



The Art of Link Building

A Hands-On Guide





Link Building: Staying Current in a Shifting Landscape

When it comes to search engine optimization (SEO), it all comes down to the 800-pound gorilla: Google. Google is the main arbiter of value in the universe of Internet websites. Google changes how it weighs and assigns value on a regular basis, which means that what you were doing last year may hurt you next year, depending on Google's latest efforts to assure that it has fairly assessed the true value of each site. This is not capricious on Google's part, just good business. The trust that a Google user places in the quality of the search results brings them back to Google time and again. This allows Google to continue to expose users to paid advertising on the Google site, which is the largest part of Google's overall income stream.

Early on in the history of Google, founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin created a method of determining how sites relate to other sites in the web as a whole. They called this concept PageRank. Google's notion was that links should stand as a vote of support for the value of a page because someone took the time and trouble to create the link and point it at your site. To be counted as valid, the link had to come from another site with some relationship to your site in terms of type of business, field, area of expertise, etc. The higher the PageRank of the referring site, the greater the value assigned to the link.

PageRank separated Google from the likes of Yahoo or other search engines, and immediately provided Google users with more accurate and valuable results. The original calculation of PageRank value drove the idea in the SEO world that more links were always better, no matter where they came from.

As a result, a lot of people approached link building in a mechanical manner. People sent out thousands of emails (all worded the same) to thousands of websites, inviting them to link to your site in exchange for your link to theirs. The idea was that the dumb spiders sent out by search engines would just count up the links. More links equal higher value, thus propelling your heavily linked site to the top of the heap.

Google viewed this practice with disapproval, and for good reason. Having a chaotic

collection of retail stores, auto supply companies and dating services linking to your insurance site was a meaningless guide to the value of your site to users. Google was looking for ways to accurately assess how valuable the content of your site was to your intended audience.

Google has tweaked its ranking algorithm several times over the years. Another innovation Google introduced was the concept of demerits for trying to game the system. Links from unrelated sites or other attempts to artificially pump up value now lead to a devaluing of your PageRank. But Google also says you need more links to achieve higher ranking, so people continue to try to find ways to game the system—leading Google to further tweak their ranking algorithm. This is likely to continue until people run out of sneaky ideas—which means forever.



Link Building and Social Media

Successful link building requires a clear understanding of Google's criteria for a high PageRank (See Figure 1).

Good content leads the way to successful link development. If you are offering value to your intended audience and offering it in an attractive and accessible manner, people will naturally want to link to your site. Having the greatest content in the world, however, won't help if people don't know about it.

Here is where link building begins to overlap with social media. Google looks at social media as one of the ways to assign value to your site. How many people are talking about it? Are they talking positively or negatively? More importantly, who is talking about it—are the people considered experts or gurus in your field? Are these comments one-offs, or do conversations continue over time? All these are taken into consideration.

Social media makes link building easier—and harder at the same time. Social media is an extremely crowded and disorganized space, and you have no control over it. There are tools you can use to analyze and understand social media, but it's a real struggle to stand out from the background noise and stake a claim.

The tools that are available to help manage social media help primarily with scheduling

content and understanding who is within the social media space. They can help identify leaders within social media, for instance, and provide analytics to tell you if your social media content is attracting followers or people who want to engage with you. What these tools don't do is help you to build links. That has become a hands-on, handcrafted activity that requires time, attention and persistence. There is no automated way to successfully build links, period.

Social media tools don't help with developing content, and content is the source of value. Make sure you are contributing original, interesting and valuable content to the social media sphere (and this includes your blog). It's also fine to be a content "curator": that is, to cast a wide net to discover content that your audience will find interesting and direct them to it via links. Don't try to present facts and figures as your own unless you have done the research yourself. Give credit where credit is due—and if it's due to you, so much the better.



Figure 1: The art of successful link building rests on a clear understanding of Google's criteria for a high PageRank.

STEP 1

Identify the gurus and thought leaders in your space.

You can use keyword searches to identify the people in your field whose content and ideas are considered valuable. This can be determined in some cases by number of followers or friends or connections associated with their social media feeds. Study your competitors and who follows them. Find out who is talking about your company, products, or services. Once you've identified them, take a look at their sites as well. Are they high-ranking sites? Do they offer valuable original content?

STEP 2

Reach out.

Reach out to the thought leaders and gurus. Try to get a conversation going. Initially, this will be at the cocktail-party level—but don't start tooting your own horn too early. If your "conversation" is all about me, me, me, expect them to lose interest quickly. This is about establishing relationships. Once you've got a conversation going, develop a unique selling proposition that will resonate with each target (no cookie cutter solutions here). Only then begin to suggest a link to your site and vice versa. Don't pretend you don't have an agenda; everyone has an agenda. But make sure they know it's about them, too. Mutual interest and mutual benefit is the theme.

If you were under the impression that building links or social media would be quick, automated and easy, now is the time to shed the illusion. This is a time-consuming, painstaking process. We all expected that computers would make our jobs easier and faster through automation. Now the time we saved must be spent on relationship building. It does pay off in the end.

STEP 3

Take advantage of Google+

Google+ is not the most active or fastest-growing social media channel, but it is steadily growing in popularity. It is in a separate category from other popular social media sites like Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn because Google places more weight on Google+ than it does on the others. This might be nepotism, but when in Googleland, do as Google does. Link your blog to your Google+ page just as you would to Facebook or Twitter. Have a Google+ button on your blog.

Challenges

You might be in a space where there are few existing conversations or gurus. On the one hand, this is a challenge because you have to build that space yourself. On the other hand, it provides a great opportunity to become the guru yourself.

Try more traditional link building—but don't go back to the mass-emailing campaigns of yesterday. You still need to know to whom you are reaching out, and you need to build a relationship before you ask for a link. Give them a reason to want to connect with you. It's still a one-on-one process, and it takes time.

Your content needs to be less oriented to your company and your products or services, and more company-agnostic. As one of a few speakers for your field in the noisy social media universe, you must stand out as providing content of solid value and interest, or you will appear to be a huckster, which will not assist you in building either an audience or links.

In a sparsely populated field, you will also find that social media tools are less useful, suffering from negative economies of scale. They are still useful for organizing and scheduling content, though.

You May Be Surprised

Link- and relationship-building have some value in gaining an understanding of your marketplace, but you may wind up seeing it from a new standpoint. We worked on a social media campaign (also intended to help with link building) with a startup company in ophthalmic pharmaceuticals whose first product addressed a condition known as “dry eye.”

We began looking for the people on Twitter that the company thought would be most interested in a solution for dry eye: ophthalmologists, optometrists and general practitioners. To everyone's amazement, these were not the people talking about dry eye solutions. The majority of Tweets were from day spas offering various treatments, not the people to whom the company wanted to market its product. Apart from day spas, the rest of the conversations in social media were from people complaining about having dry eye (again, not the desired contact at this point in the company's life cycle). This discovery shifted the company's entire game plan and it started looking for investors and business development partners, rather than for thought leaders.

Link Creation Best Practices

When you are developing links, there are some finer points you need to know. The anchor text for inbound links should not be the same. Google regards identical anchor text as mechanical link building, which means these links will be discounted. Have several target pages with interesting content. As always when creating any sort of outbound communications, keep SEO principles in mind and come up with phrases you would like to appear on a search engine and that best describe their target pages.

Press releases are the exception to this rule. Google has figured out that press releases are distributed widely, all with the same anchor text in key links. They also know that press releases often are picked up and used as-is, so the identical linking verbiage will appear everywhere the press release appears. Google does not discount these links if they derive from a press release.

The best place to get valuable links is social media. However, Google's scheme for valuing these links is not straightforward. Social media links are transient in nature, easily drowned out by other conversations. To effectively take advantage of social media as a link-building mechanism, you must hold a continued conversation around your product or service while still offering value in other aspects of the discussion.

Leaving comments on blogs does nothing for your PageRank because so many people have abused this means of creating links in the past. The primary link, the link you put out in your blog post, is generally coded as a "nofollow," link. A "nofollow" link tells Google and the other search engines not to follow the link or to include it in the Google database. As such, these links are not assigned any value. However, when someone re-Tweets the link or shares it via a blog post (not a comment) Google will notice these secondary and tertiary links and begin to assign value to them.

Use link-building tools like Moz.com's Open Site Explorer or MajesticSEO.com to identify and assess the value of new sites and authors from whom you are hoping to get a link. Both of these tools will help you to analyze your site's current in-bound link profile, compare it to your top competitors, and identify sites and authors that you can target to build new links.

Approach building a list of targets in a step-by-step process:

- ✓ Run a report on your domain and on the top pages within your domain to which you want to drive traffic and links.
- ✓ Run the same report on your top competitors in the search results.
- ✓ Compare the reports for overlap and look for areas that do not currently link to your site.
- ✓ Look at the different metrics that the tools supply (“Citation Flow” and “Trust Flow” on MajesticSEO (see Figure 2) and “Page Authority” and “Domain Authority” on Open Site Explorer (see Figure 3).
- ✓ Look at the total number of backlinks to each of the domains you are researching and look at the total number of referring domains as well. The combination of these two metrics combined with the “Flow/Authority” metrics will allow you to begin to understand which sites are viewed by Google and the other engines as having quality and authority. The higher the authority a site has, the more value a link from it is.
- ✓ Create a unique approach to each site that you are targeting. Come up with a compelling reason that a link to your site will benefit the users of your target site. Give them a business reason to take the time and effort to create a link.
- ✓ Try to identify individuals at the sites that you are targeting and address them directly.
- ✓ Dedicate enough time to the process to get results. It takes a fair number of touches to get a new link and does not generally happen overnight. Three to six months of consistent work on link building is generally required to be successful.
- ✓ Use existing outreach to build links in the meantime. If your site is publishing valuable information on a regular basis, make sure to include a link back to the relevant page on your site in every outbound communication.

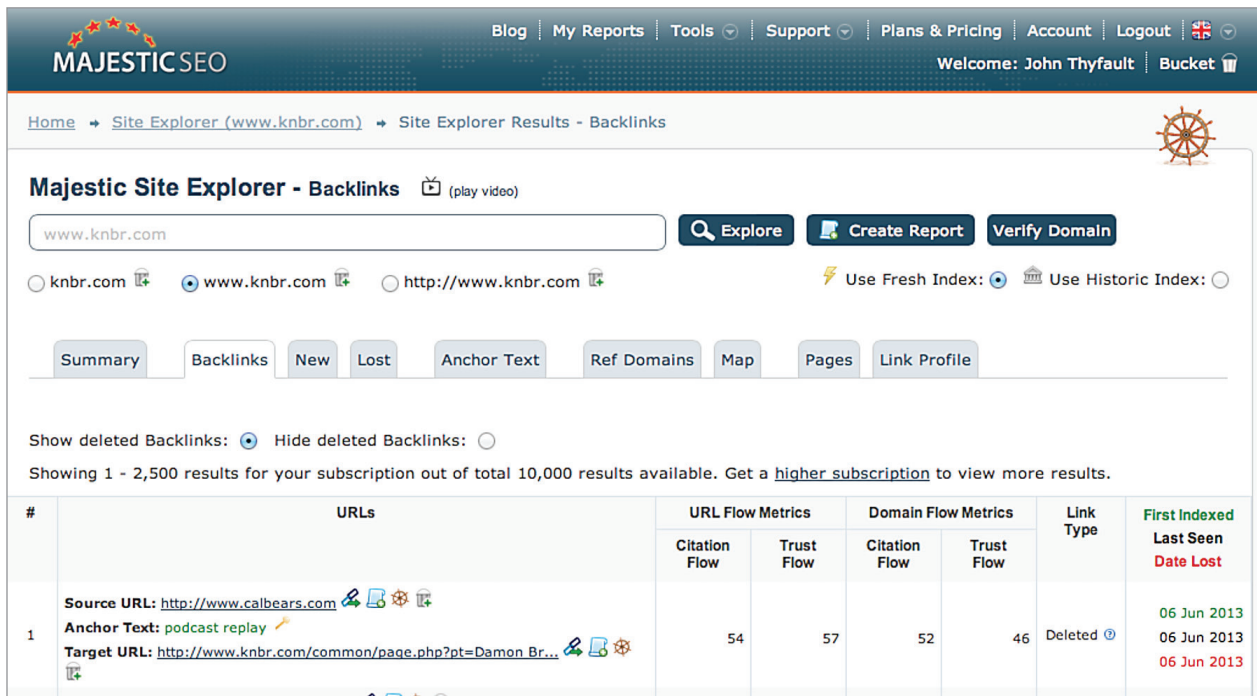


Figure 2: Link Analytics Tools To Help Assess Value of Links—MajesticSEO.com

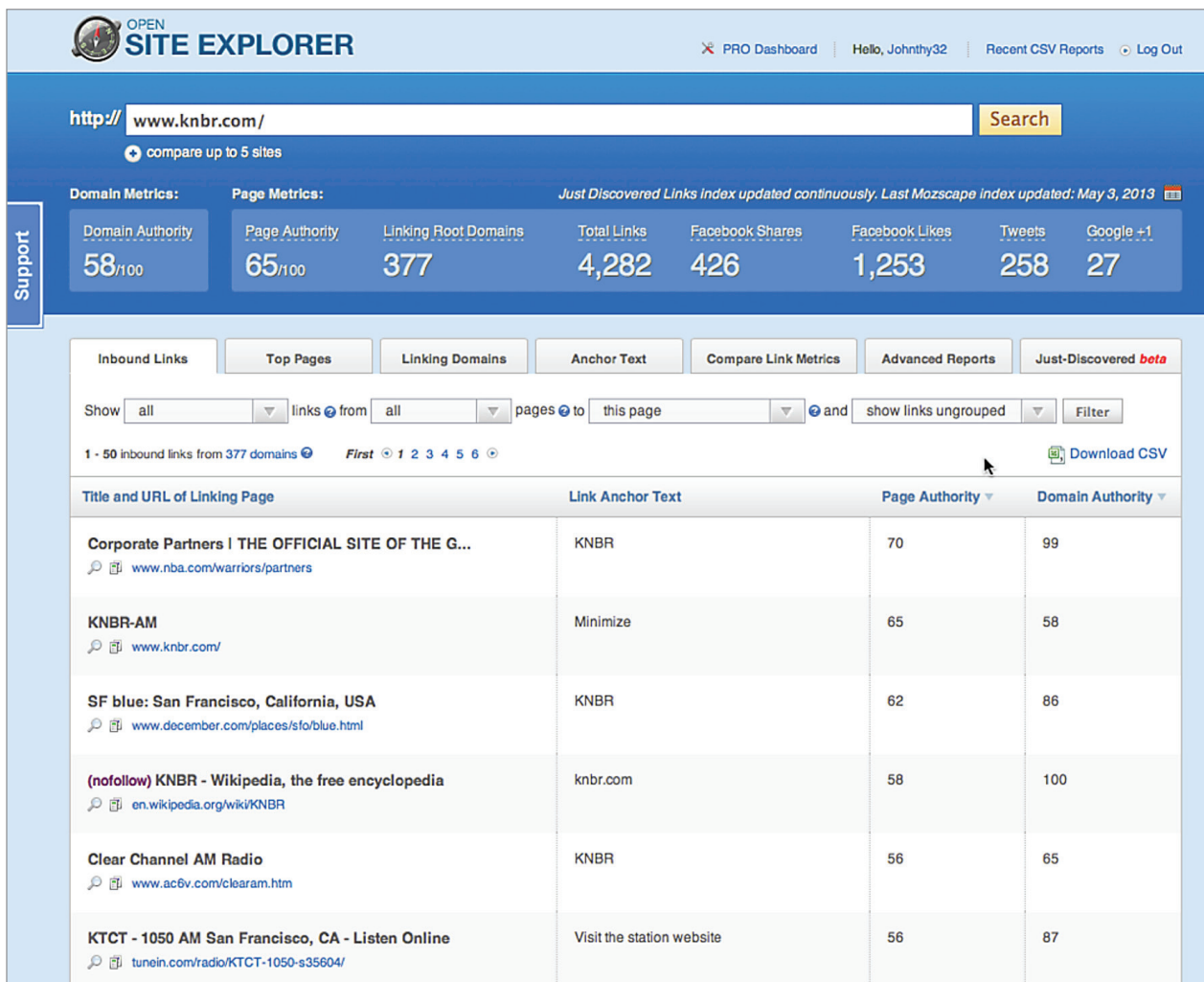


Figure 3: Link Analytics Tools To Help Assess Value of Links—Moz.com's Open Site Explorer

Rules to Link By

To conclude, we offer some guidelines to remember while you are building links:

1 Stay current with Google's algorithm changes. Check sites such as Search Engine (www.searchengineland.com) and SEOmoz (www.seomoz.com), and Webmaster World (www.webmasterworld.com) from time to time to check on the latest changes.

2 Have a dedicated team working on social media and make sure that they are aware of the power of link building as part of the social media process. There are many reasons a company may want to use social media in addition to link building. It is a time-consuming, detailed, hands-on process that requires both strategic skills and dogged persistence. Don't imagine you will achieve outstanding results by skimping on resources.

3 There are no shortcuts. Link building is not a mass media effort and automation does not assist with link building (though it may assist with other aspects of social media).

4 Remember that links must be built in an organic manner. Seek out thought leaders and opinion makers in your field and build relationships with them (and key followers).

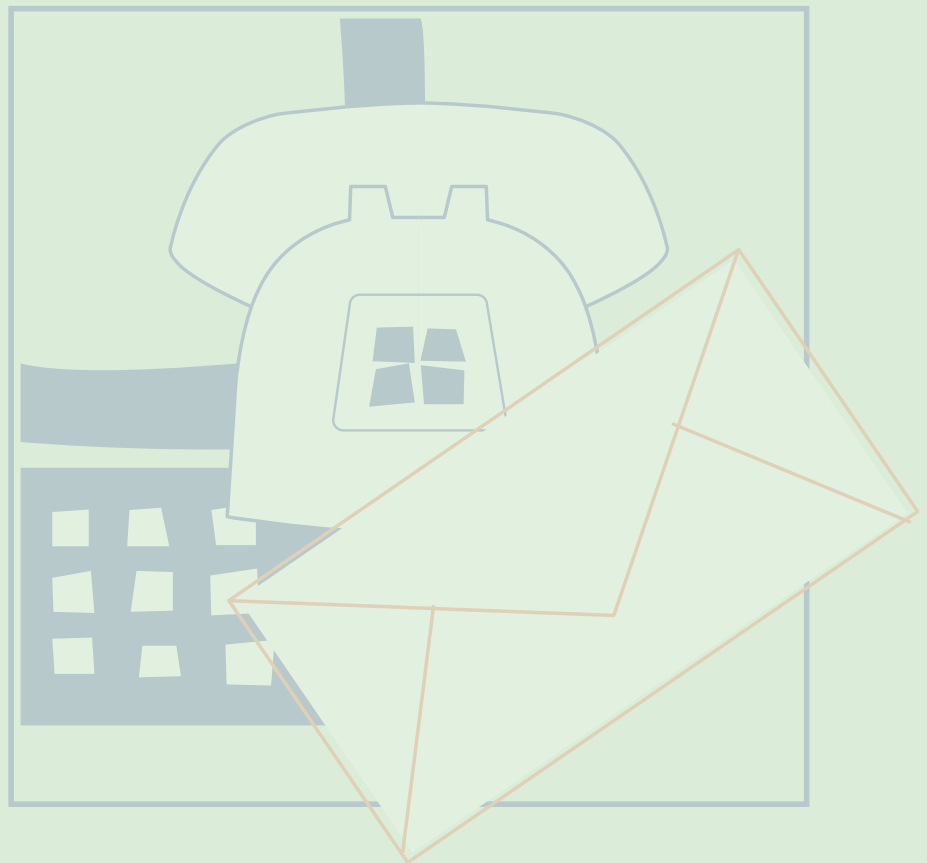
5 Invest in developing original content that will be valued by your target audience. Good content is the foundation for building links and building PageRank.

About...

The insights in this report are based on hundreds of engagements with clients in a range of industries. They represent best practices from our own experience. We hope they will save you the time and expense required for trial-and-error that few companies can afford in these economic times. Beasley Direct Marketing is a full service online and direct marketing agency. We offer a full range of marketing services and we specialize in search engine optimization and pay-per-click advertising management. Feel free to contact us if there's anything we can do to help you.

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