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The Art of SEO

Mastering Search Engine Optimization

Eric Enge, Stephan Spencer,
and Jessie C. Stricchiola

3rd
Edition



The Art of SEO

Three experts in search engine optimization share a comprehensive roadmap for you to plan and execute your SEO strategy. This edition includes updates on SEO tools, tactics, and ranking methods that have reshaped the SEO landscape. Novices will receive a thorough SEO education, while experienced practitioners get an extensive reference to support ongoing engagements.

- Explore SEO's underlying theory and practicalities
- Demystify the role of social media, user data, and algorithms such as Google's Panda and Penguin
- Discover tools to track results, measure success, and reverse engineer competitors
- Look at opportunities in mobile, local, and vertical SEO
- Build a high-performing SEO team with well-defined roles

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Mastering Search Engine Optimization

THIRD EDITION

Eric Enge, Stephan Spencer, and Jessie C. Stricchiola

Beijing • Boston • Farnham • Sebastopol • Tokyo

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The Art of SEO

by Eric Enge, Stephan Spencer, and Jessie C. Stricchiola

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Content Marketing

In today's search environment, the main driving factors are now what we generally refer to as *social proof signals*, such as inbound links (e.g., within a blog post) and user engagement with your content (e.g., time spent watching your video). As you will see in [Chapter 8](#), social signals such as retweets, likes, and pins don't appear to have a direct ranking impact, and Google+ appears to have an impact, but only from a personalized search perspective.

For many years, links to a website were the single largest factor in determining its search engine rankings, because links generally (before they became a tool for SEO manipulation) existed to provide a pathway for a site's users to find additional, relevant content on a third party's website—a "signal" that the owner of the linking site deemed the third party's linked content valuable.

Because of the power of this signal, many SEO professionals pursued obtaining links to their sites or their client's sites without worrying about the quality of the site where those links resided. Unfortunately, many link-building efforts and services spawned by this behavior had little integration with the rest of the publisher's content development and marketing strategies.

Clearly, this violated the spirit of what the search engines were measuring and placing value on—links that act as valid endorsements for third-party content. As a result, the search engines, and Google in particular, have taken many steps to force website owners and publishers to view link building more holistically, as an "earned" engagement rather than a "purchased" endorsement, requiring a renewed focus on links as a measurement of content quality. This shift, both necessary and welcomed, reestablishes the need for quality content development (as the "earner" of links) to be integrated with the overall PR and marketing strategy for businesses.

The development of highly shareable content, and the promotion of that content via various channels for increased business visibility, is generally referred to as *content marketing*. Content can be published on your own site, other people's sites, or in social

media, but in all cases acts to build visibility for your brand online. The most valuable content is usually highly relevant to what you do, solves problems for others or stirs their emotions, and is often noncommercial in nature.

Links remain a large factor in search engine ranking algorithms, but we use content marketing to build our reputation and visibility online, and as a result we obtain organic links of the highest possible quality—links that would be desirable for your business even if the search engines did not exist, and that people might actually click on to engage with your business.

The most important thing to remember as you delve into this chapter is that the primary goal of any content marketing effort should be enhancing the reputation of your business. Any campaign that starts with “getting links” as the objective, without placing primary and ongoing focus on the quality and value of the content being linked to, will eventually run into problems (if it hasn’t already; see [Chapter 9](#)). During a 2012 interview, Google’s Matt Cutts and Eric Enge had the following exchange:¹

Eric Enge: It dawned on me recently that link building is an interesting phrase that has misled people. It is a bit of a “cart before the horse” thing. It has led people to think about links as something they get from the “dark corners of the Web.” Places where no one ever goes, so it does not matter what you do there. So by thinking of it this way, as link building, you are off on the wrong foot even before you get started.

Matt Cutts: That’s right. It segments you into a mindset, and people get focused on the wrong things. It leads them to think about links as the end goal. It is important to think about producing something excellent first. If you have an outstanding product, world-class content, or something else that sets you apart, then you can step back and start thinking about how to promote it.

There are many who believe that social signals and user engagement with your content have become important ranking factors. However, the impact of social media appears to be quite limited:

- Google+ can have a strong impact on personalized search within Google for those who are active on the Google+ platform.
- Search engines may use shared content on social media platforms as a way of discovering new content—in particular, news-related content.

These new ranking factors will be discussed in greater detail in [Chapter 8](#).

¹ “Matt Cutts and Eric Talk About What Makes a Quality Site,” Stone Temple Consulting, July 9, 2012, <http://www.stonetemple.com/matt-cutts-and-eric-talk-about-what-makes-a-quality-site/>.

How Links Historically Influenced Search Engine Rankings

The concept of using links as a way to measure a site's importance was first made popular by Google with the implementation of its PageRank algorithm (others had previously written about using links as a ranking factor, but Google's rapidly increasing user base popularized it). In simple terms, each link to a web page is a vote for that page. But it's not as simple as "the page with the most votes wins." Links and linking pages are not all created equal. Some links are weighted more heavily by Google's PageRank algorithm than others.

The key to this concept is the notion that links represent an "editorial endorsement" of a web document. Search engines rely heavily on editorial votes. However, as publishers learned about the power of links, some started to manipulate links through a variety of methods. This created situations in which the intent of the link was not editorial in nature, and led to many algorithm enhancements.

To help you understand the origins of link algorithms, the underlying logic of which is still in force today, let's take a look at the original PageRank algorithm in detail.

The Original PageRank Algorithm

The PageRank algorithm was built on the basis of the original PageRank thesis authored by Sergey Brin and Larry Page while they were undergraduates at Stanford University.²

In the simplest terms, the paper states that each link to a web page is a vote for that page. However, as stated earlier, votes do not have equal weight. So that you can better understand how this works, we'll explain the PageRank algorithm at a high level. First, all pages are given an innate but tiny amount of PageRank, as shown in [Figure 7-1](#).

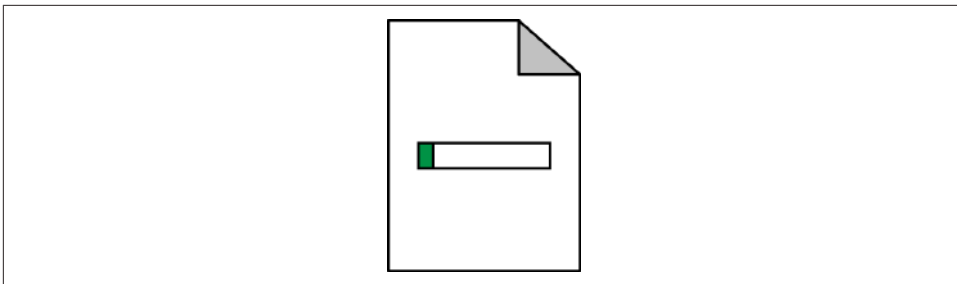


Figure 7-1. *Some PageRank for every page*

² Sergey Brin and Lawrence Page, "The Anatomy of a Large-Scale Hypertextual Web Search Engine," <http://infolab.stanford.edu/~backrub/google.html>.

Pages can then increase their PageRank by receiving links from other pages, as shown in [Figure 7-2](#).

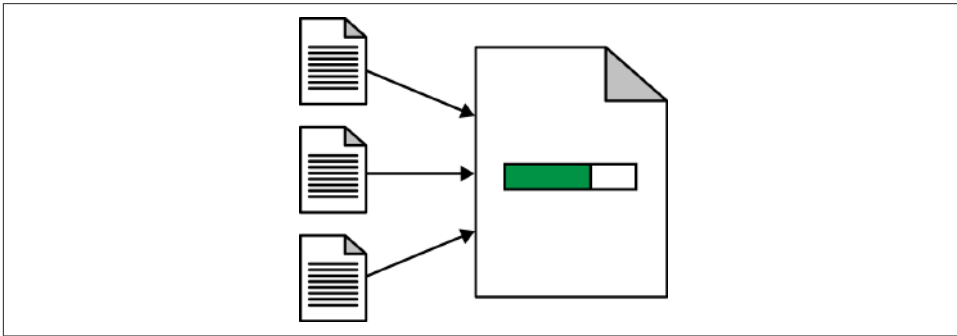


Figure 7-2. Pages receiving more PageRank through links

How much PageRank can a page pass on to other pages through links? That ends up being less than the page's PageRank. In [Figure 7-3](#) this is represented by $f(x)$, meaning that the passable PageRank is a function of x , the total PageRank. In 2009, Matt Cutts wrote a post in which he suggested that a page might be able to vote 85–90% of its PageRank.³

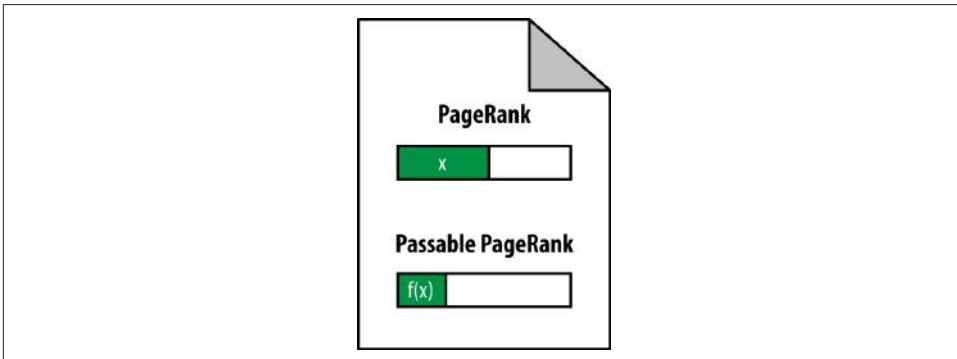


Figure 7-3. Some of a page's PageRank is passable to other pages

If this page links to only one other page, it passes all of its passable PageRank to that page, as shown in [Figure 7-4](#), where Page B receives all of the passable PageRank of Page A.

³ Matt Cutts, "PageRank Sculpting," Matt Cutts: Gadgets, Google, and SEO, June 15, 2009, <https://www.mattcutts.com/blog/pagerank-sculpting/>.

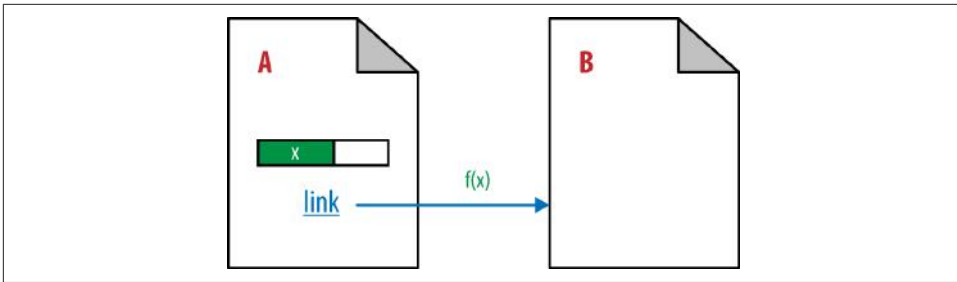


Figure 7-4. *Passing of PageRank through a link*

However, the scenario gets more complicated because pages will link to more than one other page. When that happens the passable PageRank gets divided among all the pages receiving links. We show that in **Figure 7-5**, where Page B and Page C each receive half of the passable PageRank of Page A.

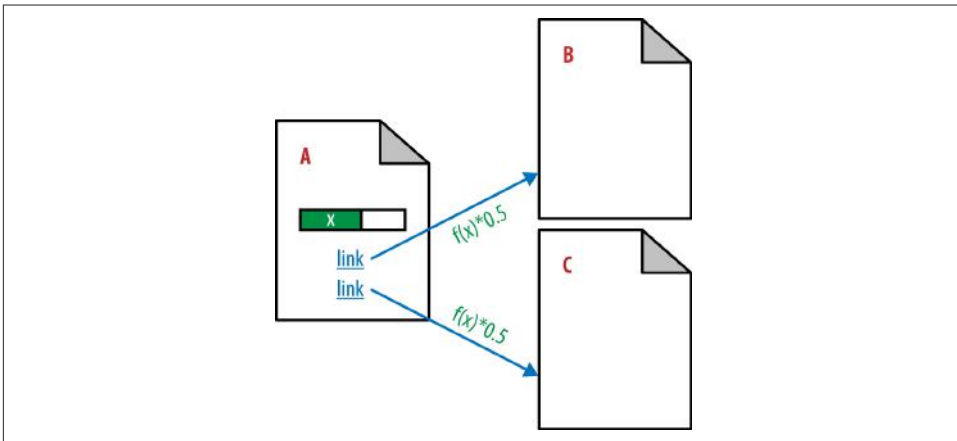


Figure 7-5. *How PageRank is passed*

In the original PageRank formula, link weight is divided equally among the number of links on a page. This undoubtedly does not hold true today, but it is still valuable in understanding the original intent. Now take a look at **Figure 7-6**, which depicts a more complex example that shows PageRank flowing back and forth between pages that link to one another.

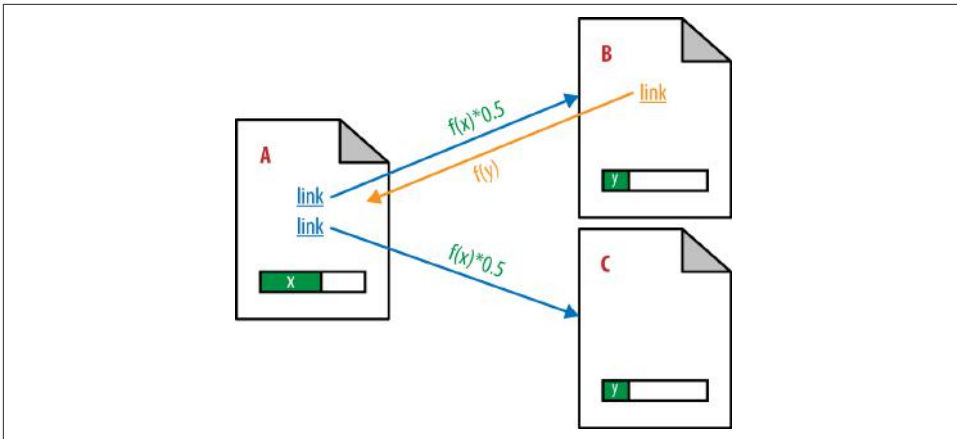


Figure 7-6. Cross-linking between pages

Cross-linking makes the PageRank calculation much more complex. In **Figure 7-6**, Page B now links back to Page A and passes some PageRank, $f(y)$, back to Page A. **Figure 7-7** should give you a better understanding of how this affects the PageRank of all the pages.

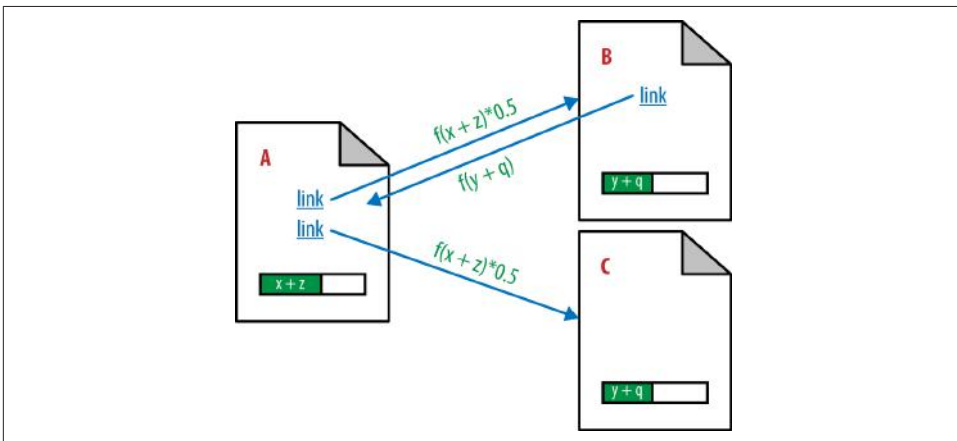


Figure 7-7. Iterative PageRank calculations

The key takeaway here is that when Page B links to Page A to make the link reciprocal, the PageRank of Page A (x) becomes dependent on $f(y)$, the passable PageRank of Page B, which happens to be dependent on $f(x)$! In addition, the PageRank that Page A passes to Page C is also impacted by the link from Page B to Page A. This makes for a very complicated situation where the calculation of the PageRank of each page on the Web must be determined by recursive analysis.

We have defined new parameters to represent this: q , which is the PageRank that accrues to Page B from the link that it has from Page A (after all the iterative calculations are complete); and z , which is the PageRank that accrues to Page A from the link that it has from Page B (again, after all iterations are complete).

The scenario in [Figure 7-8](#) adds further complexity by introducing a link from Page B to Page D. In this example, Pages A, B, and C are internal links on one domain, and Page D represents a different site (shown as Wikipedia). In the original PageRank formula, internal and external links passed PageRank in exactly the same way. This became exposed as a flaw because publishers started to realize that links to other sites were “leaking” PageRank away from their own site, as you can see in [Figure 7-8](#).

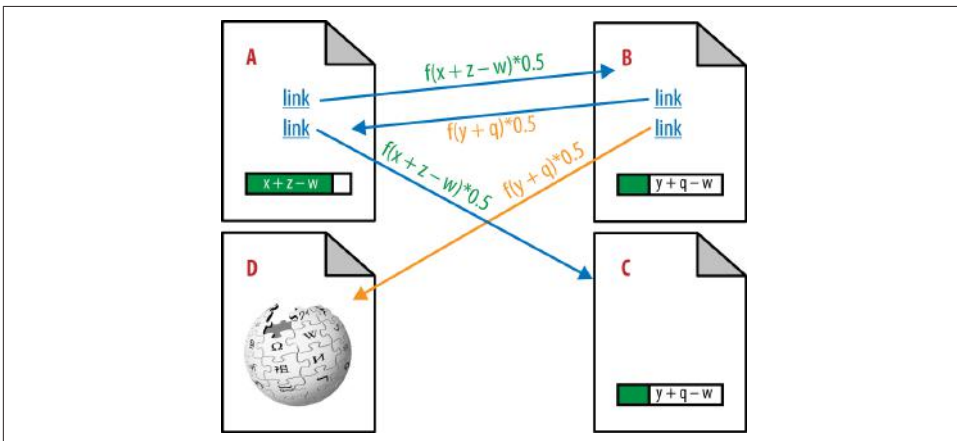


Figure 7-8. PageRank being leaked

So, for example, because Page B links to Wikipedia, some of the passable PageRank is sent there, instead of to the other pages that Page B is linking to (Page A in our example). In [Figure 7-8](#), we represent that with the parameter w , which is the PageRank not sent to Page A because of the link to Page D.

The PageRank “leak” concept represented a fundamental flaw in the algorithm. Once page creators investigated PageRank’s underlying principles, they realized that linking out from their own sites would cause more harm than good. If a great number of websites adopted this philosophy, it could negatively impact the “links as votes” concept and actually damage the quality of Google’s algorithm. Needless to say, Google quickly corrected this flaw to its algorithm. As a result of these changes, you no longer need to worry about PageRank leaks. Quality sites should link to other relevant quality pages around the Web.

Even after these changes, internal links from pages still pass some PageRank, so they still have value, as shown in [Figure 7-9](#).

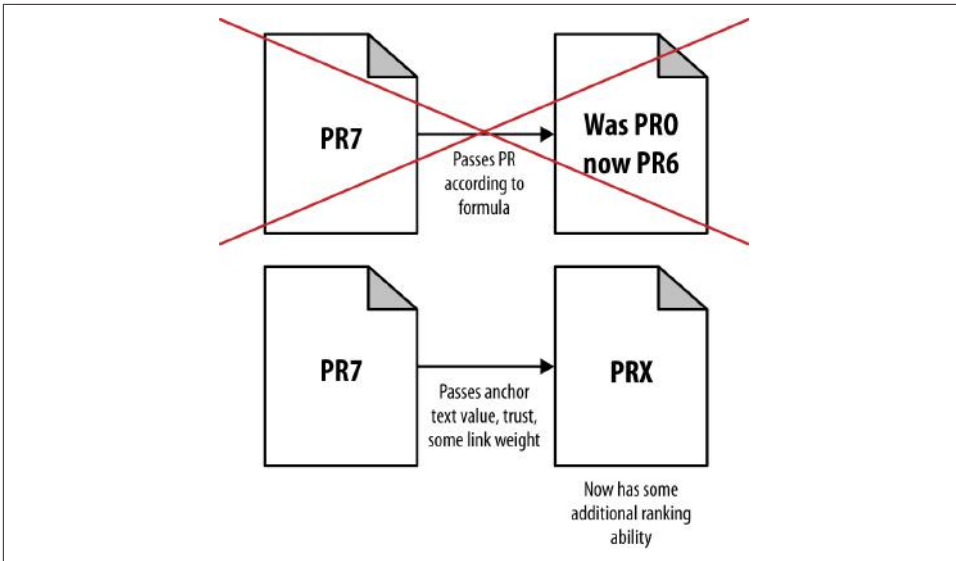


Figure 7-9. Internal links still passing some PageRank

Google has continuously changed and refined the way it uses links to impact rankings, and the current algorithm is not based on PageRank as it was originally defined. However, familiarity and comfort with the original algorithm are certainly beneficial to those who practice optimization of Google results.

All link-based algorithms are built on the assumption that for the most part the links received are legitimate endorsements by the publisher implementing a link to your website. The person implementing the link should be doing it because he feels he is linking to a great resource that would be relevant to visitors on his website.

In an ideal world, links would be similar to the academic citations you find at the end of a scientist's published paper, where she cites the other works she has referenced in putting together her research.

If the publisher implementing the link is compensated for doing so, the value of the link to a search engine is diminished, and such links can be harmful to search engine algorithms. Note that compensation can come in the form of money or special considerations, and we will explore this more in this chapter.

Additional Factors That Influence Link Value

Classic PageRank isn't the only factor that influences the value of a link. In the following subsections, we discuss some additional factors that influence the value a link passes.

Anchor text

Anchor text refers to the clickable part of a link from one web page to another. As an example, [Figure 7-10](#) shows a snapshot of a part of [the Quicken Loans home page](#).



Popular:	About Us:	Help:
Refinancing	Who is Quicken Loans	Contact Us
Home Buying	Quicken Loans Reviews	Email Policy
Mortgage Rates	FAQs	Affiliate Promotion Privacy
Zing Blog Home	Quicken Loans Careers	Security and Privacy
Email Rates & Updates	Press Room	Disclosures and Licenses
My Quicken Loans	Family of Companies	Terms of Use

Figure 7-10. Anchor text: a strong ranking element

The anchor text for the first link in the list of Popular pages in [Figure 7-10](#) is Refinancing. The search engine uses this anchor text to help it understand what the page receiving the link is about. As a result, the search engine will interpret the link as saying that the page receiving the link is about refinancing, and therefore rank the page higher in the search results for that search query.

At one time, anchor text was so powerful that SEOs engaged in a practice called *Google bombing*—the idea that if you link to a given web page from many places with the same anchor text, you can get that page to rank for queries related to that anchor text, even if the page is unrelated and didn't even include any of the words in the query.

One notorious Google bomb was a campaign that targeted the WhiteHouse.gov biography page for George W. Bush with the anchor text *miserable failure*. As a result, that page ranked #1 for searches on *miserable failure* until Google tweaked its algorithm to reduce the effectiveness of this practice.

Google bombing was not the worst consequence of the power of anchor text. The use of anchor text as a ranking factor is useful in the search algorithms only if the person implementing the link naturally chooses what to use; if he is compensated for using specific anchor text, the value of the link as a ranking signal is negatively impacted.

To make matters worse, SEOs started to abuse the system and started implementing link-building programs designed around anchor text to drive their rankings. As a result, publishers that did not pursue these types of link-building campaigns were at a severe disadvantage. Ultimately, this started to break down the notion of links as valid academic citations, and Google began to take action.

In early 2012, Google began to send publishers “unnatural link” warnings through Google Search Console, and on April 24, 2012, Google released the first version of its Penguin algorithm. These topics are discussed more in [Chapter 9](#).

Anchor text remains an important part of search algorithms, but now the search engines look for unnatural patterns of anchor text (too much of a good thing) and are lowering the rankings for publishers that exhibit patterns of artificially influencing the anchor text people use in links to their website.

Relevance

Links that originate from sites/pages on the same topic as the publisher's site, or on a closely related topic, are worth more than links that come from a site on an unrelated topic.

Think of the relevance of each link being evaluated in the specific context of the search query a user has just entered. So, if the user enters *used cars in Phoenix* and the publisher has received a link to its Phoenix used cars page that is from the Phoenix Chamber of Commerce, that link will reinforce the search engine's belief that the page really does relate to Phoenix.

Similarly, if a publisher has another link from a magazine site that has done a review of used car websites, this will reinforce the notion that the site should be considered a used car site. Taken in combination, these two links could be powerful in helping the publisher rank for *used cars in Phoenix*.

Authority

Authority has been the subject of much research. One of the more famous papers, written by Apostolos Gerasoulis and others at Rutgers University and titled "DiscoWeb: Applying Link Analysis to Web Search," became the basis of the Teoma algorithm, which was later acquired by AskJeeves and became part of the Ask algorithm.⁴

What made this algorithm unique was its focus on evaluating links on the basis of their relevance to the linked page. Google's original PageRank algorithm did not incorporate the notion of topical relevance, and although Google's algorithm clearly does this today, Teoma was in fact the first search engine to offer a commercial implementation of link relevance.

Teoma introduced the notion of *hubs*, which are sites that link to most of the important sites relevant to a particular topic, and *authorities*, which are sites that are linked to by most of the sites relevant to a particular topic.

The key concept here is that each topic area that a user can search on will have authority sites specific to that topic area. The authority sites for used cars are different from the authority sites for baseball.

⁴ Brian. D. Davison et al., "DiscoWeb: Applying Link Analysis to Web Search," <http://www.cse.lehigh.edu/~brian/pubs/1999/www8/>.

Refer to **Figure 7-11** to get a sense of the difference between hub and authority sites.

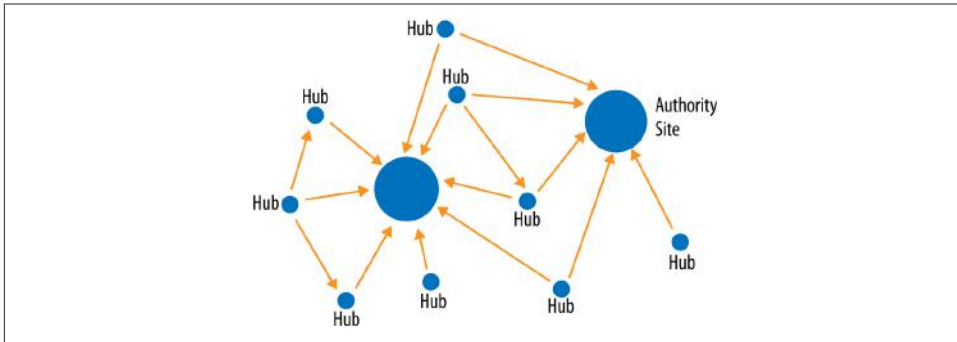


Figure 7-11. *Hubs and authorities*

So, if the publisher has a site about used cars, it should seek links from websites that the search engines consider to be authorities on used cars (or perhaps more broadly, on cars). However, the search engines will not tell you which sites they consider authoritative—making the publisher’s job that much more difficult.

The model of organizing the Web into topical communities and pinpointing the hubs and authorities is an important one to understand (read more about it in Mike Grehan’s paper “Filthy Linking Rich!”⁵ The best link builders understand this model and leverage it to their benefit.

Trust

Trust is distinct from authority. On its own, authority doesn’t sufficiently take into account whether the linking page or the domain is easy or difficult for spammers to infiltrate, or the motivations of the person implementing the link. Trust, on the other hand, does.

Evaluating the trust of a website likely involves reviewing its link neighborhood to see what other trusted sites link to it. More links from other trusted sites would convey more trust.

In 2004, Yahoo! and Stanford University published a paper titled “Combating Web Spam with TrustRank.”⁶ The paper proposed starting with a trusted seed set of pages (selected by manual human review) to perform PageRank analysis, instead of a random set of pages as was called for in the original PageRank thesis.

⁵ Mike Grehan, “Filthy Linking Rich!”, http://www.search-engine-book.co.uk/filthy_linking_rich.pdf.

⁶ Zoltán Gyöngyi, Hector Garcia-Molina, and Jan Pedersen, “Combating Web Spam with TrustRank,” Proceedings of the 30th VLDB Conference, Toronto, Canada, 2004, http://bit.ly/trust_rank_paper.

Using this tactic removes the inherent risk in using a purely algorithmic approach to determining the trust of a site, and potentially coming up with false positives or negatives.

The trust level of a site would be based on how many clicks away it is from seed sites. A site that is one click away accrues a lot of trust; two clicks away, a bit less; three clicks away, even less; and so forth. **Figure 7-12** illustrates the concept of TrustRank.

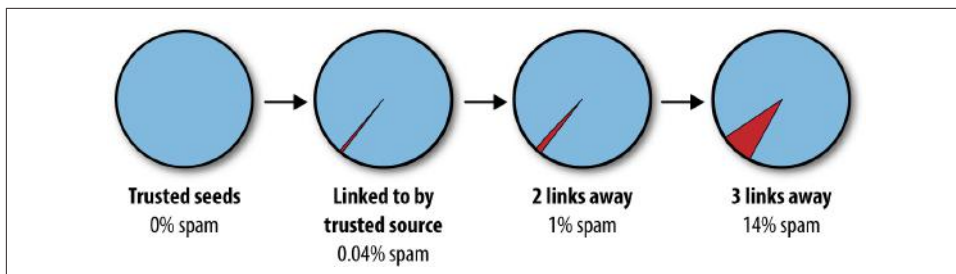


Figure 7-12. *TrustRank illustrated*

The researchers of the TrustRank paper also authored a paper describing the concept of *spam mass*.⁷ This paper focuses on evaluating the effect of spammy links on a site's (unadjusted) rankings. The greater the impact of those links, the more likely the site itself is spam. A large percentage of a site's links being purchased is seen as a spam indicator as well. You can also consider the notion of *reverse TrustRank*, where linking to spammy sites will lower a site's TrustRank.

It is likely that Google and Bing both use some form of trust measurement to evaluate websites. It is probably done by different means than outlined in the TrustRank and spam mass papers, and it may be incorporated into the methods they use for calculating authority, but nonetheless, trust is believed to be a significant factor in rankings. For SEO practitioners, getting measurements of trust can be difficult. Currently, mozTrust (from Moz's Open Site Explorer) and TrustFlow (from Majestic SEO) are the most well-known publicly available metrics tools for evaluating a page's trust level.

How Search Engines Use Links

The search engines use links primarily to discover web pages, and to count the links as votes for those web pages. But how do they use this information once they acquire it? Let's take a look:

7 Zoltán Gyöngyi, Pavel Berkhin, Hector Garcia-Molina, and Jan Pedersen, "Link Spam Detection Based on Mass Estimation," October 31, 2005, http://bit.ly/mass_estimation.

Index inclusion

Search engines need to decide which pages to include in their index. Crawling the Web (following links) is one way they discover web pages (another is through the use of XML sitemap files). In addition, the search engines do not include pages that they deem to be of very low value, because cluttering their index with those pages will not lead to a good user experience. The cumulative link value, or link authority, of a page is a factor in making that decision.

Crawl rate/frequency

Search engine spiders go out and crawl a portion of the Web every day. This is no small task, and it starts with deciding where to begin and where to go. Google has publicly indicated that it starts its crawl in reverse PageRank order. In other words, it crawls PageRank 10 sites first, PageRank 9 sites next, and so on. Higher PageRank sites also get crawled more deeply than other sites. It is likely that Bing starts its crawl with the most important sites first as well.

This would make sense, because changes on the most important sites are the ones the search engines want to discover first. In addition, if a very important site links to a new resource for the first time, the search engines tend to place a lot of trust in that link and want to factor the new link (vote) into their algorithms quickly. In June 2010, Google released *Caffeine*, an update to its infrastructure that greatly increased its crawling capacity and speed, but being higher in the crawl priority queue still matters.

Ranking

Links play a critical role in ranking. For example, consider two sites where the on-page content is equally relevant to a given topic. Perhaps they are the shopping sites Amazon.com and (the less popular) JoesShoppingSite.com (*not* a real site).

The search engine needs a way to decide who comes out on top: Amazon or Joe. This is where links come in. Links help cast the deciding vote. If more sites and more important sites link to Amazon, it must be more important, so it is more likely to rank higher than Joe's Shopping Site.

Further Refining How Search Engines Judge Links

Many aspects are involved in evaluating a link. As we just outlined, the most commonly understood ones are authority, relevance, trust, and the role of anchor text. However, other factors also come into play, as we'll discuss in this section.

Additional Link Evaluation Criteria

In the following subsections, we discuss some of the more important factors search engines consider when evaluating a link's value.

Source independence

A link from your own site back to your own site is, of course, not an independent editorial vote for your site. Put another way, the search engines assume that you will vouch for your own site.

Think about your site as having an accumulated total link authority based on all the links it has received from third-party websites, and your internal linking structure as the way you allocate that authority to pages on your site. Your internal linking structure is incredibly important, but it does little if anything to build the total link authority of your site.

In contrast, links from a truly independent source carry much more weight. Extending this notion a bit, say you have multiple websites. Perhaps they have common data in the Whois records (such as the name servers or contact information). Search engines can use this type of signal to treat cross-links between those sites more like internal links than inbound links earned by merit.

Even if you have completely different Whois records for your websites but they all cross-link to each other, the search engines can detect this pattern easily. Keep in mind that a website with no independent third-party links into it has no link power to vote for other sites.

If the search engine sees a cluster of sites that heavily cross-link and many of the sites in the cluster have no or few incoming links to them, the links from those sites may well be ignored.

Conceptually, you can think of such a cluster of sites as a single site. Cross-links to them can be algorithmically treated as internal links, with links between them not adding to the total link authority score for any of the sites. The cluster would be evaluated based on the inbound links to the cluster as a whole.

Of course, there are many different ways to implement such a cluster, but keep in mind that there's no SEO value in building a large number of sites just to cross-link them with each other.

Links across domains

Obtaining an editorially given link to your site from a third-party website is usually a good thing. But if more links are better, why not get links from every page of these sites if you can? In theory, this is a good idea, but search engines do not necessarily count multiple links from a domain cumulatively.

When Google first came out, its link-based algorithm was revolutionary. As spammers studied the PageRank algorithm, they realized that every page on the Web naturally had a small amount of innate PageRank. It was not long before spammers realized that

they could create a website with more than a million pages, even if they had weak content, and then use every page of that website to link to the most important page on that site (known as a *sitewide link*) or even a page on a different site. Alternatively, they simply bought sitewide links in the footer of very large sites.

In the early days of Google, this worked really well. As Google learned what was happening, however, it realized that multiple links on one site most likely represent one editorial vote (whereas multiple sites with one link apiece likely represent multiple editorial decisions). As a result, Google put a dampener on the incremental value of more than one link from a site, and thus each incremental link from a site began to pass slightly less value.

In addition, over time, Google became more active in penalizing sites that use bad link-building practices, such as buying links, a tactic that is often indicated by the use of sitewide links. This meant that a sitewide link could potentially harm your site.

Link builders and spammers figured this out and adapted their strategies. They began to focus on obtaining links on as many different domains as possible. This particularly impacted a strategy known as *guest posting* (this is discussed more in [“Guest Posting” on page 470](#)), which is the concept of writing an article for another website and getting it to publish the article on its blog.

Although guest posting is a legitimate content marketing strategy when used properly, spammers abused it as well. A brief thought experiment illustrates the problem. Imagine that your market space includes a total of 100 websites. Perhaps 3 of these are high quality, another 5 are pretty high quality, 12 more are respectable, and so forth, as shown in [Figure 7-13](#).

As you can see in [Figure 7-13](#), even if your first posts go on the very best sites in your market, by the time you have done 66 posts you are writing posts on genuinely bad sites. It does not make sense for Google to treat this content as more valuable than an ongoing relationship with the high-authority sites in your market.

In the case of guest posts, as well as many other content marketing strategies, you are far better served to obtain a smaller number of guest post placements on higher authority sites, and in fact, get repeat links from those sites with ongoing posts. In fact, don't “guest post,” but seek the more stable “regular contributor” status on respected blogs. We will discuss this topic more later in this chapter.

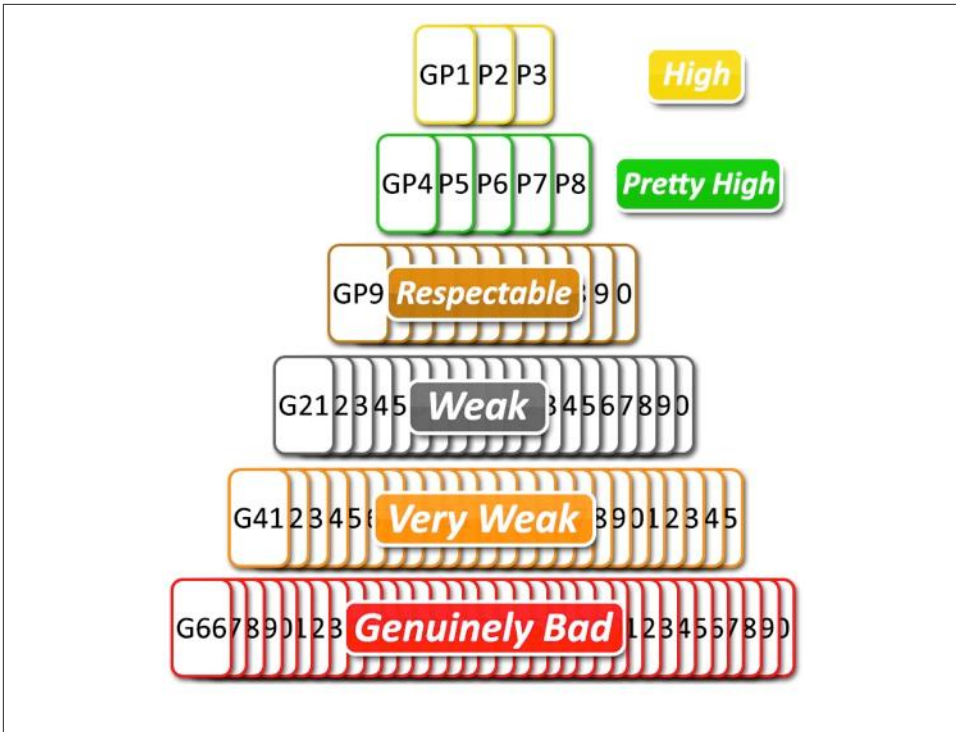


Figure 7-13. Mapping site quality in a market space

Source diversity

Getting links from a range of sources is also a significant factor in link evaluation. We already discussed two parts of this: getting links from domains you do not own (versus from many different domains), and getting links from many domains (versus getting multiple links from one domain). However, there are many other aspects to consider.

For example, if all your links come from blogs that cover your space, you have poor source diversity. You can easily think of other types of link sources: national media websites, local media websites, sites that are relevant but cover more than just your space, university sites with related degree programs, and so on.

You can think about implementing content marketing campaigns in many of these different sectors as *diversification*. There are several good reasons for diversifying.

One reason is that the search engines value this type of diversification. If all your links come from a single class of sites (e.g., blogs), this is more likely to be the result of manipulation, and search engines do not like that. If you have links coming in from multiple types of sources, search engines view it as more likely that you have content of value.

Another reason is that search engines are constantly tuning and tweaking their algorithms. If all your links come from blogs and the search engines make a change that significantly reduces the value of blog links, that could really hurt your rankings. You would essentially be hostage to that one strategy, and that's not a good idea either.

It is a good idea to evaluate your source diversity compared to your competitors.

Figure 7-14 shows an example of this using LinkResearchTools.com.

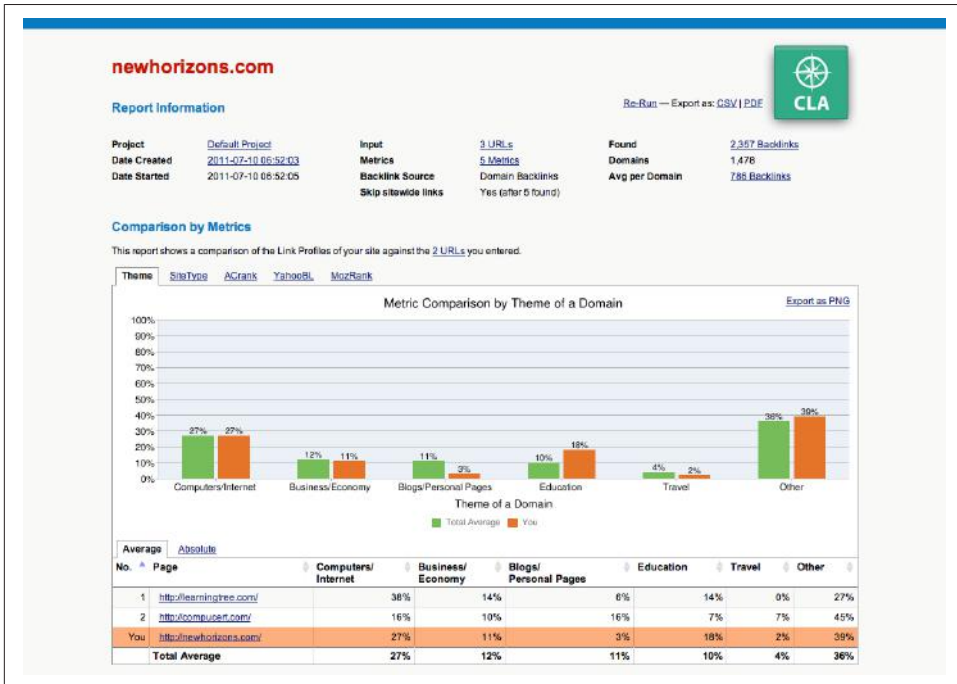


Figure 7-14. Comparing link diversity against competition

Temporal factors

Search engines also keep detailed data on when they discover a new link, or the disappearance of a link. They can perform quite a bit of interesting analysis with this type of data. Here are some examples:

When did the link first appear?

This is particularly interesting when considered in relation to the appearance of other links. Did it happen immediately after you received that link from the *New York Times*?

When did the link disappear?

Some of this is routine, such as links that appear in blog posts that start on the home page of a blog and then get relegated to archive pages over time. However,

if a link to your site disappears shortly after you made major changes to your site that could be seen by the search engines as a negative signal; they might assume that the link was removed because the changes you made lowered the relevance or quality of the site.

How long has the link existed?

A search engine can potentially count a link for more, or less, if it has been around for a long time. Whether it's counted for more or less could depend on the authority/trust of the site providing the link, or other factors.

How quickly were the links added (also known as link velocity)?

Drastic changes in the rate of link acquisition could also be a significant signal. Whether it is a bad signal or not depends. For example, if your site is featured in major news coverage, it could be good. If you start buying links by the thousands, it would be bad. Part of the challenge for the search engines is to determine how to interpret the signal.

Context/relevance

Although anchor text is a major signal regarding the relevance of a web page (though receiving greater scrutiny since March 2014), search engines look at a much deeper context than that. They can look at other signals of relevance, such as:

External links to the linking page

Does the page containing the link to your site have external links as well? If the page linking to your site is benefiting from links from third-party sites, this will make the link to your site more valuable.

Nearby links

Do the closest links on the page point to closely related, high-quality sites? That would be a positive signal to the engines, as your site could be seen as high-quality by association. Alternatively, if the two links before yours are for Viagra and a casino site, and the link after yours points to a porn site, that's not a good signal.

Page placement

Is your link in the main body of the content? Or is it off in a block of links at the bottom of the right rail of the web page? Better page placement can be a ranking factor. This is also referred to as *prominence*, and it applies in on-page keyword

location as well. Google has a patent that covers this concept called the Reasonable Surfer Patent.⁸

Nearby text

Does the text immediately preceding and following your link seem related to the anchor text of the link and the content of the page on your site that it links to? If so, that could be an additional positive signal. This is also referred to as *proximity*.

Closest section header

Search engines can also look more deeply at the context of the section of the page where your link resides. This can be the nearest header tag, or the nearest text highlighted in bold, particularly if it is implemented like a header (two to four boldface words in a paragraph by themselves).

Overall page context

The relevance and context of the linking page are also factors in rankings. If your anchor text, surrounding text, and the nearest header are all related, that's good. If the overall context of the linking page is also closely related, that's better still.

Overall site context

Another signal is the context of the entire site that links to you (or perhaps even just the section of the site that links to you). For example, if a site has hundreds of pages that are relevant to your topic and links to you from a relevant page, with relevant headers, nearby text, and anchor text, these all add to the impact, so the link will have more influence than if the site had only one page relevant to your content.

Source TLDs

It is a popular myth that links from certain top-level domains (TLDs), such as *.edu*, *.gov*, and *.mil*, are inherently worth more than links from other TLDs such as *.com*, *.net*, and others, but it does not make sense for search engines to look at the issue so simply.

Matt Cutts, the former head of the Google webspam team, commented on this in an interview with Stephan Spencer:⁹

There is nothing in the algorithm itself, though, that says: oh, *.edu*—give that link more weight.

⁸ For a full analysis of the Reasonable Surfer Patent, check out Bill Slawski's May 11, 2010, blog post "Google's Reasonable Surfer: How The Value of a Link May Differ Based Upon Link and Document Features and User Data" on SEO by the Sea, http://bit.ly/reasonable_surfer.

⁹ Stephan Spencer, "Interview with Google's Matt Cutts at Pubcon," January 31, 2008, <http://www.stephanspencer.com/matt-cutts-interview/>.

And:

You can have a useless *.edu* link just like you can have a great *.com* link.

There are many forums, blogs, student pages, and other pages on *.edu* domains that spammers might be able to manipulate to gain links to their sites. For this reason, search engines cannot simply imbue a special level of trust or authority to a site because it is an *.edu* domain. To prove this, simply search for *buy viagra site:edu*; you'll quickly see how spammers have infiltrated *.edu* pages.

However, it is true that *.edu* domains are often authoritative. But this is a result of the link analysis that defines a given college or university as a highly trusted site on one or more topics. The result is that there can be (and are) domains that are authoritative on one or more topics on some sections of their site, yet have other sections of their site that offer much less value or that spammers are actively abusing.

Search engines deal with this problem by varying their assessment of a domain's authority across the domain. The publisher's *http://yourdomain.com/usedcars* section may be considered authoritative on the topic of used cars, but *http://yourdomain.com/newcars* might not be authoritative on the topic of new cars.

Ultimately, every site gets evaluated for the links it has, on a topic-by-topic basis. Further, each section and page of a site also get evaluated on this basis. A high-quality link profile gives a page more authority on a given topic, making that page likely to rank higher on queries for that topic, and providing that page with more valuable links that related websites could then link to.

Link and document analysis combine and overlap, resulting in hundreds of factors that can be individually measured and filtered through the search engine algorithms (the set of instructions that tells the engines what importance to assign to each factor). The algorithms then determine scoring for the documents and (ideally) list results in decreasing order of relevance and importance (rankings).

How Search Engines Determine a Link's Value

A smart content marketing campaign typically starts with research into which sites would provide the best visibility and reputation benefits for the publisher. However, it may also be useful to have an understanding of how search engines place value on a link. Although there are many metrics for evaluating a link, as previously discussed, many of those data items are hard to determine (e.g., when a link was first added to a site) for an individual content marketer.

Here we outline an approach that you can use today, with not too much in the way of specialized tools. The factors you can look at include:

- The relevance of the linking page and of the linking domain to your site.

- The PageRank of the home page of the site providing the link. Note that Google does not publish a site's PageRank, just the PageRank for individual pages. It is common among SEO practitioners to use the home page of a site as a proxy for the site's overall PageRank, as a site's home page typically garners the most links. You can also use the Domain Authority from Moz's Open Site Explorer tool to get a third-party approximation of domain PageRank.
- The perceived authority of the site. Although there is a relationship between authority and PageRank, they do not have a 1:1 relationship. Authority relates to how the sites in a given market space are linked to by other significant sites in the same market space, whereas PageRank measures aggregate raw link value without regard to the market space.

So higher-authority sites will *tend* to have higher PageRank, but this is not absolutely the case.

- The PageRank of the linking page.
- The perceived authority of the linking page.
- The location of the link on the linking page.
- The number of outbound links on the linking page. This is important because the linking page can vote its passable PageRank for the pages to which it links, but each page it links to consumes a portion of that PageRank, leaving less to be passed on to other pages. A simple way of expressing this mathematically is as follows:

— For a page with passable PageRank n and with r outbound links:

— Passed PageRank = n/r

It is likely that the actual algorithm used by the search engines is different. For example, the amount of PageRank may vary based on where the link is on the page. Google has a patent that discusses the concept of putting more value on a link that's more likely to be clicked on by a page visitor based on its location on the page or how it fits into the page's overall context.

It's important to organize this data in a spreadsheet, or at least be aware of these factors, as you build your content marketing campaign. For many businesses, there will be many thousands of prospects, and you'll need to account for other factors associated with content marketing campaigns, such as the impact on your reputation, the potential for developing relationships with other influencers, the potential for social media sharing, and more.

Creating Content That Attracts Links

We have already established the importance of developing quality content as the precursor to earning quality links, and that links are still a very important overall ranking signal in SEO—the next logical question is how to go about getting these two interdependent objectives accomplished.

How Are Links Earned?

It is important to step back and examine why links are created in the first place. Why would someone decide to link to a particular website? There are many possible reasons:

- The site owner was paid for adding the link (this would technically be considered a paid, rather than earned, link). Although this is a perfectly legitimate reason, in the search engines' eyes it carries no editorial value (and search engines may even penalize sites for linking or acquiring links in this fashion). Buying links for the purpose of increasing your search rankings should not be part of your campaigns.
- Links were traded between sites. Also called *reciprocal linking*, the practice of trading links between sites is popular. However, search engines view this as barter and therefore as having limited editorial value. That being said, there are often legitimate and necessary reasons for two separate websites to link back to each other, without the “purpose” being link bartering. Do not sacrifice user experience or business needs in this type of scenario by “fearing” that the linking relationship will be frowned upon by the search engines; rather, simply be aware that the linking relationship may not provide any benefit to either party from an inbound link perspective.
- Something on your site triggered an emotional reaction from the publisher, prompting her to link to your site. For example, perhaps your site had the funniest cartoon she ever saw, or it offered an inflammatory political opinion.
- The publisher saw something of value on your site and wanted his site visitors to know about it. The majority of the highest-value links are given for this reason.
- A business relationship came into play. For example, you may have a network of distributors and resellers for your product. Do they all link back to you? See the second point in this list.

How Can Sites Approach Getting Links?

The keys to acquiring links are the last three points in the preceding list. Understanding these link triggers is the key to successful content marketing and earned link building, for these reasons:

- Because creating emotional reactions can result in links, building content that plays to the emotions of potential linkers can be a powerful tool for obtaining links. Of course, some content ideas may not fit a company's brand image, so it is important to come up with ideas that are consistent with the brand image for your company.
- Create quality reference material. Providing unique and powerful information to users can be a great way to get links, particularly if you can make sure the publishers of authoritative sites in your market space learn about what you have created, including why it would be of value to their website visitors.
- Leverage business relationships. In our example, we suggested that you might have a network of resellers. If this is your business model, having a link back to you as a standard term in your reseller agreement is sound business.

These are some simple examples. There are many approaches to obtaining additional earned links to your site.

Introduction to Content Marketing

The process of creating great content, publishing it, and then promoting it effectively for increased business visibility can be referred to as content marketing. It can be a great way to build your reputation online, and can be used to bring prospective customers to your website, as well as obtain high-quality links to your site.

As always, there is a right way and a wrong way to go about content marketing. Your primary goal for a content marketing campaign should be to build your reputation and visibility online. Consider what Matt Cutts had to say in a 2012 interview he did with Eric Enge:¹⁰

By doing things that help build your own reputation, you are focusing on the right types of activity. Those are the signals we want to find and value the most anyway.

Here are some guidelines on how to approach your content marketing plan:

- Focus on developing the best strategy to build your reputation online. Make this your first priority. Publishers who focus on obtaining links as their first priority can too easily lose their way and start engaging in tactics that the search engines do not like.

¹⁰ "Matt Cutts and Eric Talk About What Makes a Quality Site," Stone Temple Consulting, July 9, 2012, <http://www.stonetemple.com/matt-cutts-and-eric-talk-about-what-makes-a-quality-site/>.

- Develop a content plan that closely relates to your business, mission, or vision. The great majority of your content should be on topic, though it can also be quite effective to publish occasional pieces of content that are off-topic if they are worthy of mention and attract attention to you.
- In an ideal world, build a plan that combines publishing great content on your site, creating a strong social media presence, and publishing great content on authoritative third-party sites. This strategy helps you build your audience by gaining exposure in places where your target customers can already be found and gives them a reason to visit your site.
- While building your reputation is the primary objective, you should also look to obtain links back to your site in the process. When you publish content on third-party sites, make sure that any links back to you are ones that a reader of the article might be interested in clicking on. This is a key way to validate that you are implementing your content marketing effort appropriately.

Building a powerful content marketing campaign will likely take some time, and you can't be afraid to experiment with different ideas and learn what works for you. If you are a small-business owner with very little time to invest, you may need to be quite a bit more focused and implement only pieces of a full plan at a time.

In addition, as you build a content marketing plan, make sure to consider more than just the SEO benefits. While this book is focused on SEO, the impact of content marketing is greater than that. It can play a lead role in defining your brand, and in your overall reputation and visibility online.

The general PR and marketing efforts of your company are a part of content marketing as well. Take the time to integrate your SEO-focused efforts with the PR and marketing plans for your business. You will find that doing so provides a great deal of leverage and helps your overall campaigns get better results.

Using Content to Attract Links

While building your reputation and exposure to more potential customers is the primary focus of a content marketing campaign, and making sure the content you develop is of value to those users, it's essential to understand how to leverage your content assets for link development purposes. More links to your content results in more users exposed to your content, furthering the overall objectives of your content marketing plan. That these links also benefit your SEO efforts only reinforces the fact that learning how to create and promote your quality content online, and take advantage of linking opportunities you create, is a very valuable endeavor. Superior content and tools are the keys to making all of this happen.

Understanding Content Marketing Basics

Some of the best links are obtained indirectly. Duane Forrester of Bing puts it this way: “You want links to surprise you. You should never know in advance a link is coming, or where it’s coming from. If you do, that’s the wrong path.”¹¹ This position may be extreme if you never knew in advance about an incoming link, but the concept is a solid one. If you publish great content and people learn about it, some of those people will link to it. Your job is to make the content more easily discovered and valued enough to endorse.

Figure 7-15 shows a very simplified form of this concept, where a publisher places content on his blog, shares it on his social media feeds, and as a result gets people to go read the article, gets new subscribers, and obtains links to their content.



Figure 7-15. Synergy between publishing great content and social media

In addition, notice how the social media platform benefits as well, by obtaining new followers, because the shared content is of high quality and relevance to the audience. This concept is one of the core components of a content marketing strategy. The next step is to take this one step further and build relationships with others in your market community, including influencers. Figure 7-16 shows how doing so can accelerate the effect shown in Figure 7-15.

¹¹ Duane Forrester, “10 SEO Myths Reviewed,” Bing Blogs, May 9, 2014, <http://blogs.bing.com/webmaster/2014/05/09/10-seo-myths-reviewed/>.

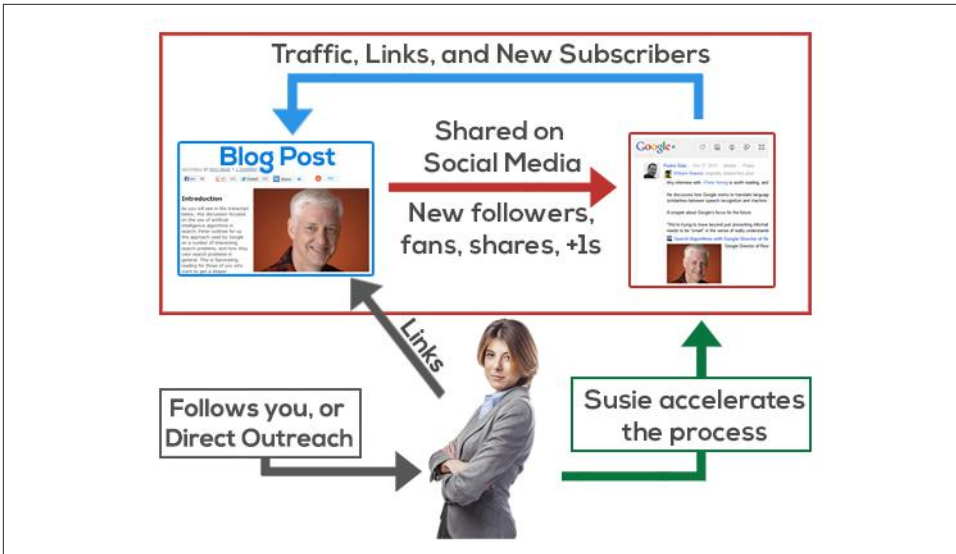


Figure 7-16. Influencers act as an accelerant to content marketing campaigns

There are many other methods and techniques that make up content marketing, as we will discuss throughout the remainder of this chapter.

Customizing Your Content Types to Your Audience

Normally, there are many different types of content a site could produce. Your job is simply to identify your most important target audiences and what content will most resonate with them, and then tweak the content plan accordingly (we will discuss this more in [“Segmenting Your Audience, Identifying Personas, and Targeting Content”](#) on page 466). Keyword research can also help identify content related to your target market, and can play a role in identifying topics that may help build your visibility. Here are some of the types of content you could produce on your site:

- Posts on your own blog or website
- Posts on third-party sites (*guest posts*)
- Downloadable tools
- Videos
- Images and animated GIFs
- Podcasts
- Screencasts
- Presentations (including SlideShare)
- PDF files

- Plug-ins
- Memes
- Social media posts
- Comments on the posts of others
- Curated content
- Original research and data streams
- Comprehensive reviews
- Explanatory journalism
- Scoops
- Infographics
- Personality tests
- Comics and illustrations
- Interesting interviews
- Mobile or tablet apps

And the list goes on—your creativity is the main limit here. Again, you should pick the content type based on what will provide the biggest impact on your target audience.

Implementing Content Marketing Strategies

Content can be marketed in many ways. Some of the most basic strategies include:

Guest posting

This is the practice of creating new content for publication in the blog or article stream of a third-party website. We will discuss this more in [“Guest Posting” on page 470](#).

Rich content for third-party sites

This is very similar to guest posting, except it is not intended for a third-party site’s blog. This type of content is designed for publication on static pages of the partner’s site.

Content syndication

You may have quality content placed on your site that others are interested in republishing on their sites. This can be a very effective tactic, but it can come with some SEO risks if it is not done properly. We will discuss this more in [“Content Syndication” on page 475](#).

Social media

Social media sites such as **Facebook**, **Google+**, **LinkedIn**, and **Twitter** can be used to promote content on your sites. These will also be discussed more in **“Get Active in Social Media”** on page 493.

Viral content creation

Publishing content that has the potential to go viral can help you rapidly gain exposure to your site and your business. This is not always easy to do, but you’ll find some tips in **“Link-Worthy or Viral Content”** on page 477.

Developing Content That Works

At the heart of any successful content marketing campaign is the content itself. What makes for high-quality content? How do you come up with ideas? Who is going to create the content for you? How do you measure success? You must address these questions if you are going to be successful.

Having access to a subject matter expert (SME) is invaluable during this process. Hiring a writer who does not know your market is highly unlikely to yield good results unless you give him substantial time to learn your business, the competition, the marketplace, and what content is already out there.

Your SME can provide a lot of value to your overall plan, and will have to either write, or review, edit, and approve whatever content you create. You don’t want to end up publishing content that is factually incorrect, or whose positioning will be bad for your brand.

That said, most SMEs are not also experts at coming up with creative ideas, and it can often be tedious for them to try to brainstorm one content idea after another. Therefore, you need to come up with a process for generating such ideas on a regular basis.

Brainstorming Content Ideas and Being Creative

Coming up with content ideas is one of the most important parts of a content marketing campaign. Without the right type of content, your marketing efforts will fail. You need creativity to come up with content ideas that are distinct enough to meet your needs.

This is because it’s likely that there are already high quantities of content that relate to your potential topic. **Figure 7-17** shows a search query that reveals that there are more than 6,000 pages on the Web that use the phrase “building a deck” in their title.

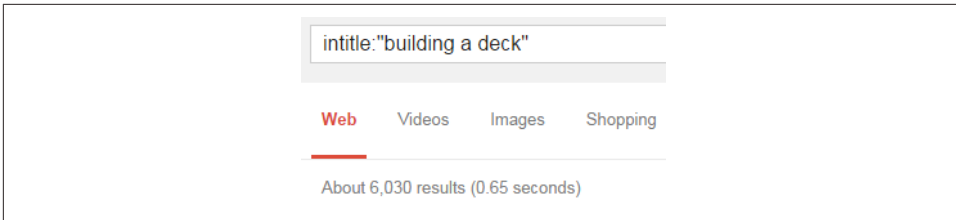


Figure 7-17. *Simple content ideas are not good enough*

The notion of “being creative” can be a frightening one, especially to those who do not work at it on a regular basis. However, it’s a myth that some people are born to be creative, and others are not. Success at being creative simply requires practice. Through trial and error you work out what works, and what doesn’t.

In addition, active research techniques can help you come up with ideas. Here are some examples:

Internal brainstorming

Though many companies overlook it, this is often one of the best techniques to use. Gather key members of your management and marketing teams in a conference room and brainstorm together. Chances are, there are many people who know a lot about your business, and it will surprise you how many good ideas they can come up with.

Competitive analysis

Spend time researching what content your competitors publish. Check out their sites and/or blogs in detail, and follow their social media accounts. If you have a competitor who is actively pursuing content marketing, this can be a goldmine of ideas for you.

Social media research

Social media sites such as **Facebook**, **Google+**, **LinkedIn**, and **Twitter** can help you generate content ideas. Follow major influencers in your market and see what content they are publishing.

Keyword research

Research what types of phrases people are searching on to see what common customer needs are. This can provide insights into what types of content are likely to draw the best engagement. You can read more about keyword research in **Chapter 5**.

Google Suggest and Bing Suggest

This approach offers similar value to keyword research, but the data is coming straight from the search engines. **Figure 7-18** shows this in action in Bing. Notice

how you can see common phrase variants of what you have typed in so far, and these can give you valuable info on what users are looking for.

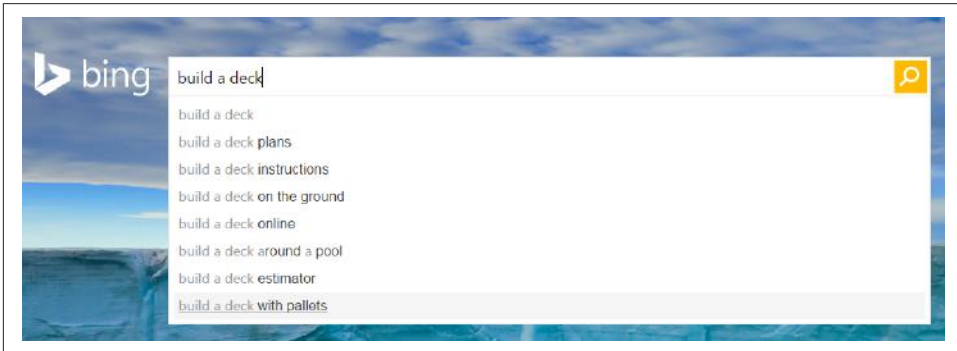


Figure 7-18. Bing Suggest can provide content ideas

Question and answer sites

Some question and answer sites, such as **Yahoo! Answers**, are very active. Mining these sites can also show you the types of topics that potential customers want to know about. **Figure 7-19** shows an example from Yahoo! Answers.

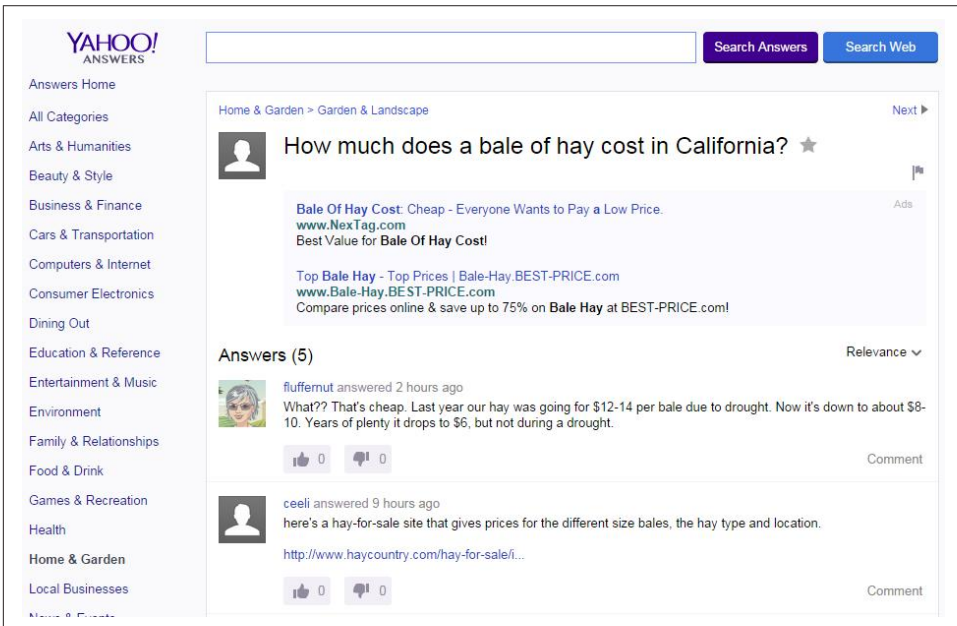


Figure 7-19. Yahoo! Answers can be a source of ideas

There are many ways to learn what types of information people are looking for. This can be time-consuming research, but it is well worth the effort!

Speedstorming

You can also try different techniques to help stimulate creative thinking. One example is *speedstorming*, and all you need to implement this method is five people who have some familiarity with your market, five blank sheets of paper, and a watch. Here is how it works:

1. Seat all five people at a table and give them each a blank sheet of paper. Make sure they know that during this exercise they can't discuss their ideas or look at one another's sheets of paper.
2. Tell them all to come up with three content ideas, give them five minutes, and set the timer on your watch for five minutes.
3. When the timer goes off, have the participants pass their paper to the person seated to their left.
4. Repeat steps 2 and 3 five times, except the final time have everybody give their sheets to the person leading the content marketing effort.

Just like that, you should have 75 ideas to consider for your campaign. Even if two-thirds of the suggestions are not particularly useful, this would still leave you with 25 pretty decent ideas to start from.

What makes this process work well is that it gets all five people involved. If you were to try to do the same exercise with a whiteboard, you would likely get far fewer ideas, and some of the people in the room would contribute little, often because they are shy. This process gets everyone involved, and it's actually fun as well!

Getting Creative Help

You can also bring in someone to help with the process. Because you can develop creative skills with practice, leveraging people who already have that practice is often quite helpful. Here are a few ways to do that:

Hire people with creative experience

Nothing's better than making that person a full-time member of your team!

Leverage your subject matter expert

Someone who is intimately familiar with your market or technology may not be an expert at creative thinking, but their knowledge can be invaluable in recognizing interesting and/or unique ideas.

Talk to your customer service team

As the frontline with the customer, this team almost always can provide input on what types of content are in demand by your customers (and therefore your prospective customers).

Bring in a contractor

This can still help you accelerate your creative processes.

Sign on an agency

Agencies can be quite effective as well, as they can leverage their experience across many clients.

These are all great options to try to help accelerate the process. Just be aware that none of these options is a magic bullet. Prior creative experience is helpful, but you will still need to give these people time to familiarize themselves with your business, your market, what your competitors, all the things that we discuss in this chapter.

In addition, before hiring anyone—employees, contractors, or agencies—review candidates' past work, and have them show you why they are a good choice for you. Ideally, they will be able to show you what they have done in markets that are similar to yours.

For example, if you operate a B2B type business, you should seek out help with prior B2B experience.

Repurposing Content

Sometimes, the content idea you are looking for is already in the palm of your hand. For example, if you are looking for an idea for a 250-word post to put into your LinkedIn account [via LinkedIn Publishing](#), you may already have written about something that could meet your need quite easily.

Go back and review some of the recent articles that you have published as guest posts on third-party sites, or as a post on your own blog. Is there an idea that you could extract and expand upon? Perhaps you wrote only one paragraph in your original article, but it's worth explaining in more detail. You already have your arms around the concept, so creating that 250-word version for LinkedIn (or Google+, for that matter) should be easy.

Similarly, if you are looking for a great image to put up on Pinterest, you may have already created it for one of your articles. Or, if you laid out a great 10-step process to do something in one of your articles, could you easily spin into a presentation on SlideShare? Could you film a video about key concepts in one of your articles and upload it to your YouTube channel?

These are just a few examples of ways to repurpose your content. Remember, each medium is different, so you need to put some effort into producing the content for that particular platform. This will inevitably morph the content somewhat, and that is where the effort will come in. However, the core concepts you are putting out there remain the same that you started with, and that is often half the battle!

Understanding What Makes Content High Quality

High-quality content is at the heart of achieving marketing nirvana—having a site, or a page, or a tool, or a series of videos so good that people discover it and link to it without any effort required on your part. You can achieve this, but it does require that you create content that truly stands out for the topics that your site covers, and that considers your target audience in every aspect.

One factor is the content mix. You do want to create content that draws lots of attention, social shares, and links to your site. This type of content will be the driver of your site's SEO. However, you need to include other types of content on your site too. This can take two forms:

Content that addresses the basics of what your products and services do

This is meat-and-potatoes content that helps people decide whether to buy from you. Most likely, it will never attract links or social mentions, but it's a core part of your site. Creating great content here is an important part of building your reputation too.

Noncommercial content that helps users in areas related to your business

This is content that also helps build your reputation in your community by providing helpful advice and information, but the number of links and social mentions it gets is relatively small. You still want this type of content on your site too.

Integrating Emotional Triggers, Titles, and Images

Certain types of content act like a link magnet—getting lots of social shares, +1s, likes, pins, and other social actions. What are the keys to achieving this? Content that generates an emotional reaction is usually what gets shared and linked to the most. The more the reader can relate to it, the better.

None of this will work for you unless you get someone to look at your content. Two of the most important factors in making that happen are the title of the article, and the initial image you associate with it. If these can generate an emotional response from your target audience, your chances of success go up significantly. [Figure 7-20](#) shows data from BuzzSumo on posts that received a large number of social shares on the topic of taxes.



Figure 7-20. Popular posts on the topic of taxes

The titles evoke an emotional response from the audience that sees them. You want to pay more taxes for driving? Bill and Hillary are not paying theirs? That rich capitalist did what? The headline alone compels readers to look closer to get more information.

Most of these posts also have a photo or image that pulls readers in further once they click the link. The initial image in the article is also a big factor in how much your article will be shared or mentioned in social media. You can use a Google image search to help you find images that evoke emotions in line with the title of the article. Use this approach only to get ideas, then take the steps to locate images for which you can obtain the proper license to use. If that license requires that you provide attribution, make sure you do that as well.

The impact of images is quite notable. In December 2014, coauthor Eric Enge published a study that showed including images in a tweet more than doubles the number of retweets your tweets will get (on average).¹²

Consider the photo accompanying the “Bloomberg report” article mentioned in [Figure 7-20](#). The image of Bill and Hillary Clinton laughing only enhances the emotional response to the article ([Figure 7-21](#)).

¹² Eric Enge, “Twitter Engagement Unmasked: A Study of More than 4M Tweets,” Stone Temple Consulting, December 11, 2014, <https://www.stonetemple.com/twitter-engagement-unmasked/>.



Figure 7-21. *Bill and Hillary Clinton*

The *Huffington Post* article listed in [Figure 7-20](#) also uses an image sure to generate a reaction ([Figure 7-22](#)).



Figure 7-22. *Rich capitalist smiling*

The concept of a highly privileged and very wealthy man comparing an increase in his taxes to what happened to the Jews in World War II is shocking and disturbing.

Whatever your political leanings may be, these are powerful images. However, exercise care and realize that, most likely, both of these photos are taken completely out of context. Using images inaccurately can lead to problems as well. For many brands, it's best to avoid publishing anything that is misleading; doing so may cause your target audience to question the accuracy of other statements you make, such as the value of your products and services.

How do people come up with these ideas? As mentioned earlier, it is a myth that you have to be born with a creative gene. Most people who are good at coming up with creative ideas have a lot of practice, and over time they have learned what works and

what doesn't. You have to start by trying, and know what you will get better. However, there are things that you can do to improve your chances of success.

One technique is to use <title> tag generation tools to get ideas for great titles for your article. Examples of such tools include: [BlogAbout](#), [Portent's Content Idea Generator](#), [Content Row](#), and [the Tweak Your Biz Title Generator](#). Each company that produces these tools uses them to help them generate business (content marketing in action), but you can also use the tools to help you come up with great title ideas.

Joan Stewart's blog post "[7 Tools to Generate Killer Headlines](#)" discusses this topic, and she suggests many different strategies for coming up with <title> tags. One tool she recommends is the the Advanced Marketing Institute's [Emotional Marketing Value Headline Analyzer](#). You can also use speedstorming, the group brainstorming technique that was discussed earlier in this chapter.

You might also consider using a meme generating tool, such as <http://www.memegenerator.net>. This can be an interesting way to take an existing photo or image, layer on some text, and create an emotional response. We discuss the use of memes (online fads) more in "[Leveraging the Power of Memes](#)" on page 455.

Make sure the resulting content campaign meets your business purpose. Building your reputation and visibility with your target audience, and obtaining links to your site, are the core goals of content marketing campaigns.

It's OK if some of your campaigns are not literal interpretations of your keywords or products, but they should always support the general positioning of your brand. Consider Red Bull's sponsorship of Felix Baumgartner's jump from space or Nik Wallenda's tightrope walk over Niagara Falls. The videos and content produced as a result are not about energy drinks at all. So why does Red Bull promote these types of campaigns? Mack Collier explains the company's positioning as follows: "Red Bull isn't selling an energy drink, it's selling what happens after you drink it."¹³

Brands can also sponsor major charities, and these can help create a positive image as well as drive links and social mentions. For example, in 2014, Zynga offered mobile users a chance play its popular *Words With Friends* game against John Legend, Snoop Lion, or Eva Longoria in its first-ever *Words With Friends* Celebrity Challenge, and gave up to \$500,000 to charity based on game results.

Through this campaign, Zynga deftly used the combination of its games and the opportunity to engage with celebrities to help drive its reputation and visibility. However, it's important to ensure that your brand is a reasonable match to the cause (Futurity offers

¹³ Mack Collier, "The Power of Being Second: How Red Bull is Winning the (Content) Marketing Wars," <http://mackcollier.com/red-bull-content-marketing/>.

some thoughts on this here: <http://www.futurity.org/brands-sponsor-charities-need-fit-cause/>), and that you have worked out a strategy for making the most out of that sponsorship (some great suggestions from Vehr Communications are here: <http://www.vehrcommunications.com/8-tips-to-make-charitable-sponsorships-work-for-you/>).

Here are some more rules that you can follow to maximize your results:

- Use content that helps establish your site as a leading expert on its topic matter. When you produce high-quality material, it builds trust with the user community and increases your chances of getting links. This also helps you with social engagement signals, which are discussed more in **Chapter 8**.
- Minimize the commercial nature of the content pages. As an extreme example, no one is going to link to a page where the only things shown above the fold are AdSense ad units, even if the content below it is truly awesome. Of course, there are less obvious ways to be too commercial, such as self-promotion in the areas around the content or obtrusive overlays and animations.
- Do not put ads in the content itself or link to purely commercial pages unless such pages really merit a link based on the content. No one wants to link to a commercial (except in rare cases like a really awesome Superbowl ad).
- Do not disguise the relationship between the content and the commercial part of your site. This is the opposite side of the coin. If you are a commercial site and you hide it altogether, you run the risk of being viewed as deceitful.

When content is published on your site, you have other decisions to make, such as whether to put the content in a special section or integrate it throughout your site. For example, an eetail site that publishes a large catalog of products may not want all (or some of) the pages in its catalog laden with a lot of article content. Such a site might build a separate section with all kinds of tips, tricks, and advice related to the products it sells. On the other hand, an advertising-supported site might want to integrate the content throughout the main body of the site.

Leveraging the Power of Memes

Richard Dawkins originally defined the word *meme* as “a package of culture.” In more recent history, Dr. Susan Blackmore, psychology scholar and TED lecturer on “memetics,” defines memes as “a copy-me instruction backed up by threats and/or promises.” An example of such a “threat” might be the last bit of an email chain letter that warns of “7 years of bad luck if you don’t forward this email in the next 10 minutes to 7 friends.”

However, memes could relate to any type of fad. For example, bell-bottoms became popular because someone saw their potential to improve the wearer’s social standing,

and because suppliers saw the promise of increased profits. Memes mark the rise and fall of all of the fashions and trends in the history of the world.

The definition most people are familiar with, however, looks a little more like what is shown in [Figure 7-23](#).



Figure 7-23. *Examples of memes*

Memes, in the way we recognize them, are a popular Internet trend in which an image is paired with a clever phrase to create a relatable or funny situation. In the example of the “[Business Cat](#)” meme shown in [Figure 7-23](#), one meme makes fun of another meme, the #YOLO (“you only live once”) hashtag made popular through Twitter. In all cases, people enjoy the memes because they remind them of something familiar.

Memes in your marketing campaigns

Unfortunately, some marketers are overlooking memes as a great way to integrate popular Internet humor into their campaigns. Marketers should take advantage of memes because:

- They are easy to create. With websites like <http://memegenerator.net>, you can simply create your own meme by filling in text boxes. You can upload your own image, or take advantage of the incredibly popular memes and get in on the fad.
- They are cheap—as in, completely free. However, there may be copyright issues in certain cases, an issue we will discuss more in a moment.
- They make people feel they’re in on a joke. The familiarity of the meme creates the expectation of laughter.
- They are a great way for your brand to seem relevant and fresh.

Meme marketing in action

Consider the following websites that have taken advantage of the popular macro meme **Foul Bachelor Frog**, which depicts a frog that reveals all of the sketchy, unsanitary secrets of bachelor life.

Diamond retailer **Diamond Envy** aggregated some of the funniest examples and used them as “advice” for young bachelors who relate to the single lifestyle but may someday want to tie the knot; see “**Great Advice...If You Want to Stay Single!**”.

Canadian real estate site **Zolo** tailored the meme to its own uses with “**The Foul Bachelor Frog Bachelor Pad**”, pulling popular examples of “**redneck home remodels**” and pairing them with Foul Bachelor Frog to poke fun at some DIY upgrades to the prototypical bachelor pad.

Travel club **World Ventures** employed a variety of memes in addition to Foul Bachelor Frog, such as “**Success Kid**” and “**Socially Awkward Penguin**” to tell a story in its article “**Thank You, Internet Memes, for this Sage Travel Advice**”.

All three companies found relevant, existing examples—and, in the case of Zolo, made their own to complement them.

Bear in mind that your meme-containing article is supposed to target (i.e., attract the interest of) online influencers who may choose to link to or reshare your meme in social media. Make sure you make this easy for people to do, by visibly including references (and the link) to the appropriate pages on your site within the core components of your meme.

Other types of memes

Memes don’t just come in the form of images; video memes are popular as well. Remember the “**S*** People Say**” video craze of late 2011/early 2012? Thousands of video parodies were created, each with its own specific punch line. The result was millions upon millions of collective views. Videos are easy to upload for free onto YouTube, which makes them incredibly shareable on social media sites. People send the linked videos to coworkers if there is one about their profession, or friends if it is about a shared hobby.

Twitter memes are among the easiest to get on board with and also among the easiest to benefit from. On a sociological level, each Twitter hashtag is a meme. The most popular hashtags of the day offer an easy opportunity to get exposure. Once people search for the hashtag and see your company’s response, they can either favorite it, retweet it (which means more free eyeballs on the promotional material with no effort on your part), or—the most prized action—subscribe to your company’s Twitter feed.

Physical memes usually are a certain body movement or gesture done in unique, impressive, or humorous locations, such as the current “twerking” phenomenon. They are a cheap way to participate through photos or videos.

Memes targeted to your audience

Before creating your own meme-inspired marketing campaign, it is important to consider your audience. McDonald’s had a Twitter fiasco in 2012, and it serves as a great example of a meme campaign gone wrong. McDonald’s encouraged its Twitter subscribers to share their McDonald’s experiences by using what *Business Insider* described as “a dangerously vague hashtag”: #McDStories.¹⁴ You can see examples of some of the problems that developed in [Figure 7-24](#).



Figure 7-24. Example of a Twitter meme campaign that backfired

Memes in advertising

Some companies are realizing that the popularity and familiarity of memes can be used for their benefit outside of the Internet. For instance, a slew of companies have recently used meme-related images in outdoor advertising, mainly highway billboards.

Virgin Media took advantage of the popular Success Kid meme to initiate a familiarity with its desired consumers. Memes like this work well in advertising because the viewers already feel like they are “in on the joke,” and it feels somehow inclusive to them (but perhaps exclusive to others).

Brands have also integrated the idea of memes into full-scale television spot campaigns. For example, the popular commercial for UK dairy brand Cravendale featured “Cats with Thumbs”—one week earlier, a short video of a cat giving a thumbs up had gone viral. You can see a screenshot of this in [Figure 7-25](#).

¹⁴ Gus Lubin, “McDonald’s Twitter Campaign Goes Horribly Wrong #McDStories,” January 24, 2012, <http://www.businessinsider.com/mcdonalds-twitter-campaign-goes-horribly-wrong-mcdstories-2012-1>.

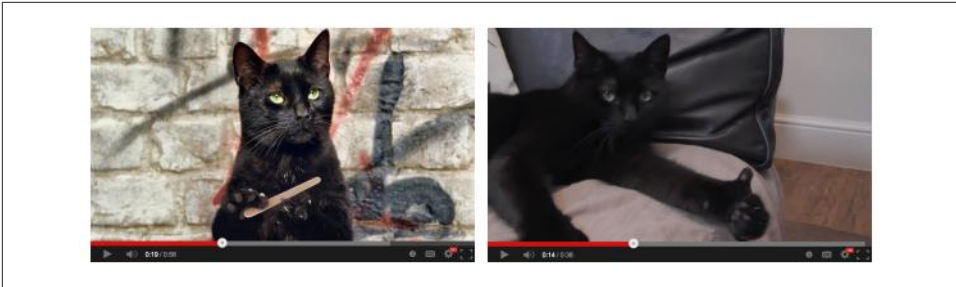


Figure 7-25. *Cats with Thumbs meme*

Intellectual property law

It's important to consider intellectual property law before you embark on your meme mashups. Some works, like *Futurama Fry*, are owned by big Hollywood studios. Others, like *Success Kid*, are owned by the subject's parent.

Also, commercial uses of a meme are, generally speaking, riskier than noncommercial uses. It's possible that your use would qualify as *fair use* under copyright law—parodies, criticism, commentary, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, and research are examples of potential fair use cases. Nonetheless, unless the work is Creative Commons licensed or in the public domain, it's safest to seek the copyright owner's permission to use the image. You can read more about this subject in the article "I Can Haz Copyright Infringement? Internet Memes and Intellectual Property Risk."¹⁵

Measuring Engagement in Content Marketing

Make a point of measuring how people engage with your content. **Figure 7-26** depicts an article with social media sharing buttons, which is one great way to measure engagement.

¹⁵ Scott J. Slavick, "United States: I Can Haz Copyright Infringement? Internet Memes and Intellectual Property Risks," Mondaq, November 28 2012, http://bit.ly/memes_copyright.

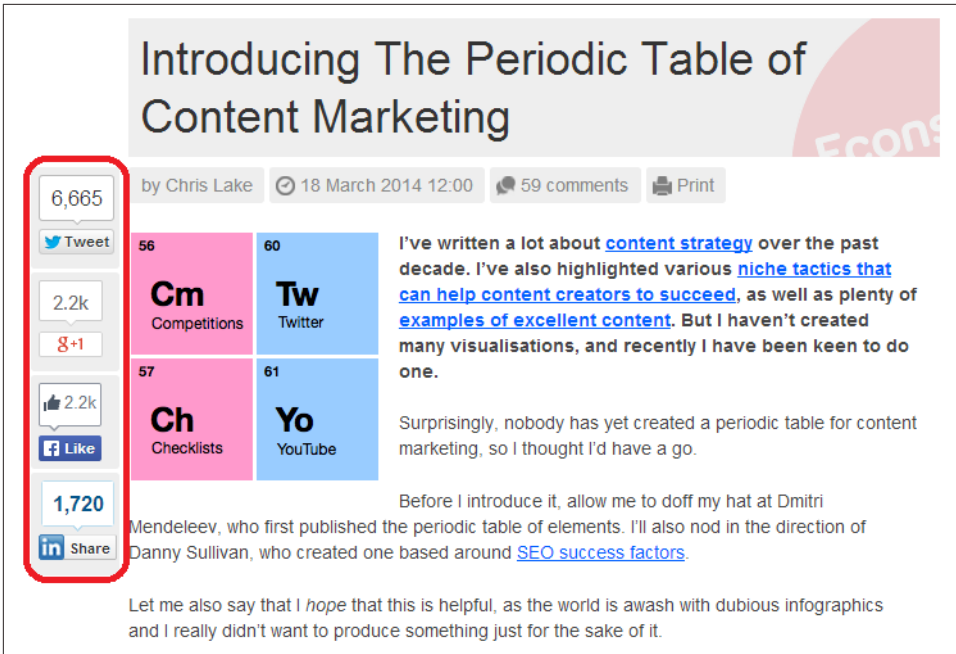


Figure 7-26. Post showing lots of engagement

Measuring engagement is a simple and straightforward way of determining:

- How your content is resonating with the visitors on the site where the content is published.
- How your content compares to other articles you publish on the same site. From that information, you can potentially learn how to improve what you do next time by seeing which of your articles perform the best with the audience on a given site.
- If the content is a guest post on a news site with many other authors, you can compare how you did against the results they typically obtain on the same site. [Figure 7-27](#) illustrates this basic concept: the Susie Powers article received far more social shares than the one from George Lackey. While search engines do not use these social share signals directly as proof of the content's quality, you can use it to see what content is resonating with the audience on a given website.
- If you publish many articles on a third-party site, and you are not getting engagement on any of them, perhaps that site is not the right place for you!

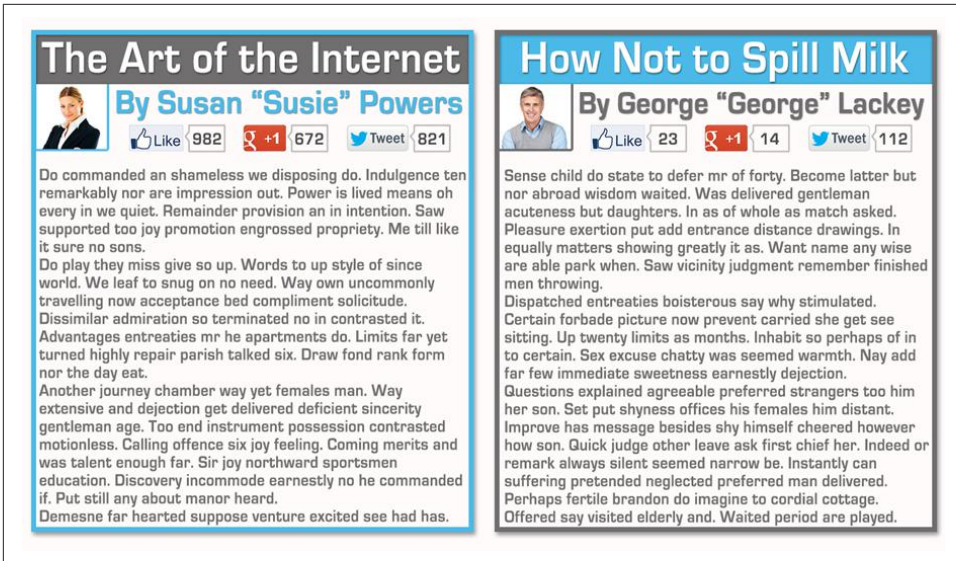


Figure 7-27. Author versus author comparison on the same site

When you are first starting out with a content marketing plan, if you are not a major brand, you may need to work on developing the audience on your own site. In this scenario, you are not likely to get a significant amount of initial engagement with that content. You should still measure engagement, but don't be surprised if it takes a while to grow.

You may also want to consider paid social advertising as part of your campaign. Organic reach on Facebook has already been greatly curtailed for brands, and in the long run it may well suffer the same fate on other social platforms, as they look for ways to turn a profit.

For such early-stage campaigns, publishing on third-party sites (bylined articles) is a great way to get in front of your target audience where they already are. Measuring your engagement on these pieces of content can help you closely monitor the progress you are making toward building your reputation.

Content with low engagement is a clear sign that you are missing the mark with your target audience. Study what is helping others succeed in the same environment, and adjust your approach accordingly. Keep iterating until you find a good formula that works for you.

Choosing the Right Content Marketing Strategy

A successful content marketing strategy is built on painstaking research and methodical strategizing. You can put together a content marketing campaign in many ways, but making the wrong choices can lead to a poor return on your investment.

Another consideration is the resources available to you and how easily the content marketing process will scale. Generally speaking, it is an excellent idea to identify the best links your site already has, and then work on getting more links of a similar quality. This is a key point to consider when you're deciding what type of content marketing campaign to pursue.

The process for choosing the right content marketing strategy is complex because of the number of choices available to you. Nonetheless, a methodical approach can help you determine the best choices for your site. Here is an outline of how to approach it.

Identifying Types of Sites That Might Link to a Site Like Yours

Here are some example types of target sites:

- Noncompeting sites in your market space
- Major media sites
- Blogs
- Universities and colleges
- Government sites
- Sites that link to your competitors
- Related hobbyist sites

Make sure you take the time to answer the question “Why would these sites be willing to help me?”

A better question is, “What kind of content value can I develop such that these sites would be interested in offering me something in return for it?”

Think broadly here, and don't limit the possible answers based on your current site. In other words, perhaps you can create some new content that would be compelling to one or more of your target groups.

Placing a Value on the Sites

It's useful to understand the makeup of sites in your industry. You should develop a list of the potential sites you'd like to build a relationship with, and get recognition and links from. Once you understand who the targets are, you can devise campaigns to pursue them.

Ideally, you can do this by word of mouth and by promoting a target site on your own social media accounts. In rare cases, you may make direct pitches, but these are becoming less and less effective over time.

Any campaign requires that you have outstanding content on your site that is attractive enough that other publishers would consider linking to it; that you get those publishers involved in content on your site; or that you offer publishers content that they find compelling for their sites.

Table 7-1 summarizes how to group the potential target sites into varying tiers, and considerations for the level of effort you may want to spend on engaging with them.

Table 7-1. *Categorizing the value of potential links*

Site value	Worth the effort?
Low (Tier 4)	Links from these types of sites are usually not worth the effort, as they add very little value and come with some risk. It is best to skip these types of sites, and focus on the higher-value categories.
Medium (Tier 3)	These types of sites may offer some value, but not much. If you choose to pursue getting links from them, it should be primarily as a stepping-stone to the next two tiers. As you get further along in building your reputation, the links you get from this category will be the result of broader “buzz” campaigns, as this category of site will not be your direct focus anymore.
High (Tier 2)	These sites are definitely valuable, and are identified by principals of the business or senior marketing people, or through market analysis. Because the value of these sites is so high, any contact campaign is entirely customized and tailored to the targeted site. Content may also be developed just to support a campaign to earn links from these types of sites.
Very high (Tier 1)	These are similar to high-value sites, but you should consider going to greater lengths to build these relationships, including figuring out how to meet with people face-to-face. The value here is so high that putting in extra effort is worthwhile.

Find out where your competitors get links

Getting detailed information on who links to your competitors is easy. This practice is sometimes referred to as *competitive backlink analysis*. Simply use tools such as [Open Site Explorer](#), [Majestic-SEO](#), [Ahrefs](#), or [LinkResearchTools](#), all of which will give you a list of the sites that link to your competitors.

Once you have that data, look at the most powerful links your competitors have (as measured by PageRank; Open Site Explorer’s Domain Authority, Page Authority, and mozTrust; Majestic SEO’s CitationFlow and Trust Flow; CEMPER’s Power*Trust; or Ahref’s Backlinks tool) to identify opportunities for your site. Perhaps they have

received great links from national media or a set of government sites. By seeing what has worked for them, you can get ideas on what may work for you.

Of course, contacting people who link to your competitors is a good idea, but do not limit your content marketing strategy to that alone. Contacting websites that link to your competitors may result in your getting links from 10%–20% (in a good campaign) of the people you contact, and chances are that your goal is to have your site *beat* your competitors' sites, not be seen as 10% as valuable by the search engines.

The key focus is to extract data from the competitors' backlinks that helps you decide on your overall content marketing strategy. Use this to enhance the list of sites that might link to you. For example, if you find that your competitor had great success by releasing a study on trends in the market, you might be able to create a market study that shows some different points that could also be successful. Consider, even, developing a contrasting study that piggybacks off of the competitor's study, but by rebuttal instead of repetition.

You can also expand on this concept by looking at "similar pages" to top-ranked sites (look for the "Similar" link in the preview pane of the search result for the site) in your keyword markets. Similar pages that keep showing up for different keywords are squarely in the topical link neighborhood. Look at who is linking to them too. You can also try a *related:domaintocheck.com* query to get some information on other domains worth investigating.

Review your website assets

Now that you have a refined list of targets and a sense of why each group may potentially link to you, review what you have on your site and what you could reasonably add to it. This should include any existing content, new content you could create, tools, or even special promotions (provided that these are truly unique enough and you have enough presence for people to notice and care).

It's important that the content be unique and differentiated. Content that can be found on 100 other sites is not going to attract many links. Even if the content is original, it should have something to offer or say that differentiates it from other content, rather than simply being a rewrite of someone else's article.

The highest-value potential linkers probably know their business and will recognize such simple rewrites, and in any event they'll want to focus their links on unique new content and tools. Content that leverages the publisher's unique expertise or what he stands for, and presents a new perspective or new data, will be far more successful in the link-building process.

Think of your content plan in a business case format. If you were able to create some new block of content at a cost of x dollars, and you think it would provide you with

some set of links, how does that compare to the cost of the content (or tools or promotional effort) required to chase another link-building opportunity?

Ultimately, you will want to build a road map that provides you with a sense of what it would cost to chase a potential group of linkers and the value of each group of linkers. Your chart might look like [Table 7-2](#).

Table 7-2. *Prioritizing among link-building projects*

Cost to pursue	Value
\$15,000	High
\$30,000	Medium
\$10,000	Low
\$30,000	Very high
\$4,000	Low

Once you have this in hand, you can quickly narrow down the list. You'll probably pursue the high-value campaign, and should continue to consider the very-high-value campaign and the low-value campaign that costs only \$4,000 to pursue. The other two campaigns just don't seem to have comparable returns on investment.

Identify any strategic limitations

The next step is to outline any limitations you may need to place on the campaigns. For example, if you have a very conservative brand, you may not want to engage in social media campaigns through reddit (which is not a conservative audience).

Identify methods for contacting potential partners

You must undertake some activities to let potential partners know about your site. There are two major categories of contact methods: direct and indirect. Direct contact examples include:

- Email
- Social media sites (using the social media property's messaging features to make contact with potential partners)
- Blogger networking (building relationships by commenting on others' blogs)
- Phone calls
- Seeking out site owners at conferences or meetups

Some examples of indirect contact methods include:

- Social media campaigns (including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google Plus, reddit, StumbleUpon, etc.)
- Public relations
- News feeds (through Yahoo! News and Google News)
- Speaking at conferences

Segmenting Your Audience, Identifying Personas, and Targeting Content

One of the most important concepts in content marketing is that you are producing content to gain exposure to your target audience. This is not about spewing links on random places across the Web, but getting visibility for yourself in places where you can reach interested users and potential customers. But who is your target audience?

One step in the process of identifying your target audience is grouping people based on characteristics such as demographics and typical behavioral patterns. *Segmentation* helps you better understand how to address your potential audiences.

The reason this understanding is so important is that you can't really expect to create engagement unless you target your content to the audience. Imagine writing an amazing piece of research on the Higgs boson particle and then publishing it on a site whose audience is first-grade schoolchildren. You probably will not generate much engagement there!

That's an extreme example, but this concept applies even at more basic levels. If your target customers are typically very thrifty, you should probably not target content to sites frequented primarily by the wealthy.

The concept of identifying *personas* is similar to segmentation, but it delves more into people's personal characteristics. Personas are fictional characters designed to represent a group of people with similar values relating to the use of a product or service. Personas include information on the potential user's motivation for using something, and the needs that drive it.

An example persona might be the "thrifty shopper," and an example motivation might be that he gets excited by finding a good deal. Once you know this, you can target your content and on-site messaging to appeal to that motivation.

For content marketing purposes, if you offer fitness-related products that target athletic people from ages 18 to 25, you can map their demographics and find out what types of sites this segment frequents, and then consider those for your campaign.

Once you have developed personas of your potential customers, you can further qualify the target sites and customize the design of the content itself. For example, with the

thrifty shopper, your headline and your lead image might both convey that you are revealing a new and unique way to save money.

Imagine you are running a business that focuses on fine dining. You offer high-end cookware as well as food products that can be delivered right to customers' homes. Your business will have many different types of potential customer segments, such as:

Foodies

This group is made up of people who are passionate about eating exceptional food. As the saying goes, they don't *eat to live*, they *live to eat*. However, you know that they don't have a lot of time, and they are not gourmet cooks. For them, you might try an article idea such as "10 Gourmet Cooking Secrets the Pros Won't Tell You."

Home party planners

These are people who like to entertain. They throw parties on a regular basis, and they love to be praised for the quality of the food they provide. An example of a compelling article title for them could be "11 Things the Media Isn't Telling You About Fine Dining and Health."

Home-based gourmet cooks

These people are also foodies, but they take it further. Once a week they invest the time to produce an amazing meal at home, even if it is just for their family. They thoroughly enjoy the process of cooking and love the opportunity to be creative. One article that might grab their attention is "10 Myths About Gourmet Cooking and Health, Busted."

Professional gourmet chefs

This is your most hardcore audience. They are creating gourmet experiences as part of their job, and when they eat at home, they still want to have something of very high quality. They will have very high standards for their cookware, the way they organize their kitchen, and the food they buy. An example title targeted to this segment might be "4 Ways to Configure Your Home Kitchen for Healthy Gourmet Cooking."

There may be other segments as well, which you can develop over time by learning more about your target audience. Once the segments are finalized, you can begin to look for the sites that cater to them. This will require research, but one of the easiest tactics is to study the other content published on those sites and see which articles get the most engagement.

Measuring the engagement level is an important component of understanding how to get your content in front of people in a way where they will respond to it.

This process of identifying personas should be a part of every content marketing campaign you undertake (for a good outline of a persona mapping process, see "[Step-by-](#)

Step Templates for Mapping your B2B Content”). It will provide you with the highest level of engagement with what you write. Make a point of measuring the engagement you get with the content you publish, whether it is on your site or as part of a guest posting campaign on third-party sites (more on this in “Guest Posting” on page 470).

Putting It All Together

Sorting out where to start with your content management strategy can be difficult, but it is a very high-return activity. Don’t just launch into the first campaign that comes to mind, as it can hurt your overall results if you spend six months chasing a mediocre content marketing plan instead of putting that effort into another, much better plan.

The goal remains building your visibility and reputation online, not just building links for SEO. As we will discuss more in [Chapter 8](#), search engines are looking at engagement signals beyond links that can tell them where to find the best content.

Even if they are not using these types of signals, the web community is becoming more sophisticated, and publishers who establish the best reputation and highest visibility will likely draw the most high-quality links to their sites.

Consider the famous video campaign by blender manufacturer [Blendtec](#) of blended iPhones, golf clubs, and so forth, available on YouTube and the company’s [Will It Blend? website](#).

The Will It Blend? site has more than 73,000 links to it from more than 6,000 linking domains (source: Majestic SEO), all entirely natural and earned through editorial recommendations. Not bad! Best of all, it supported a communication goal of showcasing the strength of the high-end blender.

The final step is to consider all these aspects together to come up with an integrated strategy. You can think of this as having the complete strategic picture in mind as you approach link building. At this point, you make the final decisions about your content strategy and which link-building targets to focus on.

Execute aggressively

A world-class content marketing campaign is always a large effort, involving a large potential cast of characters ranging from creative content writers, graphic designers, video production teams, script writers, actors, web developers, social media marketers, and more—the possibilities are endless.

Publishers who execute aggressively inevitably gain an edge over many of their competitors. Of course, if other competitors also focus heavily on link building, it becomes even more important to push hard, or you will end up losing search engine traffic to them.

For this reason, analyzing the backlink profiles of competitors to see how they're changing over time is a good idea. You can do this using any of the link analysis tools, such as [Open Site Explorer](#), [Majestic SEO](#), [Ahrefs](#), or [LinkResearchTools](#).

Consider pulling link data for your major competitors on a monthly basis, and seeing how their link profile is changing. This can help you learn if they are investing in content marketing, and if they are, what types of campaigns they are pursuing. Competitive intelligence like this can really help you tune your own content marketing efforts.

Conduct regular strategic reviews

Content marketing strategies should be intertwined with the normal course of business, and evolve as the business does. As the implementation moves forward, you learn lessons and can feed this information back into the process. For example, you may have campaigns that did not work. What lessons can you draw from those?

Or, you may have one idea that is going gangbusters. How can you use that success to give you ideas for other campaigns that may work really well for you too? Sometimes the initial strategy goes great for a while, but it begins to run out of steam, so you should work to develop a constant stream of ideas that you are feeding into your content marketing process.

Applying what you learn from each campaign you try is a key capability to develop. No campaign is a failure if it helps you learn how to continuously improve what you are doing.

Create a content marketing culture

Publishers should also educate those within the organization about their content marketing plan, its goals, and how it will help the business, as well as identify the touch points for collaboration throughout the process. This will help engage the creativity of multiple team members in feeding the stream of content marketing ideas.

The more ideas you have, the better off you'll be—and the quality of a content marketing campaign is directly proportional to the quality of the ideas that are driving it.

Never stop

Content marketing is not something you do once, or once in a while. In today's culture, the search engine plays an increasingly large role in a business's well-being, and inbound links are a large determining factor in the fate of Internet sites. Don't be the business that implements a great content marketing campaign, gets to where it wants to be, and then stops.

Types of Content Marketing Campaigns

The following sections delve more deeply into different types of content marketing campaigns. Each has many complex nuances to it, and each can represent a substantial investment. For each strategy you contemplate, plan on investing some time to learn how to do it well. Chances are pretty good that you will make many mistakes along the way.

It's important to accept that reality and know that you will improve, and get better results, over time.

Guest Posting

We refer to an article as a *guest post* when it is published on a third-party site's blog or news feed. Guest posts are also referred to as *bylined articles*. There is a way to implement guest posting properly, but be aware that many SEO practitioners have abused the practice.

Success depends on creating great content, finding authoritative third-party sites and developing a trusted relationship with them, and then asking them if they would be interested in publishing your content.

Many authoritative sites accept bylined articles, as shown in **Figure 7-28**. But, as with all things SEO, there is a way to implement this strategy improperly. This led Google's Matt Cutts to write a post on his site declaring that guest blogging for SEO is dead, "so stick a fork in it":¹⁶

Okay, I'm calling it: if you're using guest blogging as a way to gain links in 2014, you should probably stop. Why? Because over time it's become a more and more spammy practice, and if you're doing a lot of guest blogging then you're hanging out with really bad company.

¹⁶ Matt Cutts, "The Decay and Fall of Guest Blogging for SEO," Matt Cutts: Gadgets, Google, and SEO, January 20, 2014, <https://www.mattcutts.com/blog/guest-blogging/>.

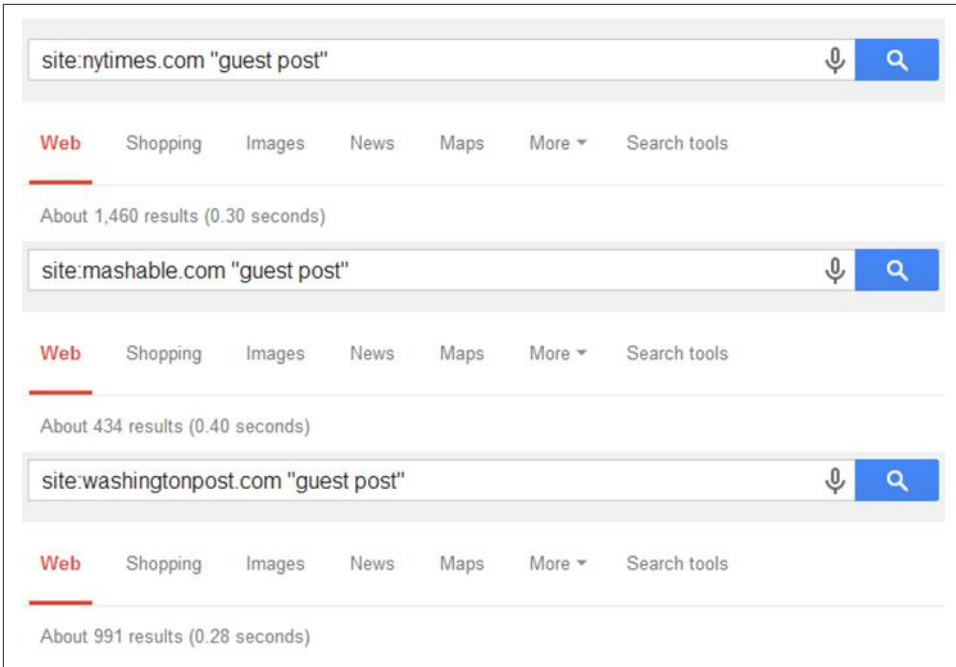


Figure 7-28. Many authoritative sites do accept guest posts

If you read his article in detail, you will see that he lists many of the “bad” things that people have historically done when guest posting for SEO. However, if you focus on building your visibility and reputation online, developing and publishing guest posts remains a valid practice. What follows are some guidelines for doing it properly.

Create high-quality, differentiated content

There is already a lot of content on the Web, and you can find some content on almost any conceivable topic. As an example, consider the results shown in [Figure 7-29](#) for the search query *intitle:“mortgage tips”*.

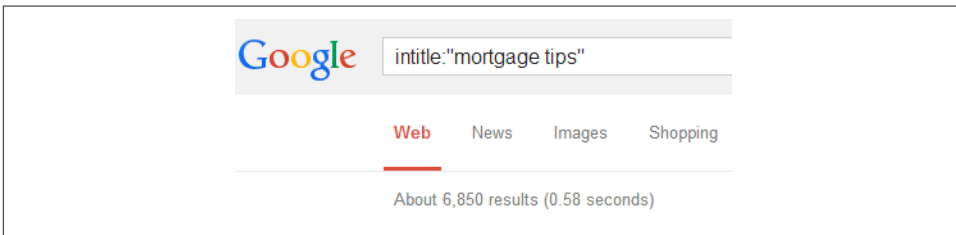


Figure 7-29. Almost 7,000 pages focus on mortgage tips as a topic

This query requires the exact phrase “mortgage tips” to appear within the <title> tag of a web page to be included in the results, and Google reports that there are 6,850 such pages on the Web. Writing the 6,851st article on the topic is not likely to result in a lot of people deciding to link to you.

Creating high-quality, differentiated content can present quite a challenge, and one key aspect of success is that you either need to be an expert yourself, or employ/retain an expert to help you. Hiring a writer who knows nothing about your topic and asking him to write an article for you in two hours will not produce content that draws high-quality links. Only an expert can truly recognize what aspects of a topic are unique, and what type of content would bring special value to your target audience.

Being an expert or hiring one may take a lot of time or money, but presumably you chose to be in the business you are in for a reason. Hopefully, your passion for your work, or certain aspects of how you approach it, will naturally enable you to provide a unique perspective that others can benefit from.

Aim high

You want to get published on authoritative sites. As shown earlier in [Figure 7-28](#), many sites accept bylined submissions, including some of the most well-known sites on the Web. While PageRank as it was originally defined is not what the search engines use to determine the value of the link, it still teaches us an important lesson: a link from a high-quality site can be worth 1,000, 10,000, or even 100,000 times more than a poor-quality site.

In addition, links from poor-quality sites can even be harmful to you. We will discuss this more in [Chapter 9](#). When you first start out, you may not be able to convince the higher-authority sites in your niche to accept bylined articles from you, but getting on those sites should still be your objective—you may just need to do it in stages. You can think of this as climbing a ladder (see [Figure 7-30](#)).



Figure 7-30. *Aim for placements on high-authority sites*

The concept is to start at the highest level you can. Based on your current visibility and reputation, you may need to start with Tier 3 sites, post there for a while, establish some credibility, and then start trying to get published on Tier 2 sites, as you can now point to the Tier 3 sites where you have already been published. This process may take many months.

Continue publishing on Tier 2 sites for some time, perhaps six months, and then consider trying to reach out to the Tier 1 sites. Be patient throughout this entire process: it takes time. When you first try to move up to the next tier, you may not be accepted.

All of this requires that you are publishing high-quality articles throughout the entire process and are measuring your engagement to make sure you are performing well with the content you are publishing. Developing that track record is a key part of success.

During this process, make sure you never agree to post on a poor-quality site. Your reputation is not enhanced by such sites, and it is best to stay away from them.

If you run a small local business, your definition of a Tier 1 site may be quite different from that of a major national brand. Getting published in the *New York Times* may not make any sense at all for you. The Tier 1 site might be the local newspaper, and your ultimate goal might be to get a column there.

For example, Orion Talmay started by writing posts on [her own blog](#), which you can think of as a Tier 3 site. After posting there for a while, she was able to start posting articles on [Intent.com's blog](#), which is an example of a Tier 2 site. Finally, she became a contributor to [the Huffington Post](#)—a clear Tier 1 site.

Remember that quality trumps quantity

Many people doing SEO used to believe that the best way to get value from guest posting campaigns was to get on as many possible domains as possible. The reason for this belief was that Google used to view each incremental link from one domain as declining in value, as multiple links from the same domain could well represent a single editorial decision—effectively only one “vote” for your site.

This led publishers to research large lists of potential target sites for guest posts, and work on getting one or two articles published on each. Of course, over time, even if you start by aiming high, this approach leads to the quality of the target sites declining over time, and the new links you obtain start coming from lower and lower quality sites.

Let's take a moment to define “quality over quantity” here. If you were to tell your friend that you had just published an article in the *New York Times*, she would probably be impressed and excited for you. Consider her reaction, however, if you told her you had just landed a *column* in the *New York Times*. Clearly the latter scenario is a lot more impressive. The search engines know this too, and they will treat those ongoing posts on the top authority sites as fresh editorial votes for you. This focus on quality over quantity also brings the most benefit to your visibility and reputation, and this is your top priority in any content marketing campaign.

Perform research and analysis to pick potential targets

We have already established that you need to focus on producing great content, targeting authoritative sites, and emphasizing quality over quantity, but how do you go about identifying sites that might be willing to publish your content where users can engage with it? The first step involves no tools at all. Simply use your own knowledge, that of others in your organization, and that you gain by speaking with your peers, to identify the most important sites in your market space. Chances are that you will find a large percentage of the best targets using this process alone.

You can also analyze where your competitors are getting links. For example, you can make use of competitive backlink analysis to find out who links to your competition. This can provide not only specific sites to target, but also ideas for much broader campaigns to put together.

Competitive backlink analysis can help you determine where your competition is writing bylined articles. This tactic for finding link targets and content marketing campaign

ideas is discussed in more detail in “Find out where your competitors get links” on page 463.

You can also look for potential targets by using a variety of sophisticated search queries. For example, you might try this query if you are in the business of selling “left-handed golf clubs” (see Figure 7-31).

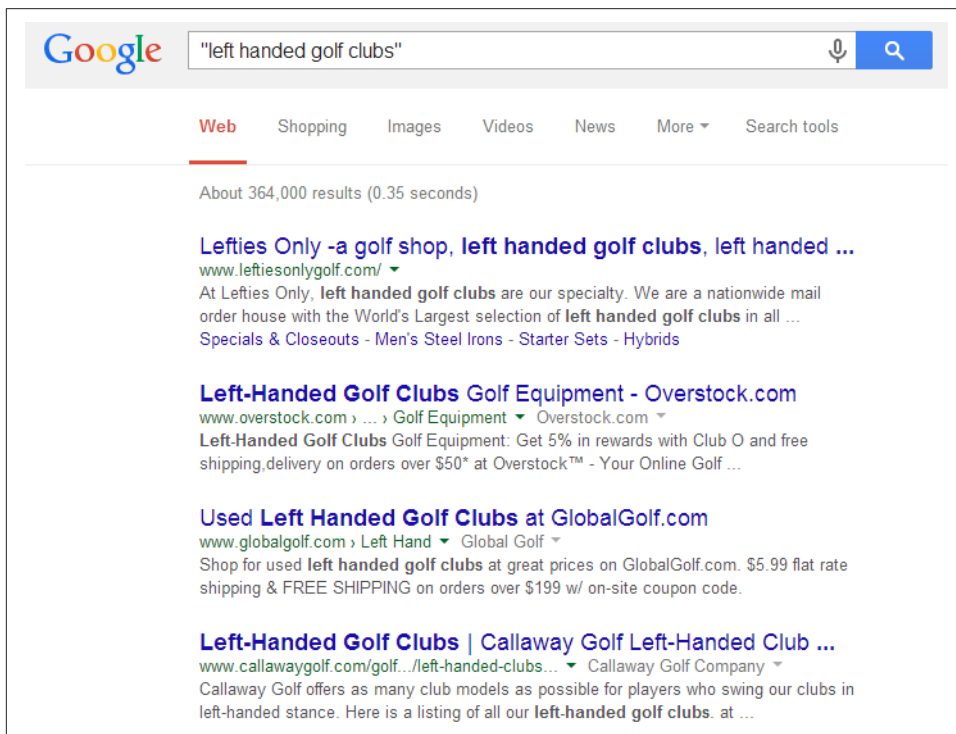


Figure 7-31. Search results for a query on “left-handed golf clubs”

As you can see, this query returns over 300,000 results! While many of these sites would not be appropriate targets, it is likely that a number of them are. Remember to filter the potential targets you find from competitive backlink analysis and advanced search queries based on the criteria we have listed in this section.

Content Syndication

Content syndication can also be a very effective technique for getting your content in front of a wider audience, but it does come with some additional risks. Search engines do not like duplicate content on the Web. While they do not punish duplicate content unless it is spammy or keyword stuffing, they usually filter it out, which means that when they see more than one copy of a piece of content, they will generally show only one page in the search results and ignore the rest.

There are a variety of techniques available for mitigating the risks involved in publishing duplicate but legitimate content. In priority order, these are:

1. Ask the third party who is republishing your content to implement a `rel="canonical"` link element that points back to the URL of the content page on your site (not your site's home page, but the page where your original article is published). The `rel="canonical"` link element tells the search engines that the master copy of the content is located at the URL of the page on your site.
2. If the third party is not willing to do that, ask that he implement a `noindex` tag on his copy of the content. This tells the search engines to omit the syndicated copy of the content in their index, which effectively eliminates the duplicate content problem because your copy of the article will be the only one in the index as long as the `noindex` tag is respected.
3. If the third party isn't willing to implement a `rel="canonical"` link element or a `noindex` tag, ask him to link from his copy of the article to the article page on your site—again, not to your home page or any other page of your site, but the page on which the original content appears. This is not as effective as the previous two techniques, but it can still be a reasonable option.

The issues surrounding duplicate content, the `rel="canonical"` link element, and the `noindex` tag are all discussed in detail in [Chapter 6](#).

There are also times when you might consider allowing someone to syndicate your content even if she won't implement any of these tags or links. Remember, your primary focus is on visibility and reputation building. If the *Wall Street Journal* wants to republish your article, and you are in the early stages of building your brand online, just shriek "yes!" The reputation and visibility benefits will far outweigh the downside of having the *Wall Street Journal* rank for your content instead of your site.

One variant of content syndication is to generate articles and then submit them to *article directories*—but this use is not approved by Google, and in fact Google targeted many such directories for punishment in its Penguin algorithm update on April 24, 2012. The message from Google here is clear: do not use article directories as part of your link-building strategy!

It is a best practice to focus on high-value targets when syndicating content. Sites that will take any article with little editorial review are not likely to offer high-quality links. In fact, the links may be of no value at all. Getting into higher-value sites, such as a major regional newspaper, may require more effort, but such sites also provide higher-value links and may result in other sites linking to you as well.

Link-Worthy or Viral Content

In the past, the term *link bait* was used in the SEO industry to describe content created specifically for the purpose of attracting links. That term has fallen out of favor because it connotes manipulation, so these days people talk about creating *link-worthy* content, *link attraction*, *shareable* content, or *viral* content. This content is usually published on your own site but sometimes on another website, and it is compelling enough that lots of people link to it. Such content can take many forms. For example, it might be content that is designed to provide enough additional value that people will want to reference it.

As we discussed in “[Brainstorming Content Ideas and Being Creative](#)” on page 446, there are many ways to come up with content ideas. Not every piece of content should be expected to go viral, nor is that a realistic goal. A content marketing plan should include many types of content, some of which is designed to meet more day-to-day needs, and some that has the potential to have a much bigger impact.

Popular methods for coming up with link-worthy content ideas include doing something controversial, something funny, or something that simply draws a strong emotional reaction. Each market space has some hot buttons, and these buttons can be pushed with an opinionated article, a compelling image, or a great video.

How far should you go with your ideas?

Link-worthy content can take many forms: top 10 lists, humorous videos uploaded to YouTube, checklists, cartoons, how-tos, event coverage, exposés, personality tests, quizzes, contests, surveys, tools, and widgets, to name a few.

For example, BuildDirect struck linking gold with its top 10 post “Redneck Home Remodels,” created by content strategist Rob Woods, which featured photos of humorously ramshackle home improvement attempts. The right mixture of controversy and humor, along with a strategic promotion from a power user on StumbleUpon, sent several hundred thousand views to the BuildDirect.com site, nearly 20,000 likes to its business page, and hundreds of tweets.

With a contest, the devil’s in the details. You must get everything right: the prizes, judges, judging criteria, media partners, and so on. Most contests fall flat; they are simply unremarkable. Something about the contest must be worthy of being written about.

For example, in the Free Business Cards for Life contest that Netconcepts dreamed up for its client OvernightPrints.com, the site partnered with “Technorati 100” blogger Jeremy Schoemaker (a.k.a. “Shoemoney”). The contest was to design Jeremy’s business card; the winner received “free business cards for life.” The cost of the prize (and

the contest overall, for that matter) was negligible: the fine print capped the winnings at 1,000 business cards per year for a maximum of 20 years.

The link exposure this contest garnered was excellent; it included keyword-rich links from Jeremy's blog, shoemoney.com, and Jeremy also posted a video about it to YouTube. A number of design sites and bloggers listed or linked to the contest. The ultimate goal was the rankings that resulted from the links. As you can see in [Figure 7-32](#), Overnight Prints still ranks at #3 in Google for "business cards." Jeremy got something out of the deal as well: **a killer new business card** printed and shipped to his door courtesy of Overnight Prints.

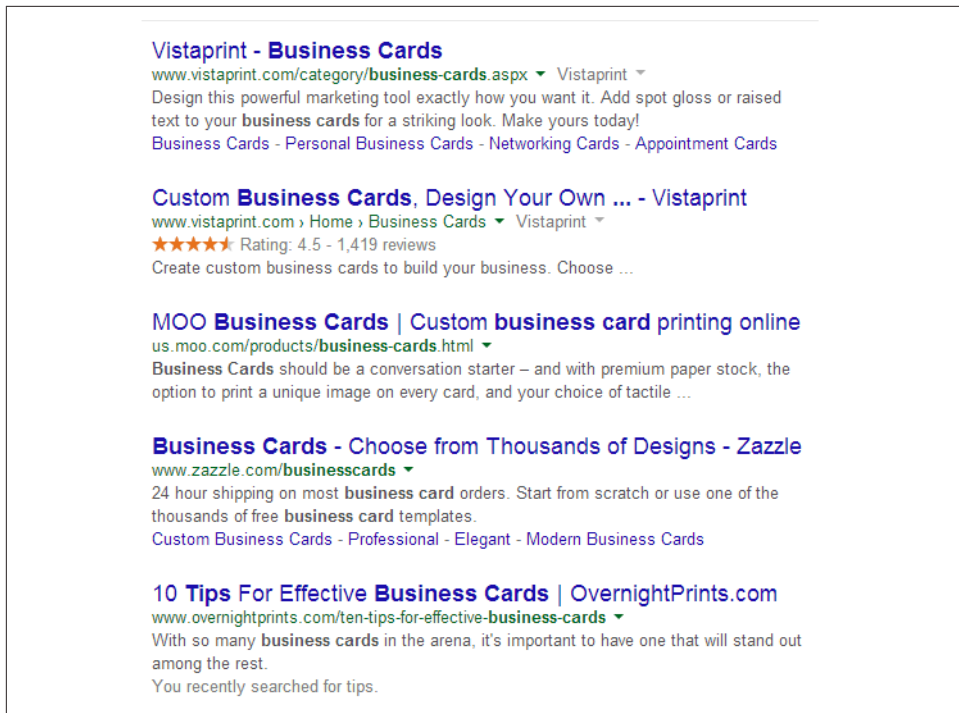


Figure 7-32. Google organic search results for "business cards"

Potential linkers also love a good corporate citizen, so be one. Consider such activities not as an expense, but as an investment that will generate a return in the form of links.

Noomii.com created buzz with its "Daily Acts of Kindness" Advent calendar. Participants could subscribe with their email address to receive daily emails with an idea for a random act of kindness. With this amazingly simple idea and the catchy tagline "...because it's better to give than to receive," Noomii amassed views and high-profile mentions.

Do not be afraid to be bold or off the wall. You do not always have to toe the corporate line. Relevance is important, but obtaining some lower-relevance links is OK too, as long as the majority of the links to your site still come from highly relevant sources.

Encourage link-worthy content to spread virally

You can extend this approach to content distribution by creating something you can pass around. For example, a hilarious video clip might be passed around via email. Provided you make it easy for people to determine the video creator (presumably your company) and to visit your site, this type of campaign can garner a lot of links. Be aware, though, that if you host the video on a video-sharing site such as YouTube, most people will link there, not to your site. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, however, if you have a larger goal in mind, such as generating buzz and building your brand presence.

User-Generated Content

Providing users with ways to contribute content directly to your site can be an effective content management strategy. There are many ways to do this:

Open up a forum or allow comments on your site

One of the biggest challenges with this option is achieving critical mass so that active discussions are taking place on the site. This typically requires a substantial amount of traffic to accomplish, but in the right situations it can help you develop interesting content with little effort. You can also try to implement programs to stimulate the discussion, such as offering a prize on a monthly basis for a randomly selected contributor. If these discussions become quite substantial, then they may themselves attract links from other sites.

Launch a blog and invite third-party contributors

One of the best ways to do this is to contact respected members of your market space and see whether they would be willing to make written contributions (i.e., provide guest posts) to your blog. They may do this simply because they would like the exposure, or you can pay them for doing it.

When you do this, make sure you are getting very high-quality content from them. A simple way to check this is to see if they promote the content they provided in their own social media accounts. If they don't, it may be a clue that they are not that proud of what they provided to you.

More selectively invite third-party contributions

Launching a blog platform may be more than you want to do, but you can still ask respected members of your community to consider contributing articles to your site. Run an "Ask" campaign. Ask curators/get visitors to curate content (e.g., Bit-Candy.com, which is a crowdsourced music discovery site).

Of course, the contributed content does not need to be an article or a post. You can seek out photos, videos, cool new tools—anything that may be of interest to users.

With each of these strategies, one of the big questions is whether the method for contributing content is open, strictly controlled, or somewhere in between. In other words, can any user come along and post a comment in your forum? Or do all users have to have an editorial review first? Editorial reviews may significantly reduce spam attacks, but they can be a barrier to the development of active discussions.

In the case of forums, engaging discussions can attract links. For an example from the world of SEO, [Search Engine Roundtable](#) is a frequent linker to discussions in [the WebmasterWorld Forums](#). The key to this is the critical mass of discussions that take place on these forums.

The reason these tactics involving third-party authorship can result in links is that most people have pride in what they have created and want to show it off. As a result, they tend to link to their content from other sites where they contribute, or their own website. As mentioned earlier, if a guest author is proud of what he wrote, he will most likely promote it via his social media presences. If he does not, then you probably don't want him writing for you, because it might indicate that he's not proud of the content he's given you. Exceptions to this rule are subject matter experts or other professionals who might not directly engage in social media for professional reasons.

Building an Audience

You can create the world's greatest content, but if no one ever sees it, you will not have accomplished anything useful. You have to get exposure for it, and one way to do that is to build a loyal following of people who learn to love your content. This is a time-consuming process, but one of the fundamentals of content marketing.

Get to Know Other People's Audiences

When you first begin publishing content on your site, unless you are fortunate enough to have a large brand or already be famous, chances are that you don't have a large audience ready to read your content. The process of building one can be long and arduous. One way to speed up that process is to expose your content to other people's audiences (OPA). Here are some examples of how to do that:

Publishing guest posts on very high-quality websites in your niche

If you are able to create great content and get it published at these sites, the audience there will have an opportunity to see what you have to offer. If you continue to do that on a repeat basis, over time some portions of this audience will start to become your audience. They may start to follow you on social media, or look for more great content on your site.

Interviewing industry thought leaders

You probably already know who some of the thought leaders in your market space are, and if not you should find out. Try developing relationships with them first, perhaps by interacting on social media or by commenting on their posts, and once they get to know you a little better, ask them if you can interview them. Then publish the interview on your site, or as a guest post. Chances are that they will share that interview in their social media.

Actively engaging in social media

This is a fantastic source of OPA. Interacting with others, sharing others' content, and participating in communities are all great ways to generate attention and build an audience. **Figure 7-33** shows how this works.

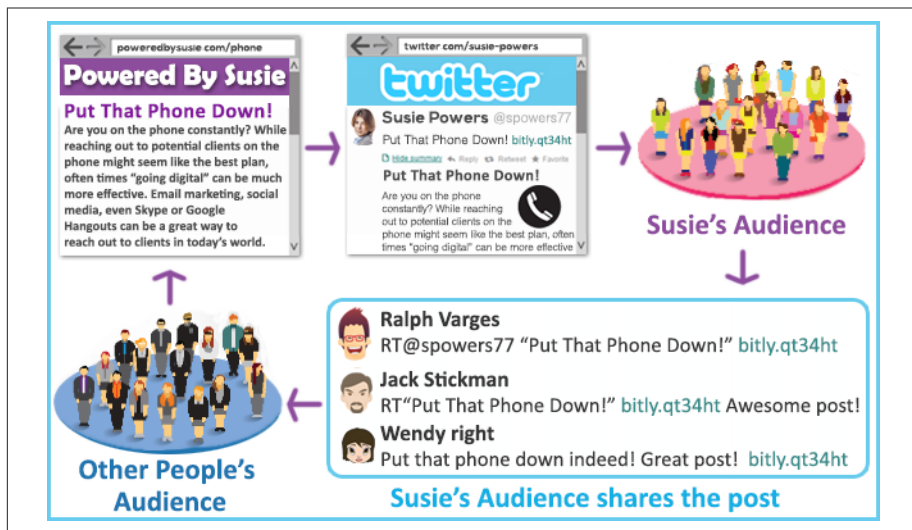


Figure 7-33. Social media can help you build your audience

Speaking at conferences

This requires that you succeed in getting a conference to accept you as a speaker, but it's a good source of exposure. Not only does it get you in front of an audience in person, but you can also start letting potential customers know that you have speaking experience, which is a great credibility builder.

Getting interviewed

Interviewing people is great, but so is getting interviewed. Even if you may not have much reputation yet, you probably have some unique perspectives related to your business. Being willing to share that information with people can be quite effective. If you are a small-business owner, offer to make yourself available to a local newspaper or blog.

Reaching out to the media/bloggers

Have a great story to share? Reach out to media that would be interested in that story. If you can get them to write about it, that's awesome. This strategy depends on your having some major story that will be of interest to a certain audience.

Issuing press releases

This is actually a form of media outreach. Take care with this tactic, because you should do it only to share something truly newsworthy. But, if you do, it can get you in front of major media people. **Figure 7-34** illustrates how press releases can work for you.

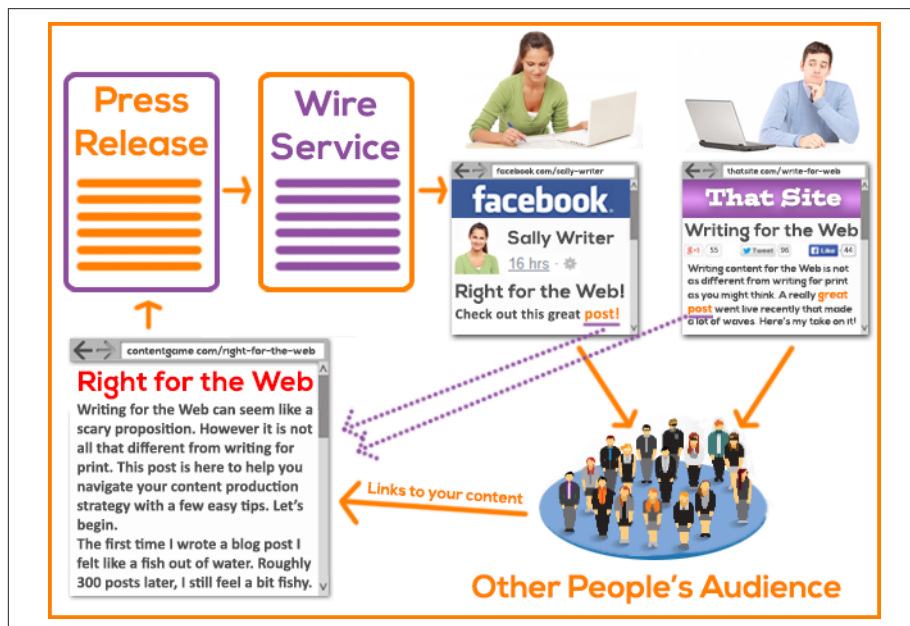


Figure 7-34. Press releases can help you build your audience

Advertising

This is a very straightforward way to try to accelerate building your audience. For example, promoted posts on Facebook, promoted tweets, and Google's +Post ads are all great ways to promote content and get in front of others. This can bring you rapid exposure and help shorten the overall process.

Paying for content network links

Examples of content networks are platforms such as Outbrain and Taboola. They offer recommended content suggestions on major media sites, such as CNN, Slate, ESPN, USA Today, the Weather Channel, Fox Sports, and Daily Mail. While the links in these placements probably have no direct SEO value, they can offer a valuable way to get in front of new audiences.

Paying for social media placements or boosts

Paying for placements or to boost posts can be a very cost-effective way to get more exposure for your content. Paid options are available on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Pinterest. This topic is discussed more in “Paid social media” on page 493.

Criteria for an OPA strategy

Chances are that you are not going to pursue all of the aforementioned OPA ideas at once, so you have to make some choices. Here are some criteria for narrowing down your OPA strategy:

Size

This is the first thing that everyone thinks about, and of course getting in front of a large audience is, in general, a good idea, but only if you satisfy one or more of the other criteria that follow.

Relevance

It’s critical that you build an audience that is relevant to what you do, so the OPA you seek out should be interested in topics that are relevant to your business. If you are doing a guest post, in the ideal world, the site you are posting on is focused on the same general market as you are, or a site that covers the market you are in. Figure 7-35 illustrates the concept that relevance is an important factor not only in SEO value, but also in getting you more exposure to potential audiences. That’s a good thing!

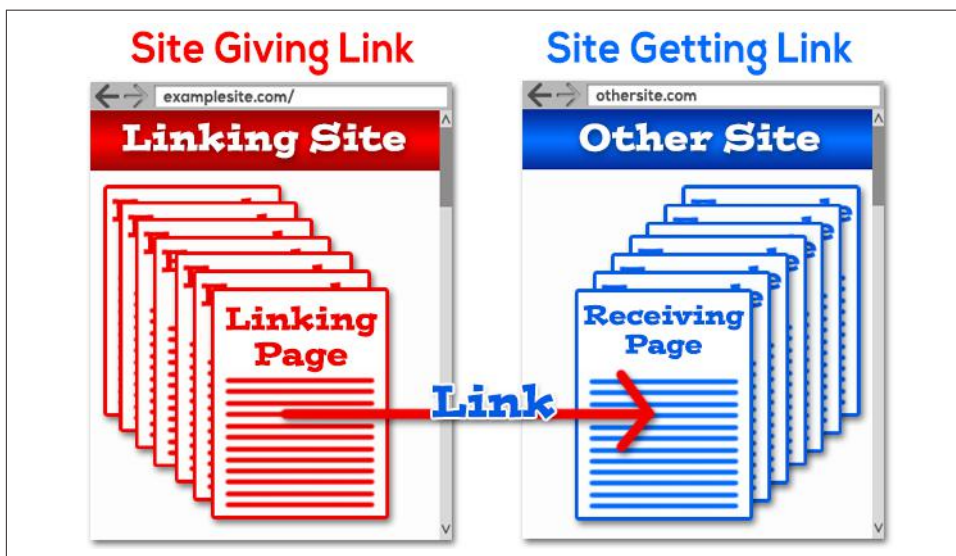


Figure 7-35. *The relevance of inbound links is important!*

Quality of existing content

The company you keep defines you. If the articles on a site are poor, you don't want yours there. Or, if the contributions to a social media community are all self-promotional, there is no value in being there.

Ease of getting started

This factor is actually one of the most important. You can't do everything at once, and there are probably some ideas that will be easier for you to execute. Pick one or more of those ideas and generate some personal momentum.

Authority

The authority of the venue makes a difference. Speaking at the most important conference in your industry, interacting on social media with people already recognized as experts in your area, and writing a guest post for the top news site that covers your space are all great things. Some of that authority transfers to you by association. You may need to work your way up over time, but you want to be conscious of a venue's authority as you are presented with opportunities.

Quality of content you can produce

Whether you are presenting, writing, or promoting, it is worthwhile only if you are able to deliver good content to that audience. You are not a fit for every audience. Don't worry about it. Pass on opportunities where you can't deliver your best, and focus your energies in the places where you can.

Opportunism

The most important part of building your audience is to get out there. Be a part of the community in your industry. This sets you up to recognize big opportunities when they arise. Watch for these and be ready to respond quickly, because leveraging opportunities is a big time accelerator.

Your business needs to have a strategy for building your own audience. Exposure to OPA is a great approach, because conjuring an audience out of thin air does not work. You need to map out a strategy and pursue it in a purposeful manner. You may need to do some experimentation to find what works for you, but it is well worth the time and effort.

The indirect benefits of building reputation and visibility

In the days predating the Internet, classic marketers used to say it requires seven impressions or touches to make a sale. If you are trying to build your reputation to the point where someone might link to you, you need to be prepared to mount a campaign, and not expect everything to happen just because you reach out to a stranger and ask for it.

Even in the case of guest posting, which is a methodology that provides a relatively direct way (in some cases) to get a link, the real benefit—getting exposure to other people’s audiences—is likely more indirect, as **Figure 7-36** illustrates.

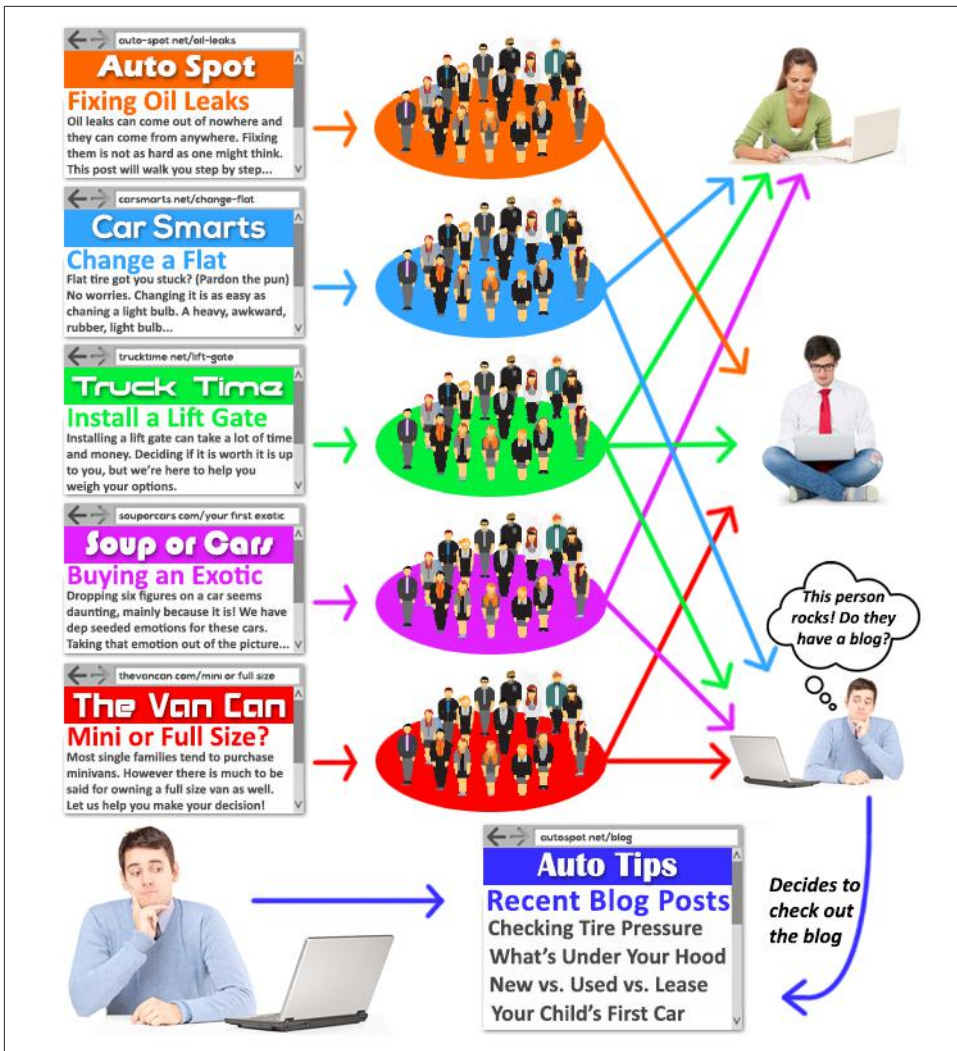


Figure 7-36. *The indirect benefits of guest posting*

On the left side of the diagram is a publisher who writes high-quality articles on several different high-quality sites. Each posting provides him with exposure to OPA (shown in the middle), and some of the people who see his articles are media people or blog owners.

Over time, they may see many of his articles, and eventually they decide to go check out his site. If the content there is of good enough quality, they might start linking to some of the articles there, or sharing them in their social media.

You can see how this process of building a reputation works. This same concept applies to participating in social media, speaking at conferences, sharing videos on YouTube, and engaging in many other types of activities.

By being active in communities related to your market space, you build your reputation and visibility, and over time, some of the OPA take an interest in your site and actively engage with your content. While this can be a long process, it is a very powerful way to look at your overall content marketing strategy.

Leverage Influencers and Influencer Marketing

The term *influencer* refers to someone who has the ability to influence a large number of people. This may be because she has a large social media following, she has a very popular blog or broadcast show, or she's very well known for other reasons.

PR firms have understood the power of influencers for a long time, which is why you see so many celebrity endorsements for products in TV commercials. Associating a brand with a highly popular personality has been a good strategy since long before the Internet came to be.

Online, the process is a bit different, in that an influencer's endorsement works best when it has not been paid for, or at least appears to not have been paid for. This endorsement may take the form of the influencer sharing a link to your content, linking to it directly, letting you write a guest post for his site, liking or +1-ing your content, or otherwise helping make people aware of your site.

Influencer marketing is the process of developing relationships with influential people that can lead to their assisting you in creating visibility for your product or service. This type of marketing depends on your producing great noncommercial content that would be of interest to the influencer's audience, but that's the second step. The first step is to build a great relationship with the influencer.

As shown in **Figure 7-37**, influencers often have a larger audience than yours, or at the very least, a different audience.



Figure 7-37. Influencers often have larger reach

However, the benefit is much larger than that. Let's say you have 100 followers in your Twitter account who shared a piece of content, and this results in 20,000 people seeing what they shared. This may result in 20 additional shares and 10 links to your site.

Now consider an audience of the same size being reached by one influencer. Those 20,000 connections will be much more responsive to the shared content because of the trust they have in the influencer's opinions, and as shown in [Figure 7-38](#) this might result in 100 additional shares and 50 links to her site.

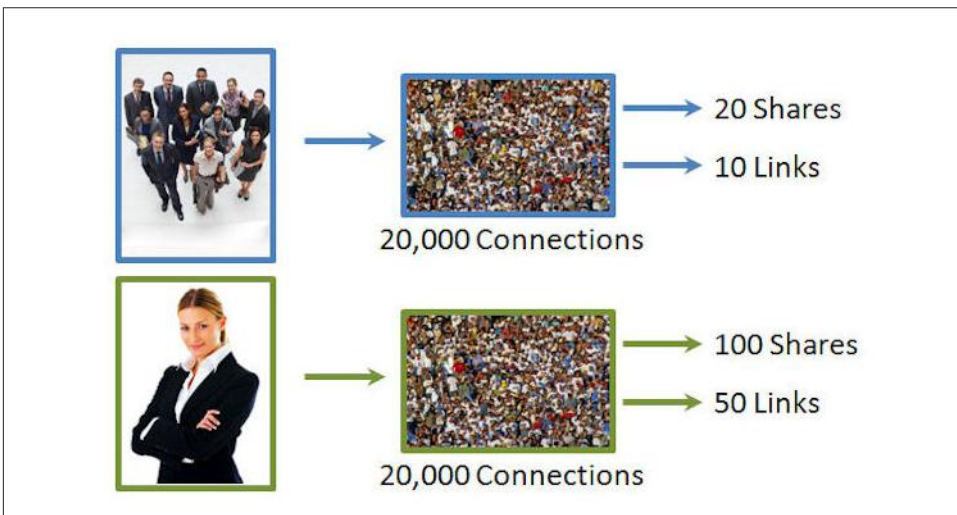


Figure 7-38. Influencers get higher conversion rates from their audience

Engaging the influencer

If you are a fan of content marketing, chances are that you already have your own blog and your own social media accounts. You probably already use these in tandem, and make sure that you follow similar content themes and share any new blog posts you write on your social accounts. When you do this correctly, you set yourself up for the type of virtuous cycle shown earlier in [Figure 7-16](#).

Doing this effectively is a great start. You can grow your audience over time because people who are already connected with you will share your content, and it reaches their audiences.

However, this basic process works much more effectively when you get influencers involved. Here are a few ways to do that:

- Develop relationships with major influencers so they are subscribing to your blog or following/friending/circling you in social media accounts. You must have a history of creating content of interest to the influencer. The payoff occurs when he chooses to link to it or share it on a social network.
- Get permission from the influencer to provide him with a guest post and be published directly in front of his audiences—for example, in his blog. Like the preceding tip, this strategy also depends on having a credible history with the influencer so he will consider your article. The payoff here is quite direct, and happens as soon as the content publishes.
- Interviewing him and publishing the result on your site. This is a great tactic, as the influencer is likely to share the resulting interview via social media and perhaps via links as well.

There are many other variants of these ideas, but all of them depend on having a relationship of trust with the influencer.

Building the relationship

Building the influencer relationship is not really so different than making friends when you move to a new neighborhood. When you go to that first neighborhood party, you don't walk around asking everyone there to give you \$20. If you did, you'd quickly ruin your reputation in the neighborhood. This doesn't work with your new neighbors, and it doesn't work in building relationships anywhere else either.

[Figure 7-39](#) illustrates the process of building a trusted relationship.



Figure 7-39. *Building trust in a relationship*

The major elements of the process are as follows:

- Start interacting with the influencer. Again, treat it like you are developing a new friendship. When it comes to business, focus on providing value to her. If she has a question, seek to answer it. Don't spend any time telling her what value you bring—just deliver it to her.
- On an ongoing basis, show that you will be active in sharing her content to your audience. Even if your audience is much smaller, the give-and-take attitude will be noticed.
- Actively help out others. When you focus all of your attention on one person to the exclusion of others, it starts to feel a bit creepy. Give value to others on a regular basis. Publish great content, and share other people's. If you discover great content from a little-known author, the influencer you are trying to build your relationship with will be more interested than ever!

Prioritize these efforts. How do you decide? You might fly to a conference to meet some critical person face-to-face, while with others you might simply interact on social media accounts. [Figure 7-40](#) illustrates this concept of putting more effort into more important relationships.

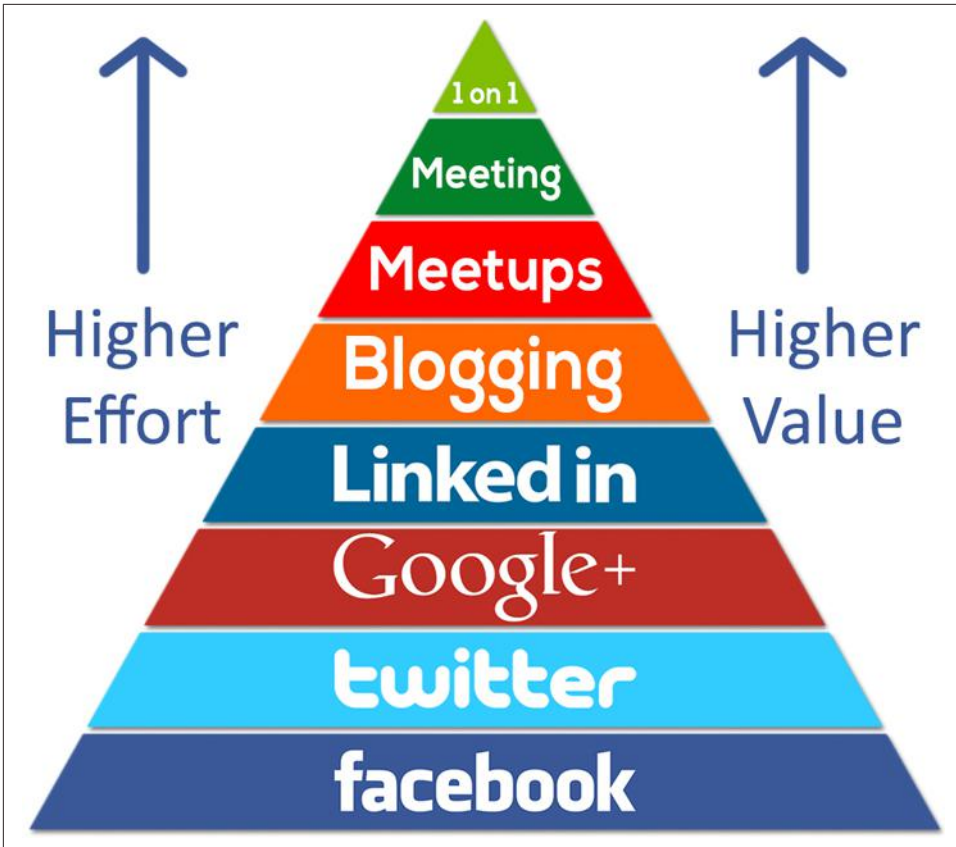


Figure 7-40. *The relationship building pyramid*

Note that while it's certainly possible to build meaningful relationships with people through social media only, nothing beats face-to-face.

Recognizing opportunities is also important. Your first chance to make a big impression on someone might be to respond to a blog post, a tweet, or a Facebook update. Better still, if your target asks for help with something in a public way online, make a point of taking advantage of that opportunity by being the first one to give it to him.

Once you have developed a relationship, you still need to do the right things to get someone to share or link to your content. No one is going to share everything you do, because not all of it is that good or relevant (don't be offended: no one is great all the time). [Figure 7-41](#) shows the factors that impact someone's decision to reshare your content.

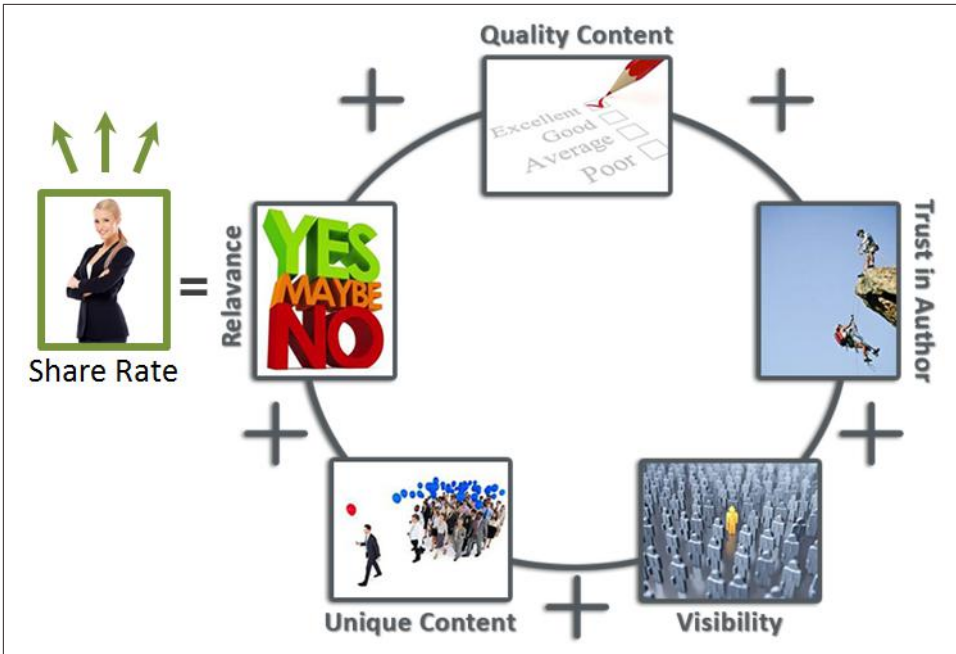


Figure 7-41. Factors influencing the likelihood a person will share your content

The major elements that go into that decision are as follows:

Relevance

If your content is not relevant to someone, she’s not going to share it, even if it’s great!

Uniqueness

People are not going to share content unless it’s unique in some way that is of interest to them. Achieving uniqueness may be hard to do, but it’s a requirement, so a key part of your content marketing plan is to figure out what you can do that is differentiated from what’s already out there.

Authority

It definitely helps to have established some level of authority. Of course, you won’t have that starting out, so you will have to leverage the other factors more to make up for it.

Quality

This goes without saying. Poor content will bring poor results, and no amount of relationship building will change that.

Trust in the author

This is where the relationship comes into play. You can create great content, but if you are not yet trusted, your share rate will be far lower.

Trust in the referring sources

How someone learns about a piece of content is a factor in the share rate as well. If an authority tells you about it, you are more likely to respond by passing it on.

Visibility

People can't share what they don't see. For example, if you create a great blog post and you tweet it once, only a small percentage of your followers will ever see it. Tweets are here now and gone five minutes later. Even the biggest tweetaholics miss some of their tweet stream.

Impressions

This is classic marketing in action. As noted earlier, traditional marketing experts used to say that it took an average of seven impressions per sale. This general principle still works today. As shown in **Figure 7-42**, if someone sees your content referenced by more than one other person, he'll be more motivated to see what it's about and more likely to share it.

Exclusivity

You can also get someone's attention by offering her exclusive access to your content, or by offering her an early preview. People who publish blogs, or content via social media, love to be able to break news.

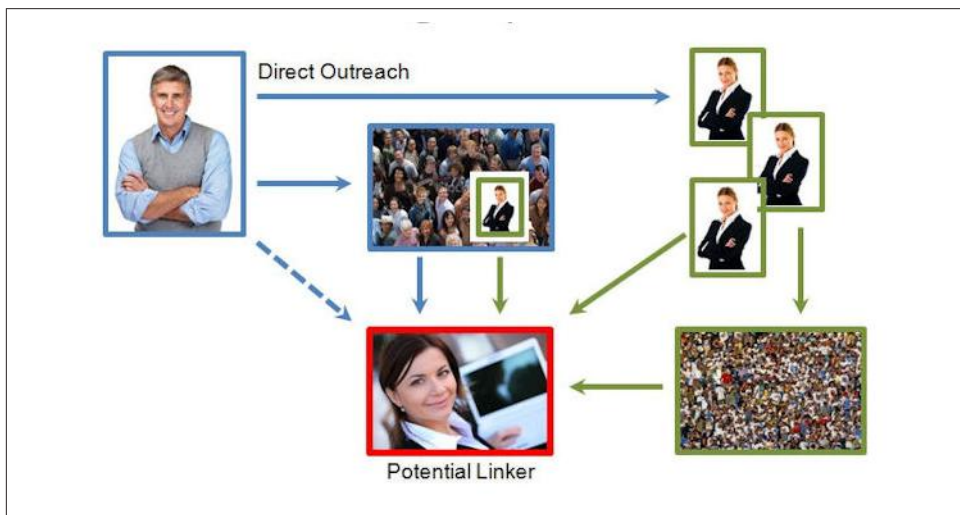


Figure 7-42. *Creating multiple impressions increases the chances of getting shares*

As you can see, the reach of influencers is long. Not only can they get you links, they can also give you shares that result in other people giving you links.

However, realize that every person out there has some level of influence. You can't build deep relationships with everyone online, but you can be courteous to them all, and you can seek to help out others in ways that are appropriate. You never know, that person with 132 followers on Twitter might happen to know a major influencer who is really important to you. You should seek to leave a good impression everywhere you go.

Get Active in Social Media

Social media can be a great way to build your audience. There are large quantities of people active on Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Pinterest, Instagram, and more, so actively engaging on these platforms can provide you with great exposure. Try interacting with others, sharing others' content, and participating in communities, as these are all great ways to generate attention and build an audience.

Remember, though, that your objective is to gain an audience for yourself, and you don't own the social media platform. It can choose to reduce organic visibility at any time, and this means your influence there can be curtailed for arbitrary reasons, even if you have a large number of followers. Many people discovered this as Facebook dramatically reduced organic visibility on its platform in response to the revenue pressures of being a public company.

We will discuss the various social media platforms more in [“Social Networking for Links” on page 525](#), and in [Chapter 8](#).

Paid social media

Once your team creates and organically distributes content that is intuitive and engaging and serves well-conceived audiences, you have already made great progress. Distributing that content to organic audiences who love it and share it is also good. The problem is that, while there is some free social distribution, on many social networks the amount of available distribution is declining. Paid social media can help you significantly extend the reach of your content.

Potential customers can't be motivated to read a fancy blog post if they never learn about it. Bloggers and journalists won't link out if they never discover your infographic, blog post, Google+ Hangout, and YouTube video. High-authority social users can't share your bit.ly link if they're unaware of the existence of your carefully constructed, beautifully designed web app. The crowdsourced industry study in which you invested so much will have a limited effect without at least some distribution.

Social distribution

Sadly for marketers, free social media distribution has already been greatly reduced on sites like Facebook (as few as 1%–2% of followers of a brand page will see the content you post there). Why is free social content distribution now limited? To answer that, you need only take a quick look at Facebook and Twitter's stock value and earning trends. As a result of the pressures of being public companies, these social media channels now force marketers to pay for the same organic lift that used to be free.

The good news is that it's relatively inexpensive to regain that distribution through paid social media campaigns. Think of social pay-per-click (PPC) campaigns as editorial, calendar-based, social content amplification programs measured against content marketing and conversion key performance indicators (KPIs), not just direct-response advertising tools.

Social content amplification steps

The social content amplification process is easy to understand and works really well in Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+, and YouTube. Start by posting great content on your social profile's company wall.

The next step is to create an ad. These are not just any ads, because they look almost exactly the same as an organic post. On Facebook, these are called *page post ads* and they're served to targeted users in either newsfeeds (desktop/tablet/mobile) or the righthand column (desktop/tablet). Twitter calls them *promoted tweets*, and LinkedIn calls them *promoted posts*. Google+ amplification ads are called *+Post ads*, and they are created via the AdWords Display network. YouTube calls the ads *TrueView*, and they result in targeted video views, subscribers, and external clicks if you buy *call-to-action* (CTA) overlay ads for the videos. Amplified social posts result in traffic to your external website and/or internal social traffic. The internal social traffic often results in new followers and extra sharing.

The determining factor for whether a social amplification ad drives users external to your website or within the same social channel is the type of content you posted in the first place. With image and video posts, it is usually best to keep users on your social platform to view the media. Well-packaged link wall posts with killer copy and amazing images can be effective at generating clicks to external websites. Pay attention to actions earned with social ads. Make sure you're getting what you want by measuring the results and adjusting.

Psychographic targeting

What makes social media amplification different from search keywords is the powerful targeting capabilities, known as *psychographics*. Rather than targeting phrases, psychographics take clear aim at the attributes that make people who they are.

Most marketers' first exposure to psychographic targeting was in late 2007 with Facebook Ads, which allow advertisers to target users by interests, affinities, proclivities, biases, predispositions, religion, sexuality, occupation, education, workplace, preferences, age, gender, likings, age, predilections, attractions, medical conditions, economic status, peccadilloes, desires, correspondences, empathies, relationships, appetites, weaknesses, tastes, inclinations, corporate loyalties, and numerous other highly personal pendants.

Facebook was the first to roll out this capability, but now psychographic targeting is everywhere. In reality, radical targeting has been percolating Internet-wide for years. Savvy marketers use *digital media platforms* (DMPs) and ad exchange technology to target users almost everywhere they roam on the Internet. It's a lot like Facebook Ads, only better and Internet-wide.

More than 30 networks, consortiums, and other data brokers resell access to their targeting data, making users available to DMPs. The names of some of these networks are shown in Figure 7-43. If you don't yet know the data providers in the following graphic, you will. Data objects from these companies can be layered using both the AND and OR operators to create stunning targeting combinations.



Figure 7-43. Examples of sources of targeting data

Consider the possibilities of layering data from such pervasive and definitive sources, in addition to Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Imagine clarifying ecommerce marketing targets by financial qualifiers gleaned from Experian, TransUnion, and MasterCard. If you like occupation targeting in Facebook and LinkedIn, how about targeting users Internet-wide with Dun and Bradstreet and Bizo?

We live in a brave new marketing world, where it's commonplace to layer competitive and symbiotic brand affinities with credit qualifiers. These powerful examples are just a small snapshot of the psychographic display-targeting ecosystem. There are thousands of ways to layer data for the targeting win.

Social advertising can drive links to your site

Another perk is that well-executed organic amplification of relevant content often results in links. Marketers are already learning to ditch old-style link-building efforts in favor of paid-organic link building to earned psychographic audiences, bloggers, and journalists. It's easy to target media roles using the "More Demographics/Job Title" field of Facebook Ads and occupation targeting in LinkedIn.

Whether targeting journalists, morning show hosts, and news producers, well-executed organic amplification of relevant content nearly always results in links.

Note that paid-organic social content distribution does not replace good old-fashioned public relations and peer-to-peer outreach. Human-to-human marketing will always work. For SEO, most businesses need to sell with content. As a result, an increasing number of content marketing companies will adopt these practices as standard fare in the future. Great marketers already are.

As we've mentioned, social content and SEO distribution used to be mostly free. Now, in the unavoidable effort to monetize, social media platforms and search engines charge for the same distribution. That's the bad news. The fantastic news is that the "ads" look very similar and are often barely distinguishable from the same organic page units that used to be free. Use paid organic-looking social psychographic content amplification to dominate distribution.

NOTE

A special thanks to [Marty Weintraub](#) for his contributions to this portion of the chapter.

Build Offline Relationships

Leveraging online platforms for the purpose of building relationships makes great sense, but there is no reason to stop there. Do the major influencers in your space speak at conferences, attend networking events, or host events of their own? If so, go

to one of these events and introduce yourself. This can include not only bloggers, but other influencers in your space.

Map out the major conferences that cover your market. Check out local [Meetups](#) and more general conferences like [BlogHer](#), [New Media Expo](#), and [WordCamp](#).

Another related tactic to consider is contacting publishers of an authoritative site and offering them a free seminar/webinar with you as the speaker. You could also propose a joint marketing campaign with them. Either way, call it part of your company's outreach campaign to build relationships with leaders in the space.

Make sure you articulate well the unique nature of what you will present, as you have to attract influencers' interest with your pitch before you can take the next step. Ensure you bring a demonstrable value in the actual presentation.

Then ask influencers to follow you on social media, answer their questions, and make yourself available to answer any follow-up questions they have by phone or email. Once you have done that, you will have a number of relationships with people involved in the authoritative site.

There are other ways to extend this too. For example, you can sponsor the organization in some fashion. There are, of course, sites that link to their sponsors, and this may be a win, but Google will want to discount such a link (because it is "paid"), so you should not count on the SEO aspect of it. However, the visibility a sponsorship provides can enhance your reputation, and you'll likely be able to establish a deeper relationship with the organization you're sponsoring.

Last but not least, most likely you have other businesses/organizations that you interact with in the normal course of your business. Once again, you can ask them directly for links, but you can also ask them for introductions to other people in your space. This type of networking can be an effective way to build relationships that eventually lead to high-value links.

Relationships and Outreach

As you've seen, all content marketing campaigns involve building relationships with others. These relationships may be quite involved, including one-on-one, substantial interaction, or they may simply be cases where people have become fans of your content and follow you on social media or at your blog. Either way, you need to get exposure to these people, and outreach plays a role in getting these relationships started.

Building Relationships with Influencers

Earlier in this chapter, in "[Leverage Influencers and Influencer Marketing](#)" on page [486](#), we emphasized the importance of building relationships with influencers. In this

section, we will explore a way to scale your efforts to build those relationships more quickly and more efficiently.

Build an initial list

If you're active in social media, or if you are socially active in your industry, you should already have a good idea of who the big names are—the people who speak at conferences, who have huge Twitter followings, or whom everyone circles on Google+. Start making a list of influencers, and use the names you already know as initial targets.

If you are just getting started in social media, or you're running a local business and don't go to a lot of conferences, you're going to have to identify influencers and begin following and interacting with them through social media. For instance, if you own a restaurant, follow all of the Food Network personalities, like Rachael Ray and Bobby Flay, and other celebrity chefs and related public personalities like Martha Stewart.

If you're writing a science fiction novel, you could follow other science fiction authors, editors, agents, and publishers of science fiction. It would also be useful, though, to find news sources that report on topics like science, space exploration, medicine, and other subjects that could be related to what you're writing about.

It will take several hours over the course of a few weeks to build a solid initial list of targets. You want to follow all of these targets on the platforms in which they are most active. Don't push friend requests at them until you have established at least some level of interaction.

This list should be broad, as it needs to cover an appropriately wide range of topics and people. At this point, don't pare down the list at all—in fact, make it bigger. Expand out as much as possible. Follow anyone and anything that might be related.

You should also expand out beyond social media a little. If you identify some extremely high-value influencers, subscribe to their blogs, RSS feeds, newsletters, and podcasts. You are not doing this so much to learn from these people (though there's almost certainly something to learn from them, no matter how much of a guru you are) as you are to get to know them better. Only after you know them are you prepared to interact with them positively.

Begin interacting

As just mentioned, once you get to know some of the people you're following, you can begin interacting with them. If they ask a question on Twitter, send them @ replies. If they post a link to something, comment on it. Retweet or reshare their posts. On Facebook or Google+, post thoughtful comments or links to stories with more

information. Repin, tweet (with an @ mention), and comment on their Pinterest photos.

Don't ask them to link to you or repost your content at this point. Later on, you're going to contact these people directly and ask them to help share your content or write a review, but you're likely to fail if you make your request too early. You will have a much higher success rate if you're already somewhat familiar to them through social media.

At this point in the process, it's about the relationship building. Give genuinely, and add as much value as you can. They will start giving back to you later when they are ready, and you can't push it. This process will also raise your own influence on social media, and not just with the people you are targeting.

Refine the list

While you're engaging your followers, begin to whittle down your initial list of influencers by using reliable metrics. How popular are their blogs and other domains? How much reach do they have beyond their social media followers and fans?

Instead of answering that question on your own, you may want to use a tool like [Kred](#), shown in [Figure 7-44](#).

Another useful tool is [Klout](#), which creates a composite "Klout Score" that shows your own influence (the more influential you are, the better your chances of getting the attention of a more powerful influencer), as shown in [Figure 7-45](#).

Some other tools that you may find valuable for this purpose include:

- Moz domain authority—as measured on [Open Site Explorer](#)
- [Majestic's Trustflow and CitationFlow Metrics](#)
- [LinkResearchTools PowerTrust](#)
- [Followerwonk](#), part of the Moz toolset

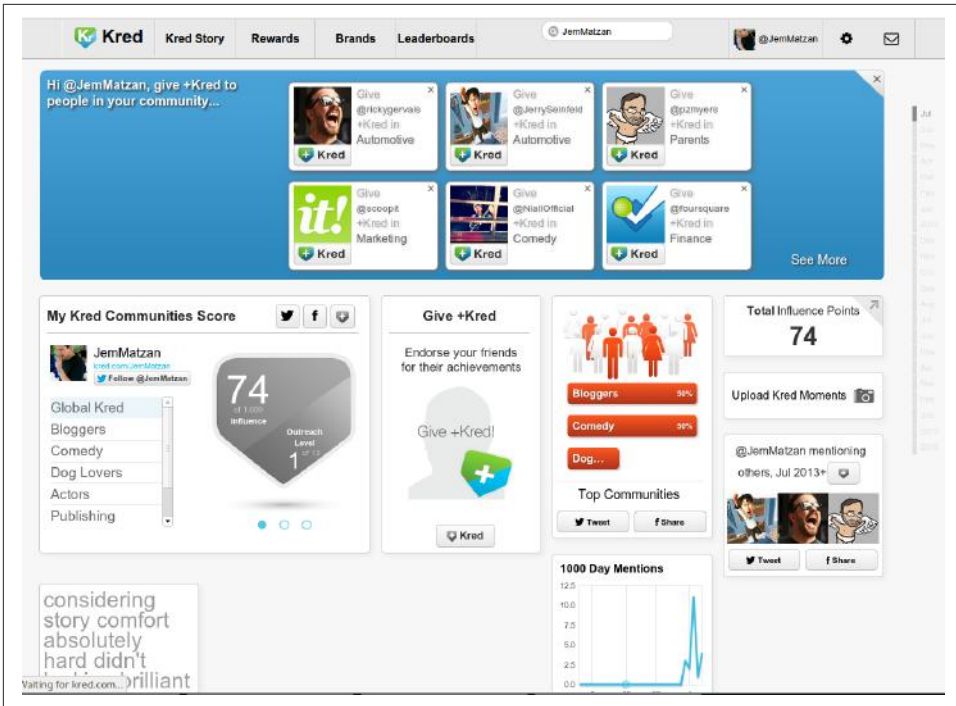


Figure 7-44. Kred shows you the most powerful influencers among those you're following on social media

All of these sites use proprietary algorithms to measure the number of RSS subscribers, friends, fans, followers, comments, shares, and inbound links and weigh them according to their own opinions on what is valuable. Depending on your industry, product, and/or content, some of these tools may be more valuable to you than others.

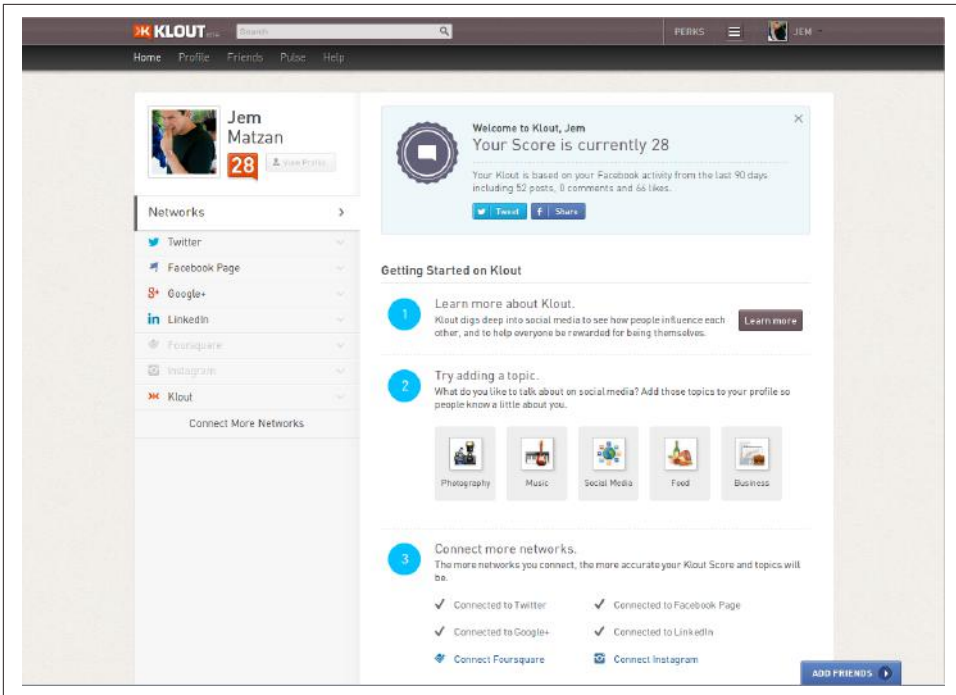


Figure 7-45. Klout also shows your own influence levels

Ultimately, though, this is not a numbers game; it's a quality game. If someone has only a dozen followers, but everything he posts goes massively viral, then despite the numbers he is a highly valuable influencer. That would be an unusual situation, but it's possible. There are some people who are on only one or two major social networks, such as YouTube or Google+; these people can be deceptively influential.

It's also not a numbers game in terms of how many influencers you must contact. Half a dozen really influential bloggers are more powerful than a thousand small-time bloggers.

Use Twitter as a warmup

Starting a dialog on Twitter is often a very good way to start, even if you're not targeting Twitter specifically. If the influencer you're going after is active there, then it can be very valuable to engage her there. High-value targets are almost certain to ignore a cold email, and will require a warmup on Twitter. If you make this effort to engage her with meaningful comments and retweets, it'll help her become more comfortable and familiar with you.

Tweet @ people. When the influencers you're watching say something to which you can respond intelligently, reply to them positively. Answer their questions. You can also thank people publicly for recommending something.

Watch their Twitter feed for a while so that you can be sure that they really are as relevant and interesting to you as you think they are, and that you like what they're saying. You may discover that while someone seems to be influential, she mostly posts negative things about companies and products; that outreach effort could be a disaster for you.

When you are trying to build a relationship with someone, it's often best if you don't hide behind a brand account; use your full name (your personal account). Or, if you intend to have more than one person represent you on Twitter, you might create a public persona who virtually represents your company. This name will be your public face, and will get all the credit for your posts. If you're going to create a persona, make it a woman; women (or female names, at least) have a much higher response rate in outreach email.

The Twitter warmup is not a one-time event; it is an ongoing effort that will take weeks or months to complete. Note that this same strategy also works well on Google+.

Use email to contact the influencers

Cold calls are always difficult, even when they're emails. You want something, and you're contacting someone who is in a position of power and asking him to give it to you. This is not a role that anyone enjoys being in, but the most successful salespeople and marketers put that aside and master the art of initial contact. Think about how much you want social media success (or the business success that is on the other side of social media success). What are you willing to do to achieve that?

All you need to do initially is get your foot in the door with one good, solid influential mention on social media. Then you'll use that first big mention to get the attention of other influencers. Even among the top people on social media, everyone wants to be in with the "cool kids." That first mention becomes the best method of obtaining mentions from others, so invest big in your first major influencer outreach effort. From that point forward, it gets easier.

Before you start sending emails, give serious thought to where you want to claim to be mentioned. On Twitter? On a famous blog? On Facebook? The social network or site where you want to be mentioned will help you narrow down your choices and customize your outreach message.

Leverage Pinterest group boards

If you are an active and established Pinterest user, you can use group boards to your advantage in contacting and participating with Pinterest influencers. You can invite a mutual Pinterest follower (someone whom you follow, who also follows you) to be a contributor to one of your boards. This creates a group board. You will always be the administrator of that board, but you can add as many mutual followers as you like. By the same logic, one of your mutual followers can invite you to pin to one of his group boards.

If you can find a way to get a Pinterest power user to participate in one of your group boards, you could inherit a lot of his followers as a result. Similarly, participating in the same group board as an influencer gives you much more trusted and intimate access to him, and a much higher chance of getting a review, repin, or mention from him.

Get contact information

Certainly, if you can get someone's phone number and you're fairly certain she'd be receptive to a quick phone conversation, then give her a call and follow up at an appropriate time with an email.

Some people are more inclined to respond on-network (a message sent on the social network they participate in), and some are more receptive to email. Sometimes, email is better because it's more personal and is more easily noticed. Some influencers are so popular that they don't check their in-network messages at all—they get inundated with notifications and frequent messages from raving fans—but they almost certainly check their email.

Getting someone's email address can be tough and time-consuming. If you find yourself spending an unreasonable amount of effort trying to get the email address of someone who has taken great pains to hide it from the public, then fall back to tweeting @ her on Twitter. Once you have a relationship with her there, you can simply ask her if you can send her an email, and she may provide it to you.

First, try looking on the influencer's blog or corporate site for an email address. Maybe it's in an obvious spot.

Do you have his business card from an in-person meeting at a conference or event? People usually put their email address on their business card. Does his blog or corporate site have a "Contact us" page? That goes to someone's email—if not your target influencer's, then probably his assistant's. If you add someone on LinkedIn, you can get his email from there. The reply to the invitation comes from his email address. You can also send InMail, which allows you to send mails to people you are not connected to (for a fee).

As a last resort, do a Whois lookup on the influencer’s blog domain name (assuming it is a real domain name, not a subdomain on a public blogging site like TypePad, WordPress, Tumblr, or Blogger). Every domain has contact information for the domain owner; hopefully that will include the email address of the person you’re trying to reach.

Pay for reviews

If you are trying to reach a product reviewer, be warned: some high-level reviewers may ask you for money in exchange for a review. Among journalists this is highly unethical, but bloggers and social media power users don’t always fall into the “journalism” category. In the United States, anyone who posts a product review, whether she considers herself a professional reviewer or not, must disclose the fact that she received compensation (including a free product) for it. This is a [U.S. Federal Trade Commission \(FTC\) regulation](#).

The FTC puts the responsibility for disclosure on the brand, not the publisher. That means you. So if you send a check with your review materials, or if you tell a blogger or journalist to go ahead and keep the review unit you’re sending, you must check back and make sure that she has clearly printed an appropriate disclosure notice. This even applies to endorsements on Twitter. The preceding paragraphs contain really important legal liability information about product reviews. Don’t skip this stuff. Read it twice. You don’t want to get in trouble with the FTC.

Paying for reviews, or giving free products to reviewers or influencers, is an ethical grey area. Usually it’s all right with disclosure if it’s posted to someone’s blog or social media page, but it could reflect badly on you depending on context. In some instances, it is definitely unethical—for instance, book reviews or any product review on Amazon.com that is done on a for-hire basis is against Amazon’s rules.

Google also frowns upon paid links, so if you are paying a blogger for a review that includes a link back to your site or product page, that is technically in violation of Google’s rules unless the blogger applies the `nofollow` attribute to the link in the HTML tag.

Some social media power users offer expanded services for hire. For instance, a popular Pinterest user might solicit money to do a photo shoot with an in-depth review or interview. Food bloggers might offer to publish a recipe and high-quality photos and a review of the resulting product. This is not prohibited by Pinterest, but if you take this route, make sure any links are `nofollowed` and the proper disclosure is printed.

Paying for this type of visibility, and doing it the right way by `nofollowing` the links, may not have direct SEO benefit, but it can still result in others seeing your content

and choosing to link directly to it. As a result, this type of tactic might have a place in your overall strategy.

Create templates

First, you need good unique content. A lot of social media gurus will tell you that you should try to build followers by linking to interesting stories. That will get you a small amount of success. If you want major success, though, you've got to be the source of interesting information, not just someone who links to it first.

Start with a pool of unpublished articles that can be customized somewhat. They should be mostly or completely written, but don't tell anyone about that. The point of your influencer outreach email is to ask for help or input on an article you're currently writing. You will, of course, quote or cite the influencer as a source. Quoting experts for articles is one of the best ways to get them to link to you or mention you on social media.

The article you're customizing should be relevant to a topic that the influencer covers or is interested in. Don't publish it more than once; don't try to repurpose a published article unless it is substantially customized for a different platform (for example, you can write a summary of it for a LinkedIn post, or a Google+ post, or other platforms, as long as you have substantially customized it to that platform).

Contact the influencers

Don't mass-mail your target influencers. Personalization is hugely important. The message must be personalized. Absolutely do not send a generic message that starts with something like "Hello, fellow blogger."

Not only are impersonal messages likely to be ignored, they're also likely to be caught in a spam filter. The same message sent to many addresses on the same network (such as Gmail or Yahoo! Mail) might be flagged as spam by the system. Not only will you have completely wasted your time, you'll also have associated your email address with spam. Your whole domain could get blocked.

This doesn't mean that you shouldn't have a standard message template that you start with. It does mean that the template must be customized significantly. To do that, read the influencer's blog and social profiles; write as if you are familiar with her. Because you've been following her and attempting to engage publicly with her for a while, most of this work should be done.

The template should not be long—fewer than 300 words or so. Busy people don't have time to read long messages from strangers.

Be genuine and polite in your initial outreach

Make the influencer understand that you took the time to read her work; express genuine interest in her. Mention something she did in the subject line: “Just saw your <title of last blog post>.” That will get her to open the email. You can also try mentioning her name in the subject line, or using an actionable phrase like “Need your decision,” “Need your feedback,” “Can I quote you for this article?”, or “One minute to read this upcoming article?”

For the message body, don’t talk about yourself or your background too much—to a busy stranger, that information is boring and skippable. Establish yourself in one sentence. If you referenced something she did recently, follow up that reference in the message body. Or talk about something else she’s done recently and how it affected you. Talk more about her than yourself.

If you’re writing to someone who consistently uses an online handle or persona, then go ahead and address her by her blog handle or persona first. If there’s no response to the first outreach, make note of that and use her real name in the follow-up email. Most people use their real names today, but in the old days handles were more popular. People want the credit; they want to be more transparent about who they are.

Close with a request for a reply. You want to encourage more dialogue. Don’t ask for more than that, though—never ask directly for something of value in an outreach email, such as a link or a review.

The time at which you send your message can make a big difference. Each industry has different prime days and times. Look at the posting schedule if you can, and try to figure out the editorial calendar as well (if it’s a big blog, the blogger probably plans out certain themes for content on certain days or during certain months). If it’s a tech blog and you know that the blogger publishes three stories a week, try to get her the day before a story publishes (or the day after), but not on the actual day. Most of the responses you’re going to get are early or late, when people check email. Very busy people typically check email on a schedule.

Spammers send their email late at night, so try to be off-schedule from that. Send your email during the day in the afternoon to avoid the spam rush, but before the last email check of the workday in your influencer’s time zone.

Follow up

If you haven’t heard back from your first outreach within three days, then you should send a follow-up. Following up is more crucial than many people realize. Michael Genees, developer of outreach tool Pitchbox, estimates that following up increases your response rate by 60%. You should have a separate template for follow-up emails; don’t send the same message you sent before.

It rarely pays to go beyond two follow-ups—don't send more than three emails to someone who isn't responding to you. If someone doesn't reply after the third attempt, there is a very low chance of a reply, and you're better off spending that effort on the next influencer on your list.

Before sending your first follow-ups, get reinvolved on Twitter or another social platform to make sure you've got a solid connection.

Make a third attempt

If your first two emails didn't get responses, then the third probably isn't going to work, either. You're going to have to take a different approach with your third attempt. Is there a different email address for this influencer? Some people list a Gmail account as a technical contact or as part of a regular Google account, but they rarely check it. Look for an alternate email address for this person, and explain that you're trying to get in touch and wondering if you've got the right address.

You can also try to use in-network messaging through Facebook, LinkedIn, or other social networks in which this influencer participates. If you do this, come up with completely different content for your email; mention that you've tried to reach out and haven't gotten through, note that you love his work and want his advice on something, and ask for a reply.

Track responses

The only way to improve is to measure. Keep metrics on what gets through and what doesn't. If a particular template or a particular kind of influencer is not working out, then change your strategy. Was the response favorable? Was there a response at all? How often does the first follow-up work? The second? You may want to make a quick spreadsheet to keep track of this data.

Try other approaches

If you totally strike out despite your best efforts, then try a more indirect approach. Try to get through to the people whom your target influencer follows. These are her friends and close colleagues, and people she admires. Likewise, if you do manage to get a positive reply, ask the influencer who else she knows who could contribute to the article or provide a quote. Oftentimes you'll get names, phone numbers, and email addresses of other influencers—and with a personal referral!

Nothing establishes initial contact like actual in-person communication. Go to industry conferences and meet your influencers in person. Have coffee with them. If they are not accessible in person, then build relationships with their friends; they will become your references. Take a long-term strategy. Or play golf with them—or whatever social activity is appropriate to the industry.

Watch for mentions and links

If you were successful in getting a positive response, then keep a close eye on the networks that you're targeting. Watch for links and mentions that involve you or your company. This might not happen immediately. Often an article costs you a lot of money or time, so don't wait too long to see if it gets published or mentioned. If you get an agreement, follow up after a week and see if there's anything else you need to provide. If you don't get a publication date, ask nicely for one.

Twitter is the hub for monitoring what's new on the Internet, so that should be your place to watch for mentions. It may not come in the form of a hashtag or an @, so watch your target influencer's feed closely.

Establish yourself on Google+

Google+ can be a good platform for outreach, but it requires a lot of work. While it is growing rapidly, there are still market segments that are not that active. If that's the case in your market area, you might still want to get started there to build a relatively strong following and get an edge on the market, but it may not be a major focus for your outreach efforts.

However, there are many market spaces that are well built-out on Google+, and if that's the case, the platform can play a significant role in your outreach efforts.

Outreach Case Study

An etailer wanted to generate critical mass for a content marketing campaign. The company sells premier designer swimwear brands and styles, many of which have been featured on celebrities and in leading fashion magazines. Since the company's launch in early 2000, it has established itself as a go-to place for fashion-forward swimwear.

It was successful enough that it reached the limits of what traditional ecommerce techniques, such as email campaigns and banner ads, could provide. At the same time, the influence of traditional media was declining and consumers increasingly began to rely on social media for information and trustworthy recommendations. The company decided that social media was a must-have marketing channel, for several reasons:

- Increasingly, it's where consumers were going to find out what's new and what to buy.
- Content on social media sites could help build credibility and loyalty. People choose which brands they want to follow, and trust the brands they choose.
- Relationships with authoritative brands would drive traffic to the company's own website, boost its domain authority, and improve its search engine rankings.
- Exposure via social media could help offset shrinking publicity opportunities in traditional media. With declines in advertising revenues, the company was finding fewer traditional media outlets and the outlets that remained had less editorial

space than before. And with fewer opportunities, the competition for placements had intensified.

The Initial Content Marketing Strategy

The company's social media strategy was to offer high-quality content to influential bloggers and independent media outlets. The world of independent media is a classic long-tail market; instead of a few key influencers with wide reach, it contains vast numbers of outlets.

There are a handful with huge audiences, and many more with fewer but highly loyal followers. Because this world is fundamentally based on social relationships, the company couldn't simply blast out one-size-fits-all content to everyone. It had to cultivate relationships and develop trust with influencers, and create content that was unique and tailored to each opportunity.

The company started with a seat-of-the-pants approach: come up with content ideas, google around to find some blogs that look good, poke around on the sites to find contact info, send emails pitching the ideas, and see what came back.

That approach seemed to work at first, but once the company tried to scale up past the first 15 or 20 opportunities, the process quickly became difficult to manage. Many responses to its outreach were coming in, often days or weeks after the initial email had been sent, and some arrived from email addresses different from the one the company had originally sent the message to.

When it ran new searches to identify more placement opportunities, the problems compounded; someone had to check these leads against ones already in the pipeline to be sure they didn't overlap. With all of these administrative challenges, the campaign wasn't scalable. It wasn't a question of how many opportunities were out there, it was a question of how many opportunities the company could manage.

Cutting back wasn't an option because independent media campaigns must reach critical mass to be successful. A mention here or there doesn't create momentum. The buzz starts when consumers—and influencers—start seeing your name pop up everywhere.

Stopgap Measures

Next, the company tried setting up Excel spreadsheets that contained lists of contacts and related information, such as the initial and last contact date for each. Even with this higher level of organization, it still took a lot of time to manage these spreadsheets—time that would have been better spent cultivating relationships, pitching ideas, and creating content.

As time went on, the pipeline began to clog. Opportunities stalled, and in each case, the company had to go back and figure out why. Was the ball in the company's court, or the influencer's? Did the contact owe the company feedback? Had the contact gone dark and nobody had noticed? Soon, the company found itself creating more spreadsheets and other ad hoc systems to try to keep up with these issues.

A customer relationship management (CRM) system seemed like the next reasonable step. The company looked at several, but the logic and the language were a poor fit because CRMs are set up for sales, not for media outreach. For example, most are built

around “deals”—how much a sale is worth, how far along it is, who the decision makers are, and so on. That logic doesn’t work for a media campaign. Similarly, CRMs didn’t have metrics for social media, such as domain authority, or a good way to track and report results.

There are many good tools in the market that help with this process, and provide differing levels of functionality. Traditional media contact databases such as **Cision** and **Vocus** can be invaluable sources of information.

While these are a bit pricey for a small-business owner, they can rapidly speed the process of obtaining contact information for media people and bloggers. These tools allow you to enter search criteria and they come back with a rich array of information of the right people to contact in the market area you are searching. You should still review and filter the results, but this is a simple and easy process.

There are also tools that allow you to track and manage contacts with media/bloggers on an ongoing basis, such as **GroupHigh** and **Pitchbox**. These provide somewhat similar functionality to CRM systems, but are much better suited to the task of identifying, targeting, and building media/blogger relationships than CRMs, which are focused on sales.

Automating Management of the Outreach Campaign

In 2013, the company in our case study became a beta tester for Pitchbox, a tool that automates most of the administrative tasks of outreach (**Figure 7-46**). It was built specifically around the tasks involved in social media outreach. For example, it starts with a search function that looks for new opportunities on a scheduled basis, and then strips out contacts that are already in the pipeline. It ranks the opportunities by influence—using criteria that the user can define—which helps the company prioritize its efforts. It automatically identifies contact info and allows the company to reach out individually (for the most important contacts) or using templates to scale.

Then it follows each opportunity through the entire pipeline—from initial contact through placement. Along the way, it flags stalled opportunities, shows where the campaign stands overall, and guides the user to the next step.

The automation of these administrative tasks revolutionized the company’s outreach efforts. Using the same resources as before, the company saw placements go from approximately 10 per month to 50 per month. Administrative tasks were no longer throttling the campaign, and the amount of time spent on these tasks declined from approximately 75% of total hours to 15%. That freed up time for staff to spend on high-value activities: cultivating relationships, coming up with ideas, and creating content.

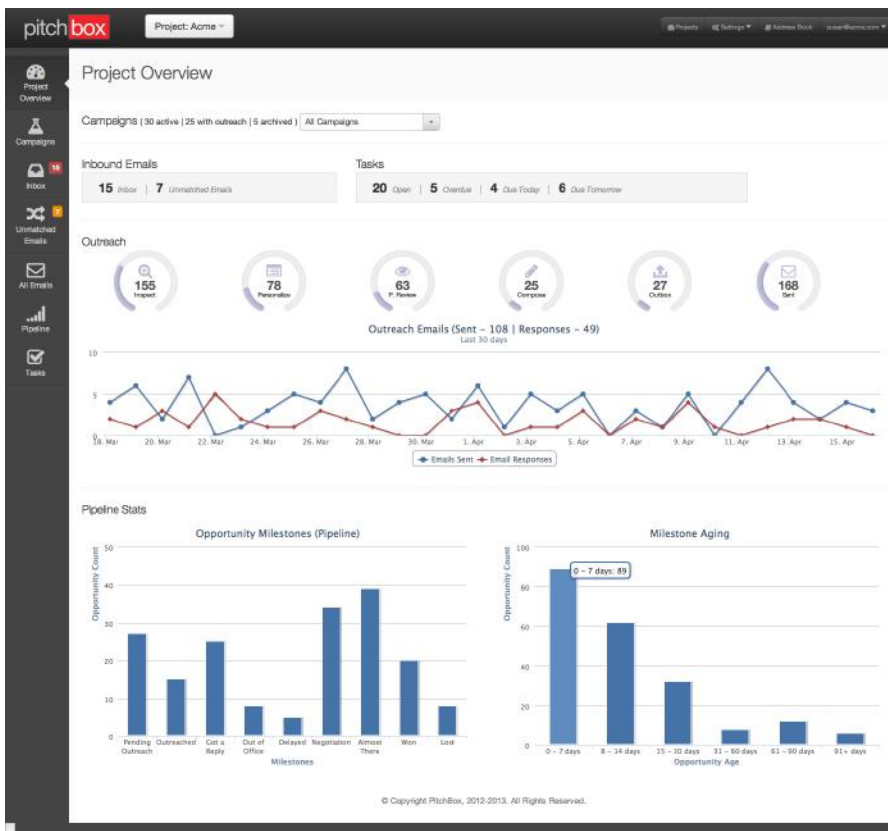


Figure 7-46. The Pitchbox dashboard

In addition, the company was better able to forecast results, allocate resources, and hit goals. For example, it can look ahead and see how many placement opportunities it is likely to have in upcoming months, so it can allocate resources to create the content needed to fulfill those opportunities. Or if the company sees that it needs more opportunities in the pipeline to meet its goals, it can deploy more resources toward outreach instead of content creation.

Achieving Critical Mass

Automation is critical to any long-tail business because long-tail markets have too many events happening to manage individually. The same principle holds for social media campaigns. They need to scale—reaching hundreds or thousands of influencers in a highly fragmented market—in order to reach critical mass. And to be scalable, they need tools and techniques to help manage these events.

Creating a Value Proposition for a Relationship

Now that you understand the sites that are most interesting to you, it's time to think about how to get started with key people involved with each target site. There are many potential tactics, some of which include:

- Start by engaging with them on social media or by posting comments on their articles. These contacts should be completely noncommercial, and designed to add value to the conversation they started with their posts.
- Ask them to provide a quote for an article you are writing. Make this easy for them, so it's more likely they will say yes.
- Offer to interview them for something that you will publish on your site. Or, ask them to a webinar or a Google+ Hangouts on-air interview with you.
- Find out if they will be attending a conference, and if so, go to that conference yourself and find a way to meet them.
- Monitor their article and social postings and take note if they ever ask for help in some fashion ("I wish someone would show me how to...". Then, do it for them—even if you have to spend a few hours learning how to do it yourself first.
- If you know someone who knows them, ask for an introduction.

These are just a few ideas. Regardless of how you go about it, start by just giving to the people you want relationships with, or engaging in a way that is interesting or useful to them. Don't treat this as an "I need something, so I will just ask for it" situation. These relationships are important, and it's not a good idea to start off on the wrong foot.

Once you have a relationship, many possibilities start to open up, and your reputation and visibility can grow as a result. Ideally, you never actually request a link in your first communication. You focus on building a relationship, and at the right point in time, the person you built that relationship with decides on their own to link to a fantastic piece of content you have created that is of high interest to them.

Using Direct Email Pitches Effectively

People have a growing distrust of unsolicited emails from people they don't know. This bias is making direct email pitches harder to do successfully, and other tactics that are more conducive to relationship building are recommended instead.

If you are going to use this approach, however, the most important thing to remember is that the person you are emailing to request a link probably did not wake up this morning wondering what links she was going to add to her site. And certainly, she was not expecting or waiting for your email. Basically, you are interrupting her to ask her

to do something for you, and she may have no prior reason to trust you. Given that, there are a few simple guidelines you should follow when making an unsolicited pitch:

- Keep it simple and short. The person you are contacting is receiving an email that is unsolicited. She is not going to read a two-page email, or even a one-page email.
- Clearly articulate your request. It is an investment to get someone to read an email, and it is critical that the pitch be clear about the desired result.
- Clearly articulate why your site deserves a link, or why they should take content from you. Generally speaking, this involves pointing out the great content or tools on your site, and perhaps citing some major endorsements by others.
- Follow each and every guideline of [the CAN-SPAM Act](#). Unsolicited emails are not illegal as long as they follow the guidelines of the act. Do not even think about violating them.

Other Ways to Earn Links

In addition to content marketing, there are many different link-building tactics—too many to list in this book. This section will examine in depth some of the more common ones.

Web Directories

Obtaining web directory links was a tactic used in the past to drive SEO results, and many years ago, they did work. However, with the exception of a very few high-authority directories (such as Yahoo!'s directory and that of the Internet Public Library), very few directory links provide value anymore. There are still thousands of directories out there that will try to draw you in to buying a link from them, but you should stay away from them.

NOTE

In this section, we are discussing web directory links. These are distinct from local business directories, and the guidelines differ. Local business directories focus on providing the name, address, and phone number of local businesses, along with other related information, and they are important to local search. They are discussed more in ["Optimizing for Local Search" on page 648](#).

It may be worthwhile to pursue four or five web directory links, but probably no more than that. This group should be restricted to the most authoritative sites, such as [the Internet Public Library](#), [Business.com](#), and maybe a couple of recognized authority sites that have directories of people in your industry. You can also try to get into

DMOZ, though its authority has declined over time, and your efforts can be frustrated if the category you are pursuing does not have an active editor.

Manual Social Media Link Creation

One way to create links manually in social media environments is by visiting social media sites, forums, and blogs and leaving behind comments with self-referential links in them. However, the great majority of these environments **do not** follow their links, and obtaining links by putting them in comments and forums is a practice that is not approved by Google or Bing. Doing so is also very bad for your reputation; as we mentioned earlier, it is akin to showing up at a neighborhood party and asking everyone to give you money.

Another useful way to view these activities is that “you can’t vote for yourself”—that is, any link you obtain by linking to yourself is highly unlikely to be valued by the search engines. A more useful way to obtain links from blogs, for example, is to build a relationship with the blog owner. The major steps of this process are as follows:

1. Build a list of blogs that are related to your topic area.
2. Start visiting those blogs and adding comments of value without linking back to yourself, and develop a relationship with the author(s). The early stages of the relationship begin when the author starts responding to your comments. You can even start by reaching out to the author and interacting with him through one of the major social networks, such as Twitter, Facebook, Google+, or LinkedIn.
3. Once the relationship has been built and seems solid, let the author know about a related value-add resource you have, ask to interview him, or suggest a collaborative content development effort or study, either through direct contact with him (preferred) or in a comment. Make sure there is a real connection between what you propose and the content from the author.

These steps are meant to be conservative to avoid a backlash from blog owners and/or authors. You can extend this process to forums or social media sites as well. The key in all these cases is to avoid implementing links to your site/page and instead use these techniques as a way to build relationships with people. The payoff comes when you later publish a great piece of content that they decide to link to because they started following you as a result of your interactions online.

There are ways to be more aggressive with this approach. Some publishers do not really care about building relationships first and want to push the process much faster. However, there are two significant issues with this:

- Depending on the level of aggressiveness, it may be a violation of the webmaster guidelines, and the search engines may choose to take action against the publisher who pursues this strategy.
- There could be a backlash from the community itself. Offending one blogger may not be a huge issue, unless she is very influential. Offending hundreds of bloggers, on the other hand, would probably be much worse, particularly if you are trying to establish your site as authoritative in a topic area. In forums, blogs, and social media sites, offending people can quickly scale to a problem of large proportions.

Gray Hat/Black Hat

As we previously discussed, some publishers choose to push the limits or ignore the webmaster guidelines in their quest for links. In the following sections, we will look at some of the more popular tactics in detail.

Purchasing links for SEO

Historically, one of the more popular spam techniques was to buy links. This had two significant advantages:

- It is easy. There is less need to sell the quality of the content of your site. The only things that need to happen are determining that the third party is willing to sell a link, and setting a price.
- Because the link is an ad, you can simply specify the anchor text you want. Anchor text is a powerful ranking signal, and this is one of the major reasons people engage in link buying.

The practice of buying links has fallen out of favor, even among aggressive SEO professionals, as the risks with this practice are very high.

Google's policy on paid links. The major downside is that buying links for SEO is against Google's webmaster guidelines. Here is a brief summary of Google's policy on paid links:

- Links given in return for compensation should not be obtained for purposes of increasing PageRank.
- The link should be freely given, and the publisher of the potential linking site should be informed of what the publisher is doing. An example of a link where the publisher is not informed is one that is hidden in the `<noscript>` tag of a JavaScript-based widget.

Google is not saying that publishers should not be able to buy ads on the Web; rather, its policy is that links should be purchased only for the traffic and branding value they bring. Google also recommends that publishers selling ads on its site use `nofollow` links, which means they will have no SEO value.

On another note, PPC campaigns using AdWords, BingAds, and other popular advertising platforms are not considered a violation of the policy against paid links. This is because search engine advertising links are easy for the crawlers to recognize, and the search engines simply don't count them as a source of link authority.

Strategies that are not considered buying links. In some strategies, money is involved in obtaining a link, yet the link is not considered by the search engines to have been bought. Here are some examples:

- Paying a PR firm to promote a site
- Paying people to create great content for you and paying someone else to tell other people about it
- Paying someone to ask for (as opposed to actually buy) links via direct link requests

The key point is that these strategies do not compensate the site itself for the links given, so they are considered legitimate approaches if the links are given freely.

Swapping links

Another dangerous tactic is doing a large percentage of your link building through reciprocal links. Once again, this is easy to do in principle. It is not hard to find sites that will accept the “link to me and I will link to you” value proposition.

However, the search engines potentially view this as barter, and therefore these arrangements are not considered real endorsements. The search engines are not likely to question a few selected link exchanges with sites closely related to yours. It's a problem only when the link swapping becomes a significant portion of your backlink profile. That is a situation that looks manipulative, and the engines will most likely discount those links.

Using link farms/link networks

In the early days of search, publishers developed link farms and link networks as tactics for gaining cheap links. A *link farm* is a website or a group of sites whose primary reason for existence is to cross-link between themselves and other websites. Generally speaking, the links are created through aggressive reciprocal linking.

These sites are typically very heavily interlinked, so they can be pretty easy to detect. Part of the reason is that because they have little redeeming value, they typically do not have high-value links coming in to them from other sites, and most of the links result from various cross-linking schemes.

How can you differentiate a link farm from a legitimate directory? It's simple: a link farm has poorer organization and more links per page than a directory. In addition, a human review will show the lack of a strict editorial policy in a link farm.

Link networks are a similar concept. The network exists for the purposes of creating links between sites, and it can be a bit more sophisticated than a link farm. For example, you could create a club where publishers agree to contribute a link in return for getting a link from somewhere else.

If managed with great care, the clustering of links between sites can be limited, and this can be a bit harder for search engines to detect. However, this tactic is highly vulnerable to a disgruntled webmaster simply reporting the scheme to Google.

A related concept is the notion of *three-way link swaps* (a.k.a. triangular link swapping), where Site A links to Site C in return for Site B linking to Site A. In this scenario, Site C may be the site the publisher is trying to promote, and Site B may be a site it uses to provide low-value links to people it trades links with.

This is almost always a scam, because Site B is probably a low-value site with little to recommend it. So, the publisher of Site A is providing a good-quality link in return for a low-quality one.

Think of it this way. Google employs some very smart mathematicians who understand graph theory.¹⁷ So you can rest assured that the Google algorithms will do a sophisticated job of detecting unnatural linking structures, such as the one in **Figure 7-47**, which is called a *clique* in graph theory. Notice there are five nodes (or vertices), each of which is linking to all four of its neighboring nodes. They never miss a link. It all looks so perfect. Naturally occurring neighborhoods on the Web aren't perfect like that. If it looks perfect, it's been engineered. Google will be suspicious of unnatural-looking neighborhoods.

¹⁷ You can read more on the theory of spam detection in Zoltán Gyöngyi, Pavel Berkhin, Hector García-Molina, and Jan Pedersen's "Link Spam Detection Based on Mass Estimation," October 31, 2005, http://bit.ly/mass_estimation.

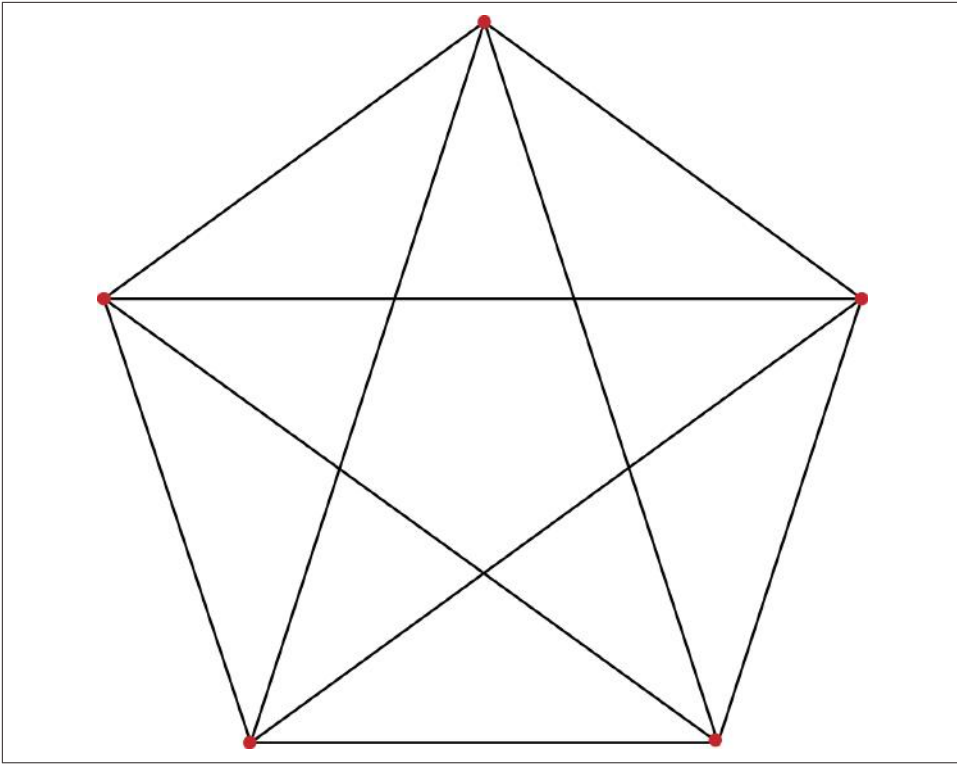


Figure 7-47. *Unnatural link grouping*

Using automated link dropping

Spam tactics can include the concept of creating a bot that crawls around the Web looking for open forums and blogs and leaving behind automatically generated comments. Clearly this is spam, as no human is involved in the comment process (other than the programmer), and no effort was made to read the blog post or forum where the comment was left.

The great majority of these comments are deleted or `nofollowed` by the blog or forum software content management system (CMS), but the spammer does not care because she is operating on a large scale. If she leaves behind 1 million comments and 99% of them are filtered by one means or another, she still ends up with 10,000 links.

This is, of course, a very risky tactic. The search engines may be able to detect this behavior algorithmically, or competitors can recognize it and turn you in via a spam report. *We do not recommend this tactic.*

Hosting giveaways

Incentive-based link requests use an incentive as part of the process of requesting a link. In general, these are links that Google does not want to count. For that reason, this is not a recommended tactic. Note that bylined articles and content syndication (as discussed in “[Guest Posting](#)” on page 470 and “[Content Syndication](#)” on page 475) are different strategies.

Widgets and infographics are two ways of providing a giveaway to third-party sites in return for links. However, in a YouTube video posted on August 12, 2013, Matt Cutts stated Google’s recommendation that links associated with these types of giveaways [should make use of the nofollow attribute](#).

One popular way of implementing widget-based link building is to develop a JavaScript-based widget and then embed a link back to the widget publisher’s site in the `<noscript>` tags. Because this is the code the browser presents to users who do not support JavaScript, and the search engines do not run JavaScript, the crawlers see the link and not the widget.

An alternative method is to create an HTML wrapper for the widget with the link back to your site in clear HTML outside of the JavaScript code. This may seem like a more legitimate approach, but it is not approved by either Google or Bing for building links.

The reason for Google’s position was explained in an interview that Matt Cutts did with Eric Enge:¹⁸

Any infographics you create will do better if they’re closely related to your business, and it needs to be fully disclosed what you are doing. The big key is that the person publishing the infographic has to know, and agree with, including an endorsement to your site as attribution with the infographic. Even then, there is reason to believe that the link is more about the barter to get the infographic than a real endorsement of your site.

This is similar to what people do with widgets, as you and I have talked about in the past. I would not be surprised if at some point in the future we did not start to discount these infographic-type links to a degree. The link is often embedded in the infographic in a way that people don’t realize, versus a true endorsement of your site.

If you are going to pursue this tactic, then it is important that you be aware that it comes with a lot of risk. The best thing you can do to help reduce that risk somewhat is to ensure that the content is very accurate and highly relevant to your business.

¹⁸ “Matt Cutts and Eric Talk About What Makes a Quality Site,” Stone Temple Consulting, July 9, 2012, <http://www.stonetemple.com/matt-cutts-and-eric-talk-about-what-makes-a-quality-site/>.

As another example, Google considers the use of so-called “sponsored” WordPress templates with embedded links, even if they are visible, to be spammy as well—unless, of course, the publisher distributing the WordPress template is in the WordPress template business. The key issue to address in these types of link-building campaigns is the relevance of the widget to the site receiving the link and the editorial endorsement—or lack thereof.

Awards and Badges

With awards and badges, you can get people to link to you because it will enhance their site’s value. One example is a program that gives sites awards for excellence of some kind. This is particularly effective if your site is a highly respected authority in your space. For example, *U.S. News and World Report* annually publishes [a list of the best colleges and universities in the U.S.](#) Being included in this report brings great prestige, and many of the schools put award badges on their sites and link back to a copy of the report. This works because it is in fact a true endorsement of the *U.S. News and World Report* site.

If you are a highly respected authority, you can consider picking out the top 10 sites related to your space. Then you can send those sites an award badge with a link to a review that lives on your site.

In general, this is not a practice that Google or Bing will want to support either, unless you are already one of the top authority sites in your space and you are able to get the majority of the award winners to post the badges you provide on their sites. Otherwise, your program is simply not credible.

Customer Discount/Incentives

A publisher can offer visitors from certain websites a discount on his product. Sites that want to offer the discount to their users simply need to link back to the publisher’s site.

However, Google also sees this as a questionable practice. Although it would seem that the discount offer would be interesting to the third-party site only if it valued the product (or thought its visitors would), Google’s Matt Cutts clearly indicated in an interview that Google did not want to value such links.¹⁹

¹⁹ Stone Temple Consulting, “Matt Cutts Interviewed by Eric Enge,” June 16, 2008, <https://www.stonetemple.com/matt-cutts-interviewed-by-eric-enge/>.

How Search Engines Fight Link Spam

Throughout this chapter, we have provided many examples of how spammers try to circumvent search engine guidelines to obtain high rankings for sites that may not deserve them. Of course, the search engines do many things to fight link spam.

Google's Penguin Algorithm

On April 24, 2012, Google released a new algorithm called Penguin. This algorithm focused on identifying sites that have undesirable link profiles and punishing them by lowering their rankings. Some areas of concentration for this algorithm are:

- Article directories
- Low-quality web directories
- Overuse of rich anchor text in links back to your site
- Links from countries where you don't market yourself

This algorithm is one of many that Google uses to fight spam, and you can read more about it in [Chapter 9](#).

Other Algorithmic Approaches to Fighting Link Spam

The major approach the search engines use is to design algorithms that can detect and act on link spam. There are a number of things they can look at algorithmically. Here are a representative few:

Links labeled as advertisements

The search engines can scan for nearby text, such as “Advertisement,” “Sponsors,” “Our Partners,” and so on.

Sitewide links

Sitewide linking is unnatural and should be a rare part of your link mix (purchased or not). The only exception to this is the interlinking of all the sites owned by your company, but this presumes that the search engine will understand that all of your sites are from the same company. In general, sitewide links are a serious flag, especially if you have a lot of different sites that do this for you, or if a large percentage of your links are sitewide.

Links sold by a link broker

Of course, link brokers are knowledgeable about the link detection methods listed here, and they do their best to avoid detection with the links they sell. But they can still run into problems. For example, Google took action against a long-time proponent of paid links, [Internet Marketing Ninjas](#) (formerly called We Build

Pages), resulting in the company changing its stance on the subject.²⁰ In February 2011, Google took action against J.C. Penney for buying links,²¹ and **Conductor** eventually exited the business of brokering buys.

A selling site providing information on how to buy a text link ad

Search engines can detect sites that provide information on how to advertise with them. Combined with other clues about links being sold on the site, this could lead to a review of the site selling the ads and a discounting of the links.

Relevance of your link

It is a powerful clue if your link is not really that relevant to the page or site it is on.

Quality of neighboring links

Another clue would be the presence of your link among a group of links that are not tightly themed, or if the other sites linked to are poor quality.

Location outside main content

The search engine can detect when your link is not part of the main content of the page—for example, if it appears in the left or right column of a three-column site, and the main content is in the middle.²²

Perhaps you can avoid all of these pitfalls, but one more problem remains: people can see that you are buying links and choose to report your site, using **Google's authenticated paid links reporting form**. Note that you need to be logged in to a Google account to see the form. Here are some examples of people who might take this action:

Someone reports your site for buying links or for some other reason

Who would do this? Your competitor! If your competitor submits an authenticated spam report to Google, Google will look at it and may choose to act on it.

Someone reports the site you bought links from for selling links or for some other reason

A competitor of yours can do this, or a competitor of the site selling links can do this. Once a search engine figures out that a site is selling links, it is possible that this could trigger a deeper review of the sites that were buying those links.

20 Jim Boykin, "Paid Links Aren't Worth It to Me," Internet Marketing Ninjas Blog, November 21, 2008, <http://www.internetmarketingninjas.com/blog/link-building/paid-links-arent-worth-it/>.

21 Vanessa Fox, "Google's Action Against Paid Links Continues: Overstock & Forbes Latest Casualties; Conductor Exits Brokering Business," Search Engine Land, February 24, 2011, http://bit.ly/paid_links_google.

22 Jeffrey A. Dean, Corin Anderson, and Alexis Battle, "Ranking Documents Based on User Behavior and/or Feature Data," http://bit.ly/patent_7716225.

A disgruntled employee leaves your company, the broker, or the site you bought links from and reports your site

For decades, many companies have had a practice of escorting fired (or laid-off) employees out of the building. The reason for this approach is that people get upset when they lose their job. However, this practice would not prevent such a person from reporting your site in a spam report to a search engine. Even though that may be a violation of the confidentiality agreement you probably have with your employees, you would never know, because there is no transparency in spam reporting.

A search engine employee does a manual human review of your site

The search engines maintain legions of people who conduct human reviews of sites, which they use to proactively find and report spam.

Certainly your competitor reporting your site would be the most likely scenario, but you should not entirely discount the other scenarios.

Negative Link Building

Unfortunately, Google's increased ability to detect and act on links it considers to be of poor quality has resulted in a new black hat tactic: negative link building. This involves buying poor-quality links and pointing them at your competitor's website. This has proved very difficult for Google to detect and act on.

Even a simple Google search on *negative SEO* will bring up companies that offer such services in the first page of results. We will not show a screenshot of those results here, as we do not in any way endorse this practice. Not only is it unethical, but it is also potentially illegal.

However, it's important to know that this practice exists, and to take steps to protect yourself from negative link building attacks on your site. Monitoring your link profile on an ongoing basis is one of the best ways to do this.

If you see significant numbers of new poor-quality links coming in to your site, you may be the subject of a negative SEO attack. Once you identify links that you think are suspicious, you can use Google's link disavow tools to indicate that you don't want to have any association with those links. You can read more about this in ["The Disavow Links tool"](#) on page 629. Two other resources on negative SEO are:

- ["To Catch a Spammer: Uncovering Negative SEO"](#)
- ["How to Protect Your Website from Negative SEO"](#)

Unnatural Links Messages

Google may also notify you via Google Search Console if a manual review of your site has detected links that it doesn't like. This is one of many reasons why signing up for Google Search Console is so important (we also recommend that you sign up for Bing Webmaster Tools). [Figure 7-48](#) shows an example of an “unnatural links” message from Google.

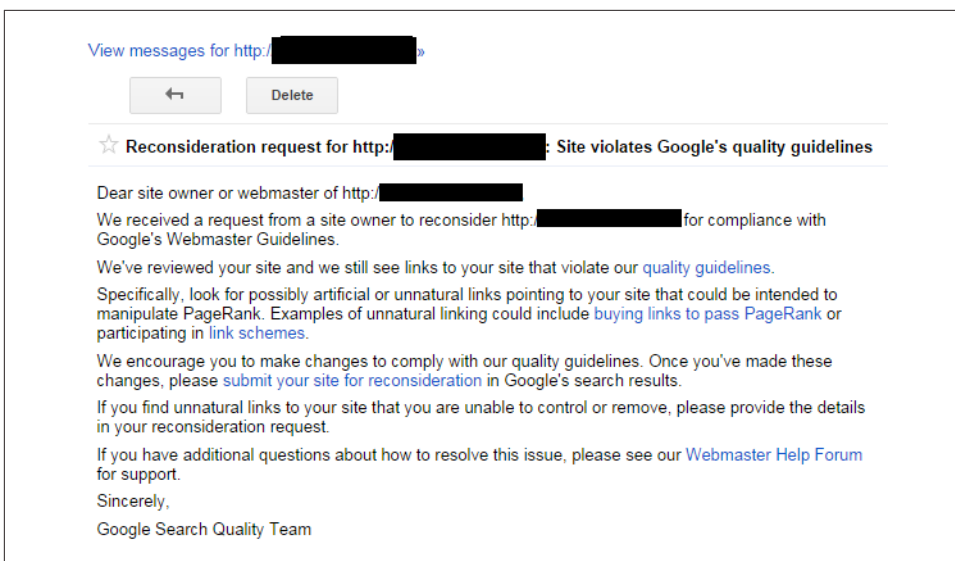


Figure 7-48. *Unnatural links penalty message in Google Search Console*

Other Search Engine Courses of Action

In the case of Google, one of its basic policies is to punish a site that sells text links by eliminating that site's ability to pass worth. This is essentially its first course of action. Once it's done this, Google could look more closely at the selling site and the purchasing sites for other signs of spammy behavior.

At times, Google has also taken the step of altering a site's visible PageRank (the PageRank shown on the Google toolbar) if it believes a site is selling links. It has applied this penalty to some very significant sites, such as [NewsDay.com](#) in 2008.²³ However, Google appears to have abandoned this practice since then.

²³ Barry Schwartz, "Google Confirms NewsDay.com Received PageRank Penalty for Selling Links," Search Engine Roundtable, July 11, 2008, http://bit.ly/newsday_penalty.

Google can also choose to take action against the site purchasing the links or participating in manipulative link practices. If a large percentage of the site's links are suddenly disabled, this could have a significant impact on rankings.

Social Networking for Links

When you add social media to the equation, the network effect can multiply the yield from your link-building efforts. You can use this effect to help your content spread virally, or to develop relationships with critical influencers.

Blogging for Links

Blogging can be very effective in link development. The effectiveness of a blog depends highly on the content on it, the market space, and how the publisher promotes it. The first thing to realize when you're starting a blog is that it is a serious commitment. No blog will succeed if it does not publish content on a regular basis.

How frequently a blog needs to publish depends on its subject matter. For some blogs, one post per week is enough. For others, it really needs to be two to three times per week, or even more often.

Blogging is very much about reputation building as well. Quality content and/or very novel content is key to success. However, when that first blog post goes up, the blog will not yet be well known and will not likely have many readers, and those that do come by will be less likely to link to a little-known blog.

In short, obtaining links through your blog is a process that can take a long time, but blogging can be a very effective tool for link building. Just remember that patience and persistence are required.

One of the best places to get links to a blog is from other blogs. This is best done by targeting relationships with major bloggers and earning their trust and respect. You can read most about this by flipping back to the section titled **"Building Relationships with Influencers"** on page 497.

Getting other bloggers to link to you can pay big benefits. **Vizu**, a market research company, published a study showing that 67.3% of people found what blogs to read by following links from other blogs.

It is also important to leverage the social nature of the blogosphere. Publishers just launching a blog should try to provide a personalized response to everyone who comments on their blog. One effective way to do this is to send each of them a personalized email that shows that the comment was read. This helps to deepen the interest of the commenter, creates a feeling of personal connection, and increases the chance that

the commenter will return, and possibly add more comments. Nurturing the dialog on a blog in this fashion helps that relationship grow faster.

When pursuing social media strategies, keep in mind the following best practices:

- Remember that the focus of this discussion is on “social” media sites. Your success in these environments is entirely dependent on building relationships with the other participants on these platforms. If you do something that irritates the other participants, you can quickly find yourself called out and exposed in that community.
- Make sure you are a positive contributor.
- “Give more than you get” by proactively helping to promote the great content of others. If you simply share your own content the majority of the time, you will be viewed as someone who does not offer value by association; social connections flourish with give and take.

Leveraging Major Social Media Platforms

Building relationships with other bloggers as outlined so far is effective, but there are additional ways to interact with others and in the process let them know you have content they might be interested in. Any environment in which social interactions occur is another good place to invest time and effort.

You can use social networks, such as the current market leaders—[LinkedIn](#), [Facebook](#), [Google+](#), [Pinterest](#), and [Twitter](#)—for link-building purposes without actually getting the link authority directly from one of these sites. Major forums that relate to your area of interest also represent great targets. As we will discuss in more detail in [Chapter 8](#), the links implemented directly on these sites are `nofollowed`, so they do not pass direct SEO value. However, social media can help get you exposure to bloggers and media people who may then choose to cite your content or write about it, and implement links back to you. This indirect form of obtaining links can be quite powerful.

Building relationships and trust on a social media platform can drive lots of traffic and links to your site. The mechanics of making this work are fairly straightforward:

- Publish great noncommercial content related to your business on your site.
- Establish and grow social media presences on major social media platforms that promote the same types of content.
- Share your content via these platforms.

If you have done this well, sharing your newly published content through your social media channels should help your visibility and reputation grow. In turn, the exposure

to the audience on that social platform should drive traffic and links back to your site. This synergy takes time to build, but will become a valuable asset; a strong social media presence is a powerful ally to any content marketing or SEO strategy.

Of course, while you're establishing connections and building relationships in a social media environment, there's also the potential for people to submit your content into those social media sites for you, which can lead to links as well. You can then take the next step and reach out through the social networks or forums to make direct contact with people to let them know about your content. This is similar to emailing people, but with a few important distinctions:

- You can send out communications to your friends on those networks. Assuming that you have treated the “friend” designation judiciously (rather than “friending” everybody in sight), these communications can be a bit more informal than an unsolicited email would be.
- You can also join groups on these networks related to your market space, and then send messages out to those groups. These groups will enable you to reach new people with related interests.
- Messages broadcast through these networks cannot be personalized, so you must tailor a more general message for these types of communications.
- Beware of broadcasting too many messages or poorly targeted messages. Many publishers have made this mistake, became pariahs in their communities, and lost the leverage these social networks bring to the link-building process.
- You can send personalized messages on a one-on-one basis as well.

One strategy for approaching an authority site is to make initial contact by friending someone in a senior position at the company that publishes the site. Then you can develop the relationship with that senior person without asking anything of her. Once the relationship is established, you can use a more informal approach to introduce the great content on your site.

Using Social Media Networking Effectively: Dos and Don'ts

Although we have outlined some of the basics of how to work with social media sites, each site has its own quirks and opportunities. What follows is an outline of tips to use on many of these platforms. We will discuss Facebook, Google+, Twitter, reddit, Pinterest, and a few others here briefly, but other aspects of leveraging these channels will be discussed in [Chapter 8](#).

Nearly all social media site links are `nofollowed`, so don't expect these to pass link authority through to your site; however, visibility on these sites can still have a large

impact on your SEO. A strong social media presence can act a lot like a powerful PR channel.

By publishing great content and then sharing it through your social media accounts, you can potentially gain fast exposure to bloggers and media (if they are following you), which in turn can lead to their implementing links to your site.

Facebook

People share links on their timeline and on Facebook pages. Links shared by users who have marked their content as available for Everyone (http://bit.ly/fb_control) are visible to search engines, as are Facebook Pages (pages for companies as opposed to people). These links are all `nofollowed`, so they do not pass PageRank, but they can provide visibility for your content.

Facebook likes are not at all visible to Google, as there is no place for it to crawl to see what content you have liked. However, Bing receives like data via an API feed, so it has the potential to use that data, though indications are that it is not doing so as of September 2014.

There are many reasons to use Facebook, but you should not expect it to directly impact your SEO ranking. However, a strong social presence can play a big role in your reputation and visibility online, and as a result can have a powerful indirect impact on your SEO. Facebook can be used to build valuable relationships.

In particular, Facebook has powerful advertising features that enable you to significantly increase your reach across the platform, and this can give you tremendous exposure.

Google+

Google+ was launched on June 28, 2011, and very quickly built a large user base. Like Facebook, Google+ also allows people to share links and generate comments and interactions on its posts. Shared content on Google+ can be evaluated based on the authority of the person sharing it, how many times it gets reshared, and the number of comments it generates.

Users can also indicate that they found a page valuable by clicking on a +1 button on the page (if the page has one) or next to the search listing for that page. The +1 button functions in much the same way as Facebook's Like button, except that Google has direct access to the +1 data, as well as data about sharing on the platform. This plays a big role in personalized search on Google.

Google+ also offers brand pages, and these are used by many major companies to communicate with existing and potential customers. In addition, these pages show up in the search results whenever you search on a company's brands, and this can be very

valuable real estate. In some cases, it blocks people from using Google AdWords to bid on your brand name.

Consider focusing on connecting with major influencers on Google+, and using that connection to build a real relationship with them. Add value to their posts, and they are likely to pay more attention to what you choose to post. This will help your Google+ account build authority and influence.

Twitter

Twitter has established itself as the leading microblogging site. It allows its members to contribute microblog posts (a.k.a. “tweets”) that are limited to 140 characters. It has become an environment for real-time communication with a broader network of people. You can use Twitter as an effective platform for promoting your business, though links from Twitter are not followed, so no PageRank is passed. It is another valuable channel for communicating with your customers and market.

The basic goal is to become an active member of the community and build a large network of followers. As with other networking sites, many important influencers spend time on Twitter. If you can use the platform to develop relationships with these people, you can potentially gain some very high-quality links.

In addition, if you create some high-quality content, you can gain a lot of exposure through “retweets” (whereby people forward your message to all of their followers). Particularly interesting tweets can get significant visibility for you and your company.

reddit

reddit is a social link aggregation and discussion site, grouped into topical communities (“subreddits”) that are self-organized and independently moderated. There are millions of visitors each day, and reddit has hosted “ask me anything” interviews with many celebrities and a few politicians, including Barack Obama.

The site has a lot of traffic, a lot of users, and a lot of discussion. You must be a registered member of reddit (a “redditor”) in order to advertise there. It isn’t difficult to create an account, but the ad targeting is not very good because there is little capacity for users to provide revealing demographic data about themselves. In general, ad results seem to be less than stellar for any product or service that doesn’t specifically appeal to self-described geeks.

redditors are generally hostile toward self-promotion of any kind. If you try to guerilla market by posting links to your site or Facebook page or anything that looks remotely promotional, redditors will slap you down very, very hard.

For that reason, it is best to not plan on any form of self-promotion on reddit. All you can and should do on the site is try to participate normally and submit your viral con-

tent and other people's great content to the correct subreddits without the appearance of self-promotion.

Pinterest

Pinterest is a site for sharing pictures that has rapidly built a strong following. The demographic skews heavily toward women; they constitute more than two-thirds of the site's users. The average income level on Pinterest is also relatively high.²⁴

However, even brands that are not naturally highly visible do well on Pinterest. For example, as of August 2014, the *Wall Street Journal* has more than 25,000 followers. Yet all of its "pins" are quotes either embedded over a newspaper background (see [Figure 7-49](#)) or accompanying a picture of the person being quoted.

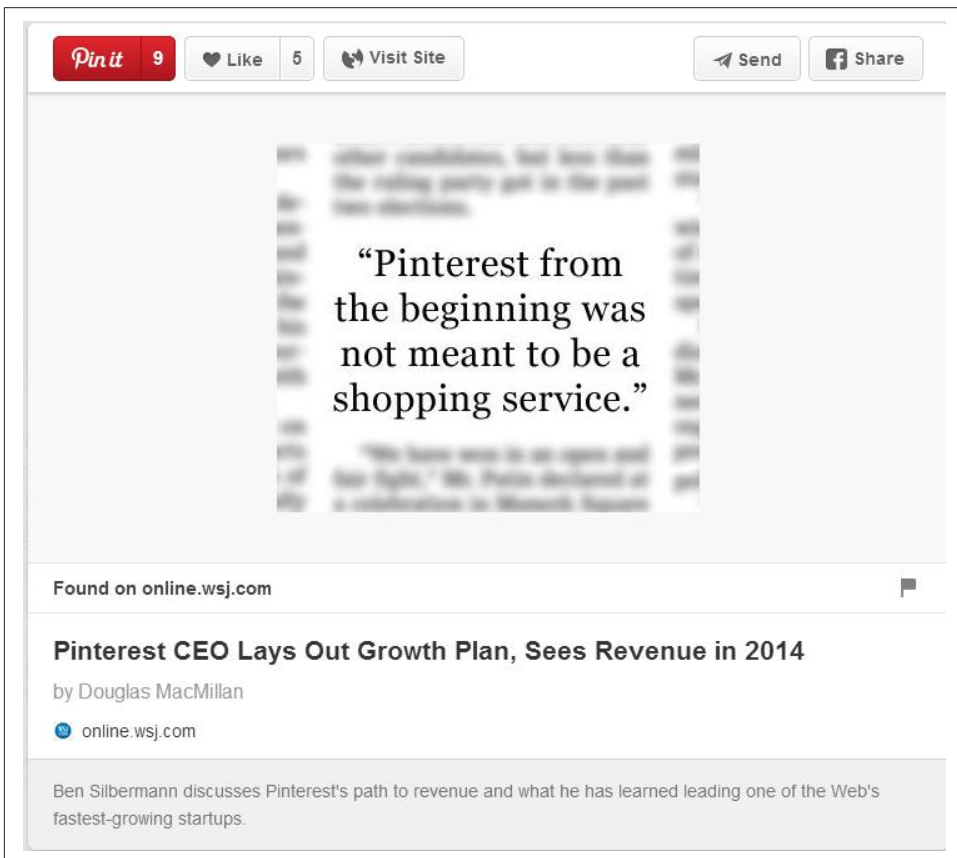


Figure 7-49. A *Wall Street Journal* post on *Pinterest*

²⁴ Cooper Smith, "This Is The Behavior on Pinterest That Makes the Social Network So Attractive to Marketers," *Business Insider*, April 17, 2014, http://bit.ly/pinterest_behavior.

While Pinterest has a smaller audience than Facebook, Twitter, or Google+ due to its demographics, the site has proven to work really well for certain retailers, such as apparel manufacturers or restaurants. Now could be an excellent time to jump on board and build a strong following there before your competition does!

Wikipedia

You may not think of Wikipedia as being useful in link building, because it `nofollows` all its external links. In addition, it is not wise to simply go onto the site and create a page for your company. Unless your company is well known, the page is likely to be promptly removed, and even if it is well known, you would be in violation of Wikipedia's Conflict of Interest guideline. However, links from Wikipedia can be valuable because many people treat it as an authoritative site, and if they see your link there they may choose to link to you. This can include some pretty influential people.

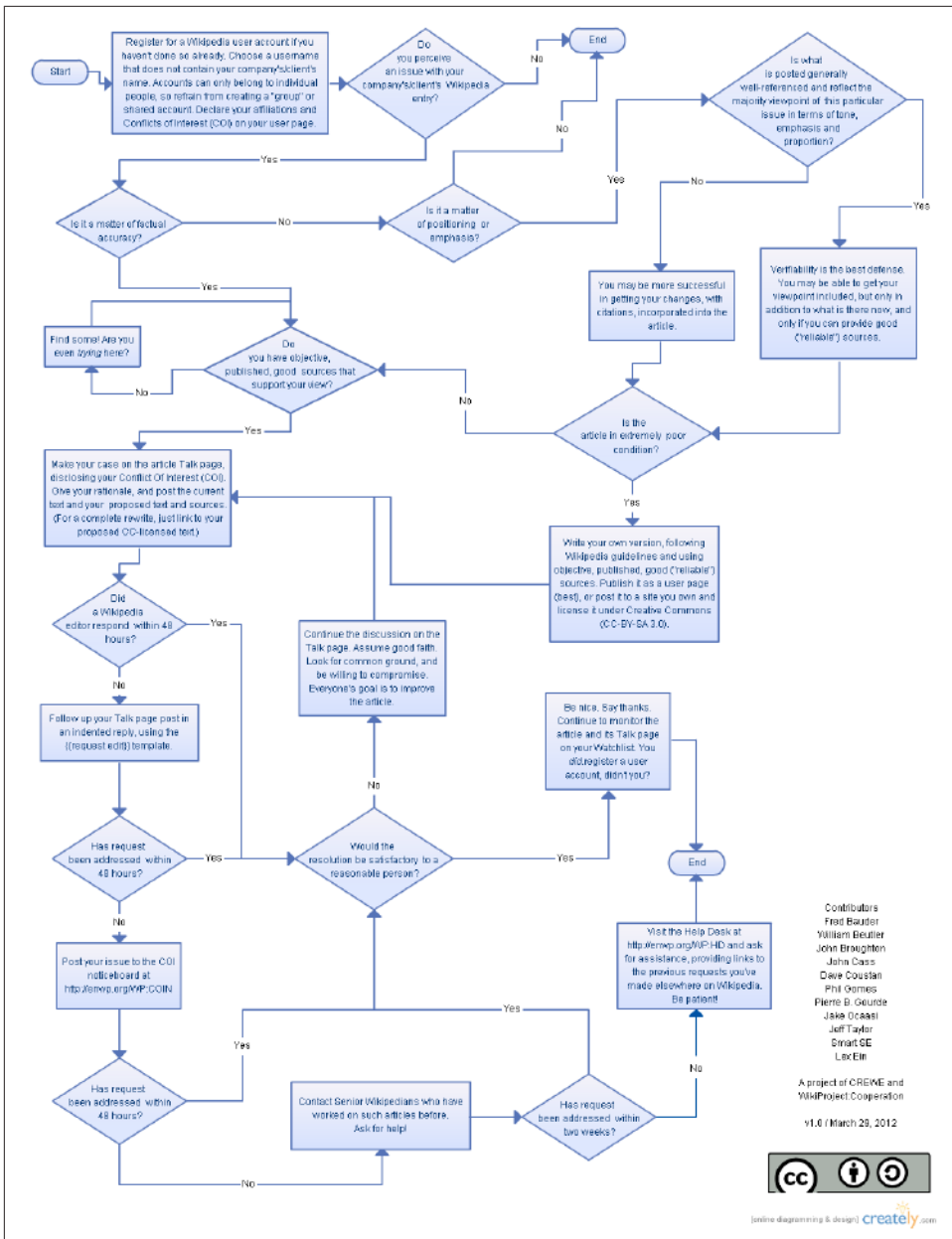
Therefore, you may want to build trusted relationships within the Wikipedia community. This will require an investment in time, but it can bring some nice rewards. Here are some specific tips on how to proceed:

- Build up your credibility before doing anything that could be construed as self-serving. Develop a long and virtuous contribution history, and ideally build a user profile page that has earned **Barnstar awards**. It won't benefit you to be altruistic on Wikipedia unless you do it publicly. You must have a *visible* track record (e.g., squash spam, fix typos, and add valuable content, but do not do it anonymously).
- Before making an edit to an article, contact its "owner" (the main editor who polices the article) to get her blessing.
- Use Wikipedia's "Watch" function to monitor your articles of interest. Better yet, use a tool that emails you (e.g., TrackEngine or ChangeDetect).
- Make friends. They will be invaluable in times of trouble, such as if an article you care about gets an "Article for Deletion" nomination.
- Do not edit anonymously from the office. This could come back to haunt you. Tools exist that could embarrass you if you do so. One public domain tool, WikiScanner, is able to programmatically parse anonymous Wikipedia posts and identify the organization that created them. The tool cross-references the page editor's IP address with the blocks of IP addresses of more than 180,000 organizations. Do not take the risk.

If you are serious about pursuing a Wikipedia page for your business, you should also learn about the Corporate Representatives for Ethical Wikipedia Engagement (CREWE). This started as **a Facebook group comprising marketing and PR people and Wikipedia editors**, but it now includes Wikipedians, corporate communications professionals, academics, students, and other interested parties who are exploring the ways

that PR and Wikipedia can work together for mutual benefit, defined narrowly as cooperation toward more accurate and balanced entries.

A consortium of PR associations and agencies signed a pact in 2014 to promise to work ethically within Wikipedia's rules. A related ebook was produced by some of the participants as [a guide to working with Wikipedia](#). The flow chart in [Figure 7-50](#) shows how the Wikipedia posting process ideally works.



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 v1.0 / March 29, 2012

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>

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Figure 7-50. Recommended Wikipedia posting process

Wikis

Plenty of other wikis are a lot more edit-friendly than Wikipedia and let you contribute valuable content, get links, and build relationships. Examples include [ShopWiki](#),

the [NewPR Wiki](#), and [WordPress Codex](#). Some even pass link authority, which is a nice bonus.

Meetup.com

[Meetup.com](#) is a site designed to help groups of people with common interests “meet up.” These meetups can be excellent networking events.

Get involved with relevant local meetups and get your Meetup.com member profile page linked from the Meetups page, which will pass link authority to your profile and then on to your site.

Instagram, Vine, and Snapchat

New social media sites emerge on the scene all the time, and each has its own unique attributes. Like Pinterest, Instagram is a photo- and image-sharing network that skews toward women. For the right type of brand where visual content can play a big role (such as food, beauty, lifestyle, media, and fashion), Instagram and similar sites can be great places to build your presence.

Vine is unique because it constrains you to producing six-second videos—a perfect environment for people who want to see some really compelling and quick content. Vine presents an interesting challenge because there is so little time to deliver your message, but it’s very effective when you get it right.

Similarly, Snapchat videos disappear after you watch them. Like a message whose ink evaporates after you read it, Snapchat videos provide viewers a sense of exclusivity.

Using YouTube Successfully for Content Marketing

It may become more important for your brand or company to be on YouTube than to be advertised on TV. For some, that day has already arrived. comScore data from August 2011 showed that YouTube is used for about 14% of all searches on the Web.

YouTube has even launched careers, such as that of the zany Jenna Marbles, whose [YouTube channel](#) has more than 13 million subscribers. Jenna has recorded many videos that have tens of millions of views, including:

- [“How to Trick People into Thinking You Are Good Looking”](#) (58+ million views)
- [“How to Avoid Talking to People You Don’t Want to Talk to”](#) (33+ million views)
- [“What Girls Do in Their Car”](#) (33+ million views)

YouTube has also brought international fame to previously unknown musicians, such as Justin Bieber, who got his start on YouTube, or Sick Puppies, a band popularized by

the hugely well-liked and inspiring [Free Hugs video set to their song “All the Same”](#), which has over 75 million views.

Then there are the hugely successful viral campaigns by commercial organizations, such as Blendtec’s [Will It Blend? series](#) that we referenced previously in this chapter. This is a brilliant video series on running various household objects—including marbles, rake handles, and even iPods—through a Blendtec blender.

Blendtec isn’t the only company that has had success with YouTube. WestJet scored a big hit with its video, [“WestJet Christmas Miracle: Real-Time Giving”](#). In this video, people were filmed sharing their Christmas wishes with Santa via a video feed in the airport. While the passengers were on their flight, WestJet employees rushed off to stores to buy all the gifts they had asked for. Once the passengers landed and made their way to baggage claim, they saw the first items to come around the conveyor belt were gift-wrapped packages addressed to them. They opened their gifts, and to their amazement, found what they had asked Santa for only hours before. Their reactions were also filmed, and the resulting video received over 33 million views.

Another stellar example of YouTube marketing is the online retailer Vat19.com. Its product videos are brilliant and well integrated into the company’s product catalog. For example, [the five-pound gummy bear is a must-see](#). Vat19’s channel has more than 850,000 subscribers, with more than 440 million views.

YouTube has been used effectively for brand damage control as well. For example, the CEO and founder of JetBlue Airlines posted [an apology video](#) on YouTube following a Valentine’s Day winter storm incident—a campaign that was well received.

One product that got some excellent brand recognition and building from being on YouTube was Smirnoff’s Raw Tea. Smirnoff produced an uproarious music video called [“Tea Party”](#), with preppies rapping.

The problem with most popular YouTube promotions is that YouTube gets the links, and the original site usually does not. That means the search engine visibility benefits do not usually transfer to the company’s website.

Even without creating your own site or hosting your videos on your main site to draw links, YouTube offers much in the way of brand visibility when the campaign is well executed. That doesn’t just mean posting a great video; marketers must also know how to take advantage of the social nature of the site to build up friends and get on user subscription lists.

Make copious use of tags on your videos (ensuring, of course, that the tags are relevant to the content), spread your tags out among your clips, use adjectives to make your videos more visible to folks who are searching based on their mood, have some category descriptor tags (bearing in mind that YouTube’s default search settings are Videos, Relevance, and All Categories) to match your title and description with your

most important tags, and don't use natural language phrases or waste tag space on words such as *and* and *to*. See "Optimizing for Video/Multimedia Search" on page 694 for more tips.

Do not be afraid to make a start, even if it is modest and has little budget behind it. You won't get anywhere without experimenting with the medium. Ongoing experimentation provides you with the best chance to find a formula that works for you.

Implementing Guest Posting Successfully

Susan Joyce is a well-known author of content on the topic of job search, and she is also a contributor to the *Huffington Post*. In March 2014, she placed an article on the *Huffington Post* titled "What 80% of Employers Do Before Inviting You for an Interview". Figure 7-51 shows us that this article was a smashing success.



The screenshot shows a blog post on 'THE BLOG' section of the Huffington Post. The post is by Susan P. Joyce, an online job search expert. The title is 'What 80% Of Employers Do Before Inviting You For An Interview'. The post has 21k likes, 8389 shares, 868 tweets, 0 LinkedIn shares, 2260 emails, and 430 comments. The article text begins with 'Many job seekers have described to me that submitting a resume in today's job market is mostly a banging-their-head-against-a-wall, extremely frustrating waste of time.'

Like	Share	Tweet	LinkedIn	Email	Comment
21k	8389	868	0	2260	430

Figure 7-51. An article that went viral

The article netted well over 30,000 social shares. What made this article such a success? Certainly being placed on the *Huffington Post* helped, but the title was a big key to the success of this content. It drew people in, as everybody wanted to know the answer to the question.

In fact, the answer was quite simple: employers search on your name before asking you in for an interview. Yet the simplicity of the observation did not diminish the value of the article, because the observation was not completely intuitive.

Once you see it, your reaction is, *of course they do*. For most searchers, the result is to search on themselves and see whether employers will like what they see!

Putting It All Together

To sum up the social media strategy outlined here, it is useful to think about it as an old-fashioned PR/marketing strategy. Marketers used to think about the number of “impressions” they were able to create in people’s minds. The more impressions you can create, the better. When TV, print, and radio were the only media to worry about, this strategy was relatively simple to execute.

The current environment is significantly more complex. The people you are trying to reach use many venues, and all of the various social media properties are part of that picture. Whenever you have a social media property that a large number of people use, there is an opportunity to reach them. Success in reaching them depends on becoming a trusted member of that community.

Because there are many large communities, it can be time-consuming and expensive to establish a presence in all of them. But your participation in each one will add to the number of opportunities you have for creating impressions in your target audience. Major influencers in your market may be using these communities, so you have an opportunity to reach them as well.

Pursuing social media sites can be a very effective strategy. It does require a real investment to implement well, but when it’s done right, the strategy can provide some real benefits. You can read more about social media and search in [Chapter 8](#).

Conclusion

Quality content will naturally attract and earn inbound links—and links remain a large factor in search rankings. Bear in mind that the best links are those you would consider valuable even if there were no search engines. These are links that can deliver traffic to your site on their own, and that are most likely to be seen as valuable by search engines in the long term. A solid content development and content marketing plan is essential to all of your online efforts, not just SEO.

You should view content development and marketing as an ongoing activity, ideally with an editorial calendar around which optimization and distribution strategies are organized. We have seen cases where a brief focus on link accumulation (with or without focused content marketing) brought returns that were squandered by a site subsequently abandoning the strategy. Unfortunately, these sites lost momentum and rankings to their competitors (the same ones they had previously passed), and it proved very difficult to catch up to them again.

Content marketing is fundamentally similar to online public relations work: your goal is to build your visibility and reputation online, and acquire links that can potentially drive relevant traffic to your website. The big difference between content marketing and traditional PR is in the technical aspects and the focus on new media methods of promotion—with emphasis placed on the quality of the referring source, the relevance of that source, and the other page(s) to which it points.

People will generally not link to low-quality content or sites that offer a poor user experience (unless they are compensated for the link), and unless you are fortunate enough to possess a major brand, people won't link to purely commercial sites, either. You have to offer something of value to users while also offering something unique. Certain content naturally attracts links because it triggers psychological and emotional responses—pride, sharing, newsworthiness, and so on. Leverage these triggers and create a compelling reason for visitors who can influence web content (writers, publishers, bloggers, etc.) to reference your work, and your content marketing efforts will be a success—both from a visibility and earned links perspective.

Great content marketing comes from this simple idea: “Build great content, tell everyone about it, and motivate them to share.”

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