

A forward-looking history of link building

Link building is still one of the most important aspects of SEO.

When other websites link back to your website, Google interprets this positively. Just *how* positively, nobody is sure.

The fact remains, you need high-quality links if you want to see success in your SEO efforts. But what *are* high-quality links, and what makes them so important?

To fully understand, we must take a trip back in time to 2005 when SEO professionals had the carpet pulled out from underneath them.

The Jagger update

Before September of 2005, link-building was in its most lawless phase of existence. SEO companies would create dummy websites with no content except hundreds, if not thousands, of links to external client websites.

Google's algorithm at the time did not penalize this. Rather, this loophole-like tactic was widely exploited, making it simple for SEO firms to power link client sites to top rankings in no time flat. Of course, competition came in the

form of other SEO firms vying for the same space, but this did little more than proliferate link spamming.

The tangled mess of backlink spam sites and reciprocal linking was a house of cards waiting obviously for the first whisper of wind to knock every site down into ranking oblivion. Enter Jagger.

Jagger changed the way links were interpreted in a few ways. First, the anchor text of the inbound link was analyzed. Second, the content on the linking page was analyzed. Third, the speed at which links would come in from the linking page was analyzed.

Additionally, changes were made that would ultimately punish (harshly) any sites engaging in reciprocal link sharing with unrelated sites, purchased links, and sourcing links from farms.

As a result, many websites that were reliant on what would now certainly be considered black hat link building were forced to remove these tainted links from their pages.

Many sites also saw their position in the SERPs crash in a manner akin to the '08 housing market bubble bursting. Optimizers cursed Google for treachery, and the entire SEO market was in jeopardy.

As with anything, though, SEO professionals who adapted to Jagger quickly were spared their business, and lived to link another day. That is, until Penguin came along.

Talk to SEO firms that were in business during the early Penguin updates and you can tell that they are still scarred from the experience. Some experts say that Penguin affected more than 3% of all English-language search results, penalizing sites for keyword stuffing and other extremely common optimization tricks.

The first Penguin update in 2012 was just the beginning, as is the case with most major Google algo updates. In future Penguin updates, Google would continue to crack down on web spam, over-optimization, and link building, and many SEO firms lived in terror of the next Penguin update.

Link building today

A lot of talk lately has been on the subject of link building losing value. These murmurs, it turns out, might have some validity, but are likely blown a bit out of proportion.

We've previously covered Google's confirmation that the top three ranking factors are its search AI Rankbrain, content, and links. Whichever way you slice it, then, links are still a *third of the equation to SEO success*. So why are some people preaching doom and gloom for the role of link building?

The link building naysayers aren't *actually* saying the strategy is dead, more that it doesn't work like it used to. Now, instead of using tangentially related and lower quality links by the dozen, *one* inbound link from a serious player in the field is the better way to go.

This leads to atypical link building strategies like link outreach and cultivating highly linkable content as an asset rather than putting together a slapdash article and paying sites in a vaguely similar field for links.

What, then, does link building involve in 2018?

Creating linkable content

This doesn't mean 370-word blog blurbs with little revolutionary content. It means getting down and dirty in the muck of your industry. It means sifting for informational gold over the course of a couple thousand words.

In short, it means crafting a piece of content that's too good

not to be linked. If any business wants to be the authority in their field, they need to *be the authority in their field*.

Helping reporters out

HARO is a platform for journalists searching for sources. Once you create that source, you can peruse HARO's free website where journalists post the story they are writing, and the sources they are after. This can be seriously advantageous for the SEO guru in need of high quality editorial links on larger newspapers.

Seeking out industry leaders

Link outreach highlights the link building paradigm shift. One of the best ways to get high quality links is by looking for high ranking industry leaders that might be interested in your content.

Once you have a solid foundational understanding of their content topics, what their site might be missing, and what sites they already link to, contact them with a proposal to include your super informational, ultra-polished link in their next post.

This is link building today, and as you can see, it takes a much more public relations-like angle on creating links. You need to interact with other blogs and high ranking sites in a non-transactional way in order to cultivate the same link power you would've gotten years ago with paid links.

But before we launch ourselves full-force into the future of link building, let's take a moment for a descriptive detour into the different types of link building.

The many flavors of link building

Becoming a link building pro is a lot like being a jack of all trades, within one oddly specific trade. There are so many

different objectives link building can serve, and just as many different strategies for implementing those links.

Brian Dean at Backlinko provides an in depth look at some little-known backlinking techniques, but this should help you get started.

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Links for traffic

What does every ecommerce website want more than anything? Perhaps they ultimately want to be ranked number one for all of their keywords, but the more honest and realistic goal is to get raw, unadulterated traffic.

More people equals more money. Getting links placed in a blog post, the comments section, forum posts, or even banner ads on a high-traffic site can make a huge difference in the number of page visits your website gets.

Links for lifting your SERP

Scaling the mountain to Google's coveted page one is a huge goal of SEO. To do this, you need really juicy links.

Link juice is the amount of power an inbound link has in conveying to Google that your page should be higher on the results page. Sites like Forbes and The New York Times have a lot of juice, while unpopular blogs about squirrel fur are parched.

The thing is, juice can flow freely, or not at all. The deciding factor is found in do-follow or no-follow links. No-follow links are a way to link a page, but tell Google to

ignore it when determining the linked page's result position.

In order to get juicy links that will propel your site to higher search positions, you *need* do-follow links.

Links for your reputation

If your goal is to fill the search results for your company's name with nothing but positivity, you will want to do a bit of reputation link building. This involves getting do-follow links that have your company's name, or CEO's name, in the anchor text.

These links can, and should, direct to your various social media platforms, your landing page, or to any website that you can ensure will present your business in a positive light. This strategy sounds a little like PR, doesn't it?

Now that you have a more thorough (albeit far from exhaustive) understanding of link building in the past and present, let's look with dewy eyes into the mysterious orb of the future.

Chasing tomorrow

The job of SEO professionals always seems to be, above all else, playing catch-up. Keeping up to speed with Google algorithm updates is a full time job, and it's a job that everyone in the industry is working on tirelessly.

Though link building will still remain relevant for some time, the dissenters might be more than simple link building haters. They could, in fact, be a form of early adopters.

One thing all SEO folks should pay attention to, starting right now, is the Google's new capacity for understanding and integrating linkless mentions into their algorithm.

Linkless mentions

With the death of Google's once dogmatically-followed tool PageRank in 2016, the SEO world was left in the dark about where a page stood in terms of link juice and overall power. Since then, there has been an implied shift away from the importance of links as an SEO factor.

Rumors soon began circling that both Google and Bing possessed a mechanism to recognize the mere mention of a brand without the little `ahref` to go along with it. This was all but confirmed in late 2017 by Google's own Gary Illyes in his keynote speech at Brighton SEO. In Illyes' own words:

"Basically, if you publish high quality content that is highly cited on the internet – and I'm not talking about just links, but also mentions on social networks and people talking about your branding, crap like that. Then you are doing great."

This is a bit more than a nod to those conspiracy theorists that suggest Google has the capacity for implied link recognition. But does that threaten link building directly?

Not exactly. Many SEO professionals have a fully implemented link building strategy that works magnificently today. That said, this is a chance for those paying close attention to adopt new and more streamlined techniques.

For example, instead of contacting websites where your business was mentioned, but not linked, you can move on and spend your time elsewhere, knowing that Google has already seen this mention and accounted for it.

This brave new linkless world could mean changes in the way SEO is done on a large scale. Originally, link building was done as a way to quantify reputation, a strategy catalyzed by PageRank. Now that PageRank is gone, and there is no

completely accurate way to get inside of Google's algorithmic brain, it might be time to invite the PR pros into the murky realm of SEO.

If link building was just quantified reputation management, one might infer that linkless mentions (aka inferred links) are a form of unquantifiable reputation management.

All signs point toward adopting a new style of metric tracking and network building that focuses on the following:

- **High quality content.** Creating those killer articles for people to reference becomes even more important. Now you aren't just hustling for a link, but for the reputation of your entire brand.
- **Guest blogs.** Not only do they offer great content, these blogs hold a good amount of weight. This is because you can guest post without ever needing to link. As long as your brand is mentioned, you will get Google's attention.
- **Social media mentions.** Having your name pop up on social media is crucial. This has been known for a long time, even outside of SEO, but mentioning a Facebook page that shares your brand's name can signal Google for both at the same time. This compounds with the positive social engagement you'll receive.

This is far from a conclusive image of the future, yet it *does* seem like SEO is trending toward a strategy that involves fewer links.

This might be scary to the deeply entrenched SEO gurus out there, but ultimately it changes very little about the way you'll build links. Instead of blue underlined text, you will be able to shout out Hubshout without a single ahref to be found.

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<https://searchenginewatch.com/2018/03/07/a-forward-looking-history-of-link-building/>