The data-driven approach to making backlink analysis decisions

30-second summary:

- The pandora’s box opened when the link building game got out of control at some point ultimately leading to lower-quality but better-linked pages on top of search results – and that’s when Google started taking counteractions.
- Whether you or Google like it or not, backlinks remain the crucial part of Google’s algorithm, and consequently, backlink analysis remains the most important step to organic visibility.
- However, everyone in our industry keeps facing the same question again and again: How to tell good links from the bad ones?
- All of the SEOs working with sites with more than 20 pages and brands with more than $200 budget know that looking at each backlink is hardly possible.
- Is there a data-driven approach to link building? Ann Smarty helps you create a data-driven backlink analysis strategy.

Backlink analysis has always been one of the toughest tasks of digital marketers and one SEOs have never really found an agreement upon.

And Google has never been really too helpful in ending that debate once and for all.

A quick look into the history of link building

A decade or so ago Google had told us to get other webmasters to link to our pages and even provided us with a tool – PageRank Toolbar – to measure the effectiveness of our link building efforts.

That's when the Pandora box was opened and no one has been able to close it ever since.

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Penguin updates and manual penalties followed discouraging the site owners from attempting to manipulate Google's algorithms. "Get backlinks" in Google's guidelines was revised into "Build high-quality content", and "link building" acquired a "spammy tactic" connotation.

Yet, no matter how much Google is trying to push away the "link building" agenda, digital businesses are unable to put it aside. In fact, the more Google is fighting bad links, the more emphasis it puts on backlink analysis and acquisition services.

Whether you (or Google) like it or not, backlinks remain the crucial part of Google's algorithm, and consequently, backlink analysis remains the most important step to organic visibility.

In fact, backlink analysis is helpful on both fronts:

- Identifying and removing/disavowing low-quality links, those probably sending poor signals to Google, may trip a filter and revive previously earned high rankings.

- Identifying high-quality link acquisition methods will improve rankings.

While the importance of backlink analysis is clear to everyone who is not living under the rock, everyone in our industry keeps facing the same question again and again: How to tell good links from the bad ones?

When you look at a backlink, you can mostly tell whether it is natural and helpful. But all of the SEOs working with sites with more than 20 pages and brands with more than $200 budget know that looking at each backlink is hardly possible.

There’s simply no business implications for “tell it when I see it” concept. So what to do?

Is there a data-driven approach to link building?

I was actually inspired to write this article by stumbling across this article on data-based decision making listing multiple benefits of using data over instincts when making business decisions.

Today, the top companies around the world use data to make decisions about their business. The reason they’re leading the way is that they’ve gained a strategic advantage over their rivals simply by shifting their focus to data rather than relying on business acumen alone.

The question is, how does this apply to link building?

Simply put, link building and backlink acquisition are crucial for any business presence and visibility in organic search results. This means they fall under the “business decisions” category which means they are basically unthinkable without data to support them.

But while we recognize the importance behind data, which data can we use to make link building and link removal decisions.

Ever since Google's toolbar PageRank has been deprecated, marketers have no reliable ways to automatically tell a good link from a bad link.

Or do they?

Focusing on a single source of data is dangerous

Lots of marketers are content to judge a link page quality by looking at one particular source, like Moz DA.

And if you have a hard time explaining to anyone why they shouldn't rely on any particular number, let me make it very easy for you:

None of the current numbers assessing the authority of a web page or a quality of a particular backlink comes from Google.

Do you need a more convincing argument?

It should be clear to any business owner at this point: You cannot achieve success with one of the marketing channels by 100% relying on a third-party source.

Yet, good link building data exists

In fact, when we say don't trust numbers when it comes to link building or analysis, we mean "no one source".

Solid link building data exists and not using it means missing valuable growth opportunities.

The smartest link building approach is about learning to combine multiple data sources and learning to identify patterns (to embrace or avoid).

There are multiple backlink research sources including link-only ones (Majesting and Link Assistant) and multi-feature platforms (SEMrush and Ahrefs). There are also newer platforms that are entering the industry that are worth looking at. Serpstat is the most recent example that claims to include one trillion backlinks for 160 million domains:

This is how different two backlink databases can be: 50% on average.

Domain	Serpstat	Ahrefs	Common	Common, %	Unique/Serpstat	Unique, %
brightlocal.com	9 872	12 899	6 257	63%	3 615	37%
worldofwarcraft.com	20 432	38 086	10 237	50%	10 195	50%
namepros.com	3 061	6 895	1 688	55%	1 373	45%
subaru.com	10 571	13 396	5 316	50%	5 255	50%
ourplanet.com	1 511	2 227	926	61%	585	39%
ispringsolutions.com	3 251	4 748	1 762	54%	1 489	46%
roccat.org	3 065	4 751	1 736	57%	1 329	43%
11bitstudios.com	1 528	2 032	886	58%	642	42%
aeg.com	784	1 028	419	53%	365	47%
serpstat.com	4 277	4 998	2 375	56%	1 902	44%
			Average	56%	Average	44%

Source: Serpstat

At Internet Marketing Ninjas, for every backlink we acquire, we pull a crazy amount of data, including:

- Number of domains referencing a linking page (based on all of these: Ahrefs, SEMrush, Majestic, and Moz)
- Number of links from Wikipedia pointing to that domain
- Stats on the author assigned to the linking page (number

of pages they authored, number of quotations from all over the web, and more)
- Number of .gov and .edu links pointing to the linking page
- How many other links that page has

Again, none of those stats is useful on its own but when looking at all of those numbers, you can be pretty confident of the value of that link.

To help you create your own data-driven link building decisions, here are a few helpful tools and resources:

- Use multiple tools. I know it may be costly but some free or freemium alternatives may help. Many of these plugins, for example, are free and lots of them include the link analysis component.
- It’s time we rethink how we measure influencers for SEO.

Conclusion

Backlink analysis is the most misunderstood task in our industry. You will see absolute extremes floating around: From experts solely relying on Mox DA to those denying the value of any number whatsoever.

Yet, the task cannot be successfully accomplished without accumulating and assessing data, so the answer is in embracing a holistic approach, that is, using a lot of data sources and making your decisions based on all of them.

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More about:

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