Is link building dead? Depends on who you talk to

Sure, link building used to be plagued by a morass of black-hat tactics like link farms, paid link schemes, hidden links and spammy content. But after Google introduced Penguin algorithm updates in 2012 to crack down on those tactics, the focus turned to white hat techniques and quality content.

But, that doesn’t mean the debate about link building is over. Some SEOs argue any form of proactive link building is a waste of time at best and a policy violation at worst. And some say it should be a valuable, legitimate part of any SEO strategy.

So which is it?

The quality content argument

A common yet contentious attitude towards link building is encapsulated by this tweet, which quotes Managing Director of Ryte Marcus Tandler's talk during SEO Fight Club at SMX Munich.

> *Link building is a waste of time. Instead of wasting time on link building spend the time writing better content and focusing on UX and user intent. @mediadonis #SMX*
>
> *— Patrick Stox (@patrickstox) April 3, 2019*

"Of course, taken out of context, this one quote from my 66-slide presentation might be quite misleading, maybe even dangerous advice," Tandler told Search Engine Land after the fact, reminding us that the nuances of link building don't easily lend themselves to Twitter.

"The old SEO advice to write content for users rather than for search engines also applies to link building. Don't build links because it might yield a certain 'SEO value,' build links that drive targeted traffic to your site."

During his session, Tandler touched upon the spam generated by link building practices as well as the post-PageRank rise of "arbitrary metrics" that blur the line between what works and what doesn't.

In an effort to sway SMX Munich attendees, Tandler invoked definitions and quotes from prominent SEO figures John Mueller, Matt Cutts and Jono Alderson to support his position that any link not organically given is, by definition, in violation of Google's webmaster guidelines.

Mueller’s response to a Webmaster Central Help Forum question regarding creating your own backlinks.

In addition to pointing out the oxymoronic nature of building quality links, he also mentioned the viability of other techniques, such as internal linking.

“If your team has limited resources (or maybe you are the whole SEO team), I would advise investing time in creating really great content, rather than in link building,” Tandler recommends.

“Invest time in providing a superior user experience and be obsessive about matching user intent. The ultimate goal should be to genuinely provide the best result. You should always aspire to be an authority in your respective field. Stop building links and start earning them!”

The organic visibility argument

Many supporters of the practice cite the need to build links to distinguish content in high-competition niches.

“The problem with a lot of content is that no one sees it. If you don’t socialize it or directly reach out, you’re missing out on a lot of great linking opportunities,” said Julie Joyce, owner of link development firm Link Fish Media.

“Recently, I secured a great link for a client after I reached out to a blogger in the same niche and pointed out some content that I thought would fit in nicely with a piece he

already had, and he thanked me. When someone says, ‘Hey, thanks for sending that!’ you really realize how easy it is for people to miss out.”

Debra Mastaler, president of Alliance-Link, also disagrees with focusing too narrowly on content.

“In link building, quality content can be used as a ‘hook’ or tool to attract attention and links. But it’s not enough,” she said.

“Your quality content won’t generate the desired outcome unless it’s promoted with a combination of tactics to influence behavior. This is where a lot of link building campaigns fail, time is spent creating content but little thought is given to where you should promote and to whom.”

Both Joyce and Mastaler agreed that link building is a technique as well as an investment.

“Content, announcements, goods and services are all spread through links, the combination of these forces means link building has a big impact on pages and people, making it a good investment of time and money,” said Mastaler.

It’s not black and white

Tandler stopped shy of totally condemning link building.

“There are a lot of very talented link builders that can build links which appear perfectly natural. There are also a lot of very creative agencies which create superb link magnets,” he said. “But, apart from companies that understand the value of great SEO and invest large amounts of money into it, there are hundreds of thousands of businesses, from one-man-shows, local store, and restaurant owners to the big corps, who are chasing a low-budget SEO approach.”

On the other side of the line, Joyce said, “Sites can rank

without great links, but generally speaking you aren’t going to find sites consistently ranking in the top 10, or even top 20, results.”

As marketers, we’re often tasked to accomplish brand awareness or reach specific KPIs on limited resources. The most effective allocation of those resources is at the core of this decades-long conversation, which is occasionally revived by algorithm updates, correlative studies and tweets by celebrity SEOs.

When this happens, the discussion itself can overshadow a link’s relatively modest purpose – not to dictate search rankings, but to provide users with the context and resources they’re looking for.

“If a link to my site brings in targeted traffic, ideally with long dwell time and multiple page impressions per visit, I consider it to be a good link,” said Tandler.

“As I’m fond of saying, ‘links help get you ranked but clicks show you deserve to be there,’” said Mastaler.

About The Author

George Nguyen is an Associate Editor at Third Door Media. His background is in content marketing, journalism, and storytelling.
http://feeds.searchengineland.com/~r/searchengineland/~3/0ZX_W7KMvJ0/link-building-dead-alive-315116