



## LINK-BUILDING FOR LAWYERS: WHY LINKS MATTER

The goal of all search engines is to deliver relevant results to their users. The limitation of all search engines is that they are machines. The dilemma of all search engine creators is how to design a machine that can determine whether a result is relevant to a user.

This was the puzzle that Larry Page and Sergey Brin were trying to solve when they created the system that would eventually become Google. Their solution was rank information on the internet through a hierarchy based on link popularity. The theory is simple: if a person goes through the trouble of linking to a page, that page must have value to that person. The more links to a page, the more likely it is that the page will be relevant to others.

Google's link analysis algorithm is called PageRank. It is computed based on a formula that transfers an amount of link authority ("link juice") to the page that it links to. The amount of link juice transferred depends on the PageRank of the linking page and the number of other outbound links on the linking page.

For example, assume that a page on Michelle's website has a PageRank of 5 and links to four other pages, one of which is a page on Hillary's site. The amount of value to Hillary's page is computed as follows:

5	PageRank of Michelle's Page
X 0.85	Multiplied by Dampening Factor
4.25	Transferable PageRank from Michelle's Page
÷ 4	Divided By Total Number of Outbound Links
1.06	Value of Link from Michelle's Page to Hillary's Page

Google's actual formula is more complex, but this example illustrates the concept behind link authority as a metric for search engine visibility. From this, we can draw a few basic conclusions:

- Some links are more valuable than others.
- All else being equal, links from pages with a higher PageRank are more valuable than links from pages with a lower PageRank.
- The number of outbound links on a page decreases the value of a link from that page.

Note: Don't confuse PageRank, which is relatively simple, with the algorithm that Google uses to determine a site's placement in the search engine results, which is far more complicated. While it is true that sites with a higher PageRank tend to rank higher, this is not a universal rule. A PR5 page may appear in the search results below many pages with lower PageRank. This is due to the complexity of Google's search algorithm, which takes into account many factors other than links.

The basic concept that links are an indicator of relevance is the bedrock of Google's success as a search engine. While Google's search algorithm now takes into account more than 200 factors, links are still the

primary indicator of relevance. Pages that rank high in Google are typically pages that are linked to by trusted sites.

## What This Means for You

If pages with more links are more likely to rank well in Google, then one thing is clear: you need more links to rank higher. But beyond this basic fact, things get complicated.

Most of the complication stems from the ongoing war between man and machine. As people have learned how Google's algorithm works, they have learned to game the system to cause some sites to appear higher in the rankings. At a high level, this is what the field of SEO is all about. We who work in this industry have developed the expertise that allows us to push websites higher in the search engine rankings.

When it comes to links, the battle between man and machine is at its hottest. Unlike on-page optimization factors (such as keyword placement and proper site architecture), links require the input of a third party (the linking website). This third party involvement is integral to Google's philosophy that links are an indicator of value. Because of this, **links are the primary factor that influences search engine rankings.**

In Google's ideal world, these third party links would occur naturally. A person would link to your site for no other reason than that he found your content useful. Google would have you focus solely on building useful content and wait for the links to come pouring in.

But the real world doesn't work that way, especially in the business arena. **Good content is necessary, but not sufficient.** When it comes to promoting that content, you have two choices:

- You can be proactive in acquiring links to your content and watch it move up in the search results; or
- You can sit idly by and watch your competitors move up in the search results.

Almost all businesses need to take a proactive approach to link-building. The SEO industry has divided into camps with differing philosophies on how to do this. The so-called "white hat" SEOs focus on promoting sites in accordance with Google guidelines. The "black hat" camp uses tactics that violate Google's guidelines in an effort to game the system.

Note: I would argue that the white hat/black hat SEO divide is an artificial and somewhat hypocritical dichotomy. Each side is engaging in search manipulation of one sort or another, and Google's "build great content and they will come" approach has been discredited by real world experience. You need something else to [help your content along](#).

Black hat techniques are becoming more and more risky as Google pours more of its vast resources into identifying and combating strategies that violate its guidelines. There are a lot of really smart people at Google whose only job is to develop systems to penalize sites who use these techniques. Sometimes the site owner's only crime was ignorance in engaging an SEO firm that used black hat techniques. **You should be suspicious of any offer to provide you with tons of links for very little effort.**

There are many (white hat) ways to earn links that do not run afoul of Google's guidelines. These strategies tend to share one characteristic: they are not scalable. The more likely your strategy can be reproduced and employed on a large scale, the more likely that Google will consider it to be a black hat technique and penalize your site.

This means that if you want to acquire links the right way, be prepared for some hard work. And since your competitors will also be working over time, the process does not stop. There are tools that can help automate some processes, but there is no getting around the fact that link-building is the most difficult facet of SEO.

To sum it up:

- You need links.
- The wrong types of links can hurt your site.
- The right types of links require ongoing hard work.

One of my goals for [this blog](#) is to provide actionable information instead of just babbling about theory. I plan to follow this post up with posts that walk you through the basic four-stage process that I use to build links. The four basic phases are:

- Identify (Know Your Market)
- Prospect (Narrow the Market)
- Qualify (Put Together a Game Plan)
- Outreach (Execute Your Strategy)

Check back over the next few weeks for this content or, better yet, [sign up for my newsletter](#) to get weekly updates by e-mail or [subscribe via RSS](#).