

## BETTER SEO THROUGH SUCCESSFUL 'LINK-BUILDING'

Link-building is the process of generating links back to specific Web pages.

It's a widely held belief – and increasingly so – that links are the most important elements of search engine optimization. "Out of all the SEO metrics, about **60 percent** of them have to do with links," says Danny Dover, of Seattle-based SEO software provider SEOMoz.

However, not all links are created equally. Inbound links are much more important than outbound links. And it's important to know if incoming links are coming from quality sites. Trust is a key factor in determining the value of a Web page, and leading search engines determine trust by analyzing, among other factors, how many other Web pages link to that page.

Here are some ways to build trust, and succeed in link-building:

1. Create pages that offer real value to unique audiences.
2. Make them findable and worth linking to for these audiences.
3. Have those pages support your integrated Web presence and extended marketing efforts.

Depending on your audiences, this might mean creating an array of unique landing pages optimized toward specific use cases and associating those pages with unique and likely search terms.

Let's say that you offer a suite of mass cards and devotional items and you want to raise the search ranking of your home page. First, you can create an array of landing pages targeted toward specific religious holidays or life-stage events (wedding bouquets, baby gifts, funerals, anniversaries). Link once—and only once—from those landing pages to your homepage, and then begin promoting those pages in relevant marketing materials and outreach. As people find those pages and link to them, the trust that those links carry will travel up the chain and add value to your homepage, raising its search rank.

- Plan and be consistent with keywords across all of your communications. Planning and committing to specific keywords is a cornerstone of effective link-building and your overall search marketing mix. Determine the terms best associated with your use cases or likely search parameters, and use them consistently across your content.

The long tail is particularly valuable for keywords and SEO. The trick is to determine the best keyword phrases for a niche market you are targeting, because these will have the least competition—helping you to rank higher in the results—and the greatest potential rewards in terms of conversions. An example is "marketing agency" versus "B-to-B tech marketing agency San Francisco." You should own your chosen keywords and think of them as working together to reinforce each other from a search perspective.

Developing an integrated content strategy and planning onsite, online and social content around your strongest keywords will, over time, contribute to the strength of your ranking—while also helping you message clearly and consistently as your page rank rises.

- The first link is the one that counts. Search engines only count links to unique URLs, so there's no need to link to the same page multiple times in the same content. The other links in your content should be to different pages of your site.
- Avoid "click here." The words "click here" are meaningless in terms of ranking. Go back to those keywords you've developed and make those your linked text.
- Do what's right, analyze and repeat. Message respectfully, authentically and generously. Partner wisely with influencers. Build community. Then test your results to learn what actions—and influencers—best helped you get the job done. Some easy measurement tools are Google Analytics and Google rankings. Your SEO results will reflect the clarity and focus of all your communications—online, offline and at all points at your users 'touches' you.
- Don't create messages for the search engines. Clogging up a Web page with repetitive terms designed to snag attention from search engines is not effective. Even if repetition and buzzword clutter rings a search engine's bells—and, increasingly, it does not—it won't resonate well with visitors once they arrive on your page. Despite of some companies' pretty aggressive SEO techniques, people still know when they land on a page that's written for search engines and not for human beings. They may have found the page, but they don't typically convert.

Instead, marketers should think about the audience they serve and its needs. Create value for these markets and invest in sharing this value with interested parties through an active online presence and integrated messaging, PR, social and partner communications.

The result? A welcoming, informative landing page that real users can understand and engage with—and that others will point to—so you attract and convert at satisfying levels.

- Avoid paid linkbacks. Some vendors offer to sell linkbacks in order to raise your ranking. Don't fall for it. They may offer hundreds of links pointing to your page from their vast networks of global Web pages, but those pages are created solely for the purpose of pointing to other sites and have no intrinsic rank or trust. They may link to you, but because these pages have no real value—who would link to them?—they are incapable of passing along any real value.

In fact, they can actually carry a negative ranking—search engines, remember, are always getting smarter—that can reduce the value of your page, which means you'd be paying to hurt your own ranking. Don't waste time or money with offers to raise your rank through mass linkbacks.

The same goes for websites or individuals that offer to trade links. Trading links with reputable, well-established sites is good. But be very careful with unsolicited requests to trade links with sites outside of your niche market. If you do trade links, make sure the other site is professional and has good content. It

needs to build your trust. Also, keep an eye on those links. Check in regularly—perhaps once a month—to make sure they sustain those links and don't remove them once you link to them.

It takes a sound strategy, patience and competent implementation to succeed. Whether you plan to carry out a linkbuilding strategy on your own, or with outside professional counsel, following these suggestions will help make your pages rise up through the 'ranks.'