Second Edition

The Art of
SEO

Mastering Search Engine Optimization

Free Sampler

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CONTENTS

Creating Link-Worthy Content and Link Marketing

One way to think about on-page SEO is that it is like obtaining admission to an event in which you are competing. It has no bearing on how you do within the competition itself, but you don't get to play in the game without it. If this analogy is true, then what is it that does drive your success in the competition (i.e., high rankings in the SERPs)? In today's search environment, the main driving factors are inbound links, social signals, and user engagement with your content.

Links remain the single largest factor in determining search rankings. Links also have a multidimensional impact. For example, the strength of a site's inbound links determines how frequently and how deeply that site is crawled.

In addition, each link's *context* (its location within the page, anchor text, surrounding text, etc.) is taken into account when determining the relevance of the link. And links can convey trust, helping to overcome potential spam designations (which can torpedo a site's SEO success).

Link building is the practice of actively marketing your site with the intent to obtain links from other sites. There are two critical points to remember regarding link building:

- Link building is a fundamental part of SEO. Unless you have an enormously powerful brand (one that attracts links without effort), you will fail without it.
- Link building should never stop. It is an ongoing part of marketing your website.

However, search ranking algorithms are evolving, and social signals and user engagement with your content are also important ranking factors. These new ranking factors will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 8.

How Links Influence Search Engine Rankings

The concept of using links as a way to measure a site's importance was first made popular by Google with the implementation of its PageRank algorithm (others had previously written about it, but Google's rapidly increasing user base popularized it). In simple terms, each link to a web page is a counted as a vote for that page, and the page with the most votes wins.

The key to this concept is the notion that a link represents an "editorial endorsement" of a web document. Search engines rely heavily on editorial votes. However, as publishers learned about the power of links, some started to manipulate them, through a variety of methods. This created situations in which the intent of the link was not editorial in nature, and in turn led to many algorithm enhancements.

To help you understand the origins of link algorithms, the underlying logic of which is still in force today, let's take a look at the original PageRank algorithm in detail.

The Original PageRank Algorithm

The PageRank algorithm was built on the basis of the original PageRank thesis (*http://infolab .stanford.edu/~backrub/google.html*) authored by Sergey Brin and Larry Page while they were undergraduates at Stanford University.

In the simplest terms, the paper states that each link to a web page is a vote for that page. However, votes do not have equal weight. So that you can better understand how this works, we'll explain the PageRank algorithm at a high level. First, all pages are given an innate but tiny amount of PageRank, as shown in Figure 7-1.
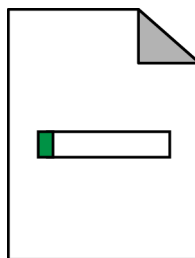
FIGURE 7-1. Some PageRank for every page

Pages can then increase their PageRank by receiving links from other pages, as shown in Figure 7-2.
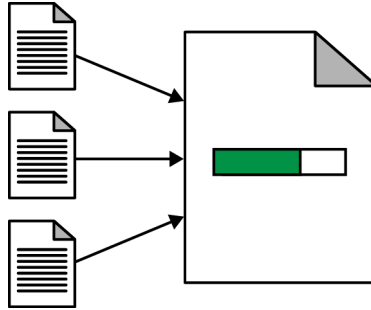
FIGURE 7-2. Pages receiving more PageRank through links

How much PageRank can a page pass on to other pages through links? The total ends up being less than that page's PageRank, so it always keeps a portion for itself. In Figure 7-3, this is represented by *f(x)*, meaning that the passable PageRank is a function of *x*, the total PageRank. In 2009, Matt Cutts wrote a post (*http://www.mattcutts.com/blog/pagerank-sculpting/*) in which he suggested that a page might be able to vote 85% to 90% of its PageRank.
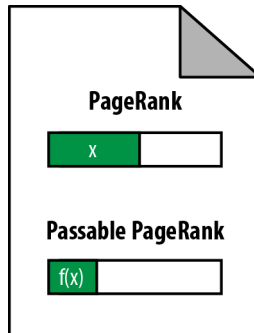
FIGURE 7-3. Some of a page's PageRank is passable to other pages

If this page links to only one other page, it passes all of its passable PageRank to that page, as shown in Figure 7-4, where Page B receives all of the passable PageRank of Page A.

However, the scenario gets more complicated because pages will often link to more than one other page. When that happens, the passable PageRank gets divided among all the pages receiving links. We show that in Figure 7-5, where Page B and Page C each receive half of the passable PageRank of Page A.

In the original PageRank formula, link weight was divided equally among the number of links on a page. This undoubtedly does not hold true today, but it is still valuable in understanding the original intent. Now take a look at Figure 7-6, which depicts a more complex example that shows PageRank flowing back and forth between pages that link to one another.
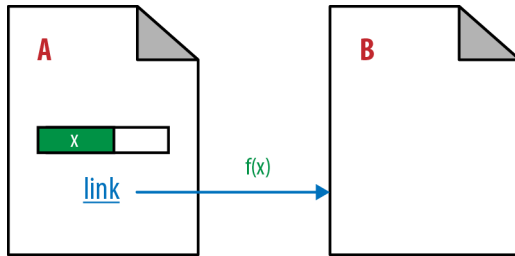
FIGURE 7-4. Passing of PageRank through a link
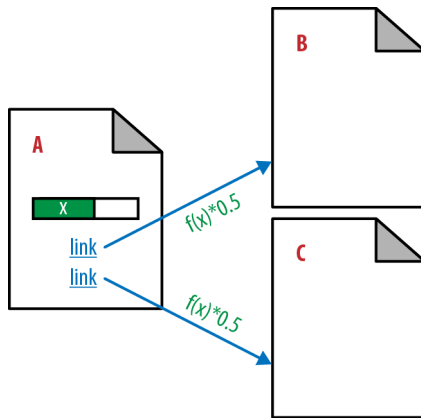
FIGURE 7-5. Passing of PageRank through multiple links

Cross-linking makes the PageRank calculation much more complex. In Figure 7-6, Page B now links back to Page A and passes some of its PageRank, *f(y)*, back to Page A. Figure 7-7 should give you a better understanding of how this affects the PageRank of each page.

The key observation here is that when Page B links to Page A to make the link reciprocal, the PageRank of Page A (*x*) becomes dependent on *f(y)*, the passable PageRank of Page B, which happens to be dependent on *f(x)*. In addition, the PageRank that Page A passes to Page C is affected by the link from Page B to Page A. This makes for a very complicated situation where the calculation of the PageRank of each page on the Web must be determined by recursive analysis.

We have defined new parameters to represent this: *q*, which is the PageRank that accrues to Page B from the link that it has from Page A (after all the iterative calculations are complete); and *z*, which is the PageRank that accrues to Page A from the link that it has from Page B (again, after all iterations are complete).
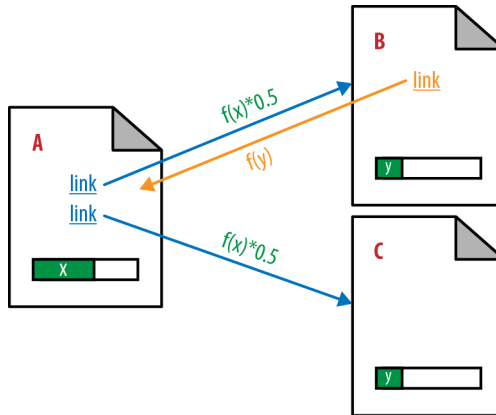
FIGURE 7-6. Cross-linking between pages
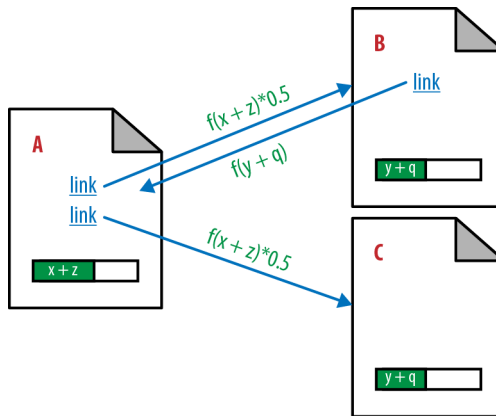
FIGURE 7-7. Iterative PageRank calculations

The scenario in Figure 7-8 adds additional complexity by introducing a link from Page B to Page D. In this example, Pages A, B, and C are internal links on one domain, and Page D represents a different site (shown as Wikipedia). In the original PageRank formula, internal and external links passed PageRank in exactly the same way. This became exposed as a flaw because publishers started to realize that links to other sites were "leaking" PageRank away from their own sites, as you can see in Figure 7-8.

That is, because Page B links to Wikipedia, some of the passable PageRank is sent there, instead of to the other pages that Page B is linking to (Page A in our example). In Figure 7-8, we represent that with the parameter *w*, which is the PageRank not sent to Page A because of the link to Page D.
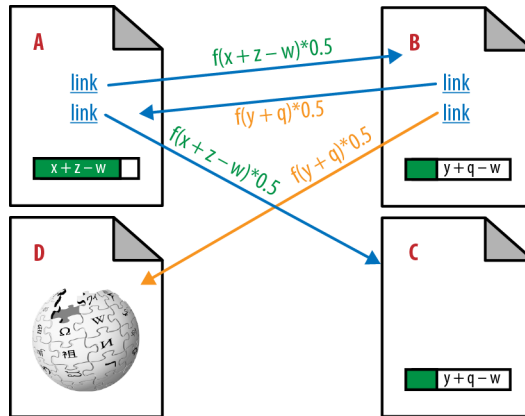
FIGURE 7-8. *PageRank being leaked*

The PageRank "leak" concept represented a fundamental flaw in the algorithm. Once people realized the way PageRank worked, and became aware of leaking PageRank, they became reluctant to link to other websites. Clearly, if a great number of websites adopted this philosophy, it could negatively impact the "links as votes" concept and actually damage the quality of Google's algorithm. Needless to say, Google was quick to correct this flaw to its algorithm, though the methods it used are not known to the public. As a result of these changes, worrying about PageRank leaks is not recommended: quality sites should link to other relevant quality pages around the Web.

Even after these changes, internal links from pages still pass some PageRank, so they still have value, as shown in Figure 7-9.

Google has changed and refined the PageRank algorithm many times. However, familiarity and comfort with the original algorithm are certainly beneficial to those who practice optimization of Google results.

Additional Factors That Influence Link Value

Classic PageRank isn't the only factor that influences the value of a link. In the following subsections, we discuss some additional factors.

Anchor text

Anchor text refers to the clickable part of a link from one web page to another. As an example, Figure 7-10 shows a snapshot of part of the Quicken Loans home page at *http://www .quickenloans.com*.
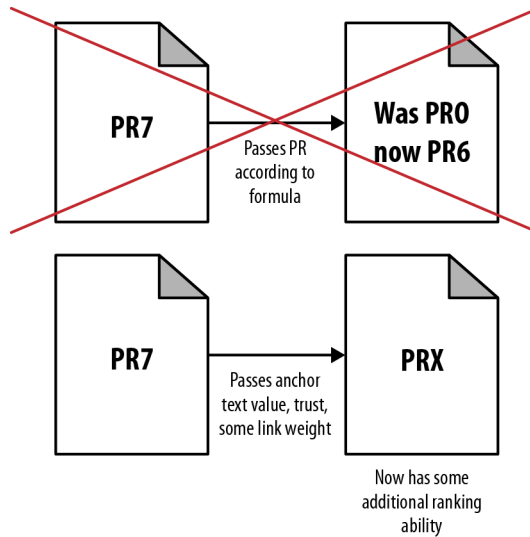
FIGURE 7-9. Internal links still passing some PageRank

FIGURE 7-10. Anchor text: a strong ranking element

The anchor text for the first link in the list of Popular pages in Figure 7-10 is "Refinancing." The search engine uses this anchor text to help it understand what the page receiving the link is about (i.e., in this case the search engine will interpret the link as saying that the page receiving the link is about refinancing).

The impact of anchor text can be quite powerful. For example, if you link to a web page that has minimal search engine–visible content (perhaps it is an all-Flash site), the search engine will still look for signals to determine what the page is about. Inbound anchor text becomes the primary driver in determining the relevance of the page in that scenario.

The power of anchor text also resulted in SEOs engaging in *Google bombing*. The idea here is that if you link to a given web page from many places with the same anchor text, you can get that page to rank for queries related to that anchor text, even if the page is unrelated.

One notorious Google bomb was a campaign that targeted the Whitehouse.gov biography page for George W. Bush with the anchor text *miserable failure*. As a result, that page ranked #1 for searches on *miserable failure* until Google tweaked its algorithm to reduce the effectiveness of this practice.

Relevance

Links that originate from sites/pages on the same topic as the publisher's site, or a closely related topic, are worth more than links that come from sites/pages on unrelated topics.

Think of the relevance of each link as being evaluated in the specific context of the search query a user has just entered. So, if the user enters *used cars in Phoenix* and the publisher has received a link to its Phoenix used cars page that is from the Phoenix Chamber of Commerce, that link will reinforce the search engine's belief that the page really does relate to Phoenix.

Similarly, if the publisher has another link from a magazine site that has done a review of used car websites, this will reinforce the notion that the site should be considered a used car site. Taken in combination, these two links could be powerful in helping the publisher rank for *used cars in Phoenix*.

Authority

This factor has been the subject of much research. One of the more famous papers on the subject, written by Apostolos Gerasoulis and others at Rutgers University and titled "DiscoWeb: Applying Link Analysis to Web Search" (*http://www.cse.lehigh.edu/~brian/pubs/1999/www8/*), became the basis of the Teoma algorithm, which was later acquired by AskJeeves and became part of the Ask algorithm.

What made this algorithm unique was the focus on evaluating links on the basis of their relevance to the linked page. Google's original PageRank algorithm did not incorporate the notion of topical relevance; although it clearly does today, Teoma was in fact the first search engine to offer a commercial implementation of link relevance.

Teoma introduced the notion of *hubs*, which are sites that link to most of the important sites relevant to a particular topic, and *authorities*, which are sites that are linked to by most of the sites relevant to a particular topic.

The key concept here is that each topic area that a user can search on will have authority sites specific to that topic area. The authority sites for used cars are different from the authority sites for baseball.

Refer to Figure 7-11 to get a sense of the difference between hub and authority sites.

So, if the publisher has a site about used cars, it should seek links from websites that the search engines consider to be authorities on used cars (or perhaps more broadly, on cars). However, the search engines will not tell you which sites they consider authoritative, making the publisher's job that much more difficult.
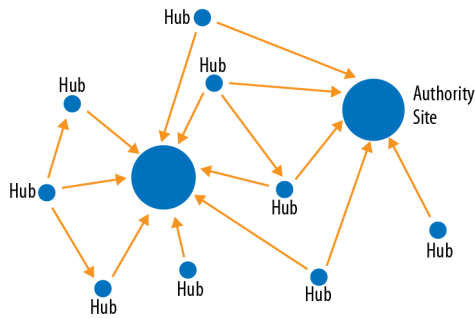
FIGURE 7-11. Hubs and authorities

The model of organizing the Web into topical communities and pinpointing the hubs and authorities is an important one to understand (you can read more about it in Mike Grehan's paper "Filthy Linking Rich!," available at *http://www.search-engine-book.co.uk/filthy_linking_rich .pdf*). The best link builders understand this model and leverage it to their benefit.

Trust

Trust is distinct from authority. Authority, on its own, doesn't sufficiently take into account whether the linking page or the website is easy or difficult for spammers to infiltrate. Trust, on the other hand, does.

Evaluating the trust of a website likely involves reviewing its link neighborhood to see what other trusted sites link to it. More links from other trusted sites would convey more trust.

In 2004, Yahoo! and Stanford University published a paper titled "Combating Web Spam with TrustRank" (*http://www.vldb.org/conf/2004/RS15P3.PDF*). The paper proposed starting with a trusted seed set of pages (selected by manual human review) to perform PageRank analysis, instead of a random set of pages, as was called for in the original PageRank thesis.

Using this tactic removes the inherent risk in using a purely algorithmic approach to determining the trust of a site, and potentially coming up with false positives/negatives. The trust level of a site is based on how many clicks away it is from one or more seed sites. A site that is one click away accrues a lot of trust; two clicks away, a bit less; three clicks away, even less; and so forth. Figure 7-12 illustrates the concept of TrustRank.

The researchers who wrote the TrustRank paper also authored a paper describing the concept of *spam mass* (*http://ilpubs.stanford.edu:8090/697/1/2005-33.pdf*). This paper focuses on evaluating the effect of spammy links on a site's (unadjusted) rankings. The greater the impact of those links, the more likely it is that the site itself is spam. A large percentage of a site's links being purchased is seen as a spam indicator as well. You can also consider the notion of *reverse TrustRank*, where linking to spammy sites will lower a site's TrustRank.

Trusted seeds — 0% spam → Linked to by trusted source — 0.04% spam → 2 links away — 1% spam → 3 links away — 14% spam
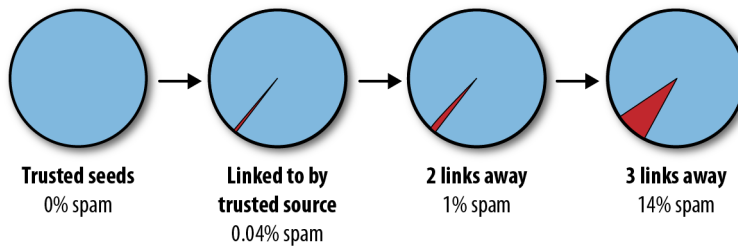
FIGURE 7-12. TrustRank illustrated

It is likely that Google and Bing both use some form of trust measurement to evaluate websites. It is probably done by different means than that outlined in the TrustRank and spam mass papers, and it may be incorporated into the methods they use for calculating authority, but nonetheless, trust is believed to be a significant factor in rankings.

For SEO practitioners, getting measurements of trust can be difficult. Currently, mozTrust, available through SEOmoz's Open Site Explorer, is the best-known publicly available measured estimation of the trust level of a web page.

How Search Engines Use Links

The search engines use links primarily to discover web pages, and count the links as votes for those web pages. But how do they use this information once they acquire it? Let's take a look:

Index inclusion

Search engines need to decide what pages to include in their indexes. Discovering pages by crawling the Web (following links) is one way they discover web pages (another is through the use of XML Sitemap files). In addition, the search engines do not include pages that they deem to be of very low value, because cluttering up their indexes with those pages will not lead to a good experience for their users. The cumulative link value, or link juice, of a page is a factor in making that decision.

Crawl rate/frequency

Search engine spiders go out and crawl a portion of the Web every day. This is no small task, and it starts with deciding where to begin and where to go. Google has publicly indicated that it starts its crawl in reverse PageRank order. In other words, it crawls PageRank 10 sites first, PageRank 9 sites next, and so on. Higher-PageRank sites also get crawled more deeply than other sites. It is likely that Bing starts its crawl with the most important sites first as well.

This would make sense, because changes on the most important sites are the ones the search engines want to discover first. In addition, if a very important site links to a new resource for the first time, the search engines tend to place a lot of trust in that link and

want to factor the new link (vote) into their algorithms quickly. In June 2010, Google released an update to its infrastructure called "Caffeine" that greatly increased Googlebot's crawling capacity and speed (*http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2010/06/our-new-search-index -caffeine.html*), but being higher in the crawl priority queue still matters.

Ranking

Links play a critical role in ranking. For example, consider two sites where the on-page content is equally relevant to a given topic. Perhaps they are the shopping sites *Amazon.com* and (the less popular) *JoesShoppingSite.com* (not a real site).

The search engine needs a way to decide who comes out on top: Amazon or Joe. This is where links come in. Links cast the deciding vote. If more sites, and more important sites, link to Amazon, it must be more important, so Amazon wins.

Further Refining How Search Engines Judge Links

Many aspects are involved in evaluating a link. As we just outlined, the most commonly understood ones are authority, relevance, trust, and anchor text. However, other factors also come into play.

Additional Link Evaluation Criteria

In the following subsections, we discuss some of the more important additional factors search engines consider when evaluating a link's value.

Source independence

A link from your own site back to your own site is, of course, not an independent editorial vote for your site. Put another way, the search engines assume that you will vouch for your own site.

Think about your site as having an accumulated total link juice based on all the links it has received from third-party websites, and your internal linking structure as the way you allocate that juice to pages on your site. Your internal linking structure is incredibly important, but it does little if anything to build the total link juice of your site.

In contrast, links from a truly independent source carry much more weight. Suppose you have multiple websites. You might think that linking from one to another would be a good way of boosting its link juice, but in fact the search engines are pretty good at determining that the two sites are related. Perhaps they have common data in the Whois records (such as the same servers or contact information). Search engines can use this type of signal to treat cross-links between those sites more like internal links than inbound links earned by merit.

Even if you have completely different Whois records for your websites, but they all cross-link to each other, the search engines can detect this pattern easily. Keep in mind that a website with no independent third-party links into it has no link power to vote for other sites.

If the search engine sees a cluster of sites that heavily cross-link and many of the sites in the cluster have no or few incoming links to them, the links from those sites may well be ignored.

Conceptually, you can think of such a cluster of sites as a single site. Cross-links between them can be algorithmically treated as internal links, with those links not adding to the total link juice scores for any of the sites. The cluster would be evaluated based on the inbound links to the cluster.

Of course, there are many different ways to implement a cluster of websites, but there is no SEO value gained by building a large number of sites just to cross-link them with each other, unless the sites receive links from other websites outside of the cluster.

Linking domains

Obtaining an editorially given link to your site from a third-party website is always a good thing. But if more links are better, why not get links from as many pages on those sites as you can? In theory, this is a good idea, but search engines do not give the same weight to each additional link from the same website.

In other words, 100 links from one domain are not as good as one link each from 100 domains, if you assume that all other factors are equal. The basic reason for this is that the multiple links on one site most likely represent one editorial vote. In other words, it is highly likely that one person made the decision, whereas 100 different sites may have involved 100 different people each making their own editorial decision. Furthermore, a link that appears on every page of a website (a sitewide link) is more likely to have been paid for, to have been acquired in return for some other form of compensation or as a result of a business relationship, or to be an indication of common ownership.

So, multiple links from one domain are still useful to you, but the value per added link in evaluating the importance of your website diminishes as the quantity of links goes up. One hundred links from one domain might carry the total weight of one link from 5 to 10 domains. Increasing the number of links on one domain to your site from 100 to 1,000 might not help you at all; the impact may in fact be negative if it looks engineered or unnatural.

Our experimentation suggests that the influence of anchor text is not treated quite the same way, particularly if the links are going to different pages on your site. In other words, those multiple links may communicate anchor text value in a way that is closer to linear. More links might not mean more importance, but the relevance of a page as communicated through the anchor text remains interesting data for the search engines, even as the link quantity increases.

Think about the number of unique linking domains as a metric for your site, or for any site you are evaluating. If you have a choice between getting a new link from a site that already

links to you as opposed to getting a new link from a domain that currently does not link to you, go with the latter choice nearly every time (we will discuss this process in more detail later in this chapter).

Source diversity

Getting links from a range of sources is also a significant factor. We already discussed two aspects of this: getting links from domains you do not own, and getting links from many different domains. However, there are many other considerations.

For example, if all your links come from blogs that cover your space, your source diversity is poor. There are many other types of places where you may be able to get links: directories, social media sites, university sites, media websites, social bookmarking sites, and so on.

You can think about implementing link-building campaigns in many of these different sectors as *diversification*. There are several good reasons for doing this.

One reason is that the search engines value this type of diversification. If all your links come from a single class of sites, the reason is more likely to be manipulation, and search engines do not like that. Sites that offer content of value are far more likely to have links coming in from multiple types of sources.

Another reason is that search engines are constantly tuning and tweaking their algorithms. If you had all your links from blogs and the search engines made a change that significantly reduced the value of blog links, that could really hurt your rankings. You would essentially be hostage to that one strategy, and that's not a good idea either.

It's a good idea to evaluate your source diversity compared to your competitors. Figure 7-13 shows an example of this using LinkResearchTools.com.

Temporal factors

Search engines also keep detailed data on when they discover the existence of a new link, or the disappearance of a link. They can perform quite a bit of interesting analysis with this type of data. Here are some examples:

When did the link first appear?
    This is particularly interesting when considered in relation to the appearance of other links. Did it happen immediately after you received that link from the *New York Times*?

When did the link disappear?
    Some of this is routine, such as links that appear in blog posts that start on the blog's home page and then get relegated to archive pages over time. However, if a link disappeared shortly after you rolled out a major section on your site, that could be a negative signal.

Report Information

Re-Run — Export as: CSV | PDF

CLA

Project	Default Project	Input	3 URLs	Found	2,357 Backlinks
Date Created	2011-07-10 06:52:03	Metrics	5 Metrics	Domains	1,478
Date Started	2011-07-10 06:52:05	Backlink Source	Domain Backlinks	Avg per Domain	786 Backlinks
		Skip sitewide links	Yes (after 5 found)		

Comparison by Metrics

This report shows a comparison of the Link Profiles of your site against the 2 URLs you entered.

Theme SiteType ACrank YahooBL MozRank

Metric Comparison by Theme of a Domain   Export as PNG

Theme of a Domain

■ Total Average ■ You

Computers/Internet: 27% 27%
Business/Economy: 12% 11%
Blogs/Personal Pages: 11% 3%
Education: 10% 18%
Travel: 4% 2%
Other: 36% 39%

Average Absolute

No.	Page	Computers/Internet	Business/Economy	Blogs/Personal Pages	Education	Travel	Other
1	http://learningtree.com/	38%	14%	6%	14%	0%	27%
2	http://compucert.com/	16%	10%	16%	7%	7%	45%
You	http://newhorizons.com/	27%	11%	3%	18%	2%	39%
	Total Average	27%	12%	11%	10%	4%	36%

FIGURE 7-13. Comparing link diversity against competition

How long has the link existed?

A search engine can potentially count a link for more, or less, if it has been around for a long time. Whether you choose to count it for more or less could depend on the authority/trust of the site providing the link, or other factors.

How quickly were the links added?

Did you go from acquiring 1 new link per week to 100 per day, or vice versa? Such drastic changes in the rate of link acquisition could be a significant signal indicating either a big news event, or heavy-duty spam-based link building (the search engines would use other signals on the Web to determine which). Whether it is a bad signal or not depends. For example, if your site is featured in major news coverage, it could be good, but if you have started buying links by the thousands, it could be bad. Part of the challenge for the search engines is to determine how to interpret the signal.

You can compare yourself against competitors and top-ranking sites to see if your link acquisition rate sticks out as unnatural using a tool like Majestic SEO (see Figure 7-14).

Context/relevance

Although anchor text is a major signal regarding the relevance of a web page, search engines look at a much deeper context than that. Other signals of relevance they evaluate include:

FIGURE 7-14. Comparing link acquisition rate against competition

Nearby links

    Do the other links on the page (especially those that appear close to yours) point to closely related, high-quality sites? That would be a positive signal to the engines, as your site could be seen as high quality by association. Conversely, if the two links before yours are for Viagra and a casino site, and the link after yours points to a porn site, that's not a good signal.

Page placement

    Is your link in the main body of the content, or is it off in a block of links at the bottom of the right rail of the web page? Better page placement can be a ranking factor. This is also referred to as *prominence*, which has application in on-page keyword location as well.

Nearby text

    Does the text immediately preceding and following your link seem related to the anchor text of the link and the content of the page on your site that it links to? If so, that could be an additional positive signal. This is also referred to as *proximity*.

Closest section header

    Search engines can also look more deeply at the context of the section of the page where your link resides. They may look at the nearest header tag, or the nearest text highlighted in bold, particularly if it is implemented like a header (two to four boldface words in a paragraph by themselves).

Overall page context

> The relevance and context of the linking page are also factors in rankings. If your anchor text, surrounding text, and the nearest header are all related, that's good. If the overall context of the linking page is also closely related, that's better still.

Overall site context

> A final signal is the context of the entire site that links to you (or perhaps just the section of that site that contains the link). For example, if you receive a link from a site with hundreds of pages that are relevant to your topic, and that link appears on a relevant page, with relevant headers, nearby text, and anchor text, all of these factors will add to the impact; such a link will have more influence than if there happens to be only one relevant page on the linking site.

Source TLDs

It is a popular myth that certain top-level domains (TLDs), such as *.edu*, *.gov*, and *.mil*, are given preferential treatment and are seen as a positive ranking signal. However, it does not make sense for search engines to look at it so simply.

Matt Cutts, the head of the Google webspam team, commented on this in an interview with Stephan Spencer (*http://www.stephanspencer.com/matt-cutts-interview/*):

> There is nothing in the algorithm itself, though, that says: oh, *.edu*—give that link more weight. [...] You can have a useless *.edu* link just like you can have a great *.com* link.

There are many forums, blogs, and other pages on *.edu* domains that spammers can easily manipulate to gain links to their sites. For this reason, search engines cannot simply assign a special level of trust or authority to a site because it is an *.edu* domain. Simply searching for *buy viagra site:edu* will give you an indication of how spammers have infiltrated *.edu* pages.

It is true that *.edu* domains are often authoritative, but this is a result of the link analysis that defines a given college or university as a highly trusted site on one or more topics. The result is that there can be (and there are) domains that are authoritative on one or more topics on some sections of their sites, yet have other sections of their sites that spammers are actively abusing.

Search engines deal with this problem by varying their assessment of a domain's authority across the domain. The publisher's *http://yourdomain.com/usedcars* section may be considered authoritative on the topic of used cars, but *http://yourdomain.com/newcars* section might not be authoritative on the topic of new cars.

One technique that *link brokers* (companies that sell links) use is the notion of *presell pages*. These are pages on an authoritative domain for which the link broker has obtained the right to place and sell ad copy and links to advertisers. The link broker pays the domain owner a sum of money, or a percentage of the resulting revenue, to get control over these pages.

For example, the link broker may negotiate a deal with a major university enabling it to place one or more pages on the university's website. The links from this page do have some of the

inherent value that resides in the domain. However, the presell pages probably don't have many (if any) links from other pages on the university site or from other websites, so links from these pages will not have much value. As with other forms of purchased links, presell pages are considered spam by search engines, and pursuing these types of links is a high-risk tactic.

Ultimately, every site gets evaluated for the links it has, on a topic-by-topic basis. Each section of a site and each page also get evaluated on this basis. A high-quality link profile gives a page more authority on a given topic, making that page likely to rank higher on queries for that topic than it would with a weaker link profile. In addition, links from that page to other websites related to that topic will also have more value.

Link and document analysis combine and overlap, resulting in hundreds of factors that can be individually measured and filtered through the search engine algorithms (the set of instructions that tells the engines what importance to assign to each factor). The algorithms then determine scoring for the documents and (ideally) list results in decreasing order of relevance and importance (rankings).

Determining a Link's Value

A link campaign typically starts with researching sites that might potentially link to the publisher's site and then determining the relative value of each potential link. Although there are many metrics for evaluating a link, as we just discussed, as an individual link builder many of those data items are hard to determine (e.g., when a link was first added to a site).

It is worth taking a moment to outline an approach that you can use today, with not too much in the way of specialized tools. Here are some factors you can look at:

- The PageRank of the home page of the site providing the link. Note that Google does not publish a site's PageRank, just the PageRank for individual pages. It is common among SEO practitioners to use the home page of a site as a proxy for the site's overall PageRank, since a site's home page typically garners the most links. You can also use the domain mozRank, available through SEOmoz's Open Site Explorer tool, to get a third-party approximation of domain PageRank.

- The perceived authority of the site. Although there is a relationship between authority and PageRank, it is not a 1:1 relationship. Authority relates to how the sites in a given market space are linked to by other significant sites in the same market space, whereas PageRank measures aggregate raw link value without regard to the market space.

   So, higher-authority sites will *tend* to have a higher PageRank, but this is not absolutely the case.

- The PageRank of the linking page.

- The perceived authority of the linking page.

- The number of outbound links on the linking page. This is important because the linking page passes some of its PageRank to each page to which it links; each of those pages

consumes a portion of the available PageRank, leaving less to be passed on to other pages. This can be expressed mathematically as follows:

For a page with passable PageRank n and with r outbound links:
Passed PageRank = n/r

It is likely that the actual algorithm used by the search engines is different, but the bottom line is that the more outbound links a page has, the less valuable a link from that page will be in comparison to a link from the same page with fewer outbound links.

- The relevance of the linking page and the site.

Organizing this data in a spreadsheet, or at least being consciously aware of these factors when putting together a link-building campaign, is a must. For many businesses, there will be many thousands of prospects in a link campaign. With a little forethought you can prioritize these campaigns to bring faster results, investing more time and effort in the higher-value links and spending little or even no time on the low-value links.

The Psychology of Linking

Since we have established the importance of links, the next logical question is how to go about getting them.

Why Are Links Created?

It is important to step back and examine why links are created in the first place. Why did a given person decide to link to that particular website? There are many possible reasons:

1. The publisher was paid for the link. Although this is a perfectly legitimate reason, in the search engines' eyes it carries no editorial value (and search engines may even penalize sites for linking or acquiring links in this fashion).

2. Links were traded between sites. Also called *reciprocal linking*, the practice of trading links between sites is popular. However, search engines view this as barter and therefore as having limited editorial value.

3. Something on your site triggered an emotional reaction from the publisher, causing her to link to your site. For example, perhaps your site had the funniest cartoon the publisher had ever seen, or it offered an inflammatory political opinion.

4. The publisher saw something of value on your site and wanted his site's visitors to know about it. The majority of the highest-value links are given for this reason.

5. A business relationship came into play. For example, you may have a network of distributors and resellers for your product. Do they all link back to you?

How Can Sites Approach Getting Links?

The keys to acquiring links are points 3, 4, and 5 in the preceding list. Understanding these link triggers is the key to successful link building. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Since creating emotional reactions can result in links, building content that plays to the emotions of potential linkers can be a powerful tool for obtaining links. Sometimes this process is referred to as *link baiting*. One key decision for a business is whether such an approach to link building is consistent with the company's brand image, but even a conservative brand can often find worthy link baiting topics to be acceptable.

- Create quality reference material. Providing unique and powerful information to users can be a great way to get links, particularly if you can make sure the publishers of authoritative sites in your market space learn about what you have created, including why it would be of value to their website visitors.

- Leverage business relationships. In our example, we suggested that you might be someone who has a network of resellers. If this is your business model, having a link back to you as a standard term in your reseller agreement is sound business practice.

These are some simple examples. There are many approaches to obtaining additional links to your site, as we'll see in the next section.

Types of Link Building

There are many different link-building tactics—too many to list in this book. This section will examine in depth some of the more common ones.

Using Content to Attract Links

In natural link building, the publisher must provide compelling content. Publishers need a good reason to provide links to another site, and it is not something they do frivolously. Providing superior content or tools is the key to obtaining such links.

Aggressive publishers can even let their content strategy be guided by their link-building strategy. This is not to say that they should let their link-building strategy drive their business strategy, however.

Normally, there are many different types of content a site could produce. The concept is simply to identify the link-building targets and what content will most resonate with the publishers of the target sites, and then tweak the content plan accordingly. Keyword research can also help identify content related to your target market, and can play a role in identifying topics that may help attract links.

High-quality content is at the heart of achieving link-building nirvana—having a site so good that people discover it and link to it without any effort on the publisher's part. This can be done,

but it does require that the publisher create content that truly stands out for the topics that its site covers, and that it thinks about link acquisition in every aspect of the publishing process.

The types of content that can attract links vary by market. Here are a few basic rules that you can follow to maximize your results:

- Use content that helps establish your site as a leading expert on its topic matter. When you produce really high-quality stuff, it builds trust with the user community and increases your chances of getting links. This also helps you with social engagement signals, which are discussed more in Chapter 8.

- Minimize the commercial nature of the content pages. As an extreme example, no one is going to link to a page where the only things they see above the fold are AdSense ad units, even if the content below it is truly awesome. Of course, there are other ways to present too many ads, such as too much advertising in the areas around the content or obtrusive overlays and animations.

- Do not put ads in the content itself or link to purely commercial pages unless such pages really merit a link based on their content. No one wants to link to a commercial.

- Do not disguise the relationship between the content and the commercial part of your site. This is the opposite side of the coin. If you are a commercial site and you hide it altogether, you run the risk of being viewed as deceitful.

You can use many types of content to attract links. Developing article content, compelling images, videos, widgets/tools, or even online games can be effective link-building tactics.

When content is published on your site, you have other decisions to make, such as whether the content goes in a special section or whether it is integrated throughout the site. As an example of how you can make this decision, consider an e-tail site that publishes a large catalog of products. A site such as this may not want all (or some of) the pages in its catalog laden with a lot of article content, so it might build a separate section presenting tips, tricks, and advice related to the products it sells. On the other hand, an advertising-supported site might want to integrate the content throughout the main body of the site.

Marketing Content for Link Acquisition

Content can be marketed in many ways. These include:

Content syndication
>   A publisher may choose to create content for placement on another site. One reason for this would be to provide the content to another site in return for a link to its site. A common form of content syndication is known as *guest posting*. This can be an effective link-building strategy, as we will see later in this chapter.

Social news and social sharing sites

> Social sites such as Digg, Reddit, StumbleUpon, and Delicious can be useful in marketing content.

Social media

> Social media sites such as Facebook, Google+, and Twitter can also be used effectively to promote content on your sites.

Spreading content via blogs

> Blogging can also be a great tactic for link building. Bloggers are very social and interactive by nature, and they tend to link back and forth quite freely. As with other forms of social media, it's best to do this by being an active contributor to other blogs through commenting and building relationships.

We will discuss the concepts in this list in more detail in "Social Networking for Links" on page 332.

Directories

Directories can be an easy way to obtain links. A large number of directories are out there, and they may or may not require a fee to obtain a listing. Table 7-1 lists some examples of quality directories.

TABLE 7-1. List of quality directories

Directory name	Category
DMOZ, a.k.a. the Open Directory Project	General
Yahoo! Directory	General
ipl2	General
Inc.com Recommended Resources	Business
Nature.com Recommended Links	Science
The Vegetarian Resource Group	Health
Open Source Initiative	Computers
Business.com	Business
Best of the Web	General
JoeAnt.com	General
FreeIndex	General
Audioholics Buying Guides	Business
Fast Company Recommended Resources	General
Yudkin's Recommended Publicity & Marketing Resources	Business

Directory name	Category
Eat Well Guide	People
SciLinks	Science
American Library Association Great Web Sites for Kids	General
Princeton University Outdoor Action Program Guide to Outdoor Resources on the Web	Recreation
Essential Links to Sports Resources	Recreation
Blog Toplist	General
Blog Catalog	General
makezine.com	Media
I Train Online	Computers
The Library of Economics and Liberty	Business
The TalkOrigins Archive	Science
TESL/TEFL/TESOL/ESL/EFL/ESOL Links	Education
Counterpunch	Politics
National Institute of Nursing Research	Health
Sexuality Information and Education Council of the US	Health
Bloggeries	General
American Society for Quality	Business
RealClearPolitics	Media
ReadWriteThink	Arts and Humanities
American Philosophical Association	Arts and Humanities
Art History Resources	Arts and Humanities
Rethinking Schools Online	Education
David Chalmers Philosophy Links	Arts and Humanities

The key to success in link building via directories is to identify the high-quality ones and stay away from the poor-quality ones. A good quality indicator is whether the directory exists for users or for manipulating search engine rankings; if it's the latter, stay away from it. The search engines view entries in the manipulative directories as being paid links that carry no value, whereas links in the high-quality directories are seen as having editorial value.

Note that DMOZ is particularly hard to get into. It is staffed solely by volunteers who may or may not respond to your submission. It is worth taking the time to submit something, but don't worry if you never hear back. Also, don't resubmit as it is common belief that sites that resubmit

get moved to the back of the line, which can only lead to further delays. Submit once, and then forget it.

What search engines want from directories

Here are the essential factors the search engines look for in evaluating directories for quality:

- Whether the fee is made specifically in payment for an editorial review, and not for a link.
- Whether editors may, at their whim, change the location, title, and description of the listing.
- Whether editors may reject the listing altogether.
- Whether the directory keeps the money even if the submission is edited or rejected (which helps confirm that the fee was paid for the editorial review and that receiving a link in return was not guaranteed).
- Whether the directory has a track record of rejecting submissions. The inverse of this, which is more measurable, is that the quality of the sites listed in the directory is high.

Ultimately, "anything for a buck" directories do not enforce editorial judgment, and therefore the listings do not convey value to the search engines.

To take a closer look at this, let's examine some of the key statements from Yahoo!'s Directory Submission Terms (*http://docs.yahoo.com/info/suggest/submit.html*):

> I understand that there is no guarantee my site will be added to Yahoo!.
>
> I understand that Yahoo! reserves the right to edit and place my site as appropriate.
>
> I understand that if my site is added, it will be treated as any other site in Yahoo! and will receive no special consideration.

These statements make it pretty clear that Yahoo! will in fact reject your submission if your site is not a quality site, and it will keep your money. In addition, Yahoo! has a proven history of enforcing these policies, and as a result the quality of the Yahoo! directory's content remains high.

Classifying directories

You can divide directories into three buckets:

Directories that provide sustainable links
> These are directories that comply with the policies outlined earlier. Most likely, these links will continue to pass link juice for the foreseeable future.

Directories that pass link juice that may not be sustainable
> These are directories that do not comply with all the policies outlined earlier. The reason such directories exist is that search engines tend to use an "innocent until proven guilty" approach. So, the search engine must proactively make a determination of guilt before a directory's ability to pass link juice is turned off.

Even so, link juice from these types of directories is probably not going to be passed in the long term, and they do not represent a good investment for publishers.

Directories that do not pass link juice

These are the directories that the search engines have already flagged. They do not pass any value. In fact, submission to a large number of them could be seen as a spam signal. Although it is unlikely that any site would be banned from or penalized by a search engine based on this signal alone, when combined with other signals of manipulation, buying lots of low-value directory links could play a role in a penalty being applied by the search engines.

Detecting directories that pass link juice

The process is relatively simple for directories that pass sustainable links, as defined earlier:

- Investigate their editorial policies and see whether they conform to what search engines want.

- Investigate the sites they list. Are they high-quality, valuable resources that do not contain spam or use manipulative SEO tactics?

- Investigate their track record. Do they enforce their policy for real? This may be a bit subjective, but if there are lots of junky links in the directory, chances are that the policy is just lip service.

- As another check, search on the directory name and see whether there is any SEO scuttlebutt about it.

The process is a bit harder for directories that do not conform to the policies search engines prefer, but there are still some things the publisher can do:

- Search on the name of the directory to see whether it shows up in the search engine results. If not, definitely stay away from it.

- Take a unique phrase from the directory's home page and see whether it shows up in the search engine results. If not, definitely stay away from it.

- Does the directory have premium sponsorships for higher-level listings? This is a sure signal that indicates to the search engines that the directory's editorial policies may be secondary to its monetization strategy.

- Does the directory promote search engine value instead of traffic? This is another bad signal.

- Evaluate the directory's inbound links. If the directory is obviously engaged in shady link-building tactics, it is a good idea to avoid it.

- Is the directory's target audience webmasters and SEO practitioners? If so, stay away from it.

Incentive-Based Link Requests

Incentive-based link requests use an incentive as part of the process of requesting a link. This can run dangerously close to violating the search engines' Webmaster Guidelines, but there are also ways to do it that remain compliant with those guidelines.

Giveaways

Content syndication can be a powerful tactic, and we will cover this in more detail in "More Approaches to Content-Based Link Acquisition" on page 324. The concept is to develop content with the intent of publishing it on third-party sites. The site that is publishing the content provides a link back to your site in return for being permitted to publish the content. Ideally, this content should be distinct from the content on your own site to avoid any risk of duplicate content issues.

Widgets are another way of syndicating content to third-party sites. They have the advantage of coming with a way to package the content so that it is not seen as duplicate content. This is because they are usually implemented in JavaScript, such that the web page publishing the widget calls back to a remote server to fetch the content. The result is that a search engine crawler does not see the content.

This also results in any links embedded within a widget being invisible to the search engine. However, it is possible to implement a widget in such a way that it has an HTML wrapper around it with a simple HTML text link in it—a link that is visible to the crawler.

Popular widgets can get adopted by a large number of websites, and can result in a large number of links. Widget campaigns can also result in links to deep pages on the site.

Key to both these approaches is that the content or widgets you provide should be very closely related to the content of your site. If the relevance of the content you syndicate is low, it is likely that the value of the links you receive will also be low, or maybe of no value at all.

Dangerous tactics

Of course, the incentives can be over the line too. For example, proactively going out and buying links might be a way to rapidly acquire links, but the search engines are getting increasingly good at detecting these types of links algorithmically (and discounting or even penalizing sites that use these tactics).

Google also provides a method for third parties to report paid links directly on an anonymous basis. There is every incentive for those third parties to do so.

Based on these risks, buying links is a dangerous practice, and it is harder to safely execute than it appears to be on the surface.

Another dangerous tactic is doing a large percentage of your link building through reciprocal links. Once again, this is easy to do in principle. It is not hard to find sites that will accept the "link to me and I will link to you" proposition.

However, the search engines may view this as barter. They are not likely to question a few selected link exchanges with sites closely related to yours; when it becomes a problem is when the swapped links become a significant portion of your backlink profile. That is a situation that looks manipulative, and the search engines will most likely discount those links.

Direct Link Requests

If the site looking for links is a high-quality site with unique and/or authoritative content, the publisher may simply need to tell other publishers about what it has.

If there is already a relationship between the publisher requesting the link and the publisher being asked to provide the link, this process is pretty easy. The requesting site sends the other party a note with whatever pitch it wants to make. This pitch is easy to personalize, and the nature of what is said is likely to be guided by the existing relationship.

However, if the person requesting the link does not know the person from whom she is requesting the link, it is a very different ballgame. Table 7-2 summarizes how to decide how to contact a site, including how much effort to put in.

TABLE 7-2. Categorizing the value of potential links

Value of site	Source of targets and approach to take
Low	Targets may result from large-scale research. Contact is by email and is personalized but likely in a somewhat automated way. These types of sites are being relied on to obtain a volume of links. No customized content is developed.
Medium	Targets may result either from large-scale research or from industry knowledge by the publishers of the link destination site. Contact is by email and is personalized, likely done by a human but with only low to moderate levels of effort in customizing a template. No customized content is developed.
High	Targets are identified by principals of the business or senior marketing people, or through market analysis. Email contact is entirely customized and tailored to the targeted site. Phone calls may also be used in pursuit of these links. Content may be developed just to support a campaign to get links from these types of sites.
Very high	Targets are identified by principals of the business or senior marketing people, or through market analysis. Email contact is entirely customized and tailored to the targeted site. Phone calls may be advisable in pursuit of these links. Face-to-face visits may also be involved. Content may be developed just to support a campaign to get links from these types of sites.

Creating a value proposition for direct requests

One of the key points is how the publisher can make its pitch interesting enough for the potential linking site. As noted earlier, this starts with understanding what content or tools the publisher has on his site that might be of interest to the potential linking site.

Site owners do not link to other sites for the purpose of helping those sites make money. They link because they perceive that the other sites' users might value the content or tools on their own sites.

This relates to the fundamental structure of the Web, which is designed around the notion of interlinking related documents. Positioning a site or a section of a site as being related to the potential linking site is a requirement of each link-building request.

With high-value sites and very-high-value sites (as defined in Table 7-2), it may be worth spending a bit of time and energy on defining a compelling value proposition. In many cases, it is even worth doing custom content development to increase the perceived value and relevance of the content to the potential linking site.

In all cases, developing a link request value proposition begins with understanding the nature of the potential linking site's content, and then deciding how to match up the content of the requester's site with it.

Once you have done this you are in a position to contact the site publisher, communicate what you have to offer, and request a link.

Basic email pitch

The most important thing to remember is that the person you are emailing to request a link probably did not wake up this morning wondering what links she was going to add to her site. And certainly, she was not expecting or waiting for your email. Basically, you are interrupting her to ask her to do something for you, and she has no prior reason to trust you. Based on this, there are few simple guidelines you should follow when making a link pitch:

- Keep it simple and short. The person you are contacting is receiving an email that is unsolicited. She is not going to read a two-page email, or even a one-page email.

- Clearly articulate the request. It is an investment to get someone to read an email, and it is critical that the pitch be clear about the desired result.

- Clearly articulate why your site deserves a link. Generally speaking, this involves pointing out the great content or tools on the site, and perhaps citing some major endorsements.

- Follow each and every guideline of the CAN-SPAM Act (*http://business.ftc.gov/documents/ bus61-can-spam-act-compliance-guide-business*). Unsolicited emails are not illegal as long as they follow the guidelines of the act. Do not even think about violating them.

Manual Social Media Link Creation

One way to create links manually in social media environments is by visiting social media sites, forums, and blogs and leaving behind comments with self-referential links in them. However, the great majority of these environments `NoFollow` their links. A more useful way to obtain links from blogs, for example, is to build a relationship with the owner of the blog. The major steps of this process are as follows:

1. Build a list of blogs that are related to your topic area.

2. Start visiting those blogs and adding comments without linking back to yourself, and develop a relationship with the author(s). The early stages of the relationship begin when the author starts responding to your comments. You can even reach out to the author through one of the major social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, Google+, or LinkedIn.

3. Once the relationship has been built and seems solid, let the author know about a related value-add resource you have, either through direct contact (preferred) or in a comment. Make sure there is a real connection between your resource and the content from the author (even if you have to create the content on a custom basis, that's OK).

These steps are meant to be conservative to avoid a backlash from the owners and/or authors of the blog. You can extend this process to forums or social media sites as well.

There are ways to be more aggressive with this. Some publishers do not really care about building relationships first and want to push the process much faster. However, there are two significant issues with this:

- Depending on the level of aggressiveness, it may be a violation of the Webmaster Guidelines and the search engines may choose to take action against a publisher who pursues this course of action.

- There could be a backlash from the community itself. Offending one blogger may not be a huge issue, perhaps, unless he is very influential. Offending hundreds of bloggers would probably be much worse, particularly if you are trying to establish your site as authoritative in a topic area. In forums, blogs, and social media sites, offending people can quickly scale to a problem of large proportions.

Gray Hat/Black Hat

As we previously discussed, some publishers choose to push the limits or ignore the Webmaster Guidelines in their quest for links. On the next few pages we will look at some of the more popular tactics in detail.

Buying links for SEO

One of the more popular spam techniques is to buy links. This has two significant advantages:

- It is easy. There is less need to sell the quality of the content of your site; all you need to do is determine that the third party is willing to sell a link, and set a price.

- Since the link is an ad, you can simply specify the anchor text you want. Anchor text is a powerful ranking signal, and this is one of the major reasons people engage in link buying.

Google's policy on paid links.   The major downside is that buying links for SEO goes against Google's Webmaster Guidelines. Here is a brief summary of Google's policy on paid links:

- Links given in return for compensation should not be obtained for purposes of increasing PageRank.

- The link should be freely given, and the publisher of the potential linking site should be informed of what the publisher is doing. An example of a link where the publisher is not informed is one that is hidden in the `NoScript` tag of a JavaScript-based widget.

Google is not saying that publishers should not be able to buy ads on the Web. Its policy is that links should be purchased only for the traffic and branding value they bring. Google also recommends that publishers selling ads on its site use `NoFollow` links, which means they will have no SEO value.

On another note, PPC campaigns using AdWords, Microsoft adCenter, and so on are not considered a violation of the policy against paid links. This is because search engine advertising links are easy for the crawlers to recognize, and the search engines simply don't count them as a source of link juice.

Methods for buying links.   There are three major methods for buying links. These are:

Direct link advertising purchases
> This method involves contacting sites directly and asking them whether they are willing to sell text link ads. Many sites have pages that describe their ad sales policies. However, sites that openly say they sell text links are more likely to get caught, resulting in their links being disabled from passing PageRank by Google.

Link brokers
> As we mentioned earlier, link brokers are companies that specialize in identifying sites selling links and reselling that inventory to publishers looking to buy such links.
>
> The major danger here is that ad brokers may have a template of some sort for their ads, and a spider can recognize them as paid links. Search engines may also implement specific programs to detect the customers of link brokers and make examples of them.

Charitable donations
> Many sites of prominent institutions request charitable contributions. Some of these provide links to larger donors. These links may be considered legitimate if there is an editorial review of which sponsors receive acknowledgment via a link on the institution's site.

Sometimes these charitable donations are quite inexpensive. However, Google frowns upon this tactic, so it's best to use it with care. One way a publisher can potentially make the tactic more acceptable is to support causes that are related in a material way to his site. However, it is not clear that Google would find this acceptable either.

Finding sites looking for charitable donations may seem hard, but the search engines can help with this. One option is to use a series of related searches that will expose sponsor sites. For example, you could go to the search engine of your choice and search on *sponsors*, which should bring up a number of sites accepting sponsorships. However, you may want to target that search a bit more. If you have a nursing-related site, the next step might be to search on *nursing sponsors*, or even *sponsors inurl:nursing*. You can also try other related words, such as *donors*, *donations*, or *patrons*.

You can even focus in on *.edu* domains by adding *site:edu* to your search query. As we noted earlier, *.edu* domains are not given a valuation boost simply because of their being in the *.edu* TLD, but major educational institutions do tend to have sites with strong inbound link profiles, and it is these link profiles that make them more valuable.

Strategies that are not considered buying links. It is worth noting that in some strategies, although money is involved in obtaining a link, such links are not considered to have been bought. Here are some examples:

- Using a consultant to help your articles reach the home page of social media sites like Digg (note, however, that this practice may not meet with the approval of the social media site)
- Paying a PR firm to promote a site
- Paying a link-building firm to ask for (as opposed to buying) links

The key point is that these strategies do not compensate the site itself for the links given, and the links are considered legitimate if they are given freely.

Link farms/link networks

In the early days of search, publishers developed link farms and link networks as tactics for gaining cheap links. A *link farm* is a website or a group of sites whose primary reason for existence is to cross-link between themselves and other websites. Generally speaking, the links are created through aggressive reciprocal linking.

Since these sites are typically very heavily interlinked, they can be pretty easy to detect. Part of the reason is that since they have little redeeming value, they typically do not have high-value links coming in to them from other sites, and most of the links result from various cross-linking schemes.

How can you differentiate a link farm from a legitimate directory? Simple. A link farm has poorer organization and more links per page than a directory. In addition, a human review will show the lack of a strict editorial policy.

Link networks are a similar concept. The network exists for the purpose of creating links between sites, and it can be a bit more sophisticated than a link farm. For example, you could create a club where publishers agree to contribute a link in return for getting a link from somewhere else.

If managed with great care, the clustering of links between sites can be limited, and this can be a bit harder for search engines to detect. However, the scheme remains at high risk of being exposed by a disgruntled webmaster simply reporting it to Google.

A related concept is the notion of *three-way link swaps* (a.k.a. triangular link swapping), where Site A links to Site C in return for Site B linking to Site A. In this scenario, Site C may be the site the publisher is trying to promote, and Site B may be a site it uses to provide low-value links to people with whom it trades links.

This is almost always a scam, because Site B is probably a low-value site with little to recommend it. So, the publisher of Site A is providing a good-quality link in return for a low-quality one.

Think of it this way: Google employs some very smart mathematicians who understand graph theory. So, you can rest assured that the Google algorithms will do a sophisticated job of detecting unnatural linking structures, such as the one in the Figure 7-15, which is called a *clique* in graph theory. Notice that there are five nodes, signified as red dots in the figure—they can also be referred to as vertices—each of which links to all four of its neighboring nodes. They never miss a link. It all looks so perfect. Naturally occurring neighborhoods on the Web aren't perfect like that. If it looks perfect, it's been engineered. Google will be suspicious of unnatural-looking neighborhoods.

> **NOTE**
>
> **You can read more on the theory of spam detection in this this article:** *http://ilpubs .stanford.edu:8090/697/1/2005-33.pdf*.

Automated link dropping

Spam tactics can include creating a bot that crawls around the Web looking for open forums and blogs and leaving behind automatically generated comments containing links. Clearly this is spam, as no human is involved in the comment process (other than the programmer) and no effort was made to read the blog post or forum where the comment was left.

The great majority of these comments are deleted or `NoFollowed` by the blog or forum's software content management system (CMS), but the spammer does not care because she is operating on a large scale. If she leaves behind 1 million comments and 99% of them are filtered by one means or another, she still ends up with 10,000 links.

This is, of course, a very risky tactic. The search engines may be able to detect this behavior algorithmically, or competitors can recognize it and turn you in via a spam report. *We do not recommend this tactic.*
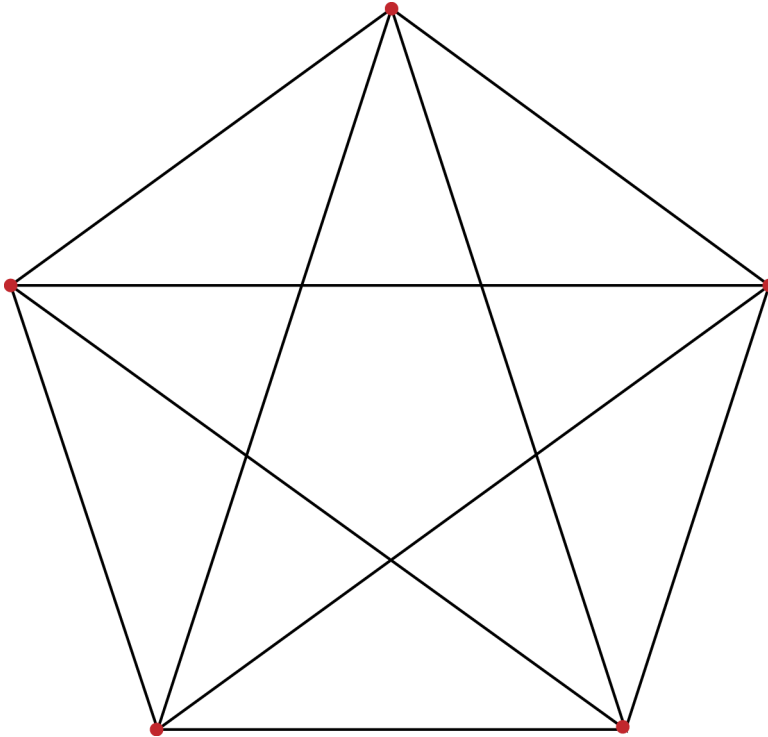
FIGURE 7-15. Unnatural link grouping

Spammy giveaways

As we discussed previously, you can use widgets as part of a link-building campaign. However, this tactic can be abused as well. One popular way of doing that is to develop a JavaScript-based widget and then embed a link back to the widget publisher's site in the `NoScript` tags. Since this is the code the browser presents to users who do not support JavaScript, and the search engines do not run JavaScript, the crawlers see the link and not the widget.

An example of someone who did this is discussed in the post "Another Paid Links Service Disguised As Hit Counter" (*http://blogoscoped.com/archive/2008-02-06-n19.html*). Four days after this post went up, the sites referenced lost all of their high rankings in Google, and therefore lost most of their traffic.

However, be aware that making the link visible is not enough to make this practice legitimate in Google's eyes. Google has confirmed that it considers tactics such as the use of unrelated widgets for link building a no-no, even if the link is visible.

The underlying reason for this is that if the link is unrelated to the widget, it is pretty unlikely that the link given actually represents an endorsement of the web page receiving the link. The goal of the person installing the widget is to get the benefit of the widget's contents.

As another example, Google considers the use of so-called "sponsored" WordPress templates with embedded links, even if they are visible, to be spammy as well—unless, of course, the publisher distributing the WordPress template is in the WordPress template business. The key issue that needs to be addressed in these types of link-building campaigns is the relevance of the widget to the site receiving the link and the editorial endorsement (or lack thereof).

NoFollow uses and scams

One of the most common uses of `NoFollow` is to `NoFollow` all links in comments on a blog or in a forum. This is a common and legitimate use of the tactic, as it is used to prevent spammers from flooding forums and blogs with useless comments that include links to their sites.

However, as you might expect, people have implemented some scams using `NoFollow`. One simple example of this is someone proposing a link swap and providing the return link but `NoFollowing` it. The goal of the site using the `NoFollow` is simple: to get a link that passes link juice, but not to provide any link juice in return.

However, Google announced that it had changed the way it handles `NoFollow` in June 2009. At this point in time, `NoFollow` still prevents the passing of link juice to the site receiving the link, but it is lost to the linking site as well. As a result, this scam no longer benefits those who attempt to use it.

Choosing the Right Link-Building Strategy

The successful link-building strategy is built on painstaking research and methodical strategizing. You can put together a link-building campaign in many ways, and making the wrong choices can lead to a poor return on your link-building investment. You should also consider which tactic will bring the best long-term value.

Another consideration is what your available resources are and how easily the link-building process will scale. If you have a site with 10,000 inbound links and your campaign is going to net you 100 new ones of similar value, that is not going to move the needle for you (unless all of those links are pointing to an individual page targeting a single keyword search term/phrase, or a smaller number of pages). This is a key point to consider when deciding what type of link-building campaign to pursue.

Outline of a Process

The process for choosing the right link-building strategy is complex because of the number of choices available. Nonetheless, a methodical approach can help you determine what the best few choices are for your site. Here is an outline of how to approach it.

Identify types of sites that might link to a site like yours

Some example types of target sites include:

- Noncompeting sites in your market space
- Major media sites
- Blogs
- University and college sites
- Government sites
- Sites that link to your competitors
- Related hobbyist sites

Make sure you take the time to answer the question, "Why would these sites link to us?" Think broadly here, and don't limit the possible answers based on your current site. In other words, perhaps you can create some new content that would be compelling to one or more of your target groups.

Find out where your competitors get links

Getting detailed information on who links to your competitors is easy. Simply use tools such as Open Site Explorer (*http://www.opensiteexplorer.com*), Majestic SEO (*http://www.majesticseo .com*), or Link Research Tools (*http://www.linkresearchtools.com*), which will give you a list of the sites that link to your competitors.

Once you have that data, look at the most powerful links your competitors have (as measured by PageRank or mozRank/mozTrust) to identify opportunities for your site. Perhaps they have received great links from national media or a set of government sites. By seeing what has worked for them, you can get ideas on what may work for you.

Of course, planning to contact people who link to your competitors is a good idea, but do not limit your link-building strategy to that alone. Contacting websites that link to your competitors may result in your getting links from 10% (in a good campaign) of the people you contact. Chances are that your goal is to have your site beat your competitors' site, not be seen as 10% as valuable by the search engines.

The key focus is to extract data from the competitors' backlinks that helps you decide on your overall link-building strategy. Use this to enhance the list of sites that might possibly link to you. For example, if you find that your competitor had great success by releasing a study on

trends in the market, you might be able to create a market study that shows some different things that could also be successful.

You can also expand on this concept by looking at "similar pages" to top-ranked sites (look for the "Similar" link in the preview pane of the search result for the site) in your keyword markets. Similar pages that keep showing up for different keywords are squarely in the topical link neighborhood. Look at who is linking to them too. You can also try a `related:domaintocheck.com` query to get some information on other domains worth investigating.

Review your website assets

Now that you have a refined list of targets and a sense of why each group may potentially link to you, review what you have on your site and what you could reasonably add to it. This should include any existing content, new content you could create, tools, or even special promotions (provided that these are truly unique enough and you have enough presence for people to notice and care).

One key aspect of this is that the content needs to be unique and differentiated. Content that can be found on 100 other sites is not going to attract many links. Even if the content is nonduplicate and original, it should have something to offer or say that is differentiated from other content, rather than simply being a rewrite of someone else's article.

The highest-value potential linkers probably know their business and will recognize such simple rewrites, and in any event they are going to want to focus their links on unique new content and tools. Content that leverages the publisher's unique expertise, or what he stands for, and presents a new take on things or some new data will be far more successful in the link-building process.

Think of your content plan in a business case format. If you were able to create some new block of content at a cost of x dollars, and you think it would provide you with some set of links, how would that compare to the cost (in terms of content creation, tools, or promotional effort) and potential results of another link-building opportunity?

Ultimately, you will want to build a road map that provides you with a sense of what it would cost to chase a potential group of linkers and the value of each group of linkers. Your chart might look like Table 7-3.

TABLE 7-3. Prioritizing among link-building projects

Cost to pursue	Value
$15,000	High
$30,000	Medium
$10,000	Low
$30,000	Very high
$4,000	Low

Once you have this in hand, you can quickly narrow down the list. You'll probably pursue the high-value campaign, and you should continue to consider the very-high-value campaign and the low-value campaign that costs only $4,000 to pursue. The other campaigns just don't seem to have comparable cost versus return metrics.

Identify any strategic limitations

The next step is to outline any limitations you may need to place on the campaigns. For example, if you have a very conservative brand, you may not want to engage in social media campaigns through Digg (which does not have a conservative audience).

Identify methods for contacting potential linkers

You must undertake some activities to let potential linkers know about your site. There are two major categories of methods: *direct* and *indirect*. Some examples of direct contact methods include:

- Email
- Social media sites (using the messaging features of a social media property to make contact with potential linkers)
- Blogger networking (building relationships by commenting on others' blogs)
- Phone calls
- Seeking out publishers at conferences or meetups

Some examples of indirect methods include:

- Social media campaigns (including Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Digg, Reddit, StumbleUpon, and others)
- PR
- News feeds (through Yahoo! News and Google News)
- Speaking at conferences

Link-Building Process Summary

Sorting out where to start can be a difficult process, but it is a very high-return activity. Don't just launch into the first campaign that comes to mind, as it can hurt your overall results if you spend six months chasing a mediocre link-building plan instead of another, much better plan.

Link building is a form of marketing, and other marketing considerations come into play. Looking at it from the other point of view, cleverly devised marketing campaigns can provide both branding and link-building opportunities. Consider the famous video campaign by Blendtec (*http://www.blendtec.com*) of blended iPhones, golf clubs, and so forth, available on YouTube and on its Will It Blend (*http://www.willitblend.com*) website.

The Will It Blend site has more than 32,000 links to it from other sites, all entirely natural and earned through editorial recommendations. Not bad!

Putting It All Together

The final step is to consider all these things together to come up with an integrated strategy. You can think of this as having the complete strategic picture in mind as you approach link building. At this point, final decisions are made about the content strategy and which link-building targets to focus on.

Execute aggressively

A world-class link-building campaign is always a large effort. The resources need to be lined up and focused on the goal. Publishers nearly always experience bumps in the road and difficulties, but it is critical to line up the resources and go for it. It is also critical to be persistent.

It is amazing how poorly many companies execute their strategies. Publishers that execute aggressively inevitably gain an edge over many of their competitors. Of course, if other competitors also focus heavily on link building, it becomes even more important to push hard, or else you will end up losing search engine traffic to them.

Conduct regular strategic reviews

Link-building strategies should evolve in the normal course of business. As the implementation moves forward, lessons are learned, and this information can be fed back into the process.

New strategies are also conceived over time, and some of these are great ones to pursue. Also, sometimes the initial strategy goes great for a while, then begins to run out of steam. Publishers should have a constant stream of ideas that they are feeding into their link-building plans.

Create a link-building culture

Publishers should also train many people within the organization about their link-building plan, its goals, and how it will help the business. The purpose of this is to engage the creativity of multiple team members in feeding the stream of link-building ideas.

The more ideas you have, the better off you'll be. The quality of a link-building campaign is directly proportional to the quality of the ideas that are driving it.

Never stop

Link building is not something you do once, or once in a while. In today's culture, the search engine plays an increasingly large role in the well-being of a business, and inbound links are a large factor in determining the fate of sites on the Internet. Consider the business that implements a great link-building campaign, gets to where it wants to be, and then stops.

What happens to that business when its competitors just keep on going? It gets passed and left behind. Publishers who are lucky enough to get in front need to be prepared to fight to stay there. Publishers who are not out in front should fight to get there.

More Approaches to Content-Based Link Acquisition

Content is your most important asset in link building. Leveraging your content—together with your users and online networks—can lead to scalable link acquisition and some exciting results.

A Closer Look at Content Syndication

The concept behind content syndication is developing content with the intent of publishing it on someone else's site. In return for providing the content, the author gets a link back to her site. This is sometimes referred to as *guest posting*, as blogs are often the target destination for such content. Provided that the content is relevant to your site, this is a legitimate strategy in the eyes of the search engines because the site is endorsing the content by accepting it, and the return links are an acknowledgment of that endorsement.

It is also often possible to get targeted anchor text in this scenario. Be careful, however, because if the anchor text is unrelated to the article itself, it will not comply with what the search engines want publishers to do in terms of link-building techniques.

There are a couple of important points to watch for when syndicating content:

- The publisher should strive not to distribute articles that are published in the same form on the publisher's own site. Search engines will see this as duplicate content. Furthermore, if the site accepting the content from you is more authoritative than your site, it will likely rank for your article and your site won't!

When looking to distribute content published on a site, the best practice is to rewrite the article from scratch, add some new angles or concepts to make it different in structure and in its material points, and syndicate that version of the article. Therefore, if the site publishing the syndicated article ranks high for key search terms, it is not a problem for the author's site.

If you must syndicate the exact article you have on your site, have the article link back to the original source article, not just your site's home page. That will serve as a signal to help the search engines identify which version is the original, and it may help you to continue to rank for that page.

- When considering the syndication of content, it makes sense to study the site's content needs and then custom-tailor the content to those needs. This practice maximizes the chances of the target site accepting the article.

One variant of content syndication is to generate articles and then submit them to *article directories*. However, the value of this approach has been limited for many years, and Google further targeted such directories in its February 2011 Panda update. For the most part, they provide no value today.

When syndicating content, it is a best practice to focus on high-value targets. Sites that will take any article with little editorial review are not likely to offer high-quality links. In fact, the links may be of no value at all. Getting into higher-value sites, such as that of a major regional newspaper, may require more effort, but these sites also provide higher-value links, and links from them may even result in other sites linking to you as well.

Leveraging User-Generated Content

Providing users with ways to contribute content directly to your site can be an effective tactic. There are many ways to do this:

Opening up a forum or allowing comments on your site
One of the biggest challenges with this strategy is achieving critical mass so that active discussions are taking place on the site. This typically requires a substantial amount of traffic to accomplish, but in the right situations it can become a way to develop high-quality content with your visitors doing most of the work. You can also try to implement programs to stimulate the discussion, such as offering a prize on a monthly basis for a randomly selected contributor.

Launching a blog and inviting third-party contributors
One of the best ways to do this is to contact respected members of your market space and see whether they would be willing to make written contributions to your blog. They may do this simply because they would like the exposure, or you can pay them for doing it.

More selectively inviting third-party contributions
> Setting up a blog platform may be more than you want to do, but you can still ask respected members of your community to consider contributing articles to your site.

Of course, the contributed content does not need to be an article or a post. You can seek out photos, videos, cool new tools—anything that may be of interest to users.

With each of these strategies, one of the big questions is whether the method for contributing content is open, strictly controlled, or somewhere in between. In other words, can any user come along and post a comment in your forum? Or do all users have to have an editorial review first? Editorial reviews may significantly reduce spam attacks, but they are a barrier to the development of active discussions.

In the case of forums, engaging discussions can attract links. For an example from the world of SEO, Search Engine Roundtable (*http://www.seroundtable.com*) is a frequent linker to discussions in the WebmasterWorld Forums (*http://www.webmasterworld.com*). The key to this is the critical mass of discussions that take place on these forums.

The reason the tactics involving third-party authorship can result in links is that most people have pride in what they have created and want to show it off. As a result, they will have a tendency to link to their content from other sites where they contribute, or their own websites.

It is a good idea to make this easy for them. Provide sample HTML that they can use, or badges that confer the value of recognition—for example, a badge that says something like "Valued Yourdomain.com Contributor," or "Contributing Officer." Only people who are authorized contributors are allowed to post such a badge, so it becomes an honor to be able to do so. The presence of the link on the authors' sites also makes visitors to their sites aware of yours.

Creating Link Bait/Viral Content

Link bait is the term that some use to refer to the notion of creating content for the specific purpose of acquiring links. The content is published on your own site or perhaps on another website, and it is compelling enough that lots of people link to it. Such content can take a couple of forms. For example, it may be content that is designed to provide enough additional value that people will want to reference it.

Other popular methods include doing something controversial, something funny, or something that simply draws a strong emotional reaction. Each market space has some hot buttons, and these buttons can be pushed with an opinionated article.

Coming up with link bait ideas

It is easy to come up with content that people will want to link to, but it does take some effort to come up with the right kinds of ideas. Here is a four-step process for coming up with and picking ideas:

1. **Write down everything.** Just collect any and all ideas that come to mind. Do not censor or edit yourself during this phase; take down every idea, no matter how bizarre, idiotic, or farfetched it may sound. Don't worry about your ability to create the content at this stage either, as a crazy idea may lead to a different great idea that you can implement.

2. **Break down your ideas.** Once you've squeezed every last drop of creative juice from your head, it is time to filter the results. It is a good idea to break down each idea (no censoring or editing yet) into its *Concept* and *Content* components. That is, what is the format (Concept) for the suggested link bait (tool, widget, top 10 list, how-to guide, blog post, etc.), and what is the subject (Content) of the suggested link bait (Wii, iPod, PPC ads, pigs, celebrity weddings, etc.)? Separate these into two lists.

3. **Evaluate the content.** Ignoring your Concept list, critically evaluate your Content list. Are some ideas time-sensitive? Can some wait for a relevant piece of news to complement them? Are there ideas you'd really like to write about? Are there ideas that can go into storage for a dry spell?

4. **Mix and match.** Once you've prioritized the content, you can mix and match it with your Concept list. No story/content is beholden to the original format in which you brainstormed it. Is your story something that might make the Digg home page? Then consider the concepts that do well there: top 10, how-to, and so on. Can it be interactive? Perhaps a tool or poll concept would be effective. By marrying your priority content to the most appropriate concept, you can optimize the effectiveness, reach, and novelty to your intended audience.

If you use this process, or something similar, you'll probably notice that you quickly generate a handy repertoire of concepts. Once you have these down, you can turn virtually any random idea that pops into your head into link bait.

How far should you go with link bait?

Most folks in the corporate communications, PR, and legal departments shy away from anything potentially controversial, and for good reason, right? But then, why would a company selling life insurance online dare to venture into the taboo topic of weird and disturbing death trivia? Sounds crazy, doesn't it?

But that's exactly what Lifeinsure.com did with its link bait article, "The 19 Things You Probably Didn't Know About Death" (*http://www.lifeinsure.com/blog/the-19-things-you-probably-didnt-know-about-death*). With such goodies as, "After being decapitated, the average person remains conscious for an additional 15–20 seconds," you can imagine how much of a hit the article was with the irreverent alpha geeks that make up the Digg community. The article made it to the Digg front page, which in turn got it in front of countless bloggers and social bookmarkers.

The success of this article in attracting links surely contributed to Lifeinsure.com's impressive page 1 ranking for *life insurance*, which it maintained for many months. Not surprisingly, though, this contentious article is nowhere to be found in Lifeinsure.com's navigation

hierarchy, so customers and prospects are unlikely to ever stumble across it. Lifeinsure's inability to maintain this high ranking in the long term may have been a result of the article not being integrated into the site, or other factors may have been responsible, such as the site not being seen as relevant enough, its link acquisition rate slowing too much, etc.

Link bait can take many forms: top 10 lists, humorous videos uploaded to YouTube, checklists, cartoons, infographics, how-tos, event coverage, exposés, personality tests, quizzes, contests, surveys, tools, and widgets—to name a few.

With a contest, the devil's in the details. You must get everything right: the prizes, judges, judging criteria, media partners, and so on. Most contests fall flat; they are simply unremarkable. Seth Godin offers a wonderful definition of *remarkable*: "worth remarking about." Something about the contest must be worth remarking (blogging) about.

For example, in the Free Business Cards for Life contest that Netconcepts (now a part of Covario) dreamed up for its client OvernightPrints.com, the site partnered with the "Technorati 100" blogger Jeremy Schoemaker (a.k.a. "Shoemoney"). The contest was to design Jeremy's business card; the winner received "free business cards for life." The cost of the prize (and the contest overall, for that matter) was negligible: the fine print capped the winnings at 1,000 business cards per year for a maximum of 20 years.

The link exposure this contest garnered was excellent: it included keyword-rich links from Jeremy's blog, shoemoney.com, and Jeremy also posted a video about it to YouTube. A number of design sites and bloggers listed/linked to the contest. The ultimate goal was the rankings that resulted from the links. As you can see in Figure 7-16, Overnight Prints still ranks #1 in Google for "business cards" (as of fall 2011). Jeremy got something out of the deal as well: a killer new business card design (*http://www.shoemoney.com/2009/07/25/congratulatons-chiwun-smith/*) printed and shipped to his door courtesy of Overnight Prints.

Potential linkers also love a good corporate citizen, so be one. Consider such activities not as an expense, but as an investment that will generate a return in the form of links. With Second Chance Trees (*http://www.secondchancetrees.org*), social media marketing agency Converseon created a charitable initiative using internal resources and expertise that could have otherwise been utilized for billable work.

The idea was to create an island in *Second Life* where players could purchase a virtual tree with Linden dollars and plant it. This would then trigger the planting of a real tree of the same species in an ecologically sensitive region, such as a Central or South American rain forest. For a charitable endeavor, the payoff was huge. High-value links came from news outlets, the blogosphere, organizations, and elsewhere.

Do not be afraid to be bold or off-the-wall. You do not always have to toe the corporate line. Relevance is important, but obtaining some lower-relevance links is OK too, as long as the majority of the links to your site still come from relevant sources.
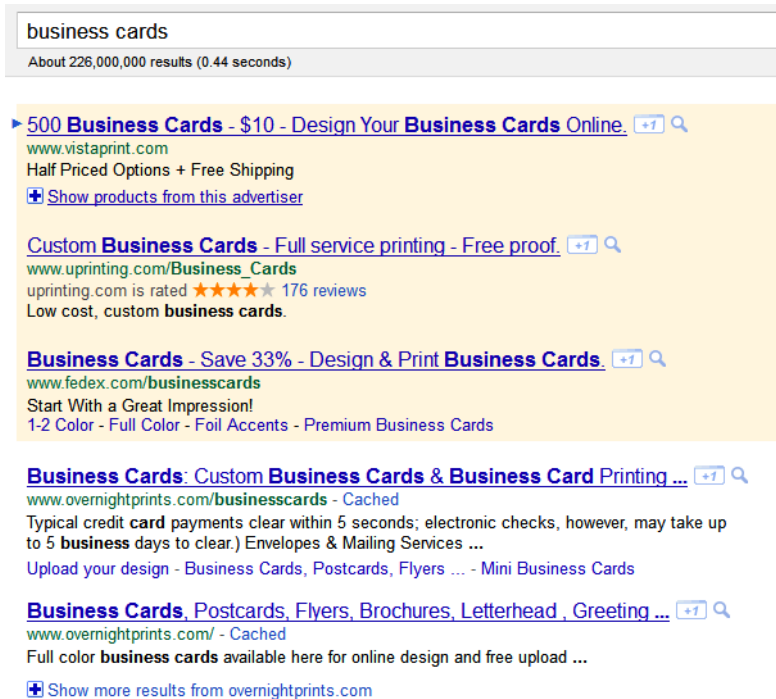
FIGURE 7-16. Non-personalized Google search results for "business cards"

Encourage link bait to spread virally

You can extend the notion of link bait distribution by creating something you can pass around. For example, a hilarious video clip might be passed around via email. Provided you make it easy for people to determine the video's creator (presumably your company) and to visit your site, this type of campaign can garner a lot of links. Be aware, though, that if you host the video on a video-sharing site such as YouTube, most people will link to YouTube and not to your site. Of course, this isn't necessarily a bad thing if you have a larger goal in mind, such as generating buzz and building your brand presence.

Incentive-Based Link Marketing

Providing an incentive for people to provide a link back to you can work well. Of course, you need to do this with care, because there are incentives that would be indistinguishable from the outright purchasing of links and are therefore risky. However, you can use certain tactics in which the resulting links will likely still have editorial value. This includes creating badges or levels of recognition that users will want to show off, as we discussed in "Leveraging User-Generated Content" earlier in this chapter. Here are a couple of other ideas.

Helping Other Sites Boost Their Value

You can get people to link to you because linking to you can enhance their site's value. One example of this is a program that gives sites awards for excellence of some kind. This is particularly effective if your site is a respected authority in your space.

If that is the case, you can consider picking out the top 10 sites related to your space. Then you can send these sites an award badge with a link to a review that lives on your site.

Another example is various forms of certification. For example, Google has badges for its AdWords Qualified Professionals and AdWords Qualified Companies, with links back to Google.

Offering Customer Discounts/Incentives

Publishers can offer visitors from certain websites a discount on their products. Sites that want to offer the discount to their users simply need to link back to the publisher's site.

However, Google also sees this as a questionable practice. Although it seems the discount offer would be interesting to the third-party site only if it valued the product (or thought its visitors would), Google's Matt Cutts clearly indicated that Google did not want to value such links in an interview at *http://www.stonetemple.com/articles/interview-matt-cutts-061608.shtml*.

How Search Engines Fight Link Spam

Throughout this chapter, we have provided many examples of how spammers try to circumvent search engine guidelines to obtain high rankings for sites that may not deserve those rankings. Of course, the search engines do many things to fight link spam.

Algorithmic Approaches to Fighting Link Spam

The major approach the search engines use is to design algorithms that can detect and act on link spam. There are a number of things they can look at algorithmically. Here are a representative few:

Links labeled as advertisements
> The search engines can scan for nearby text, such as "Advertisement," "Sponsors," "Our Partners," and so on.

Sitewide links
> Sitewide linking is unnatural and should be a rare part of your link mix (purchased or not). The only exception to this is the interlinking of all the sites owned by your company, but this presumes that the search engine will understand that the same company (or parent company) owns all of your sites. In general, sitewide links are a serious flag, especially if you have a lot of different sites that do this for you, or if a large percentage of your links are sitewide.

Links sold by a link broker

> Of course, link brokers are knowledgeable about the link-detection methods listed here, and they do their best to avoid detection with the links they sell. But they can still run into problems. For example, in 2008, Google took action against a long-time proponent of paid links, Internet Marketing Ninjas (formerly called We Build Pages, with a site at *http://www.internetmarketingninjas.com*), resulting in the company changing its stance on the subject (*http://www.internetmarketingninjas.com/blog/link-techniques/paid-links-arent-worth-it/*). More recently, in February 2011, Google took action against J.C. Penny for buying links (*http://searchengineland.com/googles-action-against-link-schemes-continues-overstock-com-and-forbes-com-latest-casualities-conductor-exits-business-65926*), Conductor (*http://www.conductor.com*) eventually exited the business of brokering buys.

Selling site has information on how to buy a text link ad

> Search engines can detect sites that provide information on how to advertise with them. Combined with other clues about links being sold on the site, this could lead to a review of the site selling the ads and a discounting of the links.

Relevance of your link

> It is a powerful clue if your link is not really that relevant to the page or site it is on.

Quality of neighboring links

> Another clue would be the presence of your link among a group of links that are not tightly themed, or if the other sites linked to are of poor quality.

Location outside main content

> The search engine can detect when your link is not part of the main content of the page—for example, if it appears in the left or right column of a three-column site, and the main content is in the middle.

Perhaps you can avoid all of these pitfalls, but one more problem remains: people can see that you are buying links and may choose to report your site, using Google's authenticated paid links reporting form (*https://www.google.com/webmasters/tools/spamreport?hl=en&pli=1*). Note that you need to be logged in to a Google account to see the form. Here are some examples of people who might take this action:

Someone reports your site for buying links or for some other reason

> Who would do this? Your competitor! If your competitor submits an authenticated spam report to Google, Google will look at it and may choose to act on it.

Someone reports the site you bought links from for selling links or for some other reason

> A competitor of yours can do this, or a competitor of the site selling links can do this. Once a search engine figures out that a site is selling links, it is possible that this could trigger a deeper review of the sites that were buying those links.

A disgruntled employee leaves your company, the broker, or the site you bought links from and reports your site

> For decades, many companies have had a practice of escorting fired (or laid off) employees out of the building. The reason for this approach is that people get upset when they lose their jobs. However, this practice would not prevent such a person from reporting your site in a spam report to a search engine. Even though that may be a violation of the confidentiality agreement you probably have with your employees, you will never know, because there is no transparency in spam reporting.

A search engine employee does a manual human review of your site

> The search engines maintain legions of people who conduct human reviews of sites, which they use to proactively find and report spam.

Certainly your competitor reporting your site would be the most likely scenario, but you should not entirely discount the other scenarios.

Other Search Engine Courses of Action

In the case of Google, it is known that one of the basic policies is to punish a site that sells text links by eliminating that site's ability to pass link juice. This is essentially a first course of action. Once this is done, Google could look more closely at the selling site and the purchasing sites for other signs of spammy behavior.

Google has also at times taken the step of altering a site's visible PageRank (the PageRank shown on the Google Toolbar) if it believes a site is selling links. This has been applied to some very significant sites, such as happened to NewsDay.com in 2008 (*http://www.seroundtable.com/ archives/017658.html*).

Google can also choose to take action against the site purchasing the links or participating in manipulative link practices. If a large percentage of the site's links are suddenly disabled, this could have a very significant impact on rankings.

Social Networking for Links

When you add social media to the equation, the network effect can multiply the yield from your link-building efforts. You can use this effect to help your content spread virally, or to develop relationships with critical influencers.

Blogging for Links

Blogging can be very effective in link development. How effective a blog will be depends highly on the content on it, the market space, and how the publisher promotes it. The first thing to realize when starting a blog is that it is a serious commitment. No blog will succeed if it does not publish content on a regular basis.

How frequently a blog needs to publish depends on its topic matter. For some blogs, one post per week is enough. For others, it really needs to be two to three posts per week, or even more.

Blogging is very much about reputation building as well. Quality content and/or very novel content is a key to success. However, when that first blog post goes up, the blog will not yet be well known and will not likely have many readers, and those that do come by will be less likely to link to a little-known blog.

In short, starting a new blog for the purpose of obtaining links is a process that can take a long time to bear fruit. It can be a very effective tool for link building, but remember that patience and persistence are required.

One of the best places to get links to a blog is from other blogs. This is best done by targeting relationships with major bloggers and earning their trust and respect. Here are a few key things to think about when building these relationships:

- Be patient when developing relationships with other bloggers. Trust and respect do not come overnight. And they certainly do not result from starting the relationship with a request for a link.

- The publisher should target a portion of its content at the interests of the major bloggers.

- Over time, this process should turn into links to the publisher's blog from the major bloggers.

- Other lesser-known bloggers will begin to see links on the major blogs and will begin to follow suit.

This can pay big benefits. Vizu, a market research company, published a study that showed that 67.3% of people found what blogs to read by following links from other blogs.

It is also important to leverage the social nature of the blogosphere. Publishers just launching a blog should try to provide a personalized response to every person who comments on their blog. One effective way to do this is to send each and every one of them a personalized response by email that shows that the comments were read.

This helps to deepen the interest of the commenter, creates a feeling of personal connection, and increases the chance that the commenter will return (and possibly add more comments). Nurturing the dialog on a blog in this fashion helps that dialog grow faster.

Leveraging Social News and Tagging Sites

Social media sites such as Digg (*http://www.digg.com*), Reddit (*http://www.reddit.com*), StumbleUpon (*http://www.stumbleupon.com*), Delicious (*http://www.delicious.com*), and others can play a big role in a link-building campaign.

Becoming "popular" on these sites can bring in a tremendous amount of traffic and links. Although social news sites such as Digg bring lots of traffic, this traffic is usually of low quality and will have a very low revenue impact on the site receiving it. The real ballgame is to get the links that result.

For example, stories that make it to the Digg home page can receive tens of thousands of visitors and hundreds—or even thousands—of links. Although many of these links are transient in nature, a significant number of high-quality links can result as well.

When pursuing social media strategies, there are a variety of best practices to keep in mind:

- The number one guideline is to remember that the focus of this discussion is on "social" media sites. Your success on these sites is wholly dependent on the response of the group of people as a whole to your strategy. If you do something that irritates the community, you can quickly find yourself called out and exposed in that community.

  Great care is recommended when working with these communities. Make sure you are a positive contributor. Take your time and build a reputation with the community. "Give more than you get" is a great principle to keep in mind.

- If you create articles for social news sites such as Digg and Reddit, focus on topics that relate to keywords relevant to your business. As a result of doing this, your articles can quickly end up ranking very well for those keywords, and the relevance of the inbound links will be high.

  The key insight into how to make that happen is to use the competitive keyword in the title of the article itself *and* in the title of the submission of the article to the social news site. These are the two most common elements that people linking to such articles grab when selecting the anchor text to use.

- Delicious and StumbleUpon are different in structure. Delicious is a tagging (or bookmarking) site used by people to mark pages on the Web that they want to be able to find easily later. StumbleUpon shares some similarities with Delicious but also offers a content discovery aspect to its service.

  Delicious has a "popular" page (*http://www.delicious.com/popular/*) for content that is currently hot on the site. Getting on that page can bring lots of traffic to a site. This traffic is of higher quality than what you get from social news sites.

  Users coming to a site via tagging sites are likely to be genuinely interested in the topic in a deeper way than users who spotted a snappy article title on a social news site. So, although the traffic may be quite a bit lower than on the social news sites, publishers can also earn some quality links in the process.

  Tagging sites are best used in attempting to reach and develop credit with major influencers in a market space. Some of these may link to the publisher, and these are potentially significant links.

Forum and Social Network Participation

Building relationships with other bloggers as outlined so far is good, but there are additional ways to interact with others and, in the process, to let them know you have content they might

be interested in. Any environment in which social interactions occur is another good place to invest time and effort.

Social networks such as those of the current market leaders—LinkedIn, Facebook, Google+, and Twitter—can be used for link-building purposes without actually getting the link juice directly from one of these sites. Major forums that relate to your area of interest also represent great targets.

The guidelines are basically the same: become an active part of the community. The goal is to become recognized as an active and trusted contributor to the community so that, based on your contributions there, people will begin to develop an interest in the other things you may have to say.

For example, people may begin asking for your opinions on other related topics. This creates opportunities to take the dialog further. Relationships and networking are essential to increasing readership.

Of course, in the process of building relationships in a social media environment, you also have the potential for people to submit your content into those social media sites, which can lead to links, and the links within these social platforms also add value (though, as we'll see in Chapter 8, they may be counted somewhat differently than other links). You can also take the next step and reach out through the social networks or forums to make direct contact with people to let them know about your content. This is similar to emailing people, but with a few important distinctions:

- Publishers can send out communications to their friends on those networks. Assuming that they have treated this designation (that of friend) with any level of seriousness, instead of "friending" everybody in sight, the communication can be a bit more informal than an unsolicited email would be.

- Publishers can also join groups on these networks related to their market space, and then send messages out to those groups. These groups will provide them with the ability to reach new people with related interests.

- Messages broadcast through these networks cannot be personalized, so a more general message needs to be tailored for these types of broadcasts.

- These are social networks. Beware of broadcasting too many messages or poorly targeted messages. Many publishers have made this mistake, become pariahs in their communities, and lost the leverage these communities bring to the process.

- Personalized messages can be sent on a 1:1 basis as well.

One strategy for approaching an authority site is to make initial contact by friending someone senior who works at the company that publishes the site. Then the publisher can develop the relationship with that senior person without asking anything of him. Once the relationship is established, a more informal approach can be used to introduce the great content on the publisher's site.

Offline Relationship Building

Leveraging online platforms for the purpose of building relationships makes great sense, but there is no reason to stop there. Do the major influencers in your space (not just bloggers, but other major players as well) speak at conferences? If so, go to one of these conferences and introduce yourself.

Another related tactic to consider is contacting the publisher of an authoritative site and offering them a free seminar/webinar, with you as the speaker, or proposing a joint marketing campaign with the publisher. Either way, call it part of your company's outreach campaign to build relationships with leaders in the space.

If you do this, make sure you articulate well the unique nature of what you will present. You have to attract your target's interest with the pitch before you can take the next step. Make sure you bring a lot of value in the actual presentation; then, collect business cards, answer questions, and make yourself available to answer follow-up questions by phone or email. In so doing, you will build up relationships with numerous people involved in the authoritative site.

There are other ways to build relationships, too. For example, you can sponsor the organization in some fashion. There are, of course, sites that link to their sponsors, and this may be a win for you, but Google may discount these links (because they are "paid"), so you should not count on that aspect of this strategy. The other win is that sponsors often are able to establish deeper relationships with the organizations they sponsor.

Last but not least, you most likely have other businesses/organizations that you interact with in the normal course of your business. Once again, you can ask them directly for links, but you can also ask them for introductions to other people in your space. This type of networking can be an effective way to build relationships that eventually lead to high-value links.

Some Success Stories Using YouTube

In the near future, it may become more important for your brand or company to be on YouTube than to be advertised on TV. For some, that day has already arrived. August 2011 data from comScore shows that YouTube is used for about 14% of all searches on the Web.

YouTube has launched careers, such as that of YouTuber "Brookers" (*http://www.youtube.com/ profile?user=Brookers*), who was hired by Hollywood celebrity Carson Daly because of her zany videos. YouTube has also brought international fame to previously unknown bands, such as Sick Puppies, a band popularized by the hugely well-liked and inspiring Free Hugs video set to the Sick Puppies song "All the Same" (*http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vr3x_RRJdd4*). And in July 2010, Antoine Dodson achieved overnight fame with the video, "Hide your kids, hide your wife" (*http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzNhaLUT520*), which has received more than 8 million views.

Then there are the hugely successful viral campaigns by commercial organizations, such as Blendtec's "Will It Blend?" (*http://www.willitblend.com*), which we referenced previously in this

chapter. This is a brilliant video series on various household objects that are run through a Blendtec blender, including marbles, rake handles, and even iPods.

Blendtec isn't the only company that has had success with YouTube. Intuit, maker of the Quicken, QuickBooks, and TurboTax software, ran a YouTube campaign known as the Tax Rap. It was a pretty off-the-wall idea suggested in a brainstorming session; as luck would have it, Intuit was able to secure rapper Vanilla Ice as its front man. After that, it decided to just pull out all the stops, avoiding any corporate marketing feel to the campaign.

As Seth Greenberg, group manager of Online Advertising and Internet Media at Intuit, said, "Rather than people making fun of our campaign, we wanted to poke fun at ourselves." The Intuit marketing team went to Vanilla Ice's house in Palm Beach, Florida, and spent several hours there shooting. Vanilla Ice has been a big supporter of the campaign, according to Seth. What's interesting is that Vanilla Ice is a polarizing figure, but that is what made it a YouTube phenomenon.

The campaign received more buzz offline than online: it was covered by news outlets such as CNN, as well as local stations. *Entertainment Weekly* listed Vanilla Ice's Tax Rap as #10 on its Hit List, and it made it onto page 6 of the *New York Post*.

The key to the Tax Rap video campaign (*http://turbotax.intuit.com/taxrap/*) was not just that Vanilla Ice was the front man, but that it encouraged participation and viewer support. There was a contest with prize money of $50,000, with users encouraged to create their own rap about taxes to compete for the prize.

Intuit made a sizeable investment, including buying a Contest channel and a Branded channel on YouTube, as well as paying for visibility on the YouTube home page. Those were crucial factors for Intuit's getting more than 1 million views of its video.

Online jewelry retailer Ice.com made its first foray into YouTube marketing with its Mr. Cupid interviews of passersby (*http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yPkW1gnhoQg*). Executive VP of Marketing and Founder Pinny Gniwisch put some videos up of himself conducting impromptu interviews on the streets of New York City, in Times Square, on the ski slopes of Utah, and elsewhere, prior to Valentine's Day. Pinny said the videos did very well for the company.

Another stellar example of YouTube marketing is the online retailer Vat19.com. Their product videos are brilliant and well integrated into their product catalog. For example, the 5-pound gummy bear is a must-see (*http://www.vat19.com/dvds/worlds-largest-gummy-bear.cfm*).

YouTube has been used effectively for brand damage control as well. For example, the CEO and founder of JetBlue Airlines put up an apology video (*http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-r_PIg7EAUw*) on YouTube because of a Valentine's Day winter storm incident—a campaign that was well received.

One product that got some excellent brand recognition and building from being on YouTube was Smirnoff's Raw Tea. Smirnoff produced an uproarious music video called "Tea Partay" (*http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PTU2He2BIc0*), with preppies rapping.

The problem with most popular YouTube promotions is that YouTube gets the links and the original site usually does not. That means the search engine visibility benefits do not usually transfer to the company's website.

Nonetheless, YouTube offers much in the way of brand visibility when the campaign is well executed. That doesn't just mean posting a great video; marketers must also know how to take advantage of the social nature of the site, to build up friends and to get on user subscription lists.

Make copious use of tags on your videos (ensuring, of course, that the tags are relevant to the content), spread your tags out among your clips, use adjectives to make your videos more visible to folks who are searching based on their mood, have some category descriptor tags (bearing in mind that YouTube's default search settings are Videos, Relevance, and All Categories), match your title and description with your most important tags, and don't use natural-language phrases or waste tag space on words such as *and* and *to*. See "Video Search Optimization" on page 439 for more tips.

Do not be afraid to make a start, even if it is modest and has little budget behind it. You won't get anywhere without experimenting with the medium. Ongoing experimentation provides you with the best chance to find a formula that works for you.

Social Media Tips for More Sites

Although we have outlined some of the basics of how to work with social media sites, each site has its own quirks and opportunities. What follows is an outline of tips to use on many of these sites. We will discuss Facebook, Google+, and Twitter here briefly; other aspects of leveraging these sites will be discussed in Chapter 8.

Wikipedia

You may not think of Wikipedia as being useful in link building, since it `NoFollows` all its external links. It is not a wise idea to simply go onto the site and create a page for your company: unless your company is well known, it is likely to be promptly removed. And even if it is well known, you would be in violation of Wikipedia's Conflict of Interest guideline. However, links from Wikipedia can be valuable because many people treat it like an authoritative site, and if they see your link on Wikipedia they may choose to link to you. Some of these people can be pretty influential.

Therefore, you may want to build trusted relationships within the Wikipedia community. This will require an investment in time, but it can bring some nice rewards. Here are some specific tips on how to proceed:

- Build up your credibility (long and virtuous contribution history, user profile page with Barnstar awards) before doing anything that could be construed as self-serving. It is not good enough to be altruistic on Wikipedia unless you *demonstrate* it. It has to be visible as

a track record—squash spam and fix typos and add valuable content, but do not do it anonymously.

- Negotiate with an article's "owner" (the main editor who polices the article) before making an edit to an article to get her blessing first.

- Use Wikipedia's "Watch" function to monitor your articles of interest. Better yet, use a tool that emails you (e.g., TrackEngine or ChangeDetect).

- Make friends. They will be invaluable in times of trouble, such as if an article you care about gets an "Article for Deletion" nomination.

- Do not edit anonymously from the office. This could come back to haunt you. Tools exist that could embarrass you if you do so. One public domain tool, WikiScanner, is able to programmatically take anonymous Wikipedia posts and identify the organization that created them. The tool cross-references the IP address used to make the edits with the blocks of IP addresses of more than 180,000 organizations. Do not take the risk.

Wikis

Plenty of other wikis are a lot more edit-friendly than Wikipedia and let you contribute valuable content, get links, and build relationships. Examples include ShopWiki, the NewPR Wiki, WordPress Codex, and conference wikis such as Web2Expo. Some even pass link juice, which is a nice bonus.

Flickr

As of early 2011, Flickr is the most popular photo-sharing site on the Web. It can be an effective tool in gathering traffic and exposure for your website. Lots of people search on Flickr, and images in Flickr can rank prominently in web search results. If people find your images on Flickr, it can cause them to click through to visit your site. As with other social media properties, this traffic can lead to links to your main site, but it is an indirect approach. Here are some key tips:

- Always use tags—as many as possible while still being accurate. Surround multiple-word tags with quotation marks.

- Make descriptive titles for your photos.

- Create thematic sets for your photos.

- If the photo is location-specific, go into Flickr's tools and geotag the picture by finding its location on Yahoo! Maps and then dragging the picture onto the map to pinpoint its location.

- License your photo with Creative Commons and state how you want the user to credit you in your photo's description.

Meetup.com

Meetup.com is a site designed to help groups of people with interests in a common topic "meet up." Completely aside from any SEO concerns, these meetups can be excellent networking events.

Get involved with relevant local meetups and get your Meetup.com member profile page linked from the Meetups page, which will pass link juice to your profile and then on to your site.

Facebook

People share links on their walls and on Facebook Fan pages. Links shared by users who have marked their content as available for Everyone (*http://ja-jp.facebook.com/blog.php?post=60186587130*) are visible to search engines, as are Facebook Fan pages. As of 2011, it was confirmed that both Google and Bing treat these links as votes for your content. In response to questions by Danny Sullivan, Google noted that it treats Facebook links the same as it treats tweeted links (*http://searchengineland.com/what-social-signals-do-google-bing-really-count-55389*).

This suggests that Facebook can play a role in a link-building campaign. Fan pages in particular can be a great way for businesses to develop exposure and share links of value. This does not necessarily mean that these links are treated the same way as traditional web page links, but they have value nonetheless.

Google+

Google+ was launched on June 28, 2011, and by January of 2012, it reportedly had more than 90 million people signed up for the service (*http://investor.google.com/earnings/2011/Q4_google_earnings.html*). Google+ also allows people to share links and appears to generate lots of comments and interactions on its posts. Shared content on Google+ can be evaluated based on the authority of the person sharing it, how many times it gets re-shared, and the number of comments it generates.

Users can also indicate that they found a page valuable by clicking on a +1 button either on the page (if the page has one) or next to the search listing for that page. The +1 button functions in much the same way as Facebook's Like button, except that Google has direct access to the +1 data (this is not the case for Facebook Likes, which it can only discover by crawling Facebook). On January 10, 2012, Google announced a major changed called "Search, plus Your World." With this change, Google+ information is heavily integrated into Google's search results. This is discussed in depth in Chapter 8.

On November 7, 2011, Google added support for Google+ Pages, enabling businesses and brands to set up pages. Then on January 10, 2012, Google went further and announced Search, plus Your World, an extensive integration of data from Google+ into its search results.

Consider focusing on connecting with major influencers on Google+, and using that connection to build a real relationship with them. Add value to their posts and they are likely to pay

more attention to what you choose to post. This will help your Google+ account build its authority and influence.

Twitter

Twitter has established itself as the leading microblogging site. It allows its members to contribute microblog posts (a.k.a. "tweets") that are limited to 140 characters, and it has become an environment for real-time communication with a broad network of people. You can use Twitter as an effective platform for promoting your business, and effective participation in Twitter has direct ranking benefits, as we will discuss more in Chapter 8. It is just another channel for communicating with your customers and market.

The basic concept is to become an active member of the community and build a large network of followers. As with other networking sites, many important influencers spend time on Twitter. If you can use Twitter to develop relationships with these people, that can lead to some very high-quality links.

In addition, if you create some high-quality content, you can gain a lot of exposure as a result of getting a lot of "retweets" (whereby people forward your message to all of their followers). Particularly interesting tweets can get significant visibility for you and your company. Here are some more specific tips for leveraging Twitter for relationships and links:

- Create a subpage or microsite dedicated to Twitter. For example, Zappos created *http:// twitter.zappos.com*. Our recommendation leans toward creating a subpage (e.g., *http://www .yourdomain.com/twitter*), as this is likely to do a better job of passing link juice back into the rest of your site.

- Avoid getting your message blocked by a recipient's email spam filter or adding to an already overflowing inbox by using Twitter's direct messages.

- Contact influencers in your Twitter network and send them requests (e.g., to check out your latest post) as direct messages.

Specialty social networks

There are numerous vertically focused social networks that specialize in a particular niche, from car enthusiasts to wine connoisseurs to pet owners and so on. For example, you can set up your dog with a profile on Dogster and your cat with a profile on Catster.

Social Media Summary

To sum up the social media strategy outlined here, it is useful to think about it as an old-fashioned PR/marketing strategy. Marketers used to think about the number of "impressions" they were able to create in people's minds. The more impressions you can create, the better. When TV, print, and radio were the only media to worry about, this was relatively simple to execute.

The current environment is much more complex. The people you are trying to reach use many venues, and all of the various social media properties are part of that picture. Whenever you have a social media property that a large number of people use, there is an opportunity to reach them. Success in reaching them depends on becoming a trusted member of that community.

Since there are many large communities, it can be complex and expensive to establish a presence in all of them. But creating presences in different communities does add to the number of opportunities you have for creating impressions in your target audience. Since major influencers in your market may be using these communities, you have an opportunity to reach them as well.

Pursuing social media sites can be a very effective strategy. Doing it well does require a real investment, but the strategy can provide some nice benefits. You can read more about social media and search in Chapter 8.

Conclusion

In this chapter's introduction, we noted that links are the main determinants of ranking behavior. If you do an okay job of link building and your competitor does a great job, your competitor's business will grow at your expense. As a result, link acquisition strategies are an essential part of an effective SEO effort. Bear in mind that the best links are the ones that you would consider valuable even if there were no search engines. These are links that can deliver traffic to your site on their own, and they are the ones that are most likely to be seen as valuable by search engines in the long term.

You should also see link building as an ongoing activity. Each of the authors has seen cases where a brief focus on link accumulation brought returns that were squandered by abandoning the strategy. Unfortunately for these sites, they ultimately lost momentum and rankings to their competitors (the same ones they passed when they were actively building links), and it proved very difficult to catch up to them again.

Link building is not fundamentally different from public relations work. Your goal is to acquire positive citations across the Web. The big difference is the technical aspects—focusing on the quality of the referring source, the keywords in the link, and the page(s) to which they point.

People will not link to low-quality content, or sites that offer a poor user experience (unless they are compensated for the link). And unless you are fortunate enough to possess a major brand, people won't link to purely commercial sites either. You have to offer something of value to users, but you also need to offer something unique. Certain content naturally attracts links because it triggers psychological and emotional responses—pride, sharing, newsworthiness, and so on. Leverage these triggers and create a compelling reason for visitors who can influence web content (writers, publishers, bloggers, etc.) to reference your work, and your link-building efforts will be a success.

Great link building comes from a simple idea: build great stuff, tell everyone about it, and motivate them to share.