

Search engine optimization: controlling inbound links

By Brian Moloney

Inbound links are a primary factor influencing how search engines rank a site. The number of Web sites that link to a site directly affects how favorably it appears in search engine results. The more inbound links, the "higher" a site will appear within search engine results.

Search engines are nothing more than equations being calculated by computers. For example, Google isn't smart enough to determine if your page is important or not, so it infers. It looks at other pages that link to your page and forms the conclusion, "if page A links to page B, page A must think that page B is important. Therefore, it must be important."

The actual process is far more complex but the basic premise holds true. Therefore, soliciting relevant inbound links to your pages is important.

Pick up the low hanging fruit

It is likely there are Web pages that should have a link to yours, but don't. Ask yourself these questions:

- Is your organization a member of any association or industry group? Is it listed in their directory? Is there a hyperlink to your Web site?
- Are individual employees members of any professional societies? Does their directory listing include a hyperlink to your site?
- Have any employees published articles? Is there a Web version? Does their author credit include an inbound link to your site?
- Has there been any press coverage of your organization? Is there an inbound link to your Web site within the article?
- Is your organization affiliated with other organizations that have Web sites? Do these sites contain inbound links to your site?
- Do your clients, vendors, distributors have Web sites? Do they list you on their site? Might you offer to be a case study for them?
- Are there any Web pages out there that list your Web address but lack a hyperlink to your site?

To see how many pages Google has in its database that link to your page, perform the following search:

link:www.yoursite.com

Don't overlook the low hanging fruit. The more relevant a Web page is that link to your site, the more important your pages will be within search engines.

What the link says is important

An inbound link is important, but the context of the link is also important. Another critical factor in page ranking is the words surrounding the link.

For example, ABC Company is a maker of ball bearings. They want to "pop" in the search engines when people enter the term "ball bearings." Here are some sample links to ABC Company:

- www.abc-co.com – This is an inbound link, however it lacks context.
- [ABC Company](#) – This link will help if people are searching for the company name, but it doesn't help with the search term "ball bearings."
- **For more information on ball bearings, visit [ABC Company](#).** – The term "ball bearings" is near the company link which makes this a very good inbound link.
- **For more information on [ball bearings](#), visit [ABC Company](#).** – The term "ball bearings" is the *hyperlinked* phrase which makes this is an exceptional inbound link.

Crafting the link

Certain sites may have an established style for linking, in which case you should take your inbound link and say "thank you very much." However, many sites do not. Those sites may be willing to adopt a suggested link. Make sure all link requests go out with a suggested style that:

- Includes your key phrase(s)
- Offers a few alternatives
- Is palatable to the linking page (e.g. short and sweet)
- Optionally, contains a thumbnail image with a request that it also link to your page

"Link to us" page

Alternatively, you can create a special "Link to us" page on your site and reference this page when requesting a link. This makes it easy for the person linking since they can visit the page and copy/paste. A sample "Link to us" page is located at:

<http://www.imagescape.com/linktous>

Conclusion

Soliciting inbound links should be a pervasive practice. Its importance should resonate throughout the entire organization. Every employee should be encouraged to request links with every professional endeavour. Every bit of content generated by the organization should be accompanied by a carefully crafted linking strategy. It is one of the most fundamental measures of a page's popularity and can have a profound effect on search engine optimization.

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