers explicitly to punitive action against a website. A site will not be penalized unless duplicate content is related to deceptive or unethical practices (such as scraping other websites). Yet, duplicate content on yours can cause a variety of problems, including pushing a page out of the search results, simply because it does not offer enough unique value.

Takeaway: Google will not penalize your website simply for having duplicate content. However, duplicate content can still harm SEO in many other ways.

Myth 2: The issue is about copyright infringement

"I did not steal anyone's content!"

"I have permission to use those articles."

"That came from a public domain source; it is not copyrighted."

These are among the most common responses when the subject of duplicate content comes up. However, copyright laws are not really the problem. Certainly, you would be at

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risk of violating Google's terms (not to mention the legal ramifications) if you actually stole copyrighted material. However, that scenario is improbable for a respectable business, such as a dermatology practice.

In reality, the majority of duplicate content is unintentional and usually legal. For example, let's say the manufacturer provided patient promotional content for the laser that you just purchased. You have the legal right to use this text. And so does every other dermatology practice that purchased the same machine. It is likely to appear on dozens or hundreds of websites. Google wants to provide variety and unique information in search results. It will not display all of these similar-to-identical web pages in results. The one that is deemed to be original and most authoritative (probably the actual manufacturer website) may appear, along with an assortment of distinctly different pages.

Takeaway: Duplicate content is not a legal issue. Having a right to use the content will not prevent SEO problems.

Myth 3: A few duplicated passages are okay

Another common misconception is that duplicate content only refers to entire articles or web pages. Going back to the laser device example above, imagine that you wrote your own content based on the provided material. Maybe you used a few sentences or phrases verbatim just because they were very well worded. There were some passages that you only changed slightly when re-writing. And you copied the bullet points about benefits because that is just a list.

In this example, the resulting content might look (to the human eye) like a distinctively different text. Yet, a computerized analysis will show a high percentage of duplicate content. That means there is a low percentage of original text. Since the original part is what Google sees as providing value for the reader, this page is unlikely to perform well in search results.

Takeaway: A small percentage of duplication will not be disastrous. However, the more original content your website has, the better.

Myth 4: I do not have to worry because I wrote all of my own content

Here is another scenario in which duplicate content problems can catch you off guard. Imagine that you or a trusted employee wrote every word on your website. It was not taken, even in small part, from other websites, manufacturer literature, or other sources. Maybe you even took the extra step of using software such as Copyscape to verify that your text is 100 percent unique. You can be confident that your website will never have duplicate content issues. Right? Wrong.

There are a few scenarios in which your totally unique website can develop duplication problems. The first is due to different URLs pointing to the same page. That often happens when content management systems are left to default settings. Maybe one URL ends with /resurfacing.asp?procedure=laser&type;=co2 and another ends with /resurfacing.asp?type=co2&procedure;=laser. To Google, different URLs equate to different pages. When those URLs load the same content, they look like identical pages. This issue rarely affects ranking because Google will select one version as the “original.” However, it can impede website performance and make it difficult for Google’s bots to crawl your site efficiently.

Another problem is content scraping, which occurs more often than you might realize. Bloggers, ad revenue-based websites, spammy directories, and yes, on rare occasions, even other business owners may blatantly steal your text for their websites. When Google finds identical content, it attempts to determine which version is the original. It is usually good at this—but not always. When this happens, you can take action to have the stolen content removed from the offending site. However, many websites find it simpler to just replace the text on your website with new and original content.

Takeaway: Duplicate content problems can arise after content creation. Like most aspects of SEO, it requires monitoring and maintenance.

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DON'T OVERLOOK THE IMPORTANCE OF TECHNICAL SEO

The term technical SEO brings to mind page loading times, meta tags, and other behind-the-scenes optimization aspects. However, there is also a crucial technical aspect to content optimization. For example, 301 redirects can be used to direct web traffic (and search engines) to a single version of a URL. Or correct HTML coding (Rel= “canonical”) can tell Google which version of content is the original, eliminating ranking conflicts.

Avoiding duplicate content issues is a three-part equation. You need good, original content to start with, followed by good technical implementation, and lastly, regular maintenance to prevent future problems. ■

Naren Arulrajah, President and CEO of Ekwa Marketing, has been a leader in medical marketing for over a decade. Ekwa provides comprehensive marketing solutions for busy dermatologists, with a team of more than 180 full time professionals, providing web design, hosting, content creation, social media, reputation management, SEO, and more. If you're looking for ways to boost your marketing results, call 855-598-3320 for a free strategy session with Naren. You may also schedule a session at your convenience with the Senior Director of Marketing – Lila, by clicking <https://www.ekwa.com/msm/> or simply send a text to 313-777-8494.