

## Search Engines and Linking

Search engine algorithms are fiendishly complicated and always changing. But they do have some consistent factors. To decide the rank that a Web site will achieve in search engine results pages (SERPs), popular search engines like Google and Yahoo! consider many things. Backlinks have always been one of the most important.

Building a collection of external links that refer back to your site can be crucial to search engine success. Along with some ideas about where and how to get the kind of backlinks you need, this guide is designed to help Web site owners understand the true value of link building and exactly what it is about this vital task that can make it so rewarding.

### Link Building and SEO

External link building should be an integral part of the general Web site promotion process that is referred to as **search engine optimisation** (SEO). It usually plays a bigger part than you might think. In most cases, as much as 75 per cent of the time spent on a successful SEO campaign will be dedicated to 'off site' marketing activity and most of the work that competent SEO professionals recommend will be about gaining links back to your site.

An effective link-building campaign will use several channels to achieve a differing variety of links, including an ongoing schedule of site submissions and registrations with online business directories, blog posts, comment posts, social media sites (digg, stumbleupon, reddit, del.icio.us, etc) and other Web sites.

### Understanding Linking

To begin, it would be best to explain what it means to have another Web site link to your site. When Web site 'A' links to Web site 'B', it is effectively giving Web site 'B' a vote of confidence. From a search engine point of view, sites that have many links referring back to them are likely to be considered more useful and relevant than sites with only a few links, and they will be ranked accordingly on the search engine result pages (SERPs). As a general rule, the more links a site has, the more popular it is. However, search engines also take account of the different types of links that are available and recognise that some have a higher value than others. Outgoing links on sites that are seen as authorities in their field are given the most weight. Popular high quality web sites, provided by

such organisations as the BBC and newspapers like The Guardian and The Times, as well as government bodies, local council and educational groups, are all seen as important. Virtually any links from these types of sites will provide significantly greater ranking benefits – sometimes referred to as 'link juice' - than links obtained at less well regarded web sites. So it's not only the quantity of links that matters, but their quality too.

Most of the time, a Web site with just a few top-quality inbound links will outperform a site with hundreds of links from mediocre sites.

### Directories and Social Media

For some years, online directories have been a popular way to build links to a site. Directories still offer linking power, although the importance of many low-quality directory sites has diminished. Search engines continue to regard links from some directories as significant, especially some of the longest established sites, including **Best Of The Web** (BOTW), the **Yahoo! Directory** and **DMOZ** (the Open Directory Project).

More recently, the emergence of social media and bookmarking sites that allow users to post links to their favourite sites is seen by many Internet marketing strategists as providing some of the best link building opportunities for online business promotion.

### Social Media & Social Bookmarking

Social media thrives on providing links. From a business perspective, the advantage of using social media to create backlinks is clear. If your aim is to use the host of bookmarking and online community sites simply to gain links that search engines might take account of, social media activity makes immediate sense.

**StumbleUpon** is one of the best potential sources of traffic for first-time site promoters because it doesn't take a lot of votes or a large network of friends or followers to get decent results. Niche social media sites are another good place to start because they are generally easier to have success with. Some niche sites will require only a few votes to make your information popular, while it may take hundreds at Digg and others.

A range of niche sites can be seen on the categorised list at: <http://traffikd.com/social-media-websites/> Otherwise, social media sites are differentiated between social news (e.g. **Digg**),

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social bookmarking (**Delicious**), personal focus (**LinkedIn** and **Facebook** or **MySpace**), Q&A (**Yahoo Answers**) and social networking (**Twitter**).

In reality, it takes something more than directory-style link building activity to get the greatest benefit for your business from these sites. Using social media as a marketing tool involves promoting content in different ways to increase traffic and exposure. It can mean developing content that specifically targets social media users, building a network of fellow-users, requesting votes, and a range of activity designed to gain positive comments or generate new traffic. A good way to start is by tracking mentions of your product name, brand, service, etc, so that you can react – i.e. answer questions, counter negative comments and add links back to your site (using friendly, sales-neutral language whenever possible). You can also use the site: operator to find relevant Facebook pages on Google, i.e. site:www.facebook.com/pages/example.

You can react to content on video sites too. The brand leader - **YouTube** - allows text comments to be added by anyone viewing one of its video clips. It's easy to search YouTube directly for content relevant to your market - or keep track of competitors and new product launches with [www.video-alerts.com](http://www.video-alerts.com) - so that you can find suitable clips and add your comments. You do need to be quite subtle about it (including links in comments is not allowed) but it should be possible to suggest an alternative product or service that you offer and make it easy to find your Web site. YouTube is certainly worth attention as a business resource even if you don't have video clips to post online yourself. Owned by Google, it is now the second largest search site on the Web and gets more searches - 3 billion per month in the US - than Yahoo!

### Involvement is Vital

However you start, it pays to remember that the biggest rewards offered by social media come from taking an approach that embraces the true spirit and purpose of each site, which means getting fully involved. If you treat them as forums for discussion and if you can take the time to create strong, well-written material that will attract links from other Web sites or be picked up by bloggers – that's the key. But there are no easy shortcuts. In fact, rather than simply adding links that might improve their search engine results, many web site owners, and particularly bloggers, spend time on social media sites because they want to generate new traffic that

comes to them directly – rather than from search engines.

By posting provoking commentary and opinion, blog remarks that raise questions, and content that provides intriguing information, ultimately they build a much bigger tier of links, often from well respected sources, and sometimes from sites with strong search engine influence. News sites – including 'big brands' like UK newspaper The Guardian and the BBC - routinely comment on stories originating as 'user-generated content' on social media sites, as does our own TVNZ. The fact that The Guardian has an entire section devoted to social media – [www.guardian.co.uk/media/socialnetworking](http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/socialnetworking) - leaves no doubt that it has arrived as a force in business marketing.

### Twitter

To take just one example, according to Hitwise data released in January 2009, micro blogging site Twitter has seen usage in the UK increase 10-fold in recent months - with celebrities such as Steven Fry, John Cleese and Richard Branson joining the list of Twitterers. The service got even more mainstream exposure recently, when UK TV presenter Philip Schofield tweeted live on British TV's This Morning programme. It all provides reasons for businesses to get involved, even if they only use Twitter to monitor any mentions of their brand on the service.

Companies like Dell already have a strong presence on Twitter in the US, and UK firms are following their lead: UK cellphone company Carphone Warehouse - <http://twitter.com/guy1067> - is using the service to improve help and support for customers. An increasing number of NZ companies are also taking advantage of Twitter, including the NZ Herald. It is currently Nz's 39th most popular website.

Examples of 'big brand' companies using Twitter:

ASDA • <http://twitter.com/asda>  
 British Airways • [http://twitter.com/British\\_Airways](http://twitter.com/British_Airways)  
 Debenhams • <http://twitter.com/DebenhamsRetail>  
 Dixons • <http://twitter.com/dixonsonline>  
 Cunard • <http://twitter.com/CunardLine>  
 Firebox • <http://twitter.com/firebox>  
 Office • <http://twitter.com/OfficeShoes>  
 Macdonald Hotels • <http://twitter.com/MacdonaldHotels>  
 Marriott • <http://twitter.com/MarriottIntl>  
 Butlins • <http://twitter.com/wearebutlins>  
 KLM • <http://twitter.com/klm>  
 Waterstones • <http://twitter.com/waterstonesltd>  
 Woolworths • [http://twitter.com/team\\_woolies](http://twitter.com/team_woolies)

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### Outsourcing or In-house?

Because of the learning curve for first-time users and time constraints in the working day, most businesses prefer to outsource the bulk of their link building work to a professional team, but it can be done in-house. It's easy enough, for example, to find directories that will provide a link to your Web site along with a listing and some basic information about your business. Online resources like [www.linksadmin.net](http://www.linksadmin.net) not only list directories, they rate them too, and you can use tools like [www.iwebtool.com/link\\_price](http://www.iwebtool.com/link_price) (higher price = higher value) to judge a directory -- or any site that provides backlinks -- by checking the theoretical dollar value of a link on a particular page before you request it. Much the same is true for social media / bookmarking sites. The most important ones are shown in the collection at [www.addthis.com/bookmark.php](http://www.addthis.com/bookmark.php) and [www.socialmediawebsites.com](http://www.socialmediawebsites.com) has a categorised list. For newcomers, the demo at: [www.stumbleupon.com/stumbleads\\_demo.html](http://www.stumbleupon.com/stumbleads_demo.html) provides a quick overview of the principal advantages of free link building in the social media marketplace, as well as an invitation to trial its own version of PPC advertising. Of course, once you have a presence to maintain across a spectrum of social media locations, the idea of updating your status regularly at multiple Web sites can be overwhelming, unless you get some help. Ping.fm is a tool that can update information for you across dozens of sites. Once you sign up, you'll be able to add your login credentials for a host of popular locations. The list at Ping.fm keeps growing and already covers the best-known examples of social media sites, including Twitter, MySpace and Facebook. It's also a good resource to check for up and coming new sites.

### Your Niche Market

Before looking at social media sites and online business directories to build multiple external site links, it's a good idea to look for opportunities closer to home. The sources that will provide you with some of the most valuable backlinks that can be gained for your site won't be found in general collections put together by others, they will be at places and publications that you know about because of the business you're in. When it comes to building the best links for your Web site, it pays to think 'inside the box' occasionally as well as further afield. You might be surprised where you can gain authoritative links from. For example: If the industry you are a part of puts on business events, can you

gain links on related Web sites by offering to sponsor or speak at one of the venues? Or perhaps you can offer to sponsor a university team, a local college or a charity. Links from .edu and .ac domain names can be particularly valuable in search engine terms.

- If you sell products to the consumer market, get in touch with the Web sites that offer reviews. It may be worthwhile sending them a sample of a new product and asking them to review it. When they write the article they should link to the product on your site.
- Use search engines to find mentions of your company name, brand, product names etc, to determine if sites mentioning any of these things included links to your site. If not, ask for the addition.
- Use Google Alerts ([www.google.com/alerts](http://www.google.com/alerts)) to monitor keyword activity related to your company, brand, and high-value keyword phrases for link opportunities in blogs, news and at other Web sites.
- Check Q&A Web sites like <http://nz.answers.yahoo.com> and [www.answerbag.com](http://www.answerbag.com) for opportunities to provide replies that can include links. Use [www.whatifsearch.com](http://www.whatifsearch.com) to monitor multiple Q&A sites.
- Find forums where you can post advice and comments (with a signature that includes your site link). Just enter the following as a Google search (but replace the term within the quotes with your own): "plastic moulding" inurl:forums – or search at [www.omgili.com](http://www.omgili.com)
- Research online publishers covering your industry, including local news publications, trade publications and industry news sources.
- If you have resellers, create a badge or logo that recognises them as an official reseller. You can provide code and text for their Web site with this so that it links back to your site.
- If you have a blog, link to other bloggers in your industry in hopes that they notice your link and link back at some point or reference a valuable post you may have written. Commenting on related blogs is a most effective strategy and responding to comments when people leave them on your blog encourages them to keep coming back and spreading the word.

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- If you don't have a blog, go to popular blogging sites such as Google's <http://www.blogger.com> and get started!
- Does your industry have a governing body, a trade association, or other organisation providing accreditations with a Web site that lists its members?
- Another recommendation is to try for a Web site listing via your local Chamber of Commerce such as the one for Wellington (<http://www.wgtn-chamber.co.nz/>).
- And, of course, look for Industry-specific and subject/topic related Web Directories and Portals.

### Press Releases

Quality of links is all-important, and that means controlling the text that's used to generate the link wherever possible. The lowest-value links on the web are those that read: "click here". The highest value links are the ones that say "Company Name", "Product Name", "Product Name Information", especially when surrounded by other relevant text. They are easy to create on your own Web site, but the form of most external links will be beyond your control. However, you can generate new pages on the Web that will include links to your site in the best possible context – surrounded by relevant, keyword-rich content that you have written -- by issuing online Press Releases. Writing a press release about your business or Web site does not have to be difficult. You can look at Web sites that have archives of press releases to get ideas. Better still, you can search for a press release on your topic to see how they are typically written. Industry-specific sites like [www.manufacturingtalk.com](http://www.manufacturingtalk.com) ([www.manufacturingtalk.com/indexes/submissiondetails.html](http://www.manufacturingtalk.com/indexes/submissiondetails.html)) are best.

Companies in all market sectors issue press releases on a regular basis. And if you're using a press release distribution service like PRLeap (<https://secure.prleap.com>), AddPR.com ([www.addpr.com](http://www.addpr.com)), or PR Web ([www.prweb.com](http://www.prweb.com)), or even PR Newswire ([www.prnewswire.com](http://www.prnewswire.com)) - there's a good chance that it will be included on lots of other Web sites, including Google News. And if you're really lucky, your press release will be seen by a reporter or journalist wanting to write on exactly your release's topic. There are many reasons that you might issue a press release. There's a good blog post here: [www.evancarmichael.com/Public-Relations/285/55-Reasons-To-Send-Out-a-Press-](http://www.evancarmichael.com/Public-Relations/285/55-Reasons-To-Send-Out-a-Press-)

[Release.html](#) that lists the most important reasons, including:

- Announce a new service
- Announce a new product
- Tie in with a national holiday or anniversary
- Report a new poll or study that you have produced
- Tie in with a hot current news item by commenting on it

### Article Submissions

Another link building and Web site promotion technique is to write articles relevant to your industry. There are many sites online that serve as article banks, and it is possible to have your work published in dozens of places. Articles should include your Web site link and some contact information in the byline. You can grant permission for others to publish your article if you wish, as long as they keep the links and byline intact.

It should be noted that some article sites don't provide very strong 'link juice' and even the better examples typically include several advertising and self-promoting links per page that search engines have to negotiate before they reach yours, which is usually positioned below all the others, at the foot of the article.

The following are typical sample pages:

<http://articles.directorym.co.uk>  
[www.articlebiz.com/submit\\_article/](http://www.articlebiz.com/submit_article/)  
[http://www.articlecity.com/article\\_submission.shtml](http://www.articlecity.com/article_submission.shtml)  
[www.goarticles.com](http://www.goarticles.com)

These sites are rated among the more 'link-worthy' sites. There are some still higher quality resources like **Buzzle.com**, **TalentZoo.com** and **Helium.com** that allow only original works, which must not have been previously published elsewhere. They review your article and decide if they want to add it to their site. If you have mostly technical articles, especially any that might be termed "whitepapers", you can submit them to online resources such as:

<http://jobfunctions.bnet.com/submitpaper.aspx>

- or add them as new pages on your own Web site and submit the links to sites like [www.123exp-technology.com](http://www.123exp-technology.com).

To find other worthwhile article sites, simply use a

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search engine. If Google, Yahoo! or MS Live doesn't list them, or makes them difficult to find, they are probably not worth using. You can search for article sites using phrases like these below, with your topic or industry name replacing the word "subject".

- Subject Article Directories
- Subject Article Directory
- Submit Subject Articles
- Subject Related Article

At the articles site, look for articles on similar subjects to yours. Copy an extract (about 10 words) and paste it into Google in "quotes". The results will show other sites that are carrying the article. There is no reason why they shouldn't take yours as well. Whilst searching for article submission sites, you will undoubtedly come across services that promise to submit your article to hundreds and even thousands of article sites for a small fee. Be wary of these providers; most of them use bulk submission software and target poor quality resources that are unlikely to enhance your online reputation.

### Ratings and Reviews

Selling the idea of link building and social media exploitation to your marketing department as a worthwhile promotional activity can be a tough job. No matter how much time the world and his brother might be spending Facebooking and Twittering each other, the hard-nosed business professional is still likely to be asking: "What's the point"? And especially: "Where's the ROI"? Steve Mulder at US marketing agency Molecular.com, thinks the answer begins by showing businesses how the essential elements of social media interaction can be used to sell more products on your own Web site. Before attempting to sow the seeds of favourable commentaries about your latest widget on Digg and Delicious, why not try it at home first, on your own site, where everything will be much easier to implement and control?

Steve has a slideshow with some impressive statistics on just how effective simply opening up your own site to ratings and reviews can be: At NetShops, products with reviews had 26 per cent higher sales; Letting users sort results by user ratings helped PetCo increase sales 41 per cent; Products with ratings on internal SERPs (search results) got a 100 per cent higher CTR (click-through rate) than those that didn't. And because incorporating reviews adds more keyword-rich copy on the page, sites got higher Google rankings - the

real reason that most marketing departments think they should be doing something about link building or social media in the first place.

[www.slideshare.net/MolecularInc/your-users-trust-each-other-not-you-why-and-how-to-implement-ratings-and-reviews-presentation](http://www.slideshare.net/MolecularInc/your-users-trust-each-other-not-you-why-and-how-to-implement-ratings-and-reviews-presentation)

Finally – and for even more link building ideas – including a long list of additional resources – you will find that "400 Quality Links that Deliver Both Immediate Traffic and Search Rankings" at: <http://short.zen.co.uk/?id=bde> provides a satisfying bounty of further inspiration.