Avoid Google Penalties – Ensure a Natural Link Landscape by @A_Ninofranco



Some SEO practitioners think that they can get away with shady and risky techniques (that Google considers webspam) to game the system and hack their way to the top of the SERPs.

Whether it’s worth the risk is a different story altogether.

But we all know that the search engines, especially Google, won’t let them off the hook easily if/when they get caught.

In his PeepCon 3.0 presentation last February, Dean Chew, Director of Asian Operations for Ayima, zeroed in on why Google will take manual action on a website, how to get a manual action revoked, and how to avoid penalties.

Here are a few takeaways from his presentation, Avoiding Google Penalties by Appearing Squeaky Clean.

Google’s Manual Actions

Google imposes different types of penalties (note: Google officially uses the term “manual action” instead of “penalty”), to erring websites. The major manual actions are:

Hacked Site

This is the most common type of website compromise. Hackers might target vulnerable and outdates websites to drive traffic to malicious or deceptive sites.

Snippets Spam

This refers to structured data spam and involves marking up content that is invisible, irrelevant or misleading

Thin Content

Google penalizes websites which contain low-quality pages such as:

- Thin affiliate pages
- Cookie-cutter sites
- Doorway pages

For the most part, Google will just exclude thin content from the index without penalizing the website.

Paid or Spammy Link Development

Despite the risks, people who want to rank faster end up buying links and engaging in link spam. Slow, steady and natural-looking links take a long time to build while aggressive and commercial links are risky but can have results faster.

Recovering from Google Penalties

To mitigate the negative consequences of a link-based penalty from Google, link cleanup and disavowal should be done.

Some link cleanup tools you can use include:

- Link Detox
- Ahrefs
- SEMrush
- Kerboo

Start off by creating a link cleanup matrix. The link cleanup tools mentioned above can make it easier to create a disavow file to upload to Google Search Console (GSC).

Next, you also have to send reconsideration requests to Google.

Recovering from a manual action can drag on to months, even after taking down the links and sending multiple reconsideration requests.

Negative SEO Attacks

On the other hand, some websites might be the target of a negative SEO attack – a sudden backlink spike on your link profile consisting of spammy anchor texts from low-quality domains.

To recover from this, submit a disavowal file to Google and request re-indexation of your most important pages.

Avoiding Link Penalties

With the help of tracking some key industry metrics, SEO pros can avoid link-based penalties.

While these metrics are not endorsed or used by Google, they

can help us understand our website's link profile.

- Moz Domain Authority
- Ahrefs Domain Rating
- Majestic Citation Flow
- Majestic Trust Flow

Chew provides this top tip for identifying an unnatural backlink profile:

> *"Try looking at Majestic Citation Flow and Trust Flow. If the scores are similar, the site is generally in good shape. Whereas a larger split between the two scores (such as 35 CF / 10 TF) means it probably has some bulk spam."*

How to Spot Unnatural Looking Links

Unnatural links are often characterized by the following:

- Low trust flow or citation flow style metrics.
- Target URLs that link to a small selection of pages.
- Targets that link into index or category pages.
- Same style of anchor texts, especially commercial style.
- Links built on a narrow selection of topics.
- Client site that is not often referenced naturally by other websites that suddenly starts getting links.
- Has no linkable assets on their website to reference.

What Else You Can Do

Ensure a Natural Link Landscape

A natural link profile will have links from images, subdomains, nofollowed links, and more.

A link landscape grows over time and so should traffic.

Don’t Over-Optimize Anchor Text

Natural links usually don’t have keyword-rich anchor text. Your top anchor text terms should be brand terms, your site name

Make Sure Your Link Looks Natural on the Page

Links should appear within text where relevant to users – and never be hidden.

Conclusion

When looking for link opportunities, metrics are a good guide but we should also not dismiss sites because they don’t meet an exact metric threshold.

Site relevancy and a clean backlink profile can identify a “seedling site.” The sites can be good for the future as they grow and generate trust flow and citation flow.

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More than 300 search marketing pros came together Feb. 17 in Manila for PeepCon (“The People’s Conference”). You can view the speakers’ presentation decks here and here. Also, check out the PeepCon 3.0 album on SEJ’s Facebook page to view photos from the event.

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