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Ethical Link Exchange, You be the judge....

Author

Lew Newlin is CTO of [SiteRecon](#), a provider of internet [email monitoring](#) and [web site monitoring](#) services for business.

Abstract

Links to quality relevant web sites will increase your search engine visibility and drive traffic to your site. However, is creating a link farm then cross-linking to your main site ethical?

Article

Webmasters understand that quality and relevant inbound links can increase site visibility; your search engine rating; and with any luck increase your traffic and revenue.

While working to locate relevant links for our site, we discovered a disturbing practice apparently being used to increase link popularity and search engine ranking. The following are the sorted details of our journey and discovery.

- 1) Most webmasters understand the hunt for quality relevant sites is, like most things of value in life, a time consuming and difficult task. Being limited on time, we first tried to hire a leading SEO expert to locate relevant links. When the SEO expert did not return emails, we tried a few link exchange sites. While a few good quality links were unearthed, the link exchange sites simply did not offer a large quantity of good relevant sites. After all, our competitors had hundreds of thousands of inbound links and we had less than 900. While tempting, we skipped over the advertisements for traffic as our desire was for prospective customers not traffic.
- 2) We finally decided on the DIY approach. First step, check current reciprocal links page to insure all was well. A few sites no longer linked to us, so our webmaster links page required a few updates.
- 3) Next we chose to use Link Popularity Check to locate links that our competitors have, that we perhaps missed. The first thing we noticed was hundreds of inbound links a competitor had, all coming from a few specific sites. Upon visiting the sites, we noticed that one was a "directory" and several others were normal sites that contained very little content. In short, the directory and other sites were nothing a competent webmaster could not create in a day or two.
- 4) We found it odd the inbound sites all have the same visual look, color scheme, and navigation. Our competitor's site was also listed in the "Related Resources" area on each and every page. The light bulb suddenly switched on! The inbound sites appeared to have been created for the sole purpose of increasing link popularity and therefore the competitor's search engine ranking!
- 5) Ping the four sites to locate the IP addresses. Four different addresses, not in consecutive order. Perhaps we were mistaken.
- 6) A few mouse clicks to see who owned the domain names of the four sites. All the sites are owned by the same company, are housed at the same ISP, and have the same email address listed for the administrative and technical contact names.
- 7) A few mouse clicks at Alexa.com to review traffic patterns show the sites have very little traffic, yet all have a PageRank score of 6 or higher. Site traffic is increasing for each.

Nope, it does not appear we were mistaken. It appears a competitor actually created web sites for the sole purchase of increasing his/her link popularity and search engine ranking for their primary business site. To recreate such a process:

1. Register a domain name that is tied to your primary sites keyword list. For example, if your primary site sells widgets and has a domain name of Widgets.com, something like "Widget- Directory.com" would be ideal;
2. Setup a new hosting account with your ISP, using a different IP address, for Widget-Directory.com;
3. Create a few pages that use the keyword list from Widgets.com, then setup a link system that invites webmasters to exchange links. Remember, no need to get carried away with content as the purpose of Widget-Directory is really keyword tie-in and link exchanges;
4. Now, code every page of Widget-Directory with a link back to Widget.com;
5. Sit back and watch. As webmasters enter their sites and subcategories into Widget-Directory, the results will increase the link quantity and apparently your search engine ranking of Widget-Directory AND Widgets.com.

We were curious to see if this was an isolated incident or a rampant practice. While not rampant, it did not take us long to find others companies utilizing this technique. Is this ethical? I am sure some would argue this is a savvy internet marketing practice, while others will view the practice as repulsive. Ethical or not, this technique is simple, cost effective, and apparently will increase your search engine ranking. One thing is clear, I will never look at directory sites or link exchange pages the same.

Hopefully, the search engine will adjust their algorithms and nullify this practice. In the interim, for those that take a negative PR and/or link exchange hit, remember that honesty builds longevity and lasting relationships. Remember the SEO expert we previously tried to hire? We went back and checked his site, and yes he utilizes the same technique. Odd thing however, his sites no longer enjoys top ratings on the major search engines. Perhaps, the search engines are starting to figure this one out.

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