Ask An SEO: How To Handle Duplicate Content Across Multiple Domains via @sejournal, @rollerblader

Today's Ask an SEO question comes from Colin in London, UK.

> *"My question is about duplicate content. I work for a group of schools in the UK. We have 21 schools, each has its own website and domain with a link or banner linking back to our main group website. The schools are very busy, so to save time, we have created blog posts centrally to give to the schools. They change a few things but basically the pages are pretty much the same.*
>
> *I have experience with SEO, so I put my Google good boy white hat on and said, 'Google says not to do it, it's duplicate content. We need them to be different.'*
>
> *My question is will we be penalized? I understand they will compete with each other (multiples have taken page 1 at the same time), but otherwise, is this doing us harm?*
>
> *Is Google smart enough to know we are a group with different emails? Should we rewrite them all? Should we just stop? It would be good to get a second opinion – maybe I need to lighten up or take take action and remove.*
>
> *Please help. Thanks, Colin."*

Great question, Colin! It is something that comes up about once a year with our clients or as a question when I'm

speaking at conferences.

I’m breaking the answer out into a few sections so that it can be applied to non-school situations, too.

But first, check out this post about Google’s duplicate content penalty myth, as it is something that is commonly misunderstood.

Use Canonicals When Publishing To Secondary Sites

In the situation above, it sounds like there is a main website and multiple variations.

If you’re worried about the variation websites taking from the main website, place canonical links back to the main site from the duplicate posts.

Let’s pretend these are the URLs:

- Official site – colininlondon.com/blog-post-school.
- Duplicate 1 – colininleeds.com/blog-post-school.
- Duplicate 2 – colininglasgow.com/blog-post-school.

The official site will have a self-referencing canonical link because it is the main website and the post that should be ranking.

Duplicates 1 and 2 should have their canonical links point back to the (official) main website. This way, Google knows which site is the official one and which are duplicates.

You can also use schema, addresses, and other localization factors to help define that these are the same company and brand, similar to doing locations if you’re a brick-and-mortar business or using TLDs for country-specific targeting.

One thing to be careful of is having canonical links go to the

wrong site.

When you publish original content on a specific school location site, make sure the canonical link is self-referencing vs. going back to the official site or main site.

And if the content gets published to the official site and secondary websites, have the canonicals point to the specific school location site.

You also want to make sure your sitemap excludes the content if it is not the official version. Not a big deal at this point, but still something you can control.

Publish To The Most Relevant Audience

When you're stuck trying to think of which site should be the official one, or your content management system (CMS) allows you to assign a main site for the content, think about who would benefit most from the post and publish there.

If it is an event and only accessible to one or five schools vs. the 21, publish to the most relevant audience and use the same canonical plan above.

You may want the content to be accessible to all students, parents, and faculty, but if it is only relevant to a smaller grouping or a single school, only publish it to the most relevant location.

Some Content Is Not A Duplicate

In the case of snow days where some schools may be cancelled, others delayed, and some are business as usual, feel free to post these.

The main part of the content will be the same or similar, and

that is ok. You can have the same opening and closing of the post; the most important content is the name of the school and the information about when school starts based on the location.

It may be beneficial to have a main post with all locations and their status on the main site, then have the “duplicate” variations with localized information on the individual.

A lot of people assume this would be duplicate content. It shouldn’t be as it is catered to a specific audience and only that audience.

Think about a pharmacy or retail chain where the only differences are hours of operation, phone number, and a couple store-specific details.

Should Content Be Rewritten For Each Site?

If you have the ability and you can make it relevant to that specific location, then yes, there would be a benefit.

For example, you may have a boys-only or girls-only school, or elementary, high, and preschool. If the content is for the Parent Teacher Association (PTA), chances are the concerns for the elementary school parent meetings will be different from those in high school.

By adding the agendas, decisions, board members, times, and other unique attributes of the meetings, you can have similar openings and closings because the body and meat of the posts will be unique.

Use Google Business Profile

Something I have not personally done, as I’ve not worked specifically on schools with multiple websites, is using

Google Business Profile for your local locations.

I have done this with retailers and similar industries, such as non-profits and service providers, that have local branches, each with its own domain.

By setting the URLs up and combining them as entities, you may help to reduce the duplication of similar content. Google Business Profile will allow you to sync them together.

This will not help with your main duplicate content question, but it could help with making sure the locations are accounted for in the local search results which may be relevant in specific situations.

If your sites make it clear you're not trying to game the system, then I wouldn't worry about duplicate content penalties.

If you're really concerned, use canonical links that reference the main version that lives on the group website. Then use self-referencing canonicals for any unique content published on the individual school sites.

I hope this helps, and thank you for asking!

More Resources:

Featured Image: Paulo Bobita/Search Engine Journal

https://www.searchenginejournal.com/ask-an-seo-duplicate-content-across-multiple-domains/536681/