Link Development
Part I: Find the Links that Count!

(Part II: To be released in December 2007)

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I. Introduction

Link development is one of the most important and most difficult aspects of search engine optimization. Its value, however, has increased significantly over the years. Early search engine optimizers knew that links could be a backdoor into the Search Engines' indexes. Links in directories were a sure fire way to be found by the Engines. A directory link in the Open Directory Project (www.dmoz.org) was invaluable for Search Engine visibility.

Links were only a small part of the equation with pre-Google search engines. Getting found was the first part of the battle, then on-page optimization came into play. Web marketers used a myriad of techniques to find their way to the top of the search engine results pages (SERPs). Many of these tactics were well known throughout the online marketing world. In a emerging environment where the rules were not clearly defined, aggressive optimizers employed non-best practices to fill SERPs with poor quality or irrelevant results. This spam, as it has become known, destroyed the quality of the search engines. Searchers were looking for a better search experience.

Along came Google and their PageRank algorithm. Google Engineers thought outside of the box when it came to their indexing of the Web's contents. PageRank took into account links that pointed to Web sites. Links counted as votes. The more votes a Web site had, the higher it was ranked. PageRank evolved to include the text in the link, the text around links, the value of sites linking in, the relevance of sites linking in and many more aspects. Google's algorithm involved a lot more than just links, but the link value addition caused a radical change in search engine optimization.

II. Backlinks Defined

A Backlink is any link that comes from another Web page. Backlinks come in all shapes and sizes; actually categories and values. They can come from the same domain, sub domains, or external domains. The most important parameter is that backlinks have to exist on the Web when a spider crawls a page. Therefore links in emails, programs, or favorites do not count.

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Backlinks are now part of every major Search Engine's algorithm. They are examined for the keywords in the links. It is possible to rank for keywords that do not appear on the Web page – a virtual impossibility before links came into the picture. Keywords in the company name can naturally enhance rankings due to the nature of links using that company name. Keywords used in links should be varied and point to pages that are relevant to them. Links to the home page or root domain are the most common. It is advantageous to link to internal pages that may be more focused on the keyword content.

Backlinks are examined for quality by the Search Engines. It is best to gain links from high quality, authoritative Web sites. The classic question of quality versus quantity is fairly clear here – quality is most significant. Some of the factors that make a Web site an authority are: a plethora of valuable and fresh content, high Google PageRank, a significant amount of inbound links, and useful outbound links. Sites that appear to exist only for links are not valuable.

Backlinks are examined for relevance. If a Web site is about automotive repair and suddenly 100 high quality healthcare Web sites link to it, the site could lose rankings for their automotive keywords. A dental practice would benefit more from a national dentist registry backlink, than they would from a local chamber of commerce backlink.

III. Link Importance
Backlinks are an integral part of each of the major Search Engine's ranking criteria. This section will display some of the particulars of links and link research for each engine.

A. Google
PageRank reinvented the value of links for Search Engine Optimization. Google is the most advanced Search Engine when it comes to analyzing links and their structure. They are looking for incrementally growing links from quality, relevant Web sites. Backlinks can be checked in Google by using "link:domain.com" in their search box. However, since this technique was used for competitive research, the true results are not public.

Google's Webmaster Tools provides full backlink information if the site is verified. This is a great tool and should be used in conjunction with any link building campaign. Backlinks should be archived and progress should be tracked. Reports are available to show links to the domain and sub pages.

B. Yahoo

Quantity may be a more important factor for Yahoo. That being said, Yahoo is very strict when it comes to backlinks. They are known for penalizing sites for being part of poor or spammy link networks.

Yahoo's Site Explorer provides great backlink information. It can be used to see all inbound links to a domain, sub domain, or Web page. There are subtle differences between reported links from verified domains and nonverified domains. It seems that some false data may be reported on the nonverified domains. Yahoo may display extra links that are not counted toward the value of the site. Their backlink data should also be tracked; crawling patterns and link discovery may differ from Google.

C. MSN

MSN is still working diligently when in comes to link analysis. Backlinks are weighted into their algorithm, but some of their results seem prone to link spam. For some time, MSN disabled the "link:" and "linkdomain:" search operators. They were being heavily used for research with very little processor value for the engine. A sitemap program is in beta. It is expected for public use in Q1 of 2008.

IV. Anchor Text

One of the most important concepts to understand when it comes to links is anchor text. This is the text used in a link. An example would be: http://www.morevisibility.com/search-engine-marketing-newsletter.html vs. SEO Newsletter. Both are links. The first is just a URL, the second uses anchor text. Search Engines use the text and keywords in the anchor text and assign its weight/relevance to the page it is pointing to.

A. Keywords

Anchor text has always been in Web sites. The most common usage was for action items like "click here." Keywords should be used in the anchor text that is relevant to the landing page. Consider using

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"download this Link Development Whitepaper" as link text instead of "download." Keyword phrases should be varied in link text. It is more natural for linking to include a large variety of text. This goes back to directory linking. Human editors frequently rewrite titles and descriptions that were submitted for review. A multitude of links that use the same anchor text or a variety or Web sites could raise a spam flag.

B. Text around the Links

Text in links is important. Text around links can also be added to the equation. Anchor text links found in the middle of good content are more valuable than text links near other off-topic links. This problem is commonly found on Web sites that sell links. A link about plasma TVs may be right next to a link for discount pharmaceuticals. A more valuable link for plasma TVs would be in the middle of a content-rich article about "1080p and high definition."

C. Theme of the Web Site

Web sites should be on-topic or aligned with the desired genre of keywords. In some cases this is not possible. Anyone can link to any site. A blogger that regularly writes about Star Wars memorabilia may find a Web site about fishing supplies that he or she really likes. A link from that blog is off-topic, but cannot be controlled. Better links would come from fishing enthusiast Web sites. If large amounts of links start coming from one type of themed grouping of Web sites, it could change the assumed theme of the destination site by the Search Engines. An example would be: that Star Wars blogger is very popular, so all of his blog readers (also Star Wars junkies) start linking to that fishing site. Google may start to favor Star Wars type keywords for that site over fishing keywords.

V. Types of Links

All links are not created equal. Link development is not just about increasing backlinks, it is about getting the right links. Below is a taxonomy of links and an overview on their value.

A. One-Way Inbound Links

A one-way inbound link is a link that just links to another Web site. These are the most highly coveted link types. They may come from any type of Web site. Hierarchies of links exist within this group based on the quality of the sites doing the linking. A one-way

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inbound link is the closest representation of Google's "vote" concept of their PageRank.

B. Internal Links

Internal links are links within a Web site that point to other page within the same Web site. These links are valuable and often under-utilized and under-optimized. Navigation links count. Links within content are even better. Whenever a good keyword phrase is used in the content of PAGE A and PAGE B could be considered a resource for that phrase, an internal link should be used to point from PAGE A to PAGE B.

C. Outbound Links

Outbound links are links from your Web site to another Web site. These links have a mixed reputation. On the positive side, there is link association. If links to authority Web sites are near internal links, the Search Engines can assume there is a common theme and value between the links. On the negative side, outbound links can be construed as drains to a Web site in the form of traffic or link value.

D. Reciprocal Links

Reciprocal links are sets of links between two Web sites. A common misconception exists that says reciprocal links are worthless. This is not the case. Link value is still passed between these links. These links may also be sources of crawling or referral traffic. Reciprocal links should not be used as the only link building tactic. They should be part of a diversified strategy.

E. Run of Site Links

Run of site links are links that exists on every page of an external Web site. Before Google's infamous "Florida" update in November of 2003, these types of links were very influential in the SERPs. Post "Florida" that value has been diminished. In most cases these links are discounted to the value of one link. Run of site links can be great links on related Web sites. Due to their referral traffic potential they should still be pursued.

F. Link Farms

Link farms are link network that exist solely for the purpose of influencing SERPs. **Link farms are Spam**. Participating in one carries the risk of being penalized in the Engines. Link farms go by many names: free for all link exchanges, link exchanges, link

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networks, and more. Link schemes are dangerous and not worth the risk.

VI. Link Development Rules

Through communication from the Search Engines, publication of official guidelines and the work of organizations like SEMPO (Search Engine Marketing Professionals Organization), general search engine optimization rules are widely known and accepted. Link-building rules are not nearly as defined or accepted. These rules are just as important. There seems to be more grey areas for linking and some very creative techniques that may push the limits. There is a risk vs. reward proposition. A few helpful guidelines are:

1. Avoid shortcuts or quick fixes.
2. Avoid link development scams.
3. Google says no to buying text links.
4. Links should grow slowly and steadily.
5. Links should come from on-topic, relevant Web sites.
6. Links should come from high quality Web sites.
7. Use a variety of anchor text.
8. The longer a link exists, the more valuable it becomes.
9. Commit to investing time and energy for ongoing link development.
10. Build great content and the links will come.

VII. Google's October 2007 PageRank Update

A major update in Google's PageRank occurred at the end of October. It is one of the most dramatic changes to their algorithm since the historical "Florida" update. It is still a little early to tell the depth and reach of this update, however, it has been called "Florida V2" on WebmasterWorld. Articles have been flying around the internet marketing world about it. An industry expert called it a pre-Halloween "Black Wednesday."

The SEO world was due for a shake up. The waters have been a little too calm for a little too long. Mixing it up right before the holiday season by Google was a nice touch. There are a few observations that are easy enough to identify. The lower range of PageRank is more populated with Web sites than ever before. "4" is the new "5." Links from low PageRank sites are weighing down the PageRank of the destination Web sites. This may cause a new flurry of "please remove your link to my Web site" requests. While there

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has been some shift in search positions, it is nowhere near as drastic as the 2003 "Florida" updates.

Conclusion – Part 1

There are no shortcuts or quick fixes for Link Development. It is a time-consuming and labor-intensive undertaking. Once those two facts are accepted the road to success becomes much clearer. Part I of this paper reviewed some of the basics of link building, types of links, and provided a set of rules. One-way inbound links from relevant authority Web sites are the gold standard of links. Link building is like creating an investment portfolio. Each investor has a risk tolerance. Those with a high-risk tolerance have the opportunity for higher dividends in the long run. The potential for those higher dividends comes with an increased risk of losing the investment. Investors with a low-risk tolerance do not have as much upside potential, but are much more secure with their investments.

Risk tolerance or risk aversion can easily be tied to link development campaigns. There is certainly a right way to do it, a safe way to grow backlinks and gain favor with the Search Engines. MoreVisibility strongly recommends the best practices approach to link building. If a Web site needs a boost or is in a competitive market, link building is more vital. If a Web site is as optimized as it can be for natural search, the next area for investment is in links.

Link Development Part II Teaser

Part II of this Whitepaper, available in December 2007, will feature where to get links, link bait, and the paid link controversy. If you would like to automatically receive Link Development – Find the Links that Count, Part II, click on the link and send an email request.

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