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Article - Exchanging Links: Have we all gone mad?

By Keli Etscorn, keli@etscorn.com, ©2010 Keli Etscorn

I've worked extensively in the area of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) since around 1997. I've had great success in helping my clients, mostly Realtors® and attorneys achieve good rankings in the majors: Google, MSN (now Bing) and Yahoo. Since back links play a part in the evaluation process where Google determines a page's "rank worth" acquiring high quality back links for my clients is high on my to-do list. There are of course other elements examined when Google evaluates a Web site however a strong back link program is one of the more important tasks you can perform.

Recently I had an experience that made me gnash my teeth. The problem? No one is doing back links right. I went to evaluate a list of links that a client wants to investigate for "back link/exchange worthiness." This client has a new Web site and wants to do the very best he can. He did his homework, sent me a big list of sites he researched on his own time, and has educated himself on SEO and what we do as SEO professionals.

However, when I researched his list, I was very disappointed in the results. My "field trip" prompted me to write this article on how to look for good sites to exchange with and how to do it right!

Link swapping is not a complicated process but it can be very time consuming if you want to do it with success. Let's start from the beginning.

What is a Link Exchange?

Link Exchange (aka Reciprocal Link Exchange, Link Exchange Request, Links Swapping, Link Trading, etc.) is the most accessible way to improve your Web site's link popularity and ranking in the Google search engine. This practice also enhances your users browsing experience.

By exchanging links with "like sites," from similar *neighborhoods* you can help your search engine ranking and increase your Web site's visibility/traffic on the Internet. Building link popularity through link exchange (links swap) means identifying sites (in a similar industry) whose Webmasters are willing to add a link to your Web site in exchange for you adding a link from your site back to theirs. Pretty simple eh?



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Link Exchange Partner Considerations

It is important to find link exchange partners among Web sites that offer a good match with the content and the theme of your own Web site, in the same "neighborhood." For example, if you're an attorney, link with other attorneys or law related site - they don't have to be in your state or city. The link exchange partner's Web site theme/topic is the first thing to review, because search engines give more "weight" to a link from a Web site that has a similar topic to yours – remember: same "neighborhood."

It's possible that visitors may see a link partnership with another Web site as an "association" between the link swap partners, so make sure your Web site only "associate" with high-quality, credible Web sites. Exchanging links with poor-quality or low-content Web sites will not help your SEO goals – or your business goals!

What to Look For in a Potential Link Exchange Partner

The following items are guidelines to follow when shopping around for a link exchange partner.

- 1) Can you click from the homepage to the page your link will be displayed on? If you can't, then the spiders probably won't find it either. You won't want to exchange with a site like this.
- 2) When you find the page your link will be displayed on, is it more than 2 clicks deep from the homepage? Humans and spiders don't travel far; the mentality is that spiders try to mimic human behavior here. Both humans and spiders want all the good info right up front, not 5 clicks deep. Having a site map can easily sort this problem out on your own site.
- 3) What is the PR of the page your site will be displayed on? If you don't already have the Google toolbar installed, you can use this page to determine PR:

<http://www.freelance-help.com/google-ranking-report/pagerank-checker.php>

A page with good PR means that Google sees it... if Google sees the site, the spiders should be able to pick up the new content (the link to your site) and it will benefit your linking strategy.

I'll link with sites having ANY PR as long as the link passes our other criteria.

NOTE: The evaluation of a link is about the only time you'll see PR in actual use – besides that, it's a pretty useless metric that a few still hang on to like grim death.



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- 4) Is the link on a page that's in a frame? It's been known for a long time that spiders have a hard time with content in a frame. It's best to avoid exchanging links with a site if your links happens to reside on a framed page.
- 5) The intent of a link exchange is to offer your visitors extra resources that enhance their browsing experience. Since it became public knowledge that Google's algorithm heavily weights sites linked to yours (the PR tool), people have really gone overboard with linking. So I ask you to consider this: Are you benefiting your visitors by adding a the link in question to your site?
- 6) Does the potential link exchange partner have good rankings in the search engines?
- 7) Is your link going to be on a page with hundreds and hundreds of **unrelated** links? If so, you don't want to exchange with them. Sites looking like a link farm could cause problems for and could negatively impact your site. Again, ask yourself, "what is my viewer going to benefit from hundreds of unrelated links?" Nothing.
- 8) Make your own link page attractive. You want it to be appealing to the eye so that your potential link exchange partners will want *their* site on your beautiful page.

You've now researched and found some potential sites to exchange links with. Now it's time to submit a request – just follow this simple procedure:

- Find potential link exchange partners in the search engines by typing in your keyword phrases you use for your own site. Mix your phrase up by adding other states and cities so you're not adding a direct competitor. People will be more willing to add your link if you're not perceived as a threat.
- Send out E-mails to ask for a link exchange with your Web site. Supply your Web site address (URL) or preferably your bank link set. You might also want to send them the page their link will appear on. (Note: In some cases, it's beneficial for you to already have your potential partner's link on your site, and then just point them to the page where they can find their link.)
- If you get a reply back, add a link from your Web site to the link exchange partner's Web site. Some may even give you specifics as to what linking text to use and may supply a description.
- Send an E-mail to your new link exchange partner when you've added them to your site (supply a link to the page) and ask if they would add your link.
- Check periodically to see if your link is still on your link partner's site.
- Be sure to include all your contact information.
- Write a personal E-mail that indicates you've looked at the site. Don't send 100% "canned" requests – you don't want your E-mail request viewed as spam or it will end up in the trash bin.



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Creating Your Very Own Link Exchange Form

To make it easier for my SEO clients back link efforts, I create a form asking for a link exchange. This way, the potential link exchange partner simply fills out the form, it gets shipped to me, and I approve or deny the link. My form stipulates that my client's link must be on their site before we consider an exchange. We supply all the information that we want to include with our link. Now days we create several back link set so all new incoming SEO clients. This way potential exchange partners have several options on how they want to link with us. Having many identical back link sets linking to your site isn't a good idea – mix it up!

Other Back Link Ideas

Directories

Directories are important because they are considered back links to your site. There are literally thousands of them out there for just about every industry you can think of. Be very selective on what directories you put your Web site in. Some have value while some directories will generate nothing but spam for you

Final Notes

As with all things SEO, don't expect instant results, especially with organic SEO. It takes time, patience and a knowledgeable SEO person to achieve your goals. Getting back links isn't the end-all, be-all of SEO either. It's just one of more important tasks out of the many practices that go into a well optimized site. Also, quantity isn't quality. Go for good links... not hundreds of them.

About the Author

[Keli Etscorn](#) is a search engine optimization specialist who focuses on organic search engine tactics. Former founder of a fiber optic ISP, she now runs her own company, [Bear Canyon Consulting, LLC](#). Keli has created nationally featured Web sites and Ecommerce sites since 1996. Her work is featured in publications such as PC Magazine, Parade Magazine, The New York Times, Hamptons Magazine, US Weekly and APC Currents magazine, just to name a few. She started concentrating on [search engine optimization](#) in 1999 and uses her master's degree in mathematics to get her clients top rankings in the most popular search engines.



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Her endeavors include starting and heading the SEO unit for one of the biggest attorney portals online (SonicSEO.com, the optimization branch of AttorneyLocate.com), including overseeing the optimization and design of over 2000 nationwide attorney and small business Web sites. Her biggest projects to date are daughter Sage and son Seven, both future UNIX system administrators.

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