

Building Link Popularity

By Scott Buresh

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What is Link Popularity?

Link popularity is a criterion that many search engines use when ranking web pages within their index. Simply put, most search engines give a ranking boost to sites that have incoming links from quality, related sites. This method of establishing importance, pioneered by the increasingly popular Google, is now used in some form by 19 of the top 20 search engines. While it is still possible to achieve high rankings for non-competitive terms without a great deal of link popularity, it is unlikely your site will rank well for very popular terms without it.

Directories

It is important to note that the sheer number of incoming links is not as important as the quality of the sites that are doing the linking. The fastest way to get some quality incoming links is to get listings in the popular directories, such as Yahoo and the Open Directory Project. For business sites, Yahoo costs \$299 per year (it is free for non-commercial sites, although it takes a while to get listed). The Open Directory is free for all sites that meet certain quality standards, but it sometimes takes a lot of follow-up inquiries to make sure your site gets listed. When listing your sites, try to get them in the highest-level category that is applicable to your site. For instance, if your company in Podunk Ohio ships wind chimes to consumers nationwide, make sure you submit to the national "Wind Chime Dealers" category, not the "Retailers in Podunk, Ohio" category.

Finding Partners

Once you have submitted your directory listings, you should look for other sites that might link to yours. Ideally, the businesses that run these sites will be related to yours but will not be direct competitors. For example, if you had a site that sold supplies for swimming pools, it could be useful to your visitors if your site had a link to a swimming pool installer, and useful to his visitors to have a link back to your site. Since your offerings complement each other, neither of you are likely to lose business by exchanging links. You also have to find sites that show a propensity to link to others. Google is an excellent engine to use when looking for potential linking partners. Typing in keywords that you think your customers might use to find you, look for quality, well-ranked, non-competing sites that have "links" or "resources" pages, and objectively look to see if your site would fit with the other sites listed. If you think it is a possibility, make a note of the site, including the webmaster's address and something specific about the site you particularly liked. It is also very useful to look at each of the sites on these "links" pages, as many of them might also be potential link partners. When you have found a good number of sites, add a link to each of them from a "links" page on your own site. It is important to do this before contacting the site owners, as they are much more likely to reciprocate if they see that you have already taken the trouble to link to them.

Making the contact

Once you have added a link to each of the sites you have identified, it is time to contact the site owners. Usually this is done by email. Due to the volume of spam most webmasters receive, it is very important to let them know that you have actually visited their site in the first few sentences. Compliment them on the site and specifically mention the attribute you particularly enjoyed (as previously noted). You should then let them know that you have already provided a link to them, and give them the URL of your links page so they can see this link for themselves. Only then do you mention that you would appreciate it if they would reciprocate.

Monitoring

Once all of your initial emails have gone out, check back to the sites you have targeted periodically to see if they have added your link. If they haven't added it within a month, one follow-up email is normally acceptable. If you don't hear back from them for a month after that, it may be time to remove their link from your links page, unless you feel that the resource they provide is of critical value to your visitors. Check your rankings every month or so to see how they improve, and, if necessary, start the process again.

The List Of Don'ts

Don't exchange links with sites that you would not want your visitors to see. This type of link can make your site look indiscriminate while defeating the entire purpose of link popularity. Also, do not ever exchange links with sites that contain nothing but a huge collection of links (AKA "link farms"). Search engines have been known to aggressively penalize sites that are associated with such sites. In addition, do not harass people who do not answer your emails. Remember that you are contacting someone, out of the blue, who probably has too much to do already. If they haven't responded within a month of your second email, don't expect a link. Finally, do not expect overnight results. Link building takes a great deal of time and labor, and there is no real shortcut- a primary reason why search engines place importance on it. If your site is terrible, you aren't going to convince many others to link to you, no matter how sweetly you ask.

Conclusion

A properly executed link building campaign will help boost your ranking with many search engines, but this is only part of the benefit. The quality sites that have agreed to link to you will also send you highly relevant traffic. Also, your brand and name will become better known within your industry as a result of the link requests that you make. Finally, your additions to Yahoo and the Open Directory will send you a great deal of additional quality traffic. Link building is a laborious process, but if done properly it is most definitely worth the effort.

NOTE TO WEBMASTER: the following resource box contains the necessary code to make the links active.

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