

Link Building: what a beginner should know

Link building is an essential ingredient in ranking your website highly on the major search engines. There, now that we've got that brilliant grasp of the obvious out of the way let's move on to what you can do to actually create them. Before we launch into the nitty-gritty of link building, no beginners guide would be complete without a brief explanation as to why links are important and the different elements of them. Being a beginner's guide this won't be an entirely complete list but it will be enough to get you going on the right path. Understanding what you're trying to do will help you do it better and more importantly, understanding the "why" of the situation will help you stretch your tactics outside of this and other articles on link building.

Why Are Links Important?

To put it simply: a link is a vote. Every link pointing to your site from another website tells the search engines that the other site finds your resource valuable and thus, the engines read this as a vote for your site. So it must be about getting tons of links and you're done right? Wrong. This is incorrect as ...

Not All Votes Are Created Equal

Unlike your own vote in an election, some votes are worth more than others and some votes are worth SIGNIFICANTLY more than yours (unless of course you're a content writer for the Google.com domain in which case you obviously have the top vote). The basic factors that affect a link's value to your website are:

The site strength – the strength of the site that is pointing to yours is a significant (and historically abused) factor in the valuation of links. In the absence of other easily-visible criteria let's look at Page Rank as a key valuation of a site's strength. If a site with a Page Rank 8 links to your site, this vote is worth significantly more than a link from a Page Rank 3 site. This is because a Page Rank 8 site is, in Google's eyes, a more important site than the Page Rank 3 site.

Relevance – the relevance of a site linking to you is, if anything, more important than a site's strength. If you run a bed and breakfast in Utah a link from a Page Rank 3 bed and breakfast will be worth more than a link from a Page Rank 5 web design site. This area is a bit grey in that it relies on the engine's ability to determine what is relevant and what is not however we've seen evidence that this area is strong at this stage in the game and is only becoming more important over time.

Anchor text – the actual text used to link to your site is extremely important. I've seen extremely strong sites get beaten out by weak ones simply due to the poor use of anchor text. If you're building links to your site be sure to include your keywords in the text that links back and, if possible, the exact phrase you are trying to rank for. At the same time, you can't make all your anchor text exactly the same – how can that possibly look natural?

Position – the position of a link on a page and the number of other links on that page impacts the value of a link. A link in the footer of a page is given less weight than a link near the top, a link in the content of a page is given more weight than a link in a list of links and a link on a page with 50 other links is given less weight than a link on a page with only a few other links. If we think about it – this makes sense. All of these things indicate whether the site with the outbound links actually intends for one of their visitors to click the link or not. From an engine's perspective – the more it appears that a site wants a link to be clicked on, the higher the weight that link (or vote) is given.

Admittedly there are a number of other factors but this is a beginner's guide. Following the considerations above will insure that as you make each link decision – you're odds of making the right choices will be significantly higher than if you ignore them. Ignoring them may not get you penalized or banned but it will make your task far more time consuming as you secure less valuable links and thus need to build far more than following the right methods.

So far we've covered briefly the why of link building, now let's get into the real-life, here's-how-to-do-it side of things. Below I'm going to cover three of my favorite link building tactics. These are tactics that apply to virtually every scenario. The number of ways to build links is only limited by your imagination however and this should not be viewed as a comprehensive list. This is, after all, a beginner's guide and I'm trying to list the tactics that apply to virtually every scenario.

Side Note: Reciprocal Link Building

I'm not going to count this as one of my favorite and so it won't count as one of the three noted above and I'll only touch on it briefly. There have been a number of assertions that reciprocal link building is dead. This is simply not the case. I have seen and competed against sites that were very

successful with reciprocal links as their primary link source.

The problem with reciprocal links isn't so much in their value which does seem to be a bit lower than non-reciprocal links however often more easily attained. No, my problem with reciprocal links is in the management. Unethical webmasters' removing links after you've put the link up to them, sites expiring and not being renewed, sites getting penalties of their own due to their bad tactics are all inconveniences the reciprocal link manager must deal with.

As an SEO company, a huge issue we faced was leaving our clients with this task after a campaign was over if they decided not to go on a maintenance package. Non-reciprocal links may be a bit harder to attain in some cases however that issue is much easier to overcome than the sum of all these issues.

And now on to the top three ...

Articles

If you're paying attention as you read this you'll probably have guessed that I'm a fan of article writing as a link building method. If you look to the "about the author" section you'll notice a link to the Beanstalk site (and if you don't, well ... let me know as somebody's stealing it without permission). While I genuinely enjoy writing and sharing my experiences with others – the purpose of getting the article distributed is primarily as a link building tactic, secondarily as a great source of qualified traffic and thirdly for my own enjoyment.

You are an expert in your field. Who knows more about your business than you? So share. Writing an article may not be easy but it is rewarding. If you can't think of a topic, think of what you get asked. If you're asked common questions repeatedly then chances are, it's a good topic for an article. I often get asked about link building, and you're reading the result.

Once the article is completed you need to get it syndicated. Using an article submission service is a simple way to get your article out to a large number of publishers quickly. On top of this you'd do well to seek out specific sites in your field using one or all of the major search engines to find highly relevant sites that accept articles and submit to them.

And oh, don't forget an "about the author" section. :)

Directory Submissions

Directory submissions are likely the most painful of the link building tactics you'll employ. Why? Because it's tedious and time-consuming work.

To be done right directory submissions must be done manually, the titles and descriptions must be tailored to the specifications of the directory in question and often, you'll have to decide if a review fee is worth it.

While there are a good many directories that accept free submissions there are also a large number that does require a review fee. The fee can range from a few dollars to a few hundred. If you see that a directory has a low Page Rank, is general in its nature (i.e. it isn't about your specific field) then it likely isn't worth more than a couple dollars if that. If the site is strong, and strongly related to your site then it's obviously worth more.

There is no hard-and-fast set of rules for how much a listing is worth. I'd recommend to start your hunt for directories (don't forget the topic and/or region specific ones), submit to all the free ones and make a list of all the ones that require a fee. After you've gotten a solid number in your "needs to be paid list" you can get a general idea as to what's out there and what you can get and for how much. This will enable you to make solid choices knowing what all your options are.

Forum Posting

I just know I'm going to get a couple comments and/or emails for listing this as a link building tactic but if it's done right there's nothing wrong with it. Forum and blog posting got a bad reputation as a link building tactic when it came under huge abuse by unethical webmasters spamming forums with useless garbage just for a link. They even went so far (and still do) as sending out spiders to automatically submit posts. To this end, I have to agree that it's a bad tactic however ...

If you're seeking out forums related to your site, reading the threads and responding with solid advice or with questions and not just firing off some sales-pitch then you're doing what you're supposed to be. Another perk to this is that, like articles, if you do this right you're gong to see traffic as well and what more can you ask from a link building tactic than traffic as well as links.

Conclusion

Above we've covered the basics of link building. As I've noted repeatedly, once you're done reading this and applying some of what you've read you'd do well to read other articles, forums and blogs. This isn't a complete breakdown of everything link-related (that would be a full book) but it will keep you out of trouble and save you countless hours of wasted time getting poor links that haven't held value since 2003.

About the Author

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