



**The Inbound Marketing
Guide for Link Building**

Link Building Guide

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Introduction

For companies looking to enhance their SEO through link acquisition, planning an inbound link strategy can be daunting – especially when there are right ways and wrong ways of pursuing it. The right ways, involve strategies that are considered credible and will keep your company in the good graces of search engines. The wrong ways, also known as “black hat” SEO strategies, are considered unethical and punishable by search engines.

This Guide is Focused on Credible, Ethical Inbound Link-Building Strategies

First, let’s briefly cover the less savory types of link buying activities, so you can be aware of paths best not taken. Once you are clear on which practices are considered “black hat,” we’ll devote the bulk of this guide to walking you through the numerous, acceptable types of quality link-building tactics available to companies today. By the end of this guide you should have a comprehensive framework of how to strategize, plan and expand your inbound links, thereby improving your standings in search engine rankings.

Link Buying Versus Link Building

Most link buying (there is one exception to this rule which will be addressed later) is considered outside the bounds of major search engine guidelines. We’d advise you to steer clear of these types of link purchases. The more content or links you acquire beyond search engine guidelines, the higher the probability you will be penalized either through a drop in rankings or worse – through a ban of your entire domain from the search engine index (the online equivalent to an extended Siberian vacation.)



Shady Link Buying Tactics Include

Buying from Link Farms: A link farm is a group of websites that all link to every other site in the group. The primary purpose of linking schemes is to manipulate search engines, as opposed to adding actual content to the internet. This behavior can get you banned from Google.

Purchasing Irrelevant Links: Some sites will allow business to buy links with whatever anchor text that business wants, regardless of whether it is relevant to what is actually being sold on the site. As an example, JC Penney was found suspect of acquiring a high number of inbound links with anchor text like “bedding,” “area rugs,” and “skinny jeans” from sites with no content or relevancy around those items. As a result, JC Penney was penalized by Google and publicly scrutinized for their poor decision.

When uncertain as to whether or not a link strategy will land you in hot water, ask yourself, “Would I be able to defend my actions if asked?” If the answer to this question is unequivocally yes, then you’re fine. If not, steer clear. Remember your brand is your biggest long-term asset. This is especially true online where the speed of conversations is increasing at an exponential rate. If you want people to do business with you online, you need to present your brand in the most favorable light possible, which means employing only above-board, “white hat” inbound link-building practices.

Why Build Links?

The search engine optimization process is comprised of three basic elements:

1. **Keyword Strategy and Selection**
2. **Site and Page Optimization**
3. **Link Building**

In order to be successful in SEO, you need all three elements working together to boost rankings, visits, and conversions. In this guide we focus specifically on number three, link building. Credible, quality inbound links to your site pass their trust and authority to your site or page. Thus pushing your content higher up the ranks. As you build your inbound link authority, your SEO rankings should improve.

How Is Link Value Assessed?

Search engines take into account a number of criteria when determining link value or link authority.

Quality: Not all links are created equal. It is better to have one high-quality link than ten mediocre links. Google Page Rank (PR) is a common method of assessing the quality of a host page. A PR10 is a fantastic (and rare) link whereas a PR0 is a common and therefore not very valuable link.

Relevancy: What is considered relevant? As an example, a business-to-business site with content about servers would be considered a very relevant link host for a target site focusing on technology for businesses.

Diversity: Search engines are giving increasingly important weight to the diversity of domains which link to your site or page. Ten thousand links from 1 or 2 sites will do you less good than 5,000 links from 1,000 sites.

Placement: If the link is included as part of content, otherwise known as an in line link, rather than in a footer or sidebar, it is better.

Quantity: Quality trumps quantity. However, the more high quality links you have, the better.



How to Build Your Links

Now that we've covered the "what" and the "why" behind link-building – we are ready to tackle the "how." There are numerous respectable inbound link building strategies. For the sake of simplification, we've grouped these tactics into the following categories:

1. **Technical**
2. **Content Focused**
3. **Online**
4. **Offline**
5. **Partnerships**
6. **Distribution**

Before you build your strategy, it is important to understand the key characteristics of the various options available to you.

Technical Link Building Tactics

Directory submissions of all types are a common link-building strategy. Directory submissions include: web directories, blog directories, podcast directories, niche directories, members-only directories, etc. It also includes posting links on Craigslist, establishing reviews on Yahoo!, and enlisting links on your local chamber of commerce sites. These tactics are legitimate, but there are two rules you must follow when pursuing these strategies. If you do not, you may find yourself in hot water.

1. You must register your site with the two first tier web directories – DMOZ, and Yahoo! The first is free, and is used by most search engines. The second costs \$299 per year. However it is faster, easier to edit, and is also used by most search engines
2. Do not use automated submissions. Google detects this tactic and definitely considers it a "black hat" strategy



LINK STRUCTURE:

- » The visible text portion of a link is called the anchor text. This is an important signal to the search engines regarding the content on the target URL.
- » The use of JavaScript redirects for internal linking does not pass page authority unless coded as a 301 redirect. Whenever possible, use simple HTML links in order to pass both the anchor text and the page authority from host to target page.

Example:

Link Host Page: <http://www.microsoft.com/online/default.aspx>
 Anchor Text: Learn more about Exchange Online
 Link Target Page: <http://www.microsoft.com/online/exchange-online.aspx>

Be aware of the "nofollow" link attribute. If the link has rel=no follow as part of its code, it will act like a normal link for the user but will not pass on its link authority or trust. This code is traditionally used to limit spam posts and links. While it may not be useful in terms of passing authority, it can still be of value when it comes to generating traffic.

As you analyze and build your list of directories consider using the following approach:

- 1. Compile a list of directories**
- 2. Analyze the various directories by competition, relevance, cost and public relations**
- 3. Rank your directories to create a prioritized workplan**
- 4. Determine your budget and your ratio of paid versus free directories**
- 5. Publish to your list**

Create an HTML draft of title, short description (160 characters,) long description (up to 500 characters,) and keywords. This will increase efficiency as all directories request a variation of this information.

Keep track of your progress via Excel. Maintain a status column and a last updated column to track your progress. Check your listings periodically. They may need to be updated over time.

Link reclamation is another technical link building tactic which you may choose to pursue. Link reclamation essentially means finding links or domains that are broken and redirecting these links to good pages. This strategy is best used for mining high-quality links from sites that want good content.



Technical Link Building Tips:

- » Review inbound links into your site and a few of your competitors.
- » Look for blank anchor text, broken pages and poorly redirected pages.
- » Research and reach out to those sending links and try to adjust them to fit your structure or new page.

Content Focused Link Building Tactics

There is no doubt that good, interesting, well-written content will be more likely to attract visitors to your site, than poor, recycled, shoddily written content. But even the best content can get lost, if it's not optimized for the web. The content you create should be interesting and insightful as well as optimized.

Create some form of content that will be willingly posted and linked from many sites by site owners. For example, create a “best product” or “certified partner” badge and reach out to partner or related sites with this “award.” Or, create a template for WordPress or other content management system with a link back to the design website in the footer. Build valuable content that people want to link to. Reach out to opinion leaders to review and consume content for link backs.

When creating great content don't forget to:

1. **Promote it**
2. **Research related keywords that are being searched and use those keywords for content creation ideas**
3. **Use keywords in headline and title tag of page content**
4. **Include link with good anchor text back to the main content page**



CONTENT SYNDICATION TIPS

- » Put your site's content, data, etc., into the hands of many sites with attribution links back to your site.
- » Make syndication part of every content publishing effort, and push content out on blogs and as RSS feeds. Then, syndicate articles through an article data base. For more specifics on how to create great, optimized content visit the blogs below.

[Want to Rank Higher: Create Great Content](#)

[Search Engine Ranking: A Step-by-Step Guide](#)

To efficiently distribute your content without harming your link building efforts, you'll need a work plan to help you track and control distribution. “The only thing more damaging than having six versions of content on your site, is having six versions of it on six other big, powerful sites.” Hence a work plan to help you keep track is essential. A simple Excel spreadsheet will suffice. As you create content, be sure to distribute it in the appropriate manner across channels. Meaning, if you create an excellent blog entry and wish to repeat the message via YouTube, you should reformat the blog content into a video.

Internal linking

By linking high authority pages within your website to less authoritative pages, you can quickly improve the value of the lesser pages. To do this use keyword rich anchor text to link from page to page and headlines as links and link text. Then, find ways within content, to link to other pages on your site. A good tactic is to use blog posts to link to product or pillar pages. You'll want to ensure the navigation can be crawled by search engines. JavaScript redirects cannot be crawled. Next, implement bread crumbing to add good link content on every non-homepage. Include a `sitemap.html` that has links to top categories (max 100 links per page) and is linked from a universal footer. Finally, put "nofollow" pages in the footer (privacy, terms of service, etc.) that you don't want to pass value to.

Social media

Distribute content to your extended network in hopes they will post, redistribute and link. Add and promote your social media profile with a link to your homesite. Use Twitter, Facebook and other social media networks. If you don't you'll be at a competitive disadvantage.

One of your strongest tools at your disposal is your blog. Social media and the blogosphere drive traffic and leads. Recently Google, Bing and Twitter have shown that real time search is becoming increasingly relevant when directing people to sites. This means your blog content should be updated regularly.

Outbound links are one of the cheapest forms of marketing available. Many bloggers track where their traffic originates from, so linking to them is an easy way to get noticed.

Most of these comments won't provide value from an SEO perspective. But, if they are useful, insightful and relevant they can drive direct traffic. They will also make other bloggers aware of your presence. As a result, these bloggers may start reading your blog and even link to it.



Social Media Tips

As in all SEO related activities, we aim to stay above board – with 'white hat' tactics and recommend our clients do the same. The SEO benefits of a well-executed widget include:

- » Fully complete and optimize social network profiles.
- » Build your network, friends and followers.
- » Participate and communicate in a positive, helpful way regularly.
- » Promote your own content through your network with shortened links back to your site.
- » Use `bit.ly` or an alternate URL shortener which uses a 301 redirect when posting links back to your site.

Offline Link Building Tactics

A common mistake by online marketers is assuming online products and services should be exclusively marketed online. Offline activities like PR, networking and advertising can increase your inbound links from authoritative sites.

Press releases are a particularly useful tool. For example, a news post in the Wall Street Journal mentioning your company will drive traffic to your site with or without a link on the *WSJ* website (although a link would be terrific too...). Be sure to train your PR team on SEO optimized press releases and include press releases in your content work plan. As for frequency, release news on no less than

a monthly basis and release news every time you have a new piece of content, major review, launch etc. Always host press releases on your domain on an optimized page and use an optimized service online such as PRWeb.

Additional offline tactics include: placing your URL on your stationery, business card and office supplies; having an event conference booth; using paid print advertising; networking with industry-insider bloggers, media editors and journalists.

Partnership Link Building Tactics

There are a few ways which you can work with other businesses and organizations in a mutually beneficial manner. Link exchanges, manual link requests, legitimate link purchases (when done right) and widgets, are all acceptable forms of link building.



Partnership Tips

- » When engaging in business development deals, include link exchanges – one way to include you if possible.
- » Be strategic and relevant with cross-linking.
- » Do NOT join link farms or spam-like link exchange programs.
- » Include link exchanges with experts providing content.
- » Identify high priority link opportunities and high profile Twitter users for engagement.

Link exchanges allow you to associate your site with other respected, relevant sites through an exchange of links. This is best used for seeking out specific relevant pages. When exchanging links it is important to remember the inbound links must be relevant to both sites/pages.

Manual link request involves targeting high-quality, highly relevant sites for links and exchanges, building relationships with the owners of these sites and essentially asking them to link to your site. Consider it part of your business development process.

Purchase links that are of high quality from specific, related websites. As we mentioned earlier, many forms of link-buying are frowned upon. Again we strongly advise you stay away from large link buying services. This is not what we are recommending here. Rather, we are suggesting you purchase links that are truly relevant to your business.

When buying links target specific, high quality “.edu” and “.org” sites that will sell links. Look at university newspapers, non-profit organizations and smaller blog sites that are willing to sell relevant placements. Focus on buying links from blog services. Links should always come from relevant sites and be written by a real person. The goal is in line linking (links in the flow of the content, not on the side of the page). Last but not least, budget for these expenditures as part of your media plan.

Widgets and Distribution

Widgets are one of the best kept secrets marketers can use to capture the attention of potential visitors and drive traffic to their website. Widgets are a great way to promote a business and a website by presenting would-be visitors with interactive content that engages their interest and interaction. Put literally, a widget is a small software application for distributed websites that displays a user interface designed to perform an action or activity based on data or calculations living on a different server.

We've all seen them. Groupon uses widgets to help merchants design their own online offers. PayScale provides a library of widgets that work with their real-time database to help other website builders add salary calculators, cost of living indexes and such. At Optify, we use widgets within our own application to surface data from reports, Twitter for Business, lead intelligence and SEO applications into a customizable dashboard.



CREATING A POWERFUL WIDGET

Creating a useful, popular widget, that the masses would be inclined to include on their websites is optimal, but for that reason it is also extremely difficult. Creating an effective widget is more of an art than a science; a good idea, a really good idea, is the toughest part of the process. When contemplating a widget, ask yourself the following:

- » Would I use it on my web site?
- » Who would want to use this widget?
- » Would traffic generated from their sites (the folks who want to use it) be traffic that I'm interested in?
- » What is the value that this widget will provide to a web site?
- » Is it easy to imitate?
- » Will this widget require maintenance, if so how much and can I sustain it over time?
- » How easily could it be placed on a website?
- » How will I monitor its success?

Widget “Rules of Thumb”

Creating a great widget is only the first step in widget success. Marketers should adhere to the following best practices when thinking about adding widgets to their websites. Widgets are an effective way to expose data or crowd sourced information in easy to access ways. They can also serve as a scalable way to build links back to your target site while offering an easy-to-implement distributed application that people find valuable.



Transparency: The embedded link in the widget should be visible to the end user – do not hide the link using CSS or other coding tricks

No Bait and Switch: Make sure the link is relevant to the creator and content of the widget. Don’t use the widget anchor text and link to send traffic to a site that is irrelevant to the content of the widget. For example, if the widget is from a pop culture site that displays the latest news on celebrities, don’t include anchor text and a link that goes to an online college sign-up site.

Brand Attribution: Focus on the brand creating the widget with a keyword modifier in the link. The anchor text value is only one component of an effective widget link. To make the most of the link include both the brand and a lock-up of the focus keyword you are targeting. An example would be Powered by PowerPoint Presentation Software.



The SEO Litmus Test

As in all SEO related activities, we aim to stay above board – with white hat tactics and recommend our clients do the same. The SEO benefits of a well-executed widget include:

- » A distributed, persistent brand presence on other sites. Brand exposure can result in awareness and additional brand searches in the engines.
- » An increase in the number of different domains linking into your site. Domain diversity is a key component of any inbound linking program.
- » An increase in the quantity of inbound links. The more useful and compelling the widget, the more it will be added to other sites.

Development Guidelines for Widgets

A widget should be well designed, load quickly and be lightweight from a code perspective so that it doesn't slow the load of the page. The key to making the widget useful for SEO (including links) is making the widget visible to the search engines as part of the hosting page. This means the following:

- » Using a build technology that can be “crawled” or “read” by the search engine bots – HTML, JQuery, etc.
- » Avoiding iframes (see below).
- » Using effective meta tags – NOT “nofollows” or “noindex” tag on the content.
- » Making the widget code as light as possible to keep the page load speed of the host page fast.
- » Making the widget as customizable from a color and targeting perspective as possible or as it makes sense for the application.

Widget Promotion

A good widget has a usefulness that excites webmasters, marketers and end-users. However, the most helpful widget in the world can get lost without the proper positioning or rendered useless if users are unaware of their existence. To make widgets easier to find and distribute, create a stand-alone page on your site for the widget. Use good SEO page optimization practices and build the page into the navigation and site map structures. Then, promote the page by having the widget embedded into your own site, partner sites or sites you have a business relationship with. Next, create blog posts, mentions in your social media channels, profiles and email newsletter. As a final step, find specific, relevant sites to partner with to “seed” the widget and get early feedback.

Measurement

Like with other marketing activities or campaigns, make sure you have referral measurement mechanism set-up in place, so that you can learn which widgets are performing per your expectations. Track click-throughs, visits, conversions, and leads captured from your distributed creations. Keep the widgets that perform well, and remove the ones that are underperforming and potentially causing damage to your brand.



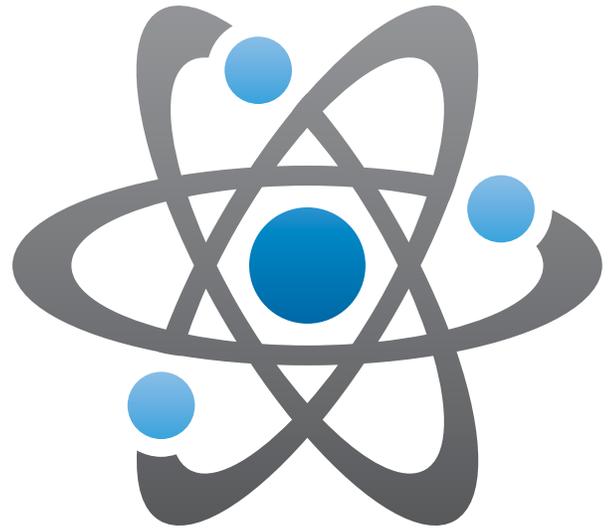
Using iframes for Widgets:

- » In general, this is a difficult approach to use and make successful for this type of application. As the iframe is a distinct page within a page, it has it's own set of properties that make it difficult for an engine to associate the content of the page with any other. This hurts crawling, indexing and creating authority in the iframe.
- » Google will “try” to associate the external frame content with the page it is on, but cannot guarantee it. Use of the “noframes” tag (think of it as an alt-tag for frames) can help. If you can, avoid using iframes, and rather use a technique that pulls the content dynamically on the page (e.g. AJAX).

A Six Step Inbound Link Building Process

Achieving the right mix between the various inbound link-building options (online, offline, and partnership tactics) is a process. For the most part it is not a clear one – often many tactics can be pursued in parallel. Although, some strategies are best executed once others have already been implemented. For example, creating and distributing your content should precede public relations efforts. On the whole, offline-marketing should happen only after you’ve created great content, and published it up to your site.

The six steps outlined below summarize a suggested link-building process. Together, they illustrate how having a comprehensive link-building plan can save you time and translate into maximum success.



Step 1

Create a list of directories you wish to target. Draw up a budget and decide on your paid versus free mix. Submit your site to your selected list. Be consistent throughout the process. When possible, submit your landing pages too.

Step 2

Choose your keywords; draw up a work-plan to create great content that uses these keywords. Make sure your content is relevant, not promotional, and is of quality and interest. Optimize your content, publish it to your site and syndicate it to other channels.

Step 3

Let the world know about the great content you’ve created. Blog, Tweet, email, comment on others’ blogs, etc. Get folks to your site and reading your content. If it is good, people will use it and will give you credit in the form of inbound links.

Step 4

Call your local news desk to let them know about your product, press release or new research you’ve just posted. Network, make connections with people in the industry, and find partners who’d be willing to exchange links or manually link to your site. Put your URL on your business card, in your newsletter, on your thank you notes and in your email signature.

Step 5

Create a useful tool or widget that other sites would be inclined to put on their website.

Step 6

Track, monitor and document your process and results. The more data you are able to collect and analyze the more refined and efficient the entire link building process will become.

Conclusion

Once you understand the dos and don'ts, know the legitimate strategies that exist, and commit to an organized game plan, link building is not particularly complicated. As you pursue your link building strategies remember:

- » Your brand comes first. Optimizing your website is important, but not at the expense of your brand equity.
- » Content is key. The first step to any good link-building plan is to create something legitimately worth linking to.
- » Link-building efforts are best executed with a comprehensive plan that focuses on multiple channels at one time.
- » If you build it, they will come. As you increase the number of quality inbound links to your site, not only will visits and conversions hopefully increase, but your search engine ranking will improve.

Like its optimization counterparts - keyword selection and page optimization, with careful tracking and monitoring of your link building tactics, you'll be able to refine your strategies and become increasingly cost-effective over time.

About Optify

Optify delivers an integrated top-of-the-funnel solution for marketers responsible for fueling their company's growth. Optify helps B2B marketers reach more buyers and generate more demand for their products or services month-after-month. The Optify Inbound Marketing Software Suite brings together the enterprise-class SEO and social marketing tools that marketers need to increase awareness of their business, influence buyers across social networks, and engage with prospects at the earliest point of their buyer's journey.

OPTIFY'S SOLUTION INCLUDES:

Inbound Demand: create a sustainable flow of inbound leads into your marketing funnel with enterprise-class SEO and social marketing.

Sales Enablement: help sales reach prospects and engage with them early in the sales process with visitor intelligence and prospect alerts.

Tracking & Analytics: get more of the prospects you want with full insight into what influences your buyers and the path they take to find and evaluate you during their research process.

Optify offers a fully-featured free trial; learn more at www.optify.net

