

Link Building For Top Search Engine Placement - StepForth Search

Engine Placement

By Dave Davies

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For many, the idea of optimizing a website for top search engine placement means entering some META tags, maybe titling the page appropriately, and then you're done. A long time ago, in an SEO galaxy far FAR away, this tactic worked. Unfortunately for those optimizing their websites, and fortunately for those using search engines to find information, this is no longer the case.

There are now some 80+ factors of your website that are taken into consideration when determining the ranking of your website. Everything from titles and META's to content and ALT tags are weighed and analyzed when your placement on the search engines is determined. In a recent article by Ross Dunn, CEO of StepForth Search Engine Placement, he addressed the fundamentals of optimizing your web pages. The article he wrote was entitled "A Ten Minute Search Engine Optimization" and can be found on the StepForth website at <http://news.stepforth.com/2003-news/ten-minute-optimization.shtml> .

This article addresses many of the internal factors taken into account in determining your ranking. Another factor which has to be taken very seriously is the external links to your website. Links to your site are not the most important factor in determining your ranking and you will have to have a well-optimized site to rank well, however, when all else is equal (i.e. when your competitors also have well-optimized sites) this can be the determining factor between being found and being buried in the search engine rankings.

Links That Work

The first consideration you have to make in your link-building efforts is who should be linking to you and whom you should link to. These are two separate considerations and despite that fact that you will be working on both at the same time, they must be considered independently.

Who Should Link To You? (Incoming Links)

When you are looking for sites to link to you there are five questions that you must ask yourself:

1) Do they compete with you? While you can try to request a link from a site that provides the same or similar products and services that you do, this is generally a waste of time that could be spent finding legitimate links from sites that would like to promote your product or service.

2) Does their site relate to your content? If you have a site promoting carpet cleaning products, a link from a hair salon will not be of much benefit. Google and the other major search engines look for content relationship when determining the value of a link. If the content of the two sites is totally unrelated the link is given very little weight if any. Focus only on attaining links from sites relevant to

your own.

3) How does Google rate the site? Google has come out with a fantastic tool called the Google Toolbar. The advanced version of the toolbar includes the PageRank of the site you are currently visiting. Without getting into a long description of PageRank (see Google's definition), the higher the number the better (it is a ranking out of 10 where traditionally anything above 4 is good and anything above 6 is excellent. If Google rates the site well then the link will be more valued than from a site that Google rates poorly. When looking for links give more time and attention to those with PageRanks of 4 or higher. The Google Toolbar is a free download available from Google at <http://toolbar.google.com/>.

4) Will they require a reciprocal link? Whether the site will require a reciprocal link or not is a serious consideration. The more links to your site that you have that are not reciprocated the better. These links are given added weight. This area will be addressed further below.

5) How many links on the page? How many links are on the page that will link to you, and where your link will be placed is another serious consideration. If your link from their site will be on a page with 100 other links then the value of the link itself is greatly reduced. Also, whether your link will be on the top of the page or the bottom will also determine the value of the link itself.

This may be a lot to consider, however it can save you enormous amounts of time and frustration. People will often work for hours to attain a link from a site they like when in reality the site has a low PageRank and the link won't even carry much weight as far as search engine placement is concerned.

It is only responsible to note that as a general rule any relevant inbound link will help somewhat. If, in your travels, you find a related site with a PageRank of 2 that is very simple to get a link from, it's well worth your time to do so given that that time taken is only about 5 minutes. Not all link building is this simple and it's in the more advanced efforts (email communications with the webmaster for example) that you will want to apply the above noted "rules".

Who Should You Link To? (Outgoing Links)

The question, "who should you link to?" is a very serious one and can have significant repercussions on your search engine placement. If you are linking to sites this is your way of saying, "This site is highly relevant to mine and that my visitors will enjoy the content on it." For this reason there are a number of considerations that have to be made when determining whether reciprocal links are in your best interest. Factors of the website that should be considered when determining whether to link to that website are:

1) Is the site's content related to yours? Like incoming links (sites linking to you), the relevancy of the content on both sites should be high. If you have a number of links from your site to websites that are completely unrelated to you're the value of these links is negligible and further, will reduce the perceived value of your site.

2) Does the site compete with you? In this case it is your interests, not those of the other webmaster, which must be taken into account. Do you want to link to a site that provides the same or similar products/services as you? Unless the site is willing to reciprocate the link and they have a very high PageRank it is probably not wise to give your visitors the opportunity to go to the site of a competitor.

3) What is their PageRank? Many people falsely believe that any outbound link will hurt your placement. This is simply not the case. Poor link-building is the cause of this misconception, not the link itself. When you are determining whether to link to another site, take a look at the PageRank it has been assigned by Google. Like the boost this gives to your site in the incoming links, so too can this have a positive effect on your outbound links. If all of your outbound links are to highly regarded sites (by the search engines) and whose content is relevant to yours then these links will help, and not hinder your rankings.

Finding The Links

Since you're looking for links to boost your search engine placement, the best place to start is... the search engines. A few searches should produce hundreds of potential links. There are a few tactics that work better than others. The first tactic provides the best links for their relevancy and for their PageRank. The second provides the best results for getting many links quickly and easily.

Getting High Quality Links –

The easiest way to get high quality links that will be well regarded by Google and the other search engines is to perform a search on the major search engines for your targeted keyword phrases. The supplied results will provide you with a list of those sites that the engine rates as the top sites for that phrase. If the engines believe this to be of value for searches looking for a particular phrase then likewise, they will view it as a valuable link to your site, which obviously deals with the same subject.

You don't have to stick to your main targeted keyword phrase either. In this stage of link building you can run searches on all the keyword phrases that you are targeting and request that they link to your site. You will have to obey the above-noted guidelines and this will mean that there will be many sites you will have to skip, as they are competitors of yours.

Getting Many Links –

Getting many links is not as difficult as getting high-quality links. Some of the same rules apply here. You will want the site to be related to yours, you will want it to be well-regarded by the search engines, and you will want it to be easy to submit to. To accomplish this, the easiest way is to once again turn to the search engines. This time however, the search will be a little bit different.

Rather than typing in the keyword phrase you are targeting you should type in the keyword phrase followed by the words "submit" or "add url". What this will give you is a listing of sites related to your keywords but also with an added bonus; a submission page. Sites that advertise their submissions are traditionally easier to submit to (i.e. they probably have a simple form to fill out rather than you having to email webmasters, etc.).

You'll be surprised at how many of these sites will link to you without the need for a reciprocal link. If the form is easy then submit to it. If the form will require significant efforts to fill out (requiring information you don't have on hand for example) or if they require a reciprocal link you will have to use the above-noted guidelines to determine if the effort is worth your time and/or outbound link.

Build Quality – And They Will Link

Why would anyone link to your website without requiring a reciprocal link? What benefit do they possibly get out of this? The answers to these questions depends greatly on the website, its design, and the content it carries.

The most significant factor that will affect your ability to attain incoming links to your website is the quality of the site itself. If you have a well-designed website that contains a significant amount of useful content it will be much easier to get other webmasters to link to you as your site is a valuable resource. If, however, your site is poorly designed and/or does not contain any useful information then you have provided nothing that the other site would need to link to, and thus, probably won't.

If you have a website on Tea Tree Oil for example, and in it you provided a great deal of information on the oil, its benefits, and its medicinal uses, without cluttering it with a glaring sales-pitch, you stand a very good chance of attaining links from other sites as the content you have provided will be useful to their visitors.

An important thing to remember is this: If you want people to link to you without having to link to

them you have to provide valuable information for their visitors and present that information in an attractive format.

Where To Start

The easiest place to start, when building non-reciprocating incoming links, is the directories. There are thousands of directories out there focused on a variety of different fields. Find the directories related to your industry and submit your site to them.

After you have submitted to all the directories related to your website it's time to move on to other sites. Now you will have to apply the rules noted above and determine how much time each link is worth and how to allot your valuable time in attaining them.

Best Practices For Outbound Links

There are a few considerations you will want to make in regards to how you organize the outbound links from your website. The most important thing to do is to create a "Resources Page". You should call it a "Resources Page" or something similar rather than a "Links Page" for both search engine considerations and for your visitors.

Placing the majority of your outbound links on one page will avoid inadvertently affecting the optimization and search engine considerations taken with the rest of your website and gives you a place to place new links as they come in the future.

Each outbound link should look something like the following example linked from an adventure tour web site:

Tea Tree Oil Exposed

Everything you wanted to know about Tea Tree Oil! From its history to its many uses, Tea Tree Oil is a requirement for any home first aid kit.

Each link should have descriptive text within it (not something ambiguous like 'click here') and there should be a quality description of the web site below the link. If you don't know what to include as the description, just ask the site owner, they are often very pleased that you are putting so much care into the reciprocal link.

Something you will also want to do is have the outbound links open in a new window. It's surprising the number of websites that don't do this. If you can keep a visitor in your site, even if your site is now in a browser beneath the one being looked at, you stand a higher chance that the visitor will return than if they have completely left your site and you're now relying on them to go back.

Conclusion

With these practices put in place your link-building efforts, while time-consuming, will be well worth the effort. As mentioned above, however, link-building, like META tags, are not the end-all and be-all of attaining top search engine placement. First you will have to build a marketable and optimized web site that provides your visitors valuable content for the search terms they are entering. Link building is the icing. Without the cake it amounts to nothing.

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