Index coverage checks to run after publishing major changes

When you publish a significant update to a site - a redesign, a content restructure, a domain migration, or a large batch of URL changes - the immediate worry is usually whether visitors can find the new pages. But the real risk often shows up weeks later, when Google has had time to recrawl and reindex. By then, pages that should rank may have fallen out of the index entirely, and old URLs that should redirect may be returning soft 404s. Running a focused set of index coverage checks right after the change lands can catch those problems while they are still easy to fix.

Check that Googlebot can reach the new URLs

The first thing to verify is that Google can actually see the pages you want indexed. If a redesign moved content behind a login wall, a JavaScript paywall, or a form that requires a click, the crawler may never fetch the new URL at all. Use the URL Inspection tool in Google Search Console for a handful of representative pages: the homepage, a category page, a product page, and a piece of core content. The tool will tell you whether Google can render the page and whether it sees a canonical tag that points somewhere unexpected.

If the inspection shows "URL is not on Google" and the reason is "Crawled - currently not indexed", the page is being seen but not added to the index. That is a signal to check the content quality and uniqueness, but it is not an emergency. If the reason is "Discovered - currently not indexed", the page was found but not crawled yet - that is normal for a very fresh change. The real red flag is "Page with redirect" or "Soft 404" on pages you intended to be live.

Compare the index count before and after the change

A simple count can reveal a lot. Pull the "site:yourdomain.com" search results from Google a few days before the change and record the rough number. Do the same a week after. If the number drops by more than 10 percent, something went wrong during the transition. Common causes include a new robots.txt that blocks important sections, a noindex tag left on a staging page, or a server configuration that returns 404s for old URLs that should be 301 redirects.

This count is not precise - Google's "site:" operator is an approximation - but the trend matters. A sharp drop is worth investigating immediately. A gradual decline over a month may indicate a deeper indexing problem that needs a forensic look at server logs and crawl patterns, the kind of work that specialists like SEO Fire Fighter handle when a traffic drop resists quick fixes.

Monitor for soft 404s on redirected URLs

When you change a URL structure, every old URL should return a 301 redirect to its new equivalent. But sometimes the redirect lands on a page that returns a 200 status code yet shows no useful content - a category page with zero products, a search results page with no results, or a thin placeholder. Google calls these soft 404s. They waste crawl budget and can cause the old URL to drop out of the index without transferring its link equity to the new page.

Search Console's Index Coverage report lists soft 404s under the "Excluded" tab. Review that section weekly for the first month after a major change. If you see a URL that used to rank well now flagged as a soft 404, check where its redirect lands. The fix is often as simple as updating the redirect target to a page that actually matches the original content.

Check that canonical tags point to the right version

After a site restructure, it is easy to end up with two versions of the same page live: the old URL still serving content and the new URL serving the same content. If the canonical tag on the old page points to itself instead of to the new URL, Google may treat both as duplicates and choose one to index - possibly the wrong one. Use a crawler or a browser extension to check canonical tags on a sample of old URLs that still return 200. They should all point to the new location.

The same logic applies to pagination. If your site changed from page-based to infinite scroll, or added query parameters for sorting, make sure the rel="canonical" on each page points to the clean, parameter-free version. Otherwise Google may index dozens of near-identical URLs, diluting the authority of the main page.



Verify that XML sitemaps reflect the new structure

A sitemap is a direct signal to Google about which pages you consider important. After a major change, regenerate the sitemap and submit it via Search Console. Then check that it does not include old URLs that now redirect, staging URLs, or parameter-heavy variants. A sitemap full of 301s tells Google your site is in flux, which can slow down the reindexing process.

Also check the lastmod dates in the sitemap. If every page shows the same timestamp - common after a bulk export - Google may treat the sitemap as less reliable. Update the timestamps to reflect actual content changes, or remove the lastmod field entirely if you cannot maintain them accurately.

Look for orphan pages that lost their internal links

A redesign often removes or renames navigation sections. Pages that used to sit under a top-level category may end up linked only from an old blog post or a footer nobody clicks. These orphan pages can fall out of the index because Google finds no crawl path to them. Run a crawl of your site with a tool like Screaming Frog or Sitebulb and compare the list of indexed pages against the list of pages reachable from the homepage within three clicks. Every page you want indexed should appear in that crawl.

If you find orphans, add internal links from relevant, high-traffic pages. A single contextual link from a related article is usually enough to get the page recrawled.

Watch for sudden drops in organic traffic to key pages

This is the most obvious check, but it is worth formalising. Set up a custom alert in Google Analytics or Search Console for any page that loses more than 50 percent of its organic traffic week over week. When that alert fires, look at the page's current index status and its redirect chain. Often the cause is a redirect that loops, a canonical that points to a different domain, or a server error that only affects that specific URL pattern.

If the page is indexed and the redirects are clean, the traffic drop may be a ranking loss caused by duplicate content or thin content introduced during the redesign. In that case, the fix is editorial, not technical.

Running these checks after every major change does not take long, but it prevents the slow erosion of search visibility that can turn a successful redesign into a six-month recovery project. The goal is to catch the issues while they are still a matter of updating a redirect or adding a link, not when they require a full forensic audit of the crawl path. For teams that lack the time or tools to run these checks regularly, a specialist service like SEO Fire Fighter can step in and identify the exact indexing gaps that are costing traffic. But even a basic weekly

review of the index coverage report and a quick crawl comparison will catch the majority of problems before they become permanent.