



Build a Link-Friendly Website

Incoming links are crucial to your SEO program, but how Google and Bing use them has changed. *by Don Kreski*

YOU'VE OPTIMIZED YOUR website, set it up for local search and at least considered a pay-per-click program. It's time to get involved with a link exchange or buy incoming links from a broker, right?

Maybe not. "While it's true that Google and Bing put a premium on the links coming into websites, they're also very aware of the tricks webmasters play to try to inflate their rankings," explains Tim Grant, director of search and social media strategy at Gamma Partners in Chicago. Though the links you secure can make all the difference in whether you land on page one of the search results, the search engines are looking for legitimate links and will do their utmost to prevent purchased or traded links from having an influence.

So is there anything integrators can do to boost the number of quality links coming into their websites?

A Working Links Strategy

The first thing we need to understand if we're going to influence the links coming into our websites is that content has never been more important than now. Compel-

ling content will not only attract visitors, but it will encourage them to tell their friends and the public about it via their blogs, Twitter feeds, Facebook or LinkedIn groups, or industry newsletters, websites

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and other publications. "This process happens naturally and to some degree will happen by itself," says Grant. "That's really what the search engines have in mind when they track incoming links — that people create them spontaneously in

order to help others find good content."

For that reason, any time you add useful pages to your website, whether how-to-it articles or videos, explanations of new technology, or case histories that show your unique solutions, you've taken the first step. What's next?

Social sites. Once you've created a great article, you need to let people know. It's not enough to post it to a blog and hope someone finds it, unless you have already have a blog with hundreds or thousands of readers. Help the process along by adding an excerpt and a link to your article in your email newsletter. Post an excerpt and link to the LinkedIn groups you've joined. If you have a Twitter feed, tweet a link, or add a link to your Facebook news feed.

To make something "go viral" takes two steps. First you have to create an article or video that's extremely compelling in some way. Then you have to get it started via links in the social and email feeds you've built. Going viral, however, is very rare, but there are other ways to grow steadily. If, say, you create a series of articles that are just plain useful and disseminate

links to them to a reasonable number of customers and prospects, you can expect them to add those links to their social sites and websites, as well as emailing them to friends and colleagues.

Your PR program. The trade press can be a very useful source of incoming links, especially since Google and Bing value a small number of links from high-quality sources much more than a large number of links from everyone else.

If you place an article, make sure you include a link to be added to the publication's online edition. When you do, don't just ask for a link to your home page. Link to (or create) a page offering more information on the topic the article is about. For example, if you place a case history about a video conferencing room, ask for a link to your video conferencing services page.

In the same way, when you send a press release be sure to include one or more of the key phrases you're targeting for that topic and optimize the release in the same way you would a web page. Then link from the press release to the appropriate product or services page — one optimized for the same key terms as the release.

One caution from Grant: "Google has the notion that good content is produced once and not overly reproduced. If your release is picked up by 50 websites, they will probably credit the link only once."

Forums and news sites. It's also possible to include links to your website in the comments you post to online forums and news stories. These can be valuable, but watch out for "no follow" links.

"Some blogs and forums will state, in their terms of service, that all outbound links are 'no follow,'" Grant explains. "They don't want to be loaded up with self-serving posts, so they insert code that asks Google and Bing not to index outbound links." A well-placed comment on a site like this may still build attention for your company, but the search engines do respect these requests.

Citation sources. With the emphasis today on local search, your listings in websites like InfoUSA are very valuable. "The more often that authoritative citation sites consistently reflect the data you've submitted to Google Plus Business and the Bing Business Portal, the more

5 Steps to Making Social Media Work

WE'VE ALL SEEN the articles in magazines and on the web proclaiming that social media is the marketing wave of the future. With so many articles hitting us at once, it's easy to believe that if we are not investing a substantial portion of our marketing effort in social media, we're wasting our time.

Here are some things you can do to make the most of your social marketing.

- » **Produce compelling content, or don't bother.** Having information that is consistently useful, unique, new or relevant is what will attract people to your Facebook, Twitter, Google+ or other social media page. Readers' time is valuable and if you aren't giving them something useful and interesting, you'll be tuned out fast.
- » **Have a single voice.** If you write a newsletter, Facebook updates, Twitter posts as well as other outlets, it helps you to have a single person writing all of them. Because social media is about engagement, and having a single voice encourages relationship.
- » **Have a purpose for each outlet.** The temptation is to put basically the same information on each social media outlet. But consider focusing each outlet slightly differently. You might, for instance, focus on cool projects and technology on your Facebook page, and use Twitter to let people know about upgrades or technical information. This has proven to be a successful strategy for many companies.
- » **Respond quickly.** Regular users of social media check it often. They expect responses quickly. Wait a few days to respond and you've lost them as a reader. A good rule of thumb is to check and respond to readers at least a couple of times a day.
- » **Simplify the process.** One of the things that surprises people moving into social media is how much time (and money) it takes to do well. Investing in a web-based platform to schedule, publish and respond can save you a lot of time and money, and help you see the cumulative trends.

The myth of social media is that it's free. But like all successful marketing, it takes an investment in thinking about what you are doing, whom you are trying to reach, and what would make a difference to them. And it takes an investment in a good writer taking real time to do this every day. Give social media time to work. Few social media campaigns take off quickly. —Tom Atkins

likely they will find you to be credible," says Grant, "and the more likely you are to appear in search results."

Search directories. "At one time, Google put a lot of faith in directories like the *Open Directory Project* or the *Yahoo! Search Directory*," says Grant, because the best of these have human editors who examine the websites. "The problem is that new directories popped up right and left and sold the right to be included." There are several directories, however, that still hold value.

Industry websites. Don't overlook links from InfoComm, NSCA, CEDIA and other trade groups, from each of your suppliers and from your Chamber of Commerce. Do be careful of reciprocal links, where you give a link to a supplier or partner in exchange for a link from them. Google is on to this trick, too, and will devalue an incoming link if it finds one going the other way.

An Ongoing Investment

As you consider a links campaign, it's important to note that soliciting links is an ongoing process. "Google wants to present the latest and greatest search results, and so they want sites that continually update their content," Grant explains. "They assume that such sites will attract a steady stream of credible incoming links, and they highly value sites that do."

It's much better to produce a few articles, a few press releases and a few social feeds every month than a whole lot of them just once. If you stay consistent about producing content, you can take your optimized website one more step ahead of your competitors. **CI**

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