

SEO Questions and Answers for My Readers

By Ross Dunn, CEO, [StepForth Search Engine Placement Inc.](#)

Thank you to those that sent in their SEO questions from the last few search engine newsletters. I would also like to again request that you take a moment and submit your own questions; it is paramount that I answer the questions that are important to you. Just [email me your question](#), it is that simple!

What Exactly Are Good Backlinks?

Question in Response to Article: [SEO Strategy for a Struggling Site on a Limited Budget](#)

"I have had enough of comments from everyone saying the website should have quality backlinks. I would agree to that too. But when you say Quality, can anyone really define it? It becomes TOO vague sometimes. I am sure this will be a great help to other SEO people around."

-- Hasit R.

My Reply:

I agree completely with your sentiments and I hope my response sets your confusion to rest.

To answer your question I need to break it into two parts; the first covering backlinks that require reciprocal links and the second being 'organic' (and more powerful) backlinks that were provided naturally by site owners because they like your site.

1. **Artificial Backlinks** (ones that require you link back to them in return)

These backlinks must be very carefully obtained. It is important to remember that major search engines like Google will scrutinize these links the most because they appear to be links obtained versus being provided non grata. As a result you should ensure that the links you obtain are from extremely relevant sites. The "relevance" factor is usually where the confusion sets in when I am explaining this to clients so I will try to be clearer. The best way to provide clarity in this matter is to place ourselves in the position of a machine... which a spider essentially is. Always consider this question when evaluating relevance; if you were a ruthlessly logical entity would you see a clear relevance between your site and the site you are considering linking to? If the answer is clearly and undoubtedly 'yes' then this is a link that you should consider further. If you are unsure then you can be reasonably certain that a search engine will not be impressed with the link and you will be wasting your time attaining the link.

Considering the link further now places you in a position of evaluating the quality of the backlink site. Is it currently listed in Google and other search engines? Does the site have a decent Google PageRank? Look at the source code of the page and check within the hyperlink of other backlinks to make sure there a "no follow" tag is not present; this tag will nullify the link's benefit. The "no follow" hyperlink tag was instituted by Google partly to allow webmasters to avoid passing on the advantage of their page rank to linked sites.

Please note, this is not to be confused with the robots "no index" tag that may appear within the header of the page or the robots.txt file; you should check these as well to ensure that the page is being indexed by Google.

2. Organic Link Building

The more organic links you obtain from relevant websites the better your site will do – without a doubt. Many find organic links the toughest to obtain but in most cases this is not true; unless their website does not inspire a person to link back to it. The fact is that many websites offer something of value that is worthy of linking to, such as, great original content or useful and compatible services/products. The key is to understand this value and pitch it in a manner that inspires positive feedback.

For example, when StepForth does link building we educate the webmasters we contact on the benefits of linking to a 9 year old SEO company with free, up-to-date and original search engine news articles. If we contacted a design firm the benefits are an increased perception that they care for their client's online success by freely providing them with such high quality content and tutorials. We would also allow the design firm to republish the content we write in their own newsletters which would again provide more value to their clientele. Each of these benefits in turn provide additional links to StepForth without us having to provide a reciprocal link.

Also consider becoming active in online blogs, forums and newsgroups. Each of these realms is indexed by search engines and you will build more relevant links by having a link to your site within the signature of each post. Just make sure that the places you post in are relevant to your business; that should not be hard considering how many vertical discussion groups there are out there.

Further Information on Organic Link Building from the Guru: Eric Ward

In addition there are other ways to create links that can provide powerful dividends. To this I bow to the [link guru, Eric Ward](#). Here is an excerpt from his "[Content Publicity Strategic Plan](#)" service; yes it is a mouthful but it looks like a very effective method.

Content from Eric Ward's Content Publicity Strategic Plan – [Here is a Link](#).

Publicity and links for your content don't just come from other web sites

While link building is important, most people fail to realize that if all you do is try and request links from a bunch of other web sites, you are missing the most important venues of all. What are these venues? Listed below are some examples. I'll research and compile for you a reviewed list of target venues where your content announcement can be sent, including...

- ? **Topical directories**, aka "Hub" sites within your niche, run by real people, not link farms and reciprocal link clubs. Those are pointless.
- ? **Niche and subject specific** search engines that are a fit just for your site's content and features. There are vertical search engines for hundreds of topics. Are you in them?
- ? **Key web site reviewers**, like Yahoo Picks of the Week, FORBES Best of the Web. I have HUNDREDS of these "under the radar" contacts that will never appear in any public media directory. Bacon's is clueless, frankly.
- ? **Blogs**. There are bloggers out there who will write about your site (and link to it) This is much different than blog comment spam links and other silly tactics people try to use to "seed" URLs in the blogosphere. For example, One of my clients was a large family magazine publisher that launched a web site about Halloween costumes. I found over 50 Blogs about Halloween. When I contacted those Blog owners and alerted them to the new site, every one of them linked to it. Repeat: Every one of the Blogs linked to my client's Halloween site. Those links are gold. They are not links for engines

- and rankings, they are links seen by people in the exact place they are most interested in them.
- ? **Private e-Groups** that are a topical match for your content and that regularly write about (and link to) other sites. I regularly find hundreds of people that will gladly write about and link to quality web content in their discussion group.
 - ? **Web/e-zines and e-newsletters** that announce and review Web sites like Netsurfer Digest, SCOUT Report, and hundreds of others.
 - ? Site announcement **mailing lists**.

A Free Link Building Tutorial:

There is an extremely detailed article on Search Engine Watch that outlines "[131 \(Legitimate\) Link Building Strategies](#)" that I highly recommend you review if you want more information on this subject.

What Are Good and Bad URLs and How to Fix the Bad Ones.

Question in Response to Article: [Demystifying Your Competitor's Ranking Success](#)

I found this article very helpful. At one point, after the following sentence, you invite people to contact you to learn more about the programming tweak. "This tweak is extremely common and highly recommended for anyone who has a database driven website with unfriendly URLs "

I would be interested to have any details on the programming tweak you mention.

We use database-driven URLs which only have one parameter and that we understood would not present problems to Google etc. For example <http://www.domain.com/princeedward-yachts.asp?class=for-sale>

Best regards,
Paul C.

My Reply:

Great question and one that I get quite often; hopefully I can lay this question to rest for many of my readers. First of all you are correct, Google and many of the top search engines would not have a problem indexing the link that you provided. In fact, I can say right now that your links will be perfectly fine for all of the search engines out there that matter in the world of traffic.

For comparison purposes, here is a BAD URL:

<http://www.surfboardsforyou.com/boards/filename.php?id=F98ZF4&productId=39222§ion=wicked&brand=582&template=532>

This would be a BETTER URL:

<http://www.surfboardsforyou.com/boards/wickedboards/39222/board532/>

OR you could get away with the following URL because it only has a single variable which provides no issue for search engines to index.

<http://www.surfboardsforyou.com/boards/wickedboards/39222/?prod=board532>

The Tweak I Mentioned

The tweak I was speaking about is used to modify your dynamic URLs in order to make them appear static. Essentially this is a customization that needs to be done to a server to ensure that dynamic URL's (where lots of "?&=" appear) look like static URLs. By creating static URLs you can be reasonably sure that the search engines will index your website deeper and in a quicker fashion.

? **Apache Servers: Mod Rewrite**

In Apache servers and it is called Mod Rewrite. Here is a link to a [search engine watch forum thread](#) discussing this.

? **Windows Servers: ISAPI Rewrites**

This is a tool especially designed for Windows IIS servers and it operates essentially the same as the Apache Mod Rewrite. [More information on ISAPI Rewrite.](#)

? **Windows: .Net Rewrite**

Ok, I am no programmer or system administrator so I am getting out of my depth here but I believe this is another tool that would work for [rewriting URLs for websites using .Net](#) (this link is definitely for techies only!)

SEO Friendly URL Guidelines

Here are a couple general rules for URL's:

1. Even with mod rewrite it is vital that you do not have too many subdirectories. If there are too many then the search engines may limit their indexing. See this [video from Google Engineer Matt Cutts](#) where he describes this very issue. As a general rule I would not have any more than 3 subdirectories within a URL.
2. Use keywords within your URLs; if you see the opportunity to create a subdirectory using a keyword related the topic of that subdirectory go for it. Just ensure not to get repetitive. i.e. /Mercedes-benz-2006/Mercedes-benz/Mercedes.php. That just looks horrible and it may not go over very well with the search engines.
3. Avoid session tagging on websites that you want to have indexed. Session tags will be applied to search engine robots just like any other person and these id's are stop signs for search engine spiders.