

10 steps to building links to your site

Marketing / Craig Fifield

It's the online equivalent of word-of-mouth advertising. And just like its offline cousin, it's the most effective way to get new business.

This advertising mode is known as "link building," and it involves getting other Web sites to link to your site. It's like one of your neighbors recommending a good plumber or handyman; it carries more weight than if a person just stumbled across your Web site.

In today's world, there is much more to good search engine listings than simply [optimizing your site for keywords](#).

In order to keep searchers happy, search engines are always developing ways to make their results more relevant. In the last couple of years, links have become increasingly more important to the engines because they see links as an endorsement of your site by other Web sites. Think about it for a minute: Would you link to a site you didn't like?

This concept is referred to as "link popularity." Based on the links pointing to your site, the search engines either increase or decrease how relevant your site is for particular keyword searches.

Obviously, you want to increase your site's relevancy, right? Good. That's the goal here: to make sure you start building the right kind of links for your site in order to improve your search-engine results.

To this day, the best way to build links is still doing it by hand. Here are the steps you should follow when building links:

1. Set a goal.

Link building takes a lot of time, but it is very effective and easy to do, so you want to keep at it. Set a goal for the number of links you want as a way to stay motivated through the process.

Depending on the sites you ask and your approach, your results will vary. But a general rule of thumb is to set your linking goal at four-to-six times higher than the number of links you actually want to receive. You need to set your goal higher because most sites will not want to trade links, for various reasons.

2. Make sure your site is worth a link.

This means your site must offer something of value to entice other sites to link to yours.

If all your site does is sell products or services, you need to get busy creating some additional linkable content. Examples of linkable content include how-to articles, product reviews, tools, tips and so on. Creating content can be tough, but if you don't have some on your site already, you've got to do it. Adding linkable content not only will encourage others to link to your site, but it will improve the overall quality of your site for your visitors.

Make it easy on yourself by writing about something you know that relates to your site. This column is a perfect example. It teaches without trying to sell something. The best part of

creating linkable content is that if you do it well enough, you will find that people will link to your site without you even asking, and that's the easiest way to build links.

You're not a writer? You can always add free tools or free downloads. Also, consider creating a links page prior to requesting a link trade with a site. You can usually expect a better reception from a potential link partner if they can see where you will place the link to their site.

3. Determine the type of sites you want to trade links with.

This takes some thought. You need to figure out all of the different types of sites that could potentially trade links with you. Focus on sites that are related to your target market.

Here's a good example:

I worked on a site that sold sunglasses, so I approached sites that sold swimsuits and tanning lotions, but not sunglasses. Once we accumulated links from those sites, we then developed a section of our site on eye protection and asked for links from all of the sites we could find that addressed eye protection. In the end, we significantly increased the number of links to our site from other sites in our target market. Plus, we added about 10 additional pages of content to our site that our visitors enjoyed and we continue to link to. This helps significantly in search-engine placements.

4. Get equipped to evaluate your link partners.

To make the most of your efforts, you don't want to spend too much time going after links from sites that the search engines don't think are valuable. While it isn't perfect, the [Google Toolbar](#) can help you decide which sites are quality link partners and which aren't.

The toolbar integrates with your Web browser. It helps you by displaying the "page rank" of each site you visit. Put simply, page rank is a rough indicator of what Google thinks of a site. You can rest assured that if Google thinks it is a good site, it probably is.

The higher a page ranks the better. One strategy is to try to link up with sites that have pages ranked as high as or higher than your own.

5. Locate quality link partners.

There are many ways to find link partners, but the easiest way to find quality link partners quickly is to start at [Open Directory](#) and [Yahoo!](#). Open Directory and Yahoo! are good places to start for three reasons:

- These directories are both so difficult to get listed in that each potential link partner you find there is likely to be of a higher quality than those you would find elsewhere.
- Yahoo! and Open Directory greatly boost a site's link popularity when they list a site. Your site will receive a little bit of that boost each time someone from one of those directories links to you.
- The links you build don't help your link popularity in the search engines unless the engines know about the link. The search engines crawl the sites listed in Yahoo! and Open Directory on a regular basis, so by starting your linking campaign here you can be sure the search engines will find you new links quickly.

To find partners, simply start searching for terms that are related to the types of link partners you decided are best (step No. 3 above). While surfing your potential partner's Web site, keep your eye on their page rank (step No. 4).

6. Organize your findings.

Again, there are many ways to do this, but it's always a good idea to keep it simple. Use a spreadsheet to keep track of the following:

- Full name of site owner or Webmaster.
- E-mail address of the site owner or Webmaster.
- Home page URL of link partner.
- URL of the page where you think your link belongs and why you think it belongs there.
- Page rank of the page where you think your link belongs.
- Something unique that you liked about the site.
- Date of initial link request.

For many sites, much of this information will not be available, but you should try to find as much of it as you can.

7. Prepare for contact.

Now that you have a list of potential link partners, go through the list and send a custom e-mail to each one requesting that you trade links. Do not send a generic e-mail requesting a link; it will not get a response. Your link request should mention the following, most of which comes from your spreadsheet (step No. 4):

- Something you liked about their site; compliments go a long way.
- Why you think your link belongs on their site.
- The URL to exactly where you think your link fits on their site.
- The URL of where you'll be placing their link on your site.
- How you would like them to link to you. Provide a sample link and description. The easier you make it, the more likely they will post it.

8. Check for links.

When building links, you are dealing with real people, so it can take some time. You may need to wait a month or longer before checking to see if anyone has linked to your site from your new partner. Usually it is best to do this step by hand, but you can use a [link popularity tool](#) if you have a lot to check.

9. Follow up with the cream of the crop.

Once a month has passed, follow up with each site that hasn't linked to you yet. Save time and only follow up with the cream of the crop — those in your spreadsheet with the highest page ranks.

10. Set a schedule.

You will find it easier to keep building links if you put yourself on some sort of link-building schedule. Consider doing a certain small amount (30 to 60 minutes) of link building each

day. It will help prevent burnout, which is inevitable if you try to do your entire campaign in a couple of days.

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