

Hide and protect your links: a little marketing cloak and dagger!

By Eric Koshinsky

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If you run a for profit website, either selling your own good or services, or as an affiliate seller, you know just how important the links are on your site. You can have all the great content in the world, but if the links fail you, you get reduced, or even no profits! Links on your website and in your ezines are your prime source of income. If they are broken, stolen, or hijacked, you lose out. To avoid these problems, you need to protect your links as best you can.

Before we really get going here, it is very important to realize that there is no such thing as perfect protection or security on the net. Anyone that tells you otherwise is simply lying. What you can achieve however is very good level of protection that will get you as close to 100% as is possible. And it isn't really that hard.

Cloaking your links is an important step in developing your website. It is important for two main reasons, 1) cloaking acts as a little bit of extra 'marketing' for the link, 2) it protects your affiliate links from prying eyes, and most importantly, it saves you lost revenue from people who simply copy your code, and then either deleting your affiliate code, or insert their own (and yes, people do that!). Heck, if someone has decided to buy a product/service from you, and can use their own affiliate link, why wouldn't they want to get a 50% discount (by a self referral)?

It isn't quite as evil as it sounds, if someone is going to buy a product/service and can earn a little discount, they may as well do it. Chopping out someone's affiliate code completely however is simply not nice.

Agree with me or not about the last statements, I think we'll all

agree that we don't really want to give people that 50% discount if we can avoid it! Our goal remains the same, protect our links! They are the lifeblood of any website based on affiliate earnings or product/service sales.

There are a number of ways to do this: some easier than others. Some more effective than others. Lets start with the easiest, and perhaps least effective.

1) status bar cloaking.

The status bar is the bar that runs along the bottom of your web browser. When you hover your mouse over a link, the destination of that link is displayed in the lower left side of your status bar. Now, if the link is to an affiliate site, the visitor can see that plainly, and for whatever reason choose to not click. What we need to do is change what is displayed on the status bar, and put something more useful and descriptive.

This is very simple to do, but doesn't provide much more than visual protection of your links. This can still be very effective, and has the added bonus that you can add a little bit of information about the link on the status bar. All it requires is a little bit of code added to each link when you make your web page.

The code you add to your links is:

```
onMouseOver="window.status='TEXT-TO-DISPLAY-ON-STATUS-BAR';  
return true;" onMouseOut="window.status="";"
```

Compare a normal link with a 'cloaked link':

Normal: `a href="http://www.myurl.com"click here/a`

Cloaked link:

```
a href="http://www.myurl.com" onMouseOver="window.status='You  
can't see me now'; return true;" onMouseOut="window.status="";"  
click here/a
```

I have set up a script at:

<http://www.newbie-guides.com/linkcloaker.php> that will create a complete cloaked link that you can simply cut and paste into your website. Feel free to test it out and use it as you need to.

Ok, so now that all of our links are nicely bundled up in their secret cloaks or invisibility, what's the next way to protect our links?

2) click tracking cgi scripts

A second and more complete way to protect your links is to use a click tracker cgi script. These are little scripts, often free that you can use to track how many times a link is actually clicked. An added side benefit is that they also hide the actual

destination link.

Basically what they do is first redirect a click through the script, add 1 to the click tally for that link, and then send the user on to the appropriate site.

How does it work? Well after you install a click tracking script you tell the script your real destination link, and it will create a new link for you that redirects click through the tracker script. You use this new link on your web pages instead.

Assume that the click tracking script is called "track.cgi". A link created for it would look something like:

non-tracked: <http://zzz.clickbank.net/r/?mynetjob>

Tracked: <http://www.newbie-guides.com/cgi-bin/ck/ck.cgi?id=6>

Ok, its true, the new link is not very beautiful, but there is no way for the visitor to know if there is any affiliate code in it, or to steal profits. Combine this with the status bar cloaking and you have a rather good system. You will also know exactly how many times any given link is being hit, a valuable bit of marketing information!

The only real downfall of most link trackers is that you need to install them on your own web host. This isn't really very hard.

You can get a very easy to install free click tracker in the downloads section of <http://www.newbie-guides.com> . Simply search for 'click tracker'.

3) professional locking products

These are programs that take a completed html page and then encrypt them so that the source code is not readable. The pages still display perfectly in a web-browser, but the actual html source code is masked. This is a much more complete form of protection that makes your whole site much more protected. These programs offer more advanced options like disabling right click, and image hotlinking. If you have a busy site with lots of images and sensitive (affiliate) links, this is probably not a bad option. Many of these programs, such as Mike Chen's WebLock Pro provide an easy to use standalone program for your PC that will automatically protect all your html pages, links, images, text and everything. However, it is essential that you realize your web pages are not perfectly protected no matter the claims being made on the site. You can visit here: <http://www.vortex-webdesign.com/help/hidesource.htm> for simple proof of that.

There will ALWAYS be those who want to and can mess around with your pages. Remember there is no such thing as 100% safe. There is only better and more complete protection, and most importantly,

gentle dissuasion. What you need to do is make your site safe and accessible for the 99.5% of people who visit your site with honest intentions, and make it just a little bit less simple for those who might have slightly 'inquiring minds'. With the information you've gained in this article, you should be able to do just that.

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We aim to provide useful tips and guidance for those who are new to personal online marketing. Learn more about programs, techniques, and software that can help you reach your goals. I look forward to getting to know you.

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