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The Dark Side Of **Link Building**

By Loren Baker



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The Dark Side Of **Link Building**

By Loren Baker

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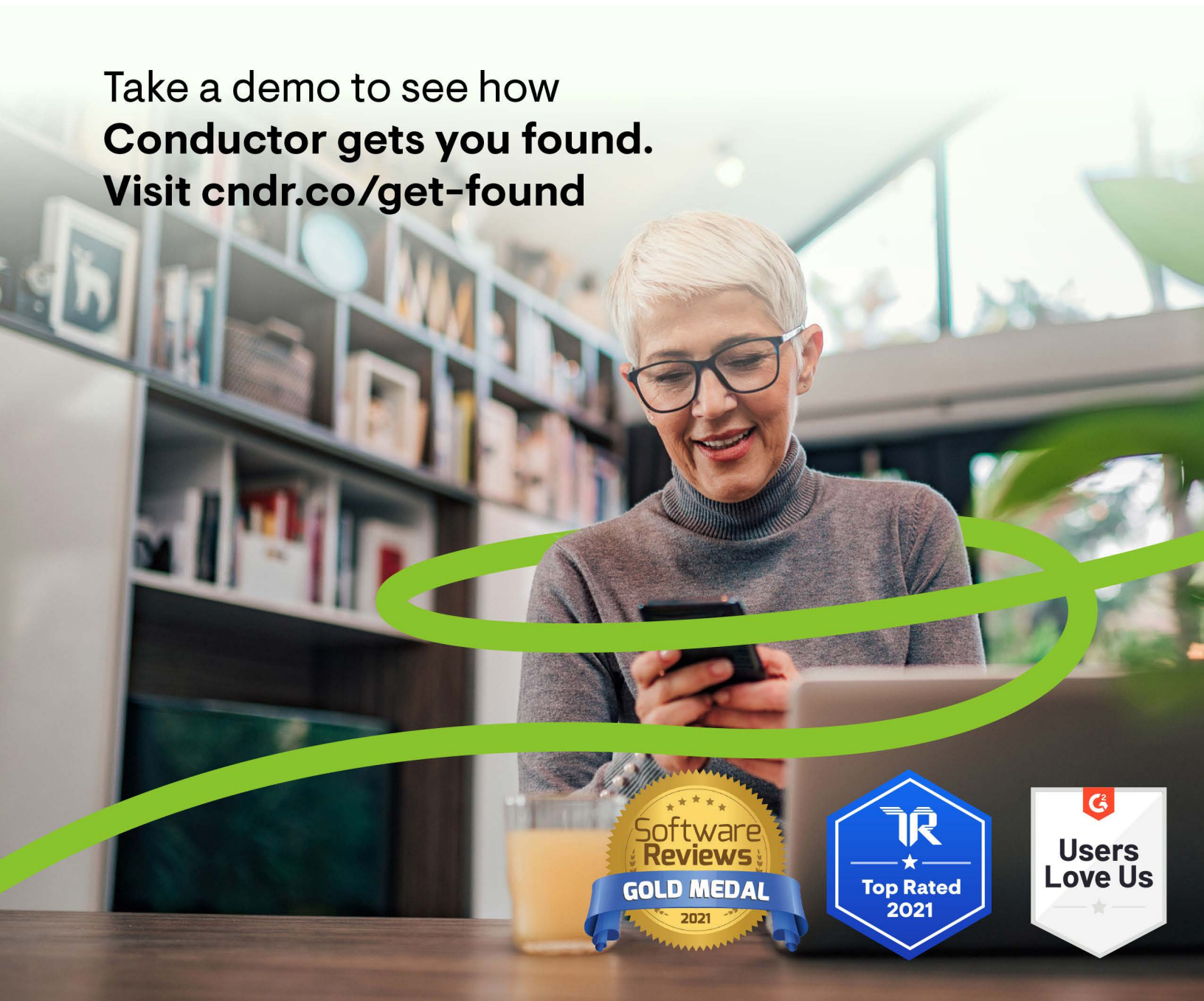
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Introduction: Is There Still A “Wild West” In SEO?

Before 2012, it wasn't that difficult to get a website to the top of page one in Google results. All you needed was technical know-how, original content, and site authority. Then, with some carefully crafted linking budget, you could rocket a page to the front page of Google for pretty much any keyword relevant to the site.

The tactics people employed back then were generally called “[link schemes](#).” Google describes link schemes as links that are created to manipulate search results. It's a broad definition that includes many different tactics.

Google search results relied heavily on [PageRank](#) when the algorithms were less advanced. One could manipulate PageRank because it weighted the volume of links pointing to a website heavily.

Money for links changed hands frequently. If you had a site that ranked well, you could sell links from your pages. And there were all sorts of manipulative strategies for pushing a page to the top of search.

You could run an article through a spinner for a few hundred permutations and post them en masse on article directories with links back to your website.

Or, you could make deals with other webmasters and set up networks of websites all linking to one another.



Loren Baker

Founder,
Search Engine Journal

It didn't always matter how relevant the websites were to one another. The link was what mattered, and almost anything went as far as acquiring links. It was a wild west, and the fastest SEO on the draw could single-handedly change a search engine results page (SERP).

Unfortunately, the unscrupulous nature of these tactics meant that Google's search results were becoming irrelevant and unhelpful to users.

Google answered with updates, first with [Panda](#) in 2011, targeting some of the biggest "content farms" – or basically sites that people never read.

Then the [Penguin update](#) hit, which basically targeted entities that many sites hit by the Panda update **linked out to** (and beyond). Many more spammy SEO tactics were obliterated. The hits kept on coming, too, with tweaks to these updates and subsequent algorithm changes focused on improving search quality.

The sheriff came to town, and to a degree, the "wild west" of SEO was history.

But, just like any history, the full story isn't quite that cut and dry. Some of those tactics kept going for a while, some remain in use today, and some old tactics aren't all black-hat.

Search evolves all the time. Google releases hundreds to thousands of updates in any given year. Both white- and black-hat marketers discover new strategies all the time.

Today, SEO is a much more mature industry. But that doesn't mean everything is cut and dry. Those old tactics come around again. Sometimes, they're reimaged in interesting ways. Sometimes, they're just rebranded spam and engaging in them is asking for trouble.

The thing about black-hat tactics is that they sometimes work **really well** – that is, until they **don't**. When they stop working, they tend to implode. And when that happens, you could be in for a lot of work undoing the damage.

Not everyone performs black-hat tactics with nefarious intent. Understanding them is essential, even if you think they're outdated and irrelevant. Otherwise, it's possible to purchase spammy services that have been rebranded or even stumble into manipulative strategies with the best of intentions.

This ebook will take you through eight black- and gray-hat tactics. It will tell you what to look out for and how these tactics might hurt you. But it will also look at the positive side and ask:

Is there a way to use these tactics ethically in ways that improve search?

Check out the tactics you're interested in, and if any other questions come up, you can always submit them to SEJ's [Ask An SEO](#) advice column, where industry experts respond to reader questions.

Saddle up, partner!

Editor's Note

"The Dark Side Of Link Building" has been my favorite project since I started working at SEJ.

I started in SEO as a freelancer and then transitioned into agencies full-time. Sometimes, I worked on campaigns for clients who needed help recovering from bad link building.

It happens more often than you might think and can happen to smart, savvy people.

If you're an SEO professional, I hope the resources in this book can help you educate your teams or clients.

Education is one of the most valuable services SEO professionals can offer. It's the reason I'm so grateful for the opportunity to take on the ebooks program at SEJ.

If you do SEO yourself for your website or business, keep this book in mind when you're looking for new partners. It's surprisingly easy to get caught out by black-hat SEO.

I'm also excited to share this ebook with you because it's the first step in a new editorial direction for our ebooks program.

I hope you enjoy it, and I welcome your feedback.

Sincerely,

Ben Steele

Senior Editor, Ebooks

The Golden Rules Of Link Building

Golden Rule #1

Pay For Work, Not Links

- Link building is difficult and time-consuming. There's nothing wrong with paying people to do the work of acquiring links.
 - But don't pay a website directly for a link.
- Some businesses choose to break down the costs of link building on a per-link basis. This can be fine.
 - Ask whether they use your budget to purchase links directly.
 - They should say no.
 - Ask whether they have agreements or relationships with the sites they build links on.
 - If they say yes, ask about these relationships.

Golden Rule #2

Cheap Links Aren't Cheap

- If the price is too good to be true, it's probably not a helpful link.
 - Google often discounts low-quality links, making any money you pay for them a waste.
- Low-quality links bring risks. Manual actions are rare, but they are an expensive and time-consuming recovery.

Golden Rule #3

Always Disclose Relationships

- Clearly disclose financial relationships to consumers if you buy or sell sponsorships/ads with links.
- Disclose these relationships to search engines by using rel=nofollow or rel=sponsored.
 - This will remove the SEO value of the link.
- Don't try to build links with pre-existing agreements or relationships for SEO.
 - This includes payments, link exchanges, and exchanging products and services for links.

Golden Rule #4

Future-Proof Your SEO

- Google is always updating its algorithms and improving at discovering link schemes.
- If Google has stated it doesn't like a certain type of link, avoid it, even if the strategy currently works.
- Bad links expose your website to future risk that increases over time.

How To Vet Link Building Service Providers

✓ Spotting Sketchy Outreach & Pitches

- If someone emails you to offer you links, that's an immediate red flag.
- Requests for links on your site can be legitimate, but they likely aren't if:
 - They offer to pay for links.
 - They want to exchange links.
 - They want to trade posts or articles for links.
- A website owner promises you links from multiple domains.
- Anyone offers you links with guaranteed DA: How can they be so sure?
 - DA is a third-party metric and not a ranking factor.

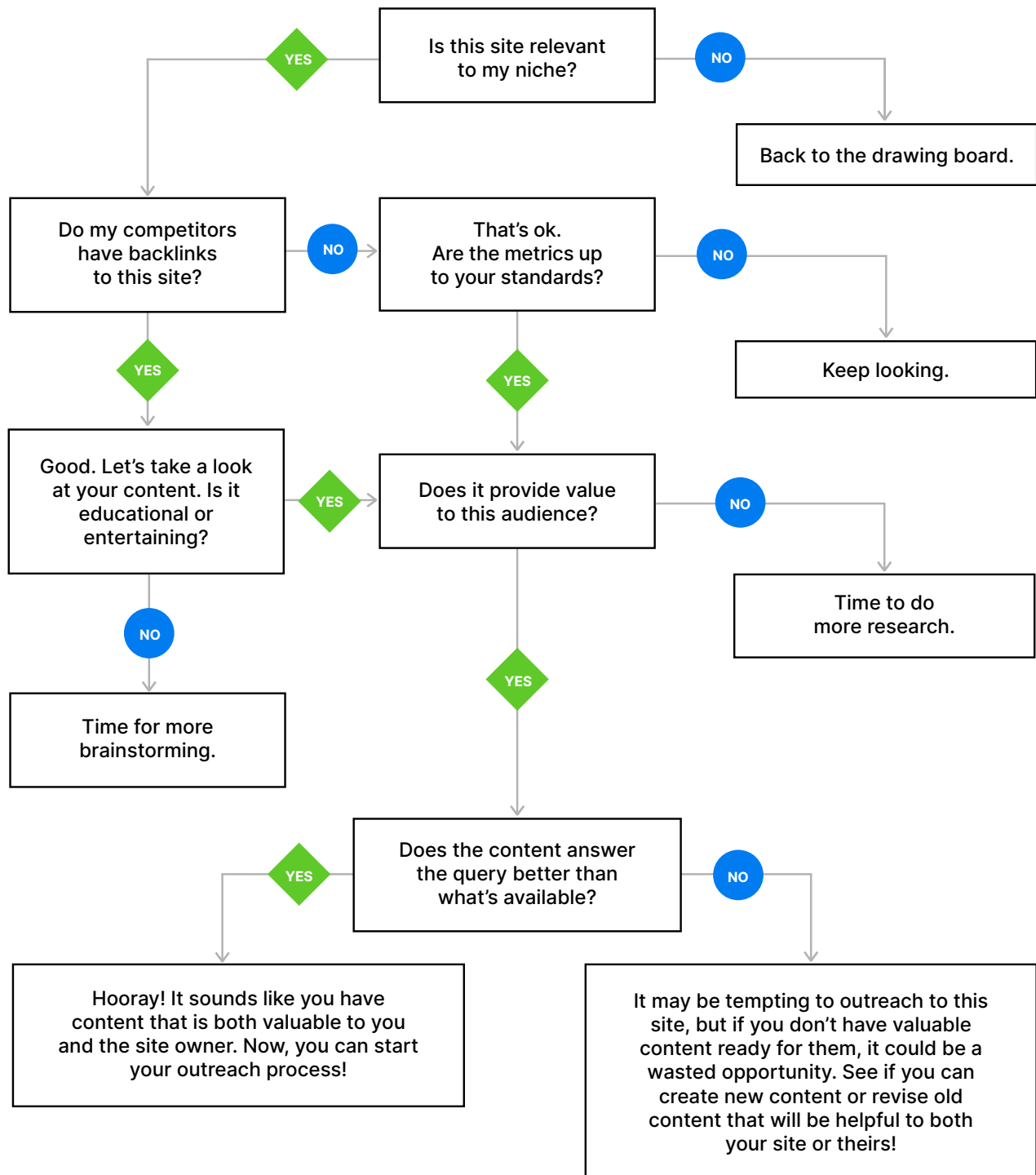
✓ Ask Your Service Provider

- For examples of sites they publish on before you sign.
 - Do a deep dive on those sites and look for red flags.
- For your backlink report after the first month (and as often as you like).
 - Use the bad link identification guides to vet the links your agency builds.
- Whether they create new domains or blogs for link building.
 - If they say yes, or you find brand new domains in your link reports, that's a red flag.
- If they use your budget to purchase links directly.
 - If they say yes, run!
- For their opinions on any of the tactics in this book you're interested in.

Do I Need Or Just Want A Backlink?

By Kaitie Frank, Digital Marketing Copywriter

Sponsored By  PAGE ONE POWER



PART 1

Generating Lots Of Links Fast

Before Panda and Penguin, SEO was all about quantity over quality. If you could build links more quickly than your competitors, you could outrank them. With the right automated tools or a willingness to pay, you could acquire links en masse and enjoy quick ranking improvements.

If you wanted to dominate any results page for any keyword with enough links, you could do it.

Nowadays, Google is so good at detecting mass link strategies that the algorithms simply ignore them. While particularly egregious infractions on quality guidelines may bring manual actions, most of the time, it doesn't need to bother actively policing link spam. It's made link spam so ineffective that it's just a waste of time and money.

If you watch responses from Google's team to questions about spammy tactics, most of them come with an ominous "we can tell what you're doing, and it doesn't work" type of answer.

But are any of these tactics still relevant today? Can you take a tactic that has been abused and use it ethically? Sometimes, they can be part of a legitimate digital marketing strategy.

But one caveat remains: If you're using these tactics purely for the links, they won't work out well for you.



Link Tactics Primer: **Private Blog Networks**

⚠️ **The Pitfalls Of PBNs:**

- PBNs are explicitly against Google's guidelines about link schemes.
- Links from PBNs could end up worthless.
- Using PBNs excessively can result in manual penalties.

👍 **What Are The Best Practices For PBNs?**

- There aren't any. SEJ considers them too risky.
- If you own more than one website, linking between them risks Google viewing it as a link scheme.
- But you **could** link between your websites if:
 - The sites are relevant to one another **and**
 - The links provide users with genuine value, **and**
 - You're transparent about the relationship between the websites, **and**
 - **You don't do it for SEO.** It's safest to nofollow those links.

✓ **How To Identify PBNs:**

- Low-quality domains with thin content or that appear to be used exclusively for "guest posting."
- Domains with very similar names.
- Subdomains on blog service websites. Ex: <name>.blogspot.com
- Brand new domains.

Introduction To Private Blog Networks

A private blog network (PBN) can be simply defined as a network of different websites owned by the same entity for the purpose of creating links to other websites.

The idea is pretty simple: Buy a bunch of different domains, put content on them, and then use them to link to a target site. SEOs would look for existing domains with history to make it easier. In theory, their collective influence improves a target site's rankings.

This was common before 2012, and many PBNs were filled with automated, poor-quality content. But they worked, and very well at that.

PBNs pretty clearly fall under Google's definition of a [link scheme](#). It's in Google's first words about link schemes:

“Any links intended to manipulate PageRank or a site's ranking in Google search results may be considered part of a link scheme and a violation of Google's Webmaster Guidelines. This includes any behavior that manipulates links to your site or outgoing links from your site.”

This is a very broad definition, but it pretty clearly includes PBNs. Google's Search Advocate, John Mueller, has confirmed this:

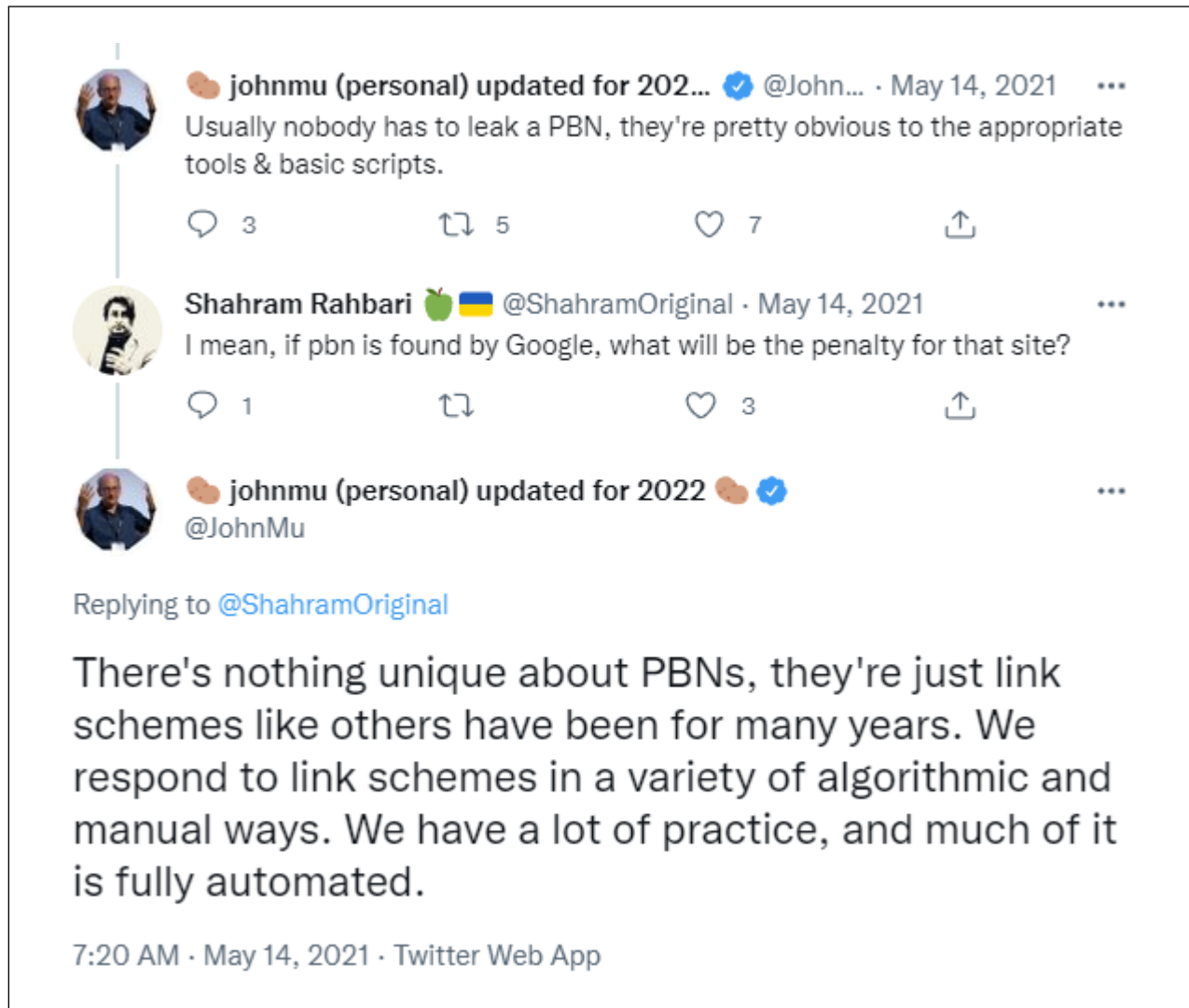


Image source: Screenshot of John Mueller's Twitter reply, August 2022

So, is this case closed on PBNs? They used to work, but now they don't, right?
Not exactly.

Do PBNs Still Work?

If you've ever used an SEO service that includes link building, there's a good chance you've got links coming in from a PBN somewhere.

Even in recent years, [PBNs remain quite common](#). And, considering Google's hardline stance against them, its advertising policies regarding PBNs sure are interesting. Check out this ad I found:

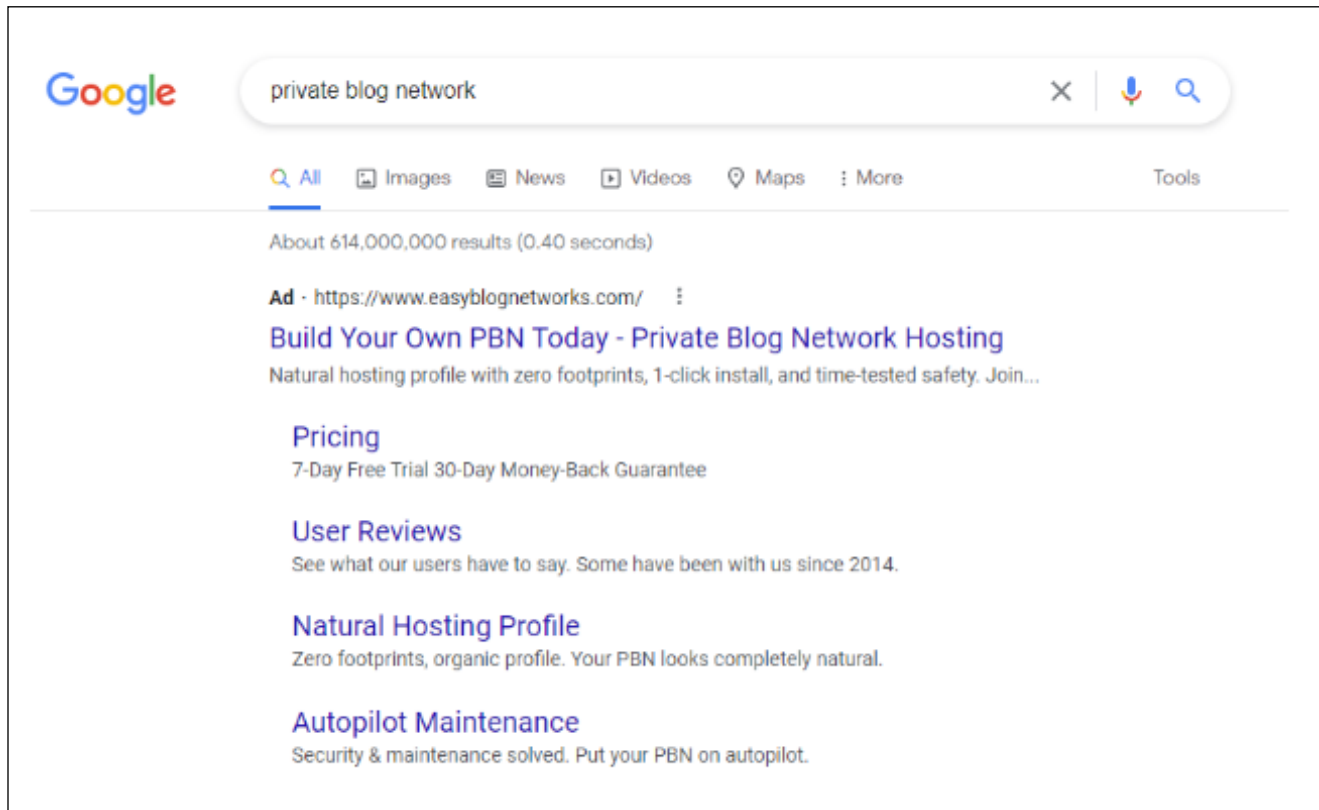


Image source: Screenshot from search for [private blog network], Google, August 2022

Setting up and maintaining PBNs is much more expensive because owners have to work a lot harder to keep from being automatically penalized. But ask around – I'll bet a lot of link builders will tell you how common PBNs still are.

In fact, with the increased availability of cloud hosting and blogging services, it's gotten easier to use PBNs in some ways.

[Link building the right way](#) is difficult. It costs time and money. Hours of research and outreach can be wasted if someone eventually says “no.” PBNs remain a tempting tactic because the network owner has ultimate control over the links.

That’s why many SEO service providers use PBNs to build links to clients, even with their inherent risks and maintenance expenses.

Make no mistake; [PBNs are a risky tactic](#) that can negatively affect your SEO. But anyone who says they’re strictly a thing of the past isn’t telling the whole story.

And that’s why you have to be extra careful.

In most cases, it’s unlikely that your website will be [penalized by Google](#) if it finds a few links it doesn’t like pointing to your website. It will probably just discount those specific links and move on. That’s not a penalty; it’s just the algorithms at work.

But if your website acquires many unnatural links, you could receive a manual penalty.

One great way to **increase** your risk of receiving a manual action is to build a PBN yourself.

There’s a difference between acquiring a few links with a shady tactic and building one. It shouldn’t be a surprise that Google comes down harder on the sources of manipulative links.

So, it’s best to avoid participating in PBNs, and you should evaluate any SEO service providers to ensure that they aren’t using PBNs to provide you with links. Those links probably aren’t worth your money.

Link Tactics Primer: **Directories**

The Pitfalls Of Directories:

- Directories no longer work well for SEO, as Google discounts many directory links.
 - And they're very easy for the bots to spot!
- Don't pay to be listed, as this violates Google's quality guidelines.
- A large number of directory links can be suspicious and could result in a manual penalty.

What Are The Best Practices For Directories?

- Not any directory will do! Look for directories that are relevant to your audience.
- Ensure your listing fits within a directory's categories.
- Focus on directories that offer recognition and build trust: Yellow Pages, BBB, etc.
- Rating sites and review sites can be very helpful!
 - Remember, directories build audiences and trust – not SEO.

How To Identify Bad Directories:

- Poor organization or content control: disorganized or non-existent categories.
- Difficult to use or search.
- No supplementary information, just long lists of links.
- Links to other directories.
- Article directories that invite you to submit content or articles for links.

Introduction To Link Directories

Link directories are another one of those old tactics that began with a genuine use case. But when people realized they could make a profit, the tactic quickly ran out of control.

Link directories began as a sort of online phone book. When search engines weren't quite as useful, users had to do a lot more up-front work to find what they were looking for. Link directories were, at first, helpful and searchable portals that collected and organized links.

That is until people realized that they could charge listing fees to website owners.

Back when every link was equal, you could make a lot of money selling them, especially if you had a website with a high [PageRank score](#).

SEJ Contributor Jeremy Knauff describes how [link directories](#) got out of control:

“Untold thousands of directories popped up in varying forms. Some were hyper-targeted, focusing on a very small niche, while others were general directories that would link to literally anyone who was willing to pay the fee.

This quickly turned into a self-feeding business model where people launching new directories would then submit their URL to existing directories to increase their link equity – measured by Google's PageRank, or PR, back then.”

So, a lot of folks started creating directories to generate income. Since new websites couldn't command high rates, these new directories needed to build PageRank.

And what was a really easy way to do that?

Submit their directory to other directories!

And so directories turned into a cycle: As soon as a directory matured enough to attract paid links, new ones were born and submitted to it.

This was, quite clearly, terrible. It became another tactic that Google had to hamstring.

Are Link Directories Still Useful?

Even in a post-Penguin world, link directories have remained quite relevant. Acquiring links in [high-quality directories](#) **can be** safe and effective.

It's just probably not going to boost your SEO. Google learned its lesson with that one.

But directories can help you build trust with your audience, especially if you run a local business. After all, you could argue that [Google Business Profile](#) is a type of directory.

There are quite a few [online directories](#) that boast a lot of traffic. The Yellow Pages, your local Chamber of Commerce, the Better Business Bureau, and many directories can be great places to list your business.

Just make sure you're targeting directories that have relevant categories for your business and that you think your target audience might use.

One exception to note is that Google is very much not a fan of [article directories](#). These are generally filled with low-quality content that contains links. This generally results in over-syndication and spammy content, said Matt Cutts, Google's former head of search spam, in 2014. They don't seem to have changed their opinion since then, and their technology has only improved. So, don't do it.

Link Tactics Primer: **Press Release Links**

⚠ **The Pitfalls Of Press Release Links:**

- Google easily recognizes and devalues press release links.
 - Since press releases are written by the company they focus on, Google doesn't consider them natural links.
- Inventing press release campaigns for SEO can harm your reputation (in addition to not working).
 - Spamming journalists with lots of press releases can burn bridges.
 - Readers can smell bogus intentions a mile away.

👍 **What Are The Best Practices For Press Releases?**

- Press releases CAN improve SEO!
 - An interesting campaign can generate traffic and organic interest on social media.
- Create genuine, interesting press releases:
 - Do something newsworthy.
 - Make press releases short, to the point, and attention-grabbing.
 - Curate a list of journalists to send press releases to; don't just send mass emails.
- Don't run press release campaigns to get links.

✓ **How To Identify Bad Press Release Campaigns:**

- "Nothing" news about inconsequential changes.
 - If it sounds like it could be an internal email, it probably should be.
- Long-winded or clumsily written content.
- No targeted plan for which journalists and publications to reach out to.

Introduction To Press Release Links

The following is an excerpt from my [article about press releases](#) on SEJ. Check it out if you're particularly interested in how to craft a successful press release.

While press releases have been around [since 1906](#), when Ivy Lee released the first one to cover a railroad accident, they took on new importance in the digital age.

And like everything that boosted SEO success, press release links started out well.

And then came the abuse. (Shocking, right?)

Once people figured out links from top-notch new sites could help with rankings, they began writing all kinds of press releases for all sorts of things or changing the color of their carpet. (True story. I seriously saw this one!)

All the spam led Google to notice and penalize sites that carried these links.

The result?

“Newswire” sites have added the [nofollow attribute](#) to links.

So yes, you can still get links from press releases.

But since they'll be nofollow links, they [may not help](#) your SEO.

Here's what Google's John Mueller [said about it](#) in 2018:

“(W)e try to ignore links from things like press releases because we know, in general, companies put the press releases out themselves. So any links in there are essentially placed by themselves.

But if these links happen and they're out there, it's not something you need to worry about because you can't really take them all back.

I just wouldn't rely on kind of press releases as a strategy for building up links for a website because, like I said, we do ignore most of those."

That lays it out pretty clearly. You don't need to worry about these kinds of links if you already have them. But don't try and build them just for links because it's probably a waste of time.

Are Press Releases Still Relevant Today?

So, if you're not getting the SEO credit for links from news sites, is it still worth including press releases in your digital strategy?

Short answer: Yes.

However, there's one important thing you absolutely have to keep in mind. That is **why** you're sending a press release.

Is it to:

- Inform people of a big event your company is hosting?
- Announce the release of a new product or service?
- Gain attention for your brand?
- Prevent a crisis from exploding?

If you can answer "yes" to any of these, then go ahead and write that press release.

But if you're doing it to gain links for your new site, stop immediately.

Even if the "newswire" does link to you, the link may not do anything to help you on Google's SERPs.

But here's the thing: That last sentence isn't *strictly* true. There is a way press releases can be used to boost SEO; it's just not in the way you think.

How To Optimize A Press Release To Benefit SEO

While press releases don't *directly* impact search rankings, they can boost them *indirectly*.

For example, you could get featured on a news site and [attract people's interest](#).

Intrigued by your release, they flock to your site, thus boosting your traffic.

If they love your site, they'll stay and click through to different pages.

And if your [content is amazing](#), they'll share it on social media or link to it on their own sites, gaining you (you guessed it!) quality links.

And **these will boost** your SEO.

So, spammy backlinks gained through low-quality news?

No.

A ton of [traffic and backlinks](#) from new fans?

Yes.

That's how you "optimize" a press release for SEO.

Four Steps To Safely Build Links

By Lauren Carel, SEO Manager

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With so much content out there, websites must be especially creative about building high-quality links. Links start with high-quality content. These techniques, along with patience and time, will help build your brand, community, authority, and traffic.

1. Be PR-Worthy

Embrace a PR-oriented content strategy centered around highly helpful, informative, and valuable content:

- Create content that's likely to be sourced by news sites, bloggers, and others writing similar content. Use previously shared content and competitor research as a reference.
- Prioritize getting relevant news and updates live faster, so others find your content first.
- Network with writers and industry publishers.
- Incorporate guest writing from reputable partners.

2. Be A Content Writer's Resource

In the same way you consider what topics to write about, consider how others in your industry might seek out and source your work.

Compose original "skyscraper" content or "ultimate guides" that include shareable and relevant tips, recommendations, quotes, statistics, etc., especially as part of:

- Large-scale comprehensive reports.
- Glossaries.

- Lists.
- Step-based processes.
- 'Why' and 'What' based content.

3. Be Branded, Visible, And Shareable

Carefully consider the visual appeal of the content you create. Add your branding and custom styling to assets that are easily shareable. Use content types such as:

- Short- or long-form infographics.
- Graphs and other data visualizations.
- Downloadable reports.
- Interactive experiences.
- Videos.

4. Create And Participate In Communities

Engage and network with audiences by sharing content on accessible channels so they can upvote and like your content. For example:

- Reddit and LinkedIn Groups/Pulse: Traffic, upvotes, and shares can boost site reputation. Other social channels have visibility as well but start with these.
- Mix: StumbleUpon's new platform aggregates links from across the web and shares them with interested readers.

While these channels don't give you direct links, they can give your content greater exposure, introducing new opportunities for links. The more people you reach through them, the more potential backlinks your content can attract.

PART 2

Link Negotiation

Deals struck in back-alley email inboxes.

Links changing hands for the right price.

Or unspoken agreements that seem perfectly reasonable.

If you trade something for a link, be it money, other links, or goods and services, you could be flirting with trouble unless you clearly disclose it.

The rub is that disclosing these relationships generally means sacrificing the SEO value of the links. And often, people would rather not do that.

Even today, people still trade and purchase links like SEO commodities without disclosure. It should come as no surprise that Google has been explicit that it doesn't like these tactics, and it can ignore these links whenever it detects them.

In Google's view, links should be genuinely earned. So, which kinds of negotiation tactics are frowned upon? Do they still work, and is there a way to engage in them ethically? Let's look at three of the main examples and investigate.



Link Tactics Primer: **Buying Links**

⚠ The Pitfalls Of Buying Links:

- Buying links without disclosure is a violation of Google's guidelines (and, potentially, FTC rules).
- Buying links for SEO is likely a waste of money. Google ignores them when it finds them.
 - With anything that violates Google's guidelines, you risk a penalty if you do it at scale.
- If a service provider engages in this tactic without your knowledge, your site could still be affected.

👍 What Are The Best Practices For Buying Links?

- Paid links undergo strict scrutiny; don't try and trick search engines or consumers.
- You can purchase links directly if they are appropriately disclosed and tagged with a link attribute (`rel=nofollow` or `rel=sponsored`).
 - Use these paid opportunities to build your brand's reputation, not to boost SEO.
 - **Any form of compensation**, including free products, must be disclosed.
- Link building is a legitimate business when it's done according to Google's guidelines.
- Pay for **work**, not **links**.
 - Creating resources, researching, and outreach is difficult and time-consuming. You can pay experts to do this for you.
 - Make sure that you're paying for the work of link building, not link placements.

- Cheap or fast services likely break Google's guidelines, so vet them carefully.
- Cheap **links** are too good to be true.
- Don't buy "sitewide" links.
- Don't sell links unless you disclose the financial relationship, and tag the links with nofollow!

✓ How To Identify Bad Paid Links:

- If a website features many guest posts about different topics containing business links, it may be selling links.
- Offers for individual links over email, freelance marketplace websites, or anyone who guarantees certain websites or specific DA metrics are likely bad, paid links.

Introduction To Buying And Selling Links

Paid links are a [negative ranking factor](#).

The simple definition of a paid link is that if you exchange anything for a link without properly tagging and disclosing it, it's against [Google's guidelines](#). It may also be against [FTC endorsement guidelines](#).

So, if you buy, sell, or trade **anything** for a link, you're part of a link scheme.

The risk is likely much greater if you're selling than if you're buying.

If you're buying links as part of a link-building strategy, chances are you're just wasting money.

But if you sell links to other people, you're playing a much more dangerous game. Google is more likely to take manual action against sites that sell links in an attempt to profit off of manipulating search.

Why Do People Buy And Sell Links?

People do still [buy backlinks for SEO](#).

In the past, before the updates that made many of the tactics in this book obsolete, trading in links was seen as positive. People viewed it like any other kind of business. A link has value, and if you own a domain with a lot of value in its links, why not take advantage of that business opportunity?

It turned out that this wasn't great for search results. Websites buying their way to the top meant that search didn't work well for users. The "voting" power of links works best when there isn't a pre-existing agreement to trade a link for something else of value.

But some people still view buying and selling links as a legitimate business practice. Some people learn it one way and don't know better. And some people do it because it works (temporarily).

If you hide it well enough, it can take some time for Google to catch up to a site that is buying or selling links. For some people, that's enough time to make their money and abandon the website when Google catches on.

If you're not careful, it's quite easy to accidentally hire an SEO service provider who will be happy to take that reckless attitude with your website.

Can You Buy Or Sell Links Effectively?

Absolutely!

As I mentioned, Google takes a dim view of **undisclosed** financial relationships regarding links. But sponsored content and links are a vital part of online business.

Sponsored Links

As part of a brand awareness campaign or lead generation strategy, paid placements are powerful and ethical tools – when properly disclosed. That means that there should be a clear disclosure of the financial relationship between users **and** search engines. Usually, the search engine disclosure uses a rel=nofollow or rel=sponsored link attribute.

These links do not pass SEO value, so make sure you're seeking these opportunities out for your marketing goals, not your SEO goals.

Link Building Services

It's also perfectly reasonable to hire an SEO professional or agency to do the **work** of building links for you. Link building is a legitimate business.

[Acquiring backlinks the right way](#) requires a lot of work. You must create resources worthy of links, perform research, conduct outreach, and build genuine relationships, among other tasks. This takes time and expertise, and it's reasonable to pay people to do this work.

You just have to vet them carefully to ensure that they won't involve you with link schemes without your knowledge. If they're just going to buy links on your behalf, then they're putting you at risk.

At best, an unscrupulous service provider will be a waste of money. At worst, you could end up spending more time and money [undoing the damage](#).

How Should You Buy Links?

You should absolutely consider **paying for link-building services** and **paying for sponsored content placements**. But remember the golden rules:

Golden Rule #1

Pay For Work, Not Links

Just because someone charges per link doesn't necessarily mean that they're shady. Some businesses choose to break down the costs of link building on a per-link basis. Handle all service providers with the same level of scrutiny. Ask:

- Whether they use your budget to purchase links directly.
 - They should say no.
- Whether they have agreements or relationships with the sites they build links on.
 - If they say yes, ask about these relationships.

Golden Rule #2

Cheap Links Aren't Cheap

Avoid anyone who claims they can build your links cheaply and/or quickly. If the price or the number of backlinks they're offering sound too good to be true, they probably are.

You should also be wary of anyone who guarantees links on specific websites or specific third-party metrics like Domain Authority (DA). It's fine if they give you a range but run from anyone who tells you they can get you a DA 84 link.

Remember, [DA is not a ranking factor](#).

You'll encounter these tactics most commonly on freelance marketplace websites and through outreach emails in your inbox.

Golden Rule #3**Always Disclose Relationships**

By all means, pay for all the links you like! As long as you properly disclose them to readers, and they're tagged with `rel=nofollow` or `rel=sponsored`, you're in the clear. It's a productive and effective marketing strategy.

Just remember that this won't – and should not – help your SEO rankings directly.

Link Tactics Primer: **Link Exchanges**

⚠ **The Pitfalls Of Link Exchanges:**

- An agreement between two websites to link to each other, in any form, is against Google's guidelines.
 - This applies **even if the links are highly relevant**.
 - Relevance doesn't matter; the agreement corrupts the process.
- If a majority of your backlinks appear to be inorganic exchanges, you could be risking manual action.

👍 **What Are The Best Practices For Link Exchanges?**

- If two websites happen to link to one another, that's not necessarily bad. Introducing your business to the audience of a relevant, non-competing business is completely organic and a form of traditional marketing.
 - If there's no prior agreement, it's perfectly natural.
- If you find that a site links to you, and you decide that linking back to them is **ideal for your users**, then go ahead!
- If a page deserves a link, link to it.
- Don't link to other sites just because you're hoping for a link back, and don't negotiate for links.

✓ **How To Identify Bad Link Exchanges:**

- Ignore anyone who asks for a link exchange, no matter how relevant your sites are to one another.
- If you spot competitors with links to **and** from a website that isn't related to them, it could be a link exchange – don't try and outreach that website.

Introduction To Link Exchanges & Reciprocal Linking

In the previous chapter, we talked about how if you exchange anything for a link, it's a bad linking practice.

Unfortunately, that includes other links.

On the surface, exchanging links makes sense. You help someone out, they help you out back!

But Google doesn't want people "dealing" in links this way. The point of a link being a "vote" is that you create links to things that you believe provide genuine value. Any kind of exchange behind the scenes corrupts that idea.

This generally applies even if you believe the links do provide genuine value to users. Once you enter into an agreement, you've crossed the line.

So, don't go scratching any backs.

Do People Still Trade Links?

It's not quite as cut and dry as I stated above.

Reciprocal links happen all the time. It often makes sense for two related websites to have links going between them, and this often occurs completely naturally.

When reciprocal links happen this way, naturally and without a prior agreement, there's no problem.

If you specifically try to acquire reciprocal links, you're technically engaging in a link scheme.

That isn't to say that you can't do it at all. [Link exchange agreements](#) are probably quite common.

Google's guidelines state that "[excessive link exchanges](#)" count as link schemes. You could probably [build a few link exchanges](#) with other high-quality websites and business partners as long as you treat them like sponsored links, and they also benefit users.

You should nofollow these links and properly disclose relationships just like a paid link. This will significantly reduce their SEO value, but that's the point.

The intent is the kicker on this one. Link exchanges are fine if you don't use them to manipulate your website's rankings. If you **are** doing it to improve your SEO and you're not using nofollows, you're playing a riskier game.

Can You Build Effective Reciprocal Links For SEO?

Not really. You should be doing it for other reasons, just like paid links.

If you try and build these links for SEO, Google will probably notice.

Is it necessarily a big deal if Google pegs some of your links as unnatural? That depends. The chances are it will just ignore them. So, how much time and effort are you willing to potentially waste?

Manual penalties are, of course, a risk with all tactics that technically fall under the definition of a link scheme. As the algorithms get better, manual penalties aren't needed as much. You're unlikely to catch one for a few link exchanges, and Google's John Mueller said that a manual penalty would probably only be applied if link exchanges make up [most of your backlinks](#).

But I want to pause to remind you that engaging in any tactics that Google has explicitly said it doesn't like is **just bad business**. Many folks will say that if it works, you can do it as long as you're comfortable with the risk.

And that's true. If you want to build a business model on that kind of risk, people certainly have done it and still do it.

But, to be quite frank, it's a stupid risk in SEO because the **risk is always increasing**.

Would you take a bet where the odds change after you put your money down?

When you engage in bad link tactics, you can't properly prepare for the future risk you expose your website to.

Remember the golden rules from the last chapter? We're going to add one:

Golden Rule #4

Future-Proof Your SEO

Google releases algorithm updates all the time. None of us know what exactly goes into them because they're proprietary.

But you can be sure that if Google has **stated it doesn't like a type of link**, it is interested in **getting better at detecting it**.

So, don't base your link-building decisions on what works today, and especially not what worked in the past. Base them on the forward direction of search updates.

If you see reciprocal links in your link profile, don't worry about them. Just don't build them to intentionally manipulate your rankings.

How To ID A Toxic Link Farm

By Diana Martins, SEO Planner

Sponsored By  rockcontent

Although fundamental in an SEO strategy, **identifying a toxic link requires in-depth analysis**. In fact, it can be a tricky task: not every low-quality link is actively toxic. So, how do you determine whether a link is toxic or healthy? **How do you identify links coming from link farms?**

Here are some practical tips to help you!

What Is A Link Farm And How Do You Identify One?

A link farm is a site – or several of them – that exists only to **create links to other sites**. As it has no role other than that, it ends up creating a wave of spam for your site. Check these tips to identify if your site has received links like these:

1. To **evaluate your site's backlinks**, download them with your preferred tool and put them in a spreadsheet.
2. **Rank websites** using the tool's authority or quality score so you know which sites might be healthy or not. You may find sites that are healthy but new (and therefore have low authority), so it's important to analyze carefully.
3. See what the **website content** looks like. If it's superficial or poorly written, you're certainly facing spam.
4. Does the topic link or even the language have absolutely nothing to do with your content? Be suspicious.

5. If you see that the website is nothing more than a list of random links, this is also a strong link farm signal.
6. Domain links with random letters and numbers are almost certainly spam sites.
7. It's essential to analyze each site individually and not make generalizations.

After ranking all the links, you can go directly to Google and **learn how to [disavow these links](#)** to your domain.

Link Tactics Primer: **Cold Outreach**

⚠ **The Pitfalls Of Cold Outreach For Links:**

- People are sick of getting cold emails. Without the right strategy, cold outreach for links could be a wasted effort.
- If someone thinks you're participating in a shady tactic, cold outreach could damage your reputation.
- Engaging in any kind of undisclosed trade or agreement for links that pass SEO value is against Google's guidelines.

👍 **What Are The Best Practices For Cold Outreach?**

- You can ask people for links! But you must earn them with compelling, valuable content.
- Seek new relationships that provide genuine value for your audiences.
- Outreach requires research.
 - Look for high-quality websites that would be of interest to your target audience.
 - Avoid sites that engage in shady link tactics or that ask for money for links.
- Have a reason to reach out:
 - The site already mentioned you, and you have further information you think is valuable.
 - You have the expertise to share, content to link to, or something else of value.
 - Build content that will be attractive to users and site owners: exceptional writing, insightful studies, white papers, infographics, etc.

- Be engaging and polite, and explain how their audience will benefit from featuring your content.
- Don't buy, sell, or exchange links.
- Don't mass outreach without vetting each site!

✓ How To Identify Bad Cold Outreach:

- You have an in-depth guide on what not to do sitting in your spam folder.
 - And that's where your emails will go if you don't get it right.
- Many of the people outreaching with guest posts are trying to build links.
 - If you're interested in their content, ask for samples of their work and a list of the citations they plan to use.
 - Evaluate their content carefully, and remove or apply nofollows to links that don't provide genuine value.
 - If they put a lot of work in, have something original to say, **and** the links are helpful, you can consider allowing them.

Introduction To Cold Outreach

We've all seen the emails.

I've got a GREAT opportunity for you to boost your SEO with many backlinks. Hey, your website is really cool I'd love to give you FREE content... I'm providing paid guest posting opportunities with high-quality websites!

Except, you know, usually riddled with typos.

These kinds of campaigns give email outreach a bad name.

And it's a shame because email outreach can be both effective and ethical!

Google's John Mueller specifically said that [outreach is an appropriate link-building tactic](#) when it doesn't contain any kind of trade, deal, or dependency agreement. You can ask for links, but they must be given freely.

Outreach is one of the primary tools of link builders, white and black hats alike.

It's also a really fast way to damage your reputation and get your email on a bunch of block lists if you don't approach it well.

SEO is full of situations that can be likened to "[the tragedy of the commons](#)," where the "commons" resource is goodwill. Perfectly reasonable strategies get abused and twisted until either Google has to crack down, the community at large rejects them, or both.

Cold outreach suffers acutely from this phenomenon. Shady link builders in people's inboxes have abused their attention and goodwill. Your reader is probably sick of you before they even open your email (if they even see it).

A lot of the hate that SEOs get in email inboxes is unjustified, but – hold on, let me check my email real quick.

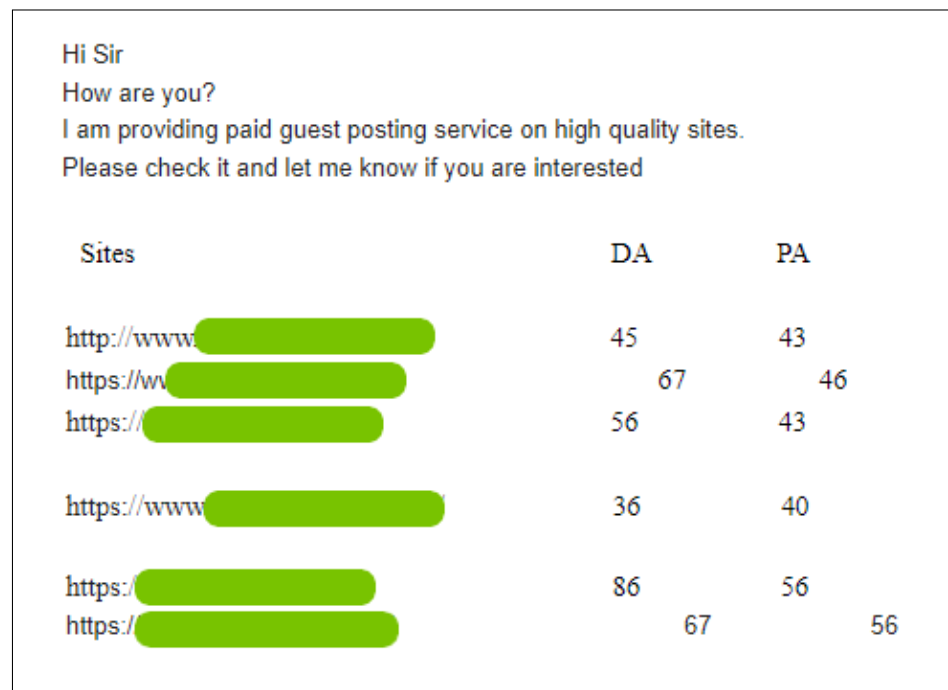


Image source: Screenshot from personal email, August 2022

The email goes on like this for a while. This is why we can't have nice things.

Oh, look, another one!

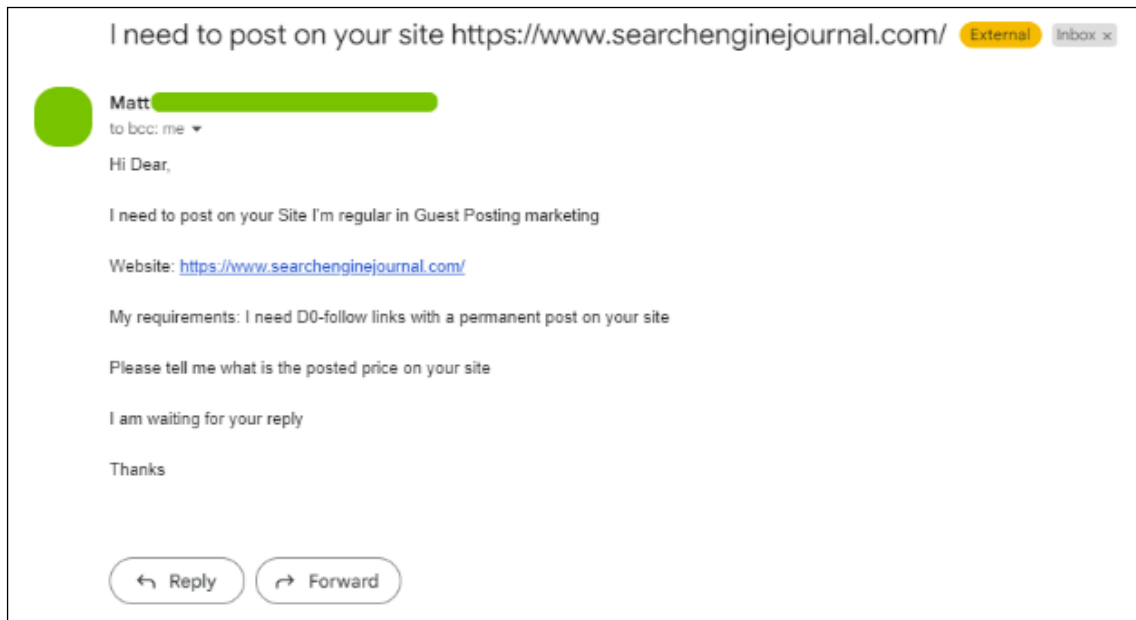


Image source: Screenshot from personal email, August 2022

This email found its way around the spam filter and landed in my inbox. Matt is a professional in the industry, and this email is definitely not actually from him.

It's also, uh, getting a little personal there.

And it's not just the obvious ones, either. If you run a blog that accepts guest posts, you probably spend a lot of time arguing with contributors who are just trying to get dofollow links to their businesses.

If you want to do email outreach the right way, you've got big issues to tackle:

- Email inboxes are saturated.
- People are busy.
- You have to stand out against all the other outreach.

How Do You Do Cold Outreach?

You have to earn links. You have to earn people's time and attention, too.

The simple answer is that to do outreach properly, you just have to put the effort in. You're emailing **people**, remember, so treat them with respect by putting time, research, and value into your outreach.

Step one is making sure that you have [link-worthy content](#) ready. If you're pitching to write something, make it a topic you can prove your expertise in.

Picking your outreach targets is the next step to approaching this strategy with respect and executing it successfully.

Evaluate your content and decide which target audiences will respond best to it. Then look for websites that serve those types of audiences. [Segment your audiences](#), choose your prospects within your segments, and then craft your outreach.

If you want to do this at scale, you can absolutely use templates. Just remember to craft unique templates for each audience segment. That way, you don't have to personalize every single email, but you've researched to ensure that your template is relevant to the people you're emailing.

For relationships that you think will be particularly important, consider dropping the templates and crafting unique outreach emails.

Relationship-building is a key component to success in any business. And many relationships begin cold, especially online. But, if you get this stage right, you can cultivate a network of professional relationships that you can reach out to in the future.

You should also consider **not** beginning your outreach by asking for links. Focus on creating relationships that you can leverage later. Try providing them with something of value first! This is known as [pre-outreach](#).

For example, asking an expert to provide you with a short quote is a great way to start a relationship. And if they like what you've written, they might give you a link.

Just remember not to ask for link trades or transactions!

When you're considering outreach, focus on building a relationship instead of acquiring a quick link. If you do it well, you can improve your reputation and visibility while attracting natural links.

PART 3

Blasts From The Past

Do these old tactics still work?

I'll give you a hint.

No.

This section is mostly a lot of ways of saying, "don't do it, buckaroo."

But there's value in digging a little bit deeper so that you can identify these tactics and avoid websites that participate in them.

The chapter on article marketing will be particularly interesting. By definition, it's an old tactic that Google takes a dim view of. But you can still build links using content externally. It's a little bit of a semantic difference.

Let's look at the things you should not even think about doing in your link-building campaigns.



Link Tactics Primer: Blog Comment & Forum Links

⚠️ The Pitfalls Of Blog Comment & Forum Links:

- **Do not** use user-generated content to build links.
 - Blog comments, forum posts, etc.
- Yes, this means Quora, too.
 - Quora is a great research and reputation tool, but don't use it for links.
- This is why rel=nofollow was invented, and it hasn't been effective since 2005.
- You **will** damage your reputation, and likely your website, by doing this.

👍 What Are The Best Practices Blog Comment & Forum Links?

- Don't build links with them.
- But by all means, comment on things that pique your interest.
- If you run a blog on your website, keeping comments enabled can actually be beneficial for SEO if you're taking steps to prevent spam.

✓ How To Identify Blog Comment & Forum Spam:

- Comment spam is pretty easy to spot and is often automatically filtered out.
- On sites like Quora and Reddit, watch out for short answers containing links. These are likely spam.
- Keep your website updated and secure, and use spam-prevention tools to prevent users from sneaking spammy links onto your pages.

Introduction To Blog Comment & Forum Links

It's my pleasure to introduce you to why [rel=nofollow was created in 2005](#).

This tactic is so old and so spammy that Google created an entire tool to help webmasters combat it **seven years before the Penguin update**.

That should tell you all you need to know.

Comment spam got so automated and problematic that Google cooperated with MSN and Yahoo to create a way to fight it.

Now, most sites that contain user-generated content automatically apply a rel=nofollow or rel=ugc tag to all outgoing links.

Since then, different kinds of user-generated content have popped up. Many people still try to use sites such as Quora and Reddit for link building today. Google is pretty wise to that. Not only are links from those sites nofollowed as a rule, but [Google can tell](#) when websites are trying to boost their SEO using them.

It's just not worth it. No matter what new form it takes or what new website it's on, putting links into user-generated content doesn't work for SEO.

Should You Create Or Allow User-Generated Content?

Yes!

There's an argument to be made that providing a helpful answer on a blog or forum [can be helpful for reputation](#) and building relationships.

But, if you add a link, be aware that Google considers it user-generated and potentially manipulative. This isn't a strategy you should use at scale for SEO.

Instead, find highly-relevant posts that you can provide genuine insights about, and leave a comment or question. Participate in the community by all means. But even if you think you have a perfect resource link to add to your comment, consider this:

Do you want to be lumped in with the crowd still using link-building strategies from 2004?

As for your own website, you should definitely keep user-generated content around. [User-generated content provides SEO value](#) when it's properly managed. A healthy ecosystem of comments provides additional context to the content and proves that people are interested in it.

Protect Yourself From Malicious User-Generated Content

Unfortunately, it's possible that you've got malicious user-generated content on your website without realizing it. Spammers have found all sorts of ways to sneak links onto websites, mostly through outdated plugins and security.

Roger Montti goes into detail about ways you can combat these spam tactics in [this article](#).

The basics are quite simple to implement. Make sure that all your plugins are up to date, and drop any that have stopped being updated. Ensure you're using current security features, and if you do run a blog, make sure you have spam protection features enabled.

Link Tactics Primer: **Article Marketing**

⚠ **The Pitfalls Of Large-Scale Article Marketing:**

- If you're automating article production or syndication, you're probably wasting your time.
- Google frowns on large-scale article and guest posting campaigns solely for link-building purposes.
- If you use these tactics or allow them on your website, you're inviting scrutiny.
- Posting the same content in multiple places without appropriate tags is a red flag and can cause additional SEO issues such as cannibalization.
- Google is good at recognizing thin or inexpert content written primarily for linking purposes.
- Large campaigns with keyword-rich anchor text are easy to spot and devalue.
- On a large enough scale, article marketing risks manual penalties, especially if your website hosts low-quality guest posts.

👍 **What Are The Best Practices For Article Marketing?**

- Guest posting and article marketing are highly valuable strategies when performed properly.
- The first step is to create valuable, knowledgeable content that is relevant to your target audience.
- Share your expertise and/or **original** content with carefully selected websites with high editorial standards.
- Don't do it just for the links.
- If your content is good enough, you may naturally generate backlinks when readers decide to reference your site.

✓ How To Identify Bad Article Marketing:

- Be wary of websites with lots of guest posts about a broad variety of topics.
- Don't pay to have your article featured for link building.
- Check on a website's editorial standards by reading some content and clicking on the links.
 - Does the anchor text make sense?
 - Is the site on the other end what you expect, based on the context the link was placed in?
 - Is the link an actual reference or resource, or is it a homepage or product page?
- Scrutinize emails asking to guest post on your website carefully, just like cold outreach:
 - If you're interested in their content, ask for samples of their work and a list of the citations they plan to use.
 - Evaluate their content carefully, and remove or apply nofollows to links that don't provide genuine value.
 - If they put a lot of work in, have something original to say, and the links are helpful, you can consider allowing them.

Introduction To Large-Scale Article Marketing

Add this one to the list of reasons SEOs can't have nice things.

Blogs and articles are the backbones of many online communities. Guest posting and article marketing remain powerful digital strategies. When they're done correctly, they're good for everyone. Audiences get exposed to new experts and interesting content hosted on websites they regularly visit, and the authors get exposure to new audiences.

Then came the low-quality content spinners, the automated tools, and the guest blogging websites full of spam.

Scale is the big problem, as [Google sees it](#). Effective, healthy article marketing happens when someone creates valuable content and shares it with a carefully selected audience.

Just like everything we've talked about so far, the problems come when marketers engage in large campaigns specifically for generating links and SEO value. This one is a lot less cut and dry than others. Here's exactly what Google says about article marketing:

Google does not discourage these types of articles in the cases when they inform users, educate another site's audience or bring awareness to your cause or company. However, what does violate [Google's guidelines on link schemes](#) is when the main intent is to build links in a large-scale way back to the author's site. Below are factors that, when taken to an extreme, can indicate when an article is in violation of these guidelines:

- Stuffing keyword-rich links to your site in your articles
- Having the articles published across many different sites; alternatively, having a large number of articles on a few large, different sites
- Using or hiring article writers that aren't knowledgeable about the topics they're writing on
- Using the same or similar content across these articles; alternatively, duplicating the full content of articles found on your own site (in which case use of `rel="canonical"`, in addition to `rel="nofollow"`, is advised)

Image source: Screenshot from developers.google.com, August 2022

Note that they take some care to say that these tactics violate Google's guidelines **when taken to an extreme**.

This is talking about marketers who perform tactics such as:

- "Spinning" multiple versions of the same article using AI tools and posting all the different versions.
- Using the same article many times to generate more links.
- Creating articles for the sole purpose of acquiring links.
- Using unnatural, exact match keyword-rich anchor text in links.

Should You Do Article Marketing For SEO?

On the other hand, if you write a genuinely useful and knowledgeable article and include genuinely user-friendly reference links, article marketing is a valid tactic.

Just remember that Google considers any links that **you** create on **other** websites to be self-serving. So, if you use this tactic to build links, websites you submit to may well tag your links with nofollow, and Google may end up ignoring them, too.

A link is great. If an editor evaluates your links and decides they pass muster, that's a win. You can increase this likelihood by creating [genuinely useful content](#) to link to. But don't scoff at nofollowed links, either.

If you're going about [guest blogging the right way](#), then you'll get **so much more value out of a guest post than a link**. And you're unlikely to receive any negative consequences if you're making a good-faith effort to bring value to an audience.

Your goal should be to place your content where the right people see it. Pique their interest and see if they decide to learn more about you. This is how you generate the gold standard in naturally earned links. If your content is good enough, the people who discover it via your guest posts may link to it themselves.

Much like with the other strategies in this book, you're unlikely to risk a manual penalty unless you're using this tactic at a scale where it comprises the majority of your backlinks. However, if you allow guest posting on your website and end up pointing a bunch of links out to other websites, you're more likely to catch a manual action.

Article marketing itself isn't a bad thing. But done at scale with the sole intention of acquiring many links, without regard for users, it's asking for trouble.

Final Words, And How To Recover From Bad Link Building Tactics

Listen, if you were genuinely mistaken, there's no shame in having used shady tactics in the past. SEO is an ever-evolving industry. If anything in this book caught you off guard and you're worried, first, I want to say:

It's going to be okay.

You can turn things around, even if you've been hit by a manual penalty and [deindexed by Google](#).

Check out that article by Maddy Osman to check for a few more ways you might get a penalty if you're worried.

Remember that there is a big [difference between a manual penalty](#) and falling afoul of search algorithms.

If you have a manual penalty, you'll be notified in Google Search Console and need to take specific steps to remove it.

If the algorithms have detected that you're using shady tactics and decided to ignore a bunch of your links, there's no real "fix" other than abandoning the bad links and creating new, good ones.

Step One: Stop.

Stop using shady tactics now. If you know that a service provider is building links in a shady way, drop them.

The best time to stop participating in link schemes is right now.

Step Two: Disavow.

This might hurt, but you may want to consider [looking through your backlink profile](#) and use the disavow tool to remove links that you know are against Google's guidelines OR are of extremely bad quality. This can help alleviate some of the pressure if the algorithms have determined that you're using bad link tactics, but remember that Google's most common tool is to **ignore** bad links.

If you've lost traffic due to the algorithms, you're unlikely to be able to win it back quickly. The traffic was coming from those bad links, and now it's gone.

Step Three: Build Links Better.

Start overhauling your strategy and work on acquiring links the right way.

Check out [SEJ's complete link-building guide](#) to help you develop your new strategy. Remember that the core of building links is creating assets that are worth linking to.

You're an expert in your niche. Use that to create something amazing and share it with the world.

And if you need more support, you can always submit questions to the [Ask An SEO](#) advice column.

Well, partner, it's time to hit the trail.

Put on your white hat, and we'll say farewell. Until next time!

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