

Product Lifecycle SEO Playbook

Nature Baby · keeping search equity intact as products come and go

Why this exists

Nature Baby's range moves with the seasons, so products are constantly added, sold through, replaced and retired. Every time a product URL disappears without a plan, Google loses the page it had ranked, the link equity built up behind it, and any customer who clicks an old link hits a dead end. That is the single biggest cause of the broken links we are cleaning up now. This playbook is the simple set of rules that stops it happening again, written so anyone on the Nature Baby team can follow it without needing a developer.

The one thing that matters most. A product left in **Draft** status returns a 404 error and loses all its search ranking, even though it still exists in the admin. Draft is not a way to hide a product from customers. Of the current catalogue, more than 3,000 products sit in Draft, which is where most of the broken links come from. The rules below replace "set it to Draft" with the right action for each situation.

The one rule

Before you delete, hide, replace or retire any product, identify its lifecycle stage and follow the URL action for that stage. Never simply delete a product or set it to Draft. The five stages below cover every situation.

The lifecycle playbook

Stage	What it means	What to do
Core	Always in stock, permanent range, replenished year round.	KEEP LIVE No action needed. The page stays live and indexed.
Seasonal Core (Merino)	Goes out of stock between seasons but always returns with the next order.	KEEP LIVE NEVER DELETE OR REDIRECT Keep the page live and indexed even when out of stock. Turn on "notify me" or "back soon". In Searchspring, sort it to the bottom of its collection rather than hiding it. It keeps its ranking so it sells the moment it is back.
New Season	Introduced for one season, available until sold through.	If it is likely to carry over or return: treat it as Seasonal Core (keep live). If it is genuinely one season and will not come back: treat it as Discontinued (redirect and archive). If unsure, keep it live until the buying decision is made.
Carryover	Returns from a previous season on strong demand; future replenishment not guaranteed.	KEEP LIVE Keep the page live while the decision is pending. Only redirect once it is confirmed discontinued.
Discontinued	Gone for good, will not return.	301 REDIRECT + ARCHIVE Set a 301 redirect from the product URL to the closest live equivalent (the nearest live product, or its parent collection), then Archive the product. This passes the old page's ranking to the new destination and removes the dead end.

Out of stock: the golden rule

Out of stock is not the same as gone. The decision is only ever about one question: **is it coming back?**

- **Coming back (Seasonal Core, Carryover, restocking):** keep the page live and indexed, mark it out of stock with "notify me", and let Searchspring sort it low in the collection. Do not hide it, draft it, or redirect it.
- **Not coming back (Discontinued):** 301 redirect to the nearest live page, then archive.

How this works with Searchspring

Searchspring controls what shows on the search results and collection pages, including whether out-of-stock products appear. This playbook and Searchspring line up cleanly, with no conflict:

- **For products that are coming back**, set Searchspring to **sort out-of-stock items to the bottom** of the collection, not to hide them. That keeps the collection page full of content for Google, keeps each product's own page live and ranking, and still shows customers the in-stock items first.
- **Do not use a global "hide all out of stock" rule.** That would remove seasonal products that are returning, drop their rankings, and recreate the broken links we are fixing.
- **For discontinued products**, the 301 redirect handles it at the Shopify level, so it works regardless of Searchspring. Searchspring simply stops showing a product that no longer exists.

In short: Searchspring decides the display order, Shopify decides whether a URL lives or redirects. Use Searchspring's sort-to-bottom for temporary gaps, and Shopify redirects only for permanent goodbyes.

The decision flow

- 1 **Is the product gone for good?** If yes, set a 301 redirect to the nearest live page, then archive it. Done. If no, continue.
- 2 **Will it come back (seasonal, carryover, restocking)?** Keep the page live and indexed, mark it out of stock with "notify me", and set Searchspring to sort it low. Do not redirect, delete or draft it.

3 Are you replacing it with a new version? Update the existing product in place so the URL stays the same. Only if a brand-new URL is unavoidable, 301 the old URL to the new one.

4 Never use Draft to hide a product. Draft returns a 404 and loses the ranking. Use "Unlisted" (keeps the URL live but out of navigation) or the out-of-stock pattern above.

Redirects: how to do them yourselves

Redirects do not need a developer. In Shopify: **Online Store → Navigation → URL Redirects**. Add them one at a time, or import many at once with a CSV (two columns, "Redirect from" and "Redirect to", using the paths only). Matrixify does the same for larger batches. Two rules:

- **Always redirect to the nearest relevant live page**, a similar product or the parent collection. Never send everything to the homepage; Google treats that as a soft error and passes on no ranking.
- **Redirect only genuinely discontinued products**. A product that is coming back should stay live, not be redirected.

Where we are right now

Working from the current broken-link scan (1,563 URLs across both markets), we have split them by exactly the rules above:

- **267 are unambiguous** (deleted or legacy URLs) and are being redirected to their closest live pages in this batch.
- **688 are draft products** that need a lifecycle decision using this playbook: activate the ones that are returning, redirect and archive the ones that are discontinued.
- **The rest need a quick manual look** where no confident match exists.

Once the draft catalogue is worked through with this playbook, broken links stop being a recurring clean-up and become a rare exception.

Team Empathy

Search and AI discovery for ecommerce brands

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