

If you think you're link building, you're doing it wrong

30-second summary:

- Founder and CEO of Organic Growth, Kevin Carney interviewed 39 marketing professionals about their link building practices.
- He has brilliantly condensed all these thoughts and highlighted a group of eight which is much more strategic about their link building.
- More insights on what makes them unique and the most preferred link building platforms across the globe.

The hyperbolic title of this article is a conclusion I've come to after interviewing 39 people – with titles ranging from Marketing Specialist, Outreach Team Lead, Head of Content, to VP of SEO & Analytics, about their link building practices.

Of the 39 people, 23 work for agencies, 16 work for brands, and out of that group of 39, there are eight who do link building better, by approaching it differently.

So, what do they do that's different?

First, let's please notice that this is an almost perfect 20/80 Pareto principle split, so kudos to Vilfredo Pareto, who first noticed how common this split is, way back in 1896.

The group of eight have the following in common:

1. It's not about link building, it's about something else

The best way I can think to describe this, is these people don't do link building per se, they do some higher-level activity, which they take VERY seriously, and which includes the intention to attract high-quality links.

While their primary focus is on the higher-level activity, they are very aware of the importance of attracting links, and how their higher-level activity helps them do that.

2. It's important in its own right

Did I mention they take this VERY seriously? The higher-level activity they do is not something they attend to when they can, it's not something they "get to". It is one of their highest marketing priorities. They devote resources to it, and in most cases wish they could devote more.

I think it's also worth noting that of the group of eight, five are brands and three are agencies.

Examples of their higher-level activities

Below I identify the group of eight and provide a summary of what they do, and how they do it.

1. Matt Zajechowski of Digital Third Coast

Matt Zajechowski is an Outreach Team Lead and Content

Marketing Promotions Specialist at Digital Third Coast, a Chicago based digital marketing agency. They work to position their clients as experts through digital public relations, and yes, I know everyone says that.

Early in the interview, Matt said,

“We do a lot of content-based linked building.”

But their idea of content is more involved than what others do.

They employ a primary tool of data-driven stories and articles, where the data comes from surveys involving 1,000 to 3,000 people. They don't conduct the surveys themselves, but rather make use of online survey platforms such as SurveyMonkey and Amazon Mechanical Turk. These surveys run over the course of weeks and in some cases a few months.

The survey results provide patterns, trends, and stories with which to create highly unique content that provides insights not available elsewhere. The design of their surveys takes into account what articles are already published on the topic in question, as they work to avoid publishing something already covered by someone else.

As you can imagine, these articles make excellent link bait. Not because they are link bait per se, but because they're good.

Their link building philosophy is that truly unique content, based on large sets of data that provide interesting insights, not only makes initial link building easier but soon attracts links without continued effort on their part.

2. Steve James, Freelance Marketing

Consultant

Steve James is a freelance marketing consultant in Vancouver, British Columbia. Steve focuses on helping small, medium, and enterprise businesses.

What Steve does differently is to not focus on “what” to do, but rather to focus on “who” might be interested.

Steve said something I found to be a very interesting perspective:

“You need links to show you’re known by the right people.”

I can best illustrate his approach by sharing a story he told me to explain his approach.

Steve had a client who was a tailor who sold custom made suits. Rather than focus on building links to the tailor’s website per se, Steve thought about who cares about suits at all, let alone custom made suits.

Obviously, people who wear suits. So, who wears suits? Well, the mayor and the members of the City Council wear suits. The next question is, what can he do to get them to notice the tailor?

This resulted in content being published on the tailor’s website that was effectively written for the mayor and other city dignitaries and promoted to them.

This resulted in links from the city government website, and the mayor’s blogs. Being a local business, that was enough to lift the tailor’s website onto the first page of Google.

This led to a whole new market of online prospects, people who follow the Council members, and business professionals that wear suits.

Steve's link building philosophy is not that he does a set of things related to building links, but he does whatever is appropriate to attract the attention of the right people.

3. Olga Mykhoparkina of Chanty

Olga Mykhoparkina former Chief Marketing Officer at Better Proposals Chanty, a software company that provides a team messaging tool similar to Slack and MS Team. They're based in Zurich and Kharkiv, Ukraine. Their approach is public relations, where link building is a side effect of that.

Olga told me,

"We don't really do anything to just get backlinks.... Links that we get are more of a side effect".

Their larger effort is "to be known", not to build links per se.

She then described how their main focus is on maintaining contact with journalists and answering questions of interest to these journalists.

They have people who monitor journalist requests on platforms such as HARO, SourceBottle, and JournoRequest, read every request and respond to every relevant inquiry. Any question they can answer, they do answer.

This is resulting in 20 to 50 quality backlinks per month, some from websites as authoritative as Forbes, American Express, and Business Insider.

This public relations work requires two full-time people.

Their link building philosophy is that by helping journalists, they greatly improve their exposure and their backlink profile.

4. Jamie Kehoe of Venturi

Jamie Kehoe, Former Content Manager at Venturi, an IT recruitment agency located in Manchester, England mentioned that their approach is community management, which helps them greatly with link building.

What encapsulates that idea is Jamie's statement of,

"We've been nurturing this community...."

A Slack channel is the hub of their community discussions, and their community management also includes content on their blog and a weekly podcast, Venturi's Voice.

The discussions within their community are focused on teams; recruiting, building, nurturing, managing, and so on.

The podcast gives them unique content not available elsewhere, and each episode is an interview with someone solving problems in interesting ways.

The community management activities, including producing the podcast, are done by multiple people and works out to about two full-time equivalents.

Their link building philosophy involves generating unique interesting content to answer questions their community is asking.

5. Cécilien Dambon of Venngage

Cécilien Dambon is International Growth Manager at Venngage provides a software tool for making infographics and is based in Toronto, Ontario.

An interesting comment Cécilien said is,

"You send the same email to 100 people and you get a 3%

conversion rate, and you send that same email super customized to ten people and you get the same result."

So they focus on relationship building, and yes, I know everyone says that.

At Venngage this shows up as ten people in Venngage marketing maintaining a close relationship with people outside of Venngage with whom they do co-marketing. Co-marketing being a corporate buzzword for helping people who are also helping you.

They are proactive about doing favors for their friends without an expectation of payback for each and every favor.

Of course, there are limits. If someone they co-market with accepts favors and never returns them, that relationship is allowed to wither and is replaced with one that is more mutually beneficial.

This is not a dedicated function with Venngage marketing per se but by virtue of ten people maintaining co-marketing relationships with (give or take) 10 people each, their co-marketing network is strong.

Then when they need favors, they have a network of friends to ask for help.

Their link building philosophy can be summed up in that Beatles lyric: "With a little help from my friends".

6. Miles Smith of Imaginasium

Miles Smith is Director of Digital & Inbound/Content Marketing at Imaginasium, an agency located in Green Bay, Wisconsin, specializing in helping manufacturing businesses.

Their focus is best summed up in the word "alignment".

Miles said two things to me that I found to be of great interest:

Marketing is not simply creating demand for what is. It involves changing the business to best meet what demand exists.

Everything is link building, and links indicate the right people know about you.

Item two above is similar to the focus Steve James has on “who” rather than “what” and drives what content they publish, to whom they promote it, and how they promote it to them.

Their focus on “everything is link building” is the principle around which they organize their work.

While from this point on, things do look tactical for a while email outreach jumpstarts their link building, the alignment they worked on earlier helps their link building occur on its own faster, as they have less “content promotion inertia” to overcome.

As they’re an agency, the level of staffing required to make this happens depends upon what their client is paying for, but generally, for a client who takes this seriously, one to two full-time equivalents, consisting of bits and pieces of various team members (in-house and outsourced), are involved in this work.

Their link building philosophy is it’s important to be known by the right people.

7. Chris Eckstrum of Housecall Pro

Chris Eckstrum, former Manager of SEO at Housecall Pro, a company that provides software to tradespeople to help them run more efficient businesses. They’re located in San Diego, California.

They also focus on community management.

The hub of their community is two Facebook groups they own and manage. One is for home service professionals, the other is for women service professionals.

The groups are closed, in the sense that people need to ask to join and Housecall Pro vets them to make sure they are tradespeople, but the group is not limited to Housecall Pro customers. Any tradesperson can join.

Chris told me the discussions within the group provide them with content ideas as well as content amplification and links, as much of their content comes from discussions and interviews with group members, and all content is then shared with the group.

Their management of the groups is very active. They engage frequently with members.

Link building occurs primarily by members of their community directly linking to their content, as well as members of their community promoting the content with others.

Managing those two Facebook groups is a full-time job for two people.

Their link building philosophy is; links come fairly naturally from managing and nurturing their online communities.

8. Araks Nalbandyan of 10Web Inc

Araks Nalbandyan is the Director of Digital Marketing at 10Web an agency that builds, manages, and hosts WordPress websites. They're based in Newark, Delaware.

They are the exception within this group of eight, as they do what the rest of us do, but more so, and better, which primarily means with a high degree of personalization.

Their primary link building strategy is content promotion via email.

By “more so”, I mean they have two people doing it full time, and by “better” I mean that every pitch is highly personalized. They do not send mass emails.

The degree to which this is true is illustrated by how Araks described the training of the people who do link building. The very first pitch they compose can take four hours to draft. Over time, they get better at it, and four months later they’re able to craft a highly customized pitch in 20 minutes.

What they’re doing is highly customized email pitches at volume, which I am differentiating from the sending of mass email, which is generally very slightly customized by the use of templates.

The other thing they do differently from the bulk of us is they actually and rigorously track their outreach attempts and results, and adjust based on that feedback. They do this in part with the reporting capability of the email product they use (Lemlist), and in part by dumping data from various sources into Google Data Studio and generating information from the data.

She said one that really caught my attention,

“The main reason I separate the Content Promotion (from other link building tactics) is because of the open rate, the click-through rate, and the answer rate of those kinds of emails are super high. One of our campaigns reached an open rate of about 78%, which was huge, and we got a lot of responses and a lot of links from that.”

Their link building philosophy has two prongs:

1. Highly personalized email pitches are worth the effort.
2. You can’t manage what you don’t measure.

The rest of us are focused on the tactical aspects of link building

Which it appears, is not an effective way to build links at scale. The other 31 people I interviewed aren't doing link building wrong per se, they're just being less effective. Their efforts build links, but not on the same scale.

From talking with this group of people, the "issue" if that's the right word, is their link building approach is much more tactical, and not as strategic as the group of eight listed above.

The group of eight is much more strategic about their link building (by considering it to be part of a higher-level activity) and much more tactical about their higher-level activity, which is what they attend to in their daily to-do lists.

And I appreciate their contribution to this article

For the record, the group of people I interviewed above and beyond the group of eight is:

Agencies

- Olivier Mamet of Sandbox, located in Mauritius
- Nick Bennett of Growmeo Marketing, in Phoenix, Arizona
- Brooks Manley of Egenius, in Greenville, South Carolina
- Sam White of New Dimension Marketing & Research, in Encinitas, California
- Greg Heilers of Jolly Content, in Walnut Creek, California
- Djordje Milicevic of StableWP, in Toronto, Ontario
- Syed Irfan Ajmal of SyedIrfanAjmal.com, in Peshawar,

Pakistan

- Kyle Douglass of Revium, in Melbourne, Australia
- Andy Nathan of Smart at the Start, in Chicago, Illinois
- Jonathan Aufrey of Growth Hackers, in Taipei, Taiwan
- Amine Rahal of IronMonk Solutions, in Toronto, Ontario
- Markelle Harden of Knowmad Digital Marketing, in Fort Mill, South Carolina
- David Kranker of David Kranker Creative, in Grand Rapids, Michigan
- Kyle Kasharian of 9Saill, in Fairfield, New Jersey
- Dean Cacippo of One Click SEO, in New Orleans, Louisiana
- Cory Hedgepeth of Direct Online Marketing, in Wexford, Pennsylvania
- Jonathan Gorham of Engine Scout, in South Yarra, Australia
- Irena Zobniów of Insightland.org, in Wroclaw, Poland
- Celest Huffman of Rocket Web, in Nashville, Tennessee

Brands

- Shejraj Singh of YoStarter, in Punjab, India
- Michael Anderson of Geolango Maps, in Pleasanton, California
- Slisha Kankariya of With Clarity, in New York City
- Christina Sanders of Lucidpress, in Salt Lake City, Utah
- Erin Osterhaus of CORT, in Austin, Texas
- Patrick Whatman of Spendesk, in Paris, France
- Matt Bassos of Vuly Play, in Brisbane, Australia
- Dana Roth of FortVision, in Tel Aviv, Israel
- Quincy Smith of Ampjar, in Shanghai, China
- Taavi Rebane of Messente Communications, in Tartu, Estonia
- Praveen Malik of PMbyPM, in Delhi, India
- Jakub Kliszczyk of CrazyCall, in Wroclaw, Poland

The software tools used

I thought it would be interesting to know what software tools are used for their link building activities, so I asked and compiled this list.

In the spirit of full disclosure, these are the tools people thought to mention to me when I asked, and I tried not to ask leading questions. As such, it's possible some people simply didn't feel that a tool such as Google Sheets was worthy of mention, whereas others did.

What surprised me is that neither Majestic SEO nor Google Custom Search Queries get much respect.

Below is a list of each software tool, and the number of people who said they use it.

- Ahrefs: 27
- SEMRush: 21
- Google Sheets: 15
- BuzzStream: 8
- io: 8
- MozPro: 6
- Screaming Frog: 5
- Mailshake: 4
- VoilaNorbert: 4
- Google Custom Search Queries: 3
- MajesticSEO: 3
- HubSpot: 2
- MozBar: 2
- SimilarWeb: 2
- Trello: 2
- Answer the Public: 1
- Asana: 1
- Boomerang: 1
- Cision: 1
- Cora: 1

- Google Calendar: 1
- io: 1
- LemList: 1
- Link Prospector: 1
- com: 1
- PitchBox: 1
- io: 1
- Scrapebox: 1
- SEO Power Suite: 1
- SEOquake: 1
- org: 1
- Spyfu: 1
- Ubersuggest: 1

The tactics employed

I also asked people about their link building tactics, but since seeing that the difference that makes the difference is not one's tactical approach to link building, but rather one's tactical approach to their higher-level activity, I fear I would be leading you astray by publishing this list.

In spite of the fact that I met everyone but one person through HARO, I was surprised to discover how many people consider HARO to be a valuable link building tactic. It was the third most popular tactic, by a long shot.

Below are the top three, and the number of people who stated they use it.

- Content promotion via email: 24
- Guest blogging: 23
- HARO: 18

The fourth most popular tactic was used by only 8 people.

In closing

Link building at scale requires resources. Some companies, even some larger companies, do not devote the one or two full-time equivalents required to do it effectively.

If, due to resource constraints, you can't be one of the top tier link building players, the way you emulate them is:

Devote bits of pieces of lots of people to make up as many full-time equivalents as you can. Since your more successful competitors are devoting appropriate resources, you've got to compensate or be left behind.

Prioritize that work as important enough to get to, even if that requires something else to be less important, and yes, I know that is easier said than done.

While each email might start with a template, make each email highly personalized to the person you're sending it to. Based on the people I spoke to for this article, fewer highly personalized emails have greater success than mass emails where the personalization is just what's done in the template.

Kevin Carney is the Founder and CEO of the boutique link building agency Organic Growth.

More about:

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