Making the argument for nofollow links in SEO



30-second summary:

- The debate still continues in the SEO community on the variation of value from backlinks.
- Google has shifted their position on these links.
- What do we get for our efforts?
- Are nofollow links worth the pain?

Are nofollow links a waste of time?

SEO practitioners have for years been told that nofollow links have zero value. It has become a mantra that has been repeated to the point where it has become a vulgar term to us.

Is this a healthy approach to link building though? Should opportunities for these diminished backlinks be ignored moving forward? Here I'd like to make the case for these lowly search engine signals.

What is a dofollow and a nofollow link?

I will keep this short. There are no dofollow links. All links start out as follows by default for search engines. Google came out many years ago with a new attribute called a nofollow and asked website managers to add them to links in their comments section because unscrupulous spammers were causing havoc on their algorithms. It was an easy way for these black hat SEO types to build lots of links on multiple sites.

Over time, some websites added this attribute to other parts of their content, if not their entire website to dissuade marketers from trying to get links on their websites for SEO purposes only. As a result, many marketers lost a lot of interest in these sites for providing them quality content.

Google with all of its vagaries, updates their position

A little over a year ago, Google came out and told us they had updated the algorithm to consider some nofollow links as hints. The extent of what that means can be open to interpretation.

But it does tell us that Google is paying attention to them. This does not mean I am recommending open season and that your link building strategy should be entirely built on them. But there is definitely more value to them than most people realize.

Nofollow backlinks can still provide authority

The quality rater guidelines published by Google have put a

lot of focus on Expertise, Authority, and Trustworthiness (E-A-T). Going through the verbiage you will find that they place authority on the authors of content being mentioned in news articles and publications. Even Wikipedia is specifically mentioned (which has nofollow links as policy on its entire website).

Forbes, Huffington Post, and Medium are great examples of websites that only provide nofollow links. But I imagine that would have little concern about these quality raters.

In ignoring these publications you could very well be missing out on one of the keys to increasing the authority of your website based upon the assumption that there is a lack of link juice.

Search console consistently provides these links in their reporting

As much data as is available in the Google Search Console, there is quite a bit more information we in the SEO community would like to see that is not readily given in this tool. And yet, Google has consistently provided many nofollow links mixed in with the regular backlinks in the reporting. Why do you think this is?

Google easily knows the difference between them and yet still provides them and has for years. Not only that – they also factor them into the top linking text (anchor text) section which is a big part of this puzzle.

A mixture of the two types has always been considered healthy for a backlink profile for your website. Where nofollows can have a strong impact is providing context. Being able to reinforce brand name and other keyword terms for your site and individual pages.

No one can expect to get exact keyword match anchor text from high authority websites on a regular basis. But mentions in forums, now comments and other places can provide context if not link strength. If you are trying to refine the keyword focus of your pages, this is a worthwhile endeavor.

More direct traffic

Qualified traffic of any kind is valuable. If your entire job is to increase the rankings of your website, then this point does not apply. But being an SEO usually means getting more organic traffic to your website. It would be hard to dispute that visitors from high traffic websites to yours' based upon the intent of the link, would not count as such.

When visitors to those websites are reading their content on a particular subject and inevitably click a link to your website, that is a win in my book. It is kind of the whole point of your job.

Not to mention that someone who has been researching a topic and ran across your company name mentioned multiple times on industry-specific websites starts to solidify that brand recognition everyone is always talking about.

Summary of nofollow backlinks

For seasoned marketers, much of this is known and sometimes a helpful reminder is welcome. Those that are new to the industry often hear derision regarding the matter and shun these backlinks without having done their research or tested them on their own.

These hints for the search engines can bring a lot of value if utilized with restraint and consideration. Don't be so willing to discount them out of hand.

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