

Ross Dunn Answers SEO Questions #4

By Ross Dunn, CEO, [StepForth Search Engine Placement Inc.](http://www.stepforth.com)

The following question was sent in using StepForth's [SEO question submission form](#). If you have a question that you don't mind being answered publicly please send it in and we might just use it in our next SEO newsletter.

QUESTION: "When do inbound links dictate ranking?"

"We have been told by an SEO consultant that, once the number of inbound links becomes significant, this rather than any SEO optimisation of the site itself dictates ranking for search terms. How true? If so, it implies that, to make any changes in rankings and search terms, we need to devote effort to links and link text from appropriate sites (authority etc). It implies time spent on adjusting title tags, keyword density etc, is fruitless." Paul C.

ANSWER

As I see it the issue is that your SEO consultant has told you once a large number of incoming links are obtained their ranking power will usurp the benefit of optimization. In my opinion this is too bold a statement to make so I will try to define it better in two parts:

Part 1: How to Make Inbound Links Fulfill Their Potential

Quality inbound links are indeed an extremely important element of any promotion and when many are obtained I am certain they are a significant cause for rankings. There are even circumstances where 'Google Bombing' (the act of having many sites linking to an unrelated site using nefarious text in order to get that site ranking for that text) has worked. Google Bombing, however, is SPAM and not the type of promotion that a business should be considering because it is against search engine policy and it has the inevitable negative of placing all of one's eggs in one basket.

In reality before an inbound link can be established as credible your page must be credible. For your page to be credible it must clearly identify the topic that is reflected on the inbound page. Here is an example:

Say you currently have 800 links from various relevant sites pointing to a page within your site. Now, consider a search engine algorithm; it will try to determine if these links are relevant to your page and determine if you are to get a boost from these links. This is your moment; you must convince this ruthlessly objective software algorithm that your page is clearly and undeniably relevant to the pages that are pointing to your page. This determination will require that your page is setup to clearly present relevance. In other words, you will need to ensure that your page title, Meta Description, headings and content all clearly reinforce the topic you wish to portray.

Part 2: Optimization is the Resin, Link Popularity is the Catalyst

Are you familiar with two-part epoxies? Essentially they are two chemicals (the Resin and the Catalyst) that when mixed becomes glue. Apart they are nothing but smelly chemicals but together they become powerful. This analogy is very apt for describing the benefits of link building and optimization:

- ❖ Link building alone will perhaps get you a competitive ranking but it can take a long time.
- ❖ Optimization alone may also get you a ranking but in my experience rankings rarely 'stick' without some popularity thrown in; in fact if your rankings bounce around a lot it is fair to guess that you may not have enough inbound links.



The ultimate solution is to combine the two and make them both work to improve rankings.

In this analogy, however, unlike an epoxy product there is no indication of the formula to use; should it be 50/50, 20/80, 60/20? This is where the process of ongoing optimization comes in. For example, say your 800 links and your optimized page combined to create a ranking in the top 10. Now you obviously want a #1 ranking so what do you do next in order to improve your rankings? Do you wait until you have more inbound links, do you tweak the text used in the inbound links or do you optimize your page to increase relevance? Let's take these one at a time:

1. Waiting until you get more inbound links is not the answer, especially in today's fast paced marketplace where achieving that top ranking quickly is paramount.
2. Changing the linking text in your inbound links requires contacting each webmaster and somehow convincing them that it is in their best interest to drop what they are doing and change the text in your inbound link; highly unlikely and very time consuming.
3. Optimizing your page further by finding ways to increase relevance is quite painless and as soon as you make the changes you may only have to wait a few days to see results.

To me the answer is obvious; while you continue to naturally build inbound links (you should never stop) you should re-optimize your page and try to increase its ranking. This is where everyone who is trying to obtain a ranking is essentially trying to discover their personal ranking formula; the formula for you may be totally different to someone else's.

I suppose the question now is, "Will optimization work in such a scenario?" Yes, in my experience optimization is that extra edge that can move you up a single position or many positions depending on just how competitive your top ranking goal is.

QUESTION Continued...

"We were told this some way down the line in an SEO contract, where the initial proposal was made in standard terms. The argument we were given was that one of his sites had remained at no1 position for some keywords despite major changes to the home page, thanks to the weight of consistent link text from inbound links. We seem to have seen this ourselves a few times on our well-established websites: a major change in home page design, where we placed more emphasis on design than retaining SEO structures, did not affect our good Google rankings. Is this due to good inbound links? Look forward to your views!" – Paul C.

ANSWER

I get the impression from your question that your SEO consultant was not immediately clear just how important link building was to the success of your contract. This is unfortunate and in my opinion it was an oversight on his/her part. I am always very vocal with my clientele about the importance of having an active link building strategy. I also don't leave it at that. I have a whole array of tools that allow me to determine where to attain the best inbound links and I also recommend a link building company to help the ongoing process of building link popularity.

With Luck the Formula May Change For You: Optimization 10% / Inbound Links 90%

You also mention that in your experience there have been occasions where you have been able to alter your design without affecting rankings. It is difficult for me to know for certain without having explored the situation but in my experience this can happen when you have built such a strong credibility (through inbound links and consistent site wide topic) that you are many steps ahead of your fellow ranking competitors. As a result when you made these changes your relevance 'perhaps' dropped (assuming your site optimization didn't actually improve with the new design) but not enough to lower your ranking. So in essence you are in the ideal situation of being a leader in your rankings which means you can take more risks with design and enjoy your reign at the top.



Ask Your SEO Question

Do you have a question you want to ask an SEO expert? The following question was sent in using StepForth's [SEO question submission form](#). If you have a question that you don't mind being answered publicly please send it in and we might just use it in our next SEO newsletter.

