

Like Links? Begin With Top-notch Content

By Marcia Yudkin

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These days, one of the best routes to traffic from search engines is posting substantive content that has value for a particular audience. Then you want to get that content linked like heck. Inbound links increase your chances of rising in the search engine ranks. When you've chosen an appealing topic, filled your piece with meaty content and kept self-promotion to no more than 10 percent of the file, you should be able to arrange free links with a lot of effort and no monetary outlay. Here's how I've done it.

The obvious, head-on type of link campaign would involve visiting a search engine, plunking in the keywords that would index your bait piece and screening the sites that turn up, selecting those likely to be receptive to a link request. Best bets: non-commercial information sites trying to offer comprehensive links to quality resources in your topic area. For linking to your bait piece, forget brochure sites of companies and professional firms unless they include a sizable link directory.

Because this method forces you to screen out so many poor candidates for links, I use a more backhanded technique. First I identify a well-established site or page containing substantive bait that targets the very audience I would like to reach. By "well-established," I mean something from a respected source that has been on the Web for at least a year -- the longer the better. Then I perform a link search to hone in on sites that have linked to the well-established site's bait.

For instance, when looking for sites to link to my resources for freelance writers, I sifted through sites linking to the late lamented Inkspot, which predated me on the Web by a couple of years. When looking for link candidates in the solo-professional category for my marketing and publicity resources, I performed a link search on predecessor Working Solo.

Several of the major search engines make a link search easy to do. For example, at Altavista.com, if I wanted to find which sites had linked to the ClickZ Network, I would type: (without the quotation marks) "+link:clickz.com -site:clickz.com" into the search box. This asks Altavista to find all pages linking to clickz.com except pages within the ClickZ domain itself.

You can also use free-standing services set up for precisely this kind of search, such as linkpopularity.com, which provides easy access to the links turned up by Altavista, Hotbot and Google.

Now once you've identified sites you consider likely to add a link to yours, how should you approach them? I'm not a big fan of a "you link me, I'll link you..." overture. To me that implies that your site lacks intrinsic value and that you have to add an incentive to become worthy of the link. Also, you'll often find sites you don't want to link to (because they're amateur-looking or contain nothing distinctive, for instance) but still want links from. Instead, I tell the Webmaster or site owner that I'm writing to tell them about a new resource on ___ that would make their list of links even more valuable, or more comprehensive.

If you are creating a master list of topical links for your own site, it works well to say that you've linked to them and would they consider a link in return? This makes most people curious enough to check your site and reciprocate where appropriate.

Make sure your link request is patently personal, a genuine one-to-one message. And instead of merely providing a URL that you invite them to check out, provide the title of your bait piece and say something about its value to their site visitors. Something in the format of a press release, or any kind of carbon-copy message, will definitely not yield the results you want.

I have to admit that even with the strategy outlined above, the quest for links is tedious and slow. Don't even get started with it unless you feel relaxed, with a long evening ahead of you. You'll encounter frequent frustration when you find a perfect link candidate and comb the site in vain for the Webmaster or site owner's e-mail address -- indeed, any contact information at all.

Above all, remember that links to your bait piece are not the end in themselves. You've installed your bait within your site, so that any inbound link to your information piece stimulates readers who find it valuable to explore the rest of your site and buy your products or sign on as clients. That's the real goal of all this work!

Marcia Yudkin marcia@yudkin.com is the author of Poor Richard's Web Site Marketing Makeover and 10 other books. Her site review service tells you what, if anything, you need to change at your site to turn visitors into customers and clients. Details: <http://www.yudkin.com/sitereview.htm>

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