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# MINUTE MARKETER

## External Link Building

12 tactics for using links for  
SEO benefits

# 30-Minute Marketer

## External Link Building: 12 tactics for using links for SEO benefits

### **Author**

Bobbi Dempsey, Editor, *30-Minute Marketer*

### **Contributors**

Jen Doyle, Senior Research Manager

Kaci Bower, Senior Research Analyst

David Kirkpatrick, Senior Reporter

Adam T. Sutton, Senior Reporter

### **Editor**

Daniel Burstein, Director of Editorial Content

### **Production Editor**

Brad Bortone, Senior Research Editor



### **External Link Building: 12 tactics for using link building for SEO benefits**

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# TACTICS YOU CAN LEARN OVER LUNCH

Welcome to *30-Minute Marketer* – a resource from MarketingSherpa featuring bite-sized tips for busy marketers.

In this report, we show you how to use link building for maximum SEO benefits. Links pointing to your site are one of the biggest factors that affects search ranking. For the purposes of this report, we will focus on external links. By this, we mean those from outside sources, as opposed to links on your own site that point to different pages on your site.

Links from the right sites can channel a wealth of high-quality traffic in your direction, ensuring first-page search results for your site. A link from an authoritative site lends you credibility. A link from a popular site sends you traffic. Both can boost your search results.

Without these links, your site might wallow in obscurity. For this reason, links are too valuable to ignore. But, as with most search engine optimization efforts, link building is not a quick win, but rather an ongoing process that pays off with time.

In this report, we'll show you:

- Why good content is critical for link building
- How to select valuable targets
- Tools that can help you research the market
- The important rules you cannot break

We know you're in a hurry, so let's get started. We're eager to share these tips on how you can use link building to boost your search rankings!

Bobbi Dempsey  
Editor, *30-Minute Marketer*

## **About *30-Minute Marketer***

MarketingSherpa's *30-Minute Marketer* is designed with you, the busy marketer, in mind. We provide quick, simple tips that you can put into action right away.

For each *30-Minute Marketer*, we scour the vast MECLABS library of marketing research, from MarketingSherpa case studies and benchmark reports, to MarketingExperiments optimization tests and analysis. We highlight tips to help improve your marketing performance right now ... or, at least, by the time you're done with lunch.

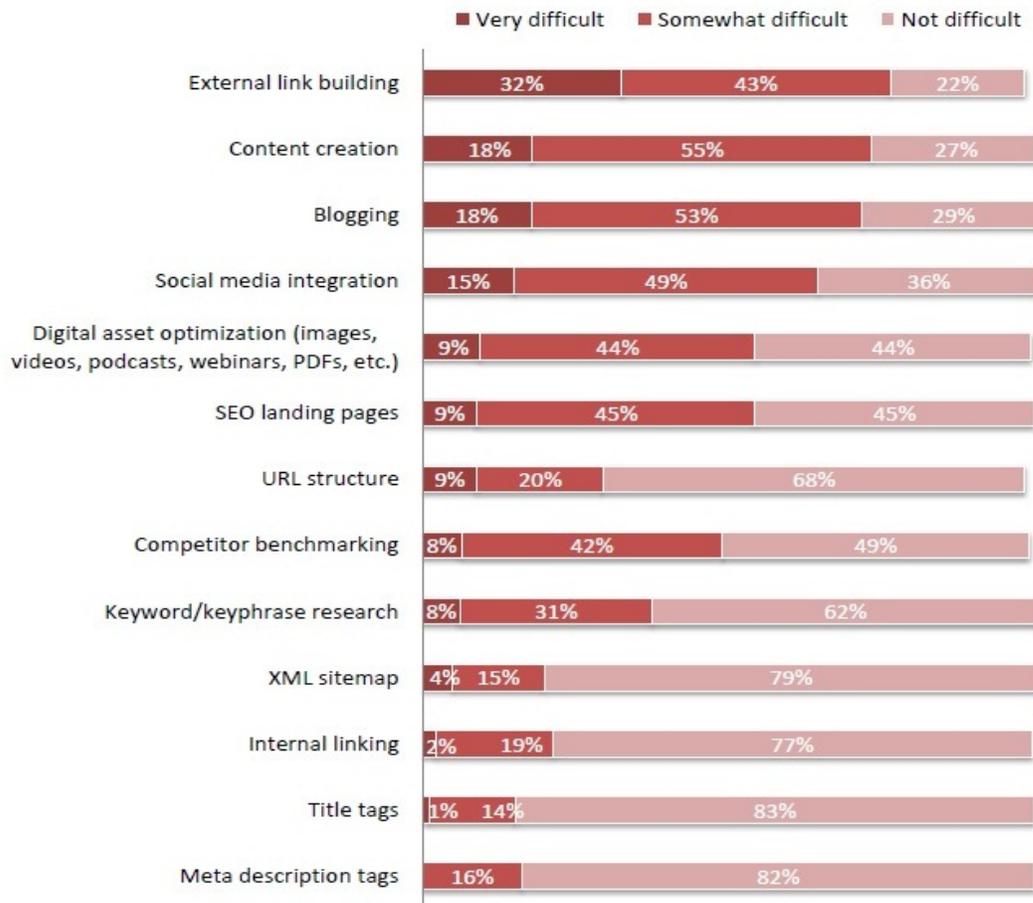
Building external links is a time-consuming process. While it may not be quick—or easy—it will probably be well worth the time and energy you invest. As the two charts below from the [MarketingSherpa 2012 Search Marketing Benchmark Report](#) (free excerpt at this link) show, marketers felt external link building was the most challenging of all the SEO tactics they use. However, it was also one of the most effective.

On a related note, content creation and blogging are two additional SEO tactics considered “very difficult” or “somewhat difficult” by a large percentage of marketers, while also ranking among the most effective. All these tactics are interrelated, so, if you plan your overall inbound strategy to incorporate all tactics working together, you can use your time and efforts most efficiently.

**CHART: SEO TACTICS BY DEGREE OF DIFFICULTY**

**Chart: SEO tactics vary widely in their degree of difficulty to execute**

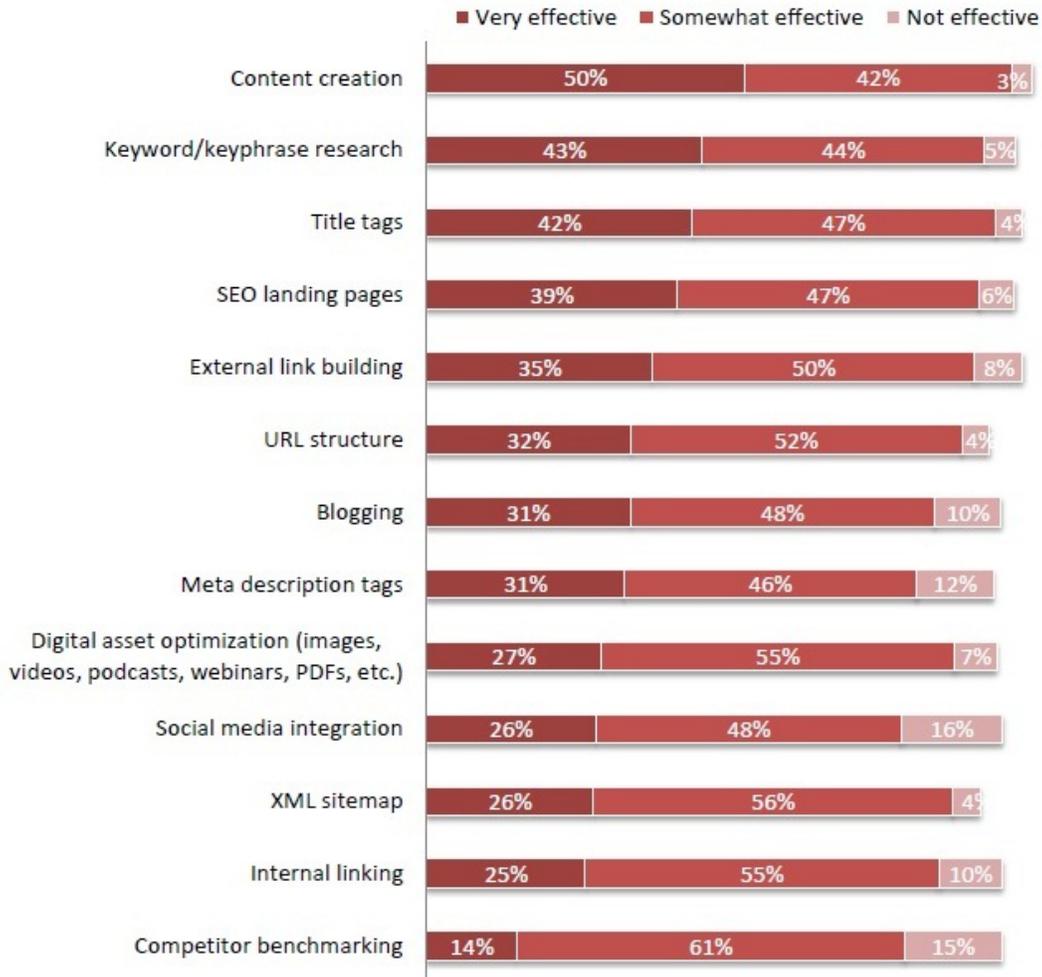
*Q. Please indicate the DEGREE OF DIFFICULTY (time, effort and expense required) for each of the SEO tactics used by your organization.*



Source: ©2011 MarketingSherpa Search Marketing Benchmark Survey  
Methodology: Fielded April 2011, N=1,530

**CHART: SEO TACTICS BY EFFECTIVENESS**

*Q. Please indicate the LEVEL OF EFFECTIVENESS (in terms of achieving objectives) for each of the SEO tactics used by your organization.*



Source: ©2011 MarketingSherpa Search Marketing Benchmark Survey  
Methodology: Fielded April 2011, N=1,530

**Tactic #1: Create great content**

Most link building tactics rely on the existence of quality content, as noted in the MarketingSherpa article, [“Special Report: Missing Links? 7 Traffic-Building Tips to Boost SEO.”](#) People need a reason to link to you – and it should be great content.

Content comes in many forms:

- Editorial

- Research
- Multimedia – videos, podcasts, music, etc.
- Software
- Any valuable resource

**Two examples: Tools as content**

E-Loan, Inc. gets lots of links to its loan calculators, says Linda Harjono, Director, Search Marketing, E-Loan, which helped the site earn a #2 Google ranking for “loan.”

One of the most linked-to pages on Aaron Wall’s site, SEO Book, is the download page for his free “SEO for Firefox” extension. The tool is useful, cost about \$2,000 to create (with more costs for later upgrades), and has more than 8,000 inbound links, according to Yahoo! Site Explorer.

“When I first launched it [in June 2006], after two days of direct sales, it actually paid for itself. So, basically after two days, the links were all free,” he says.

**Link baiting**

Link bait is content designed to attract links. Matt Cuts of Google describes it as “...interesting enough to catch people’s attention.” It’s similar to viral content because it’s supposed to encourage sharing. Any relevant and valuable resource, like research or a tool, could be considered link bait.

Other examples:

- Contests
- Humor – video, image, audio or text
- Controversial opinions
- Breaking news
- Free stuff

## **Tactic #2: Properly build links**

As noted in the article mentioned above, links are more valuable when they’re well-made.

**Get links that work**

Certain links, such as display ads, are marked to not provide search engine benefits. They will send traffic to your website, but they will not help your search rankings. Two ways links are rendered useless in this way:

1. Marked rel=“nofollow” in their HTML
2. Redirected to an intermediate page that is blocked from search engines with a robots.txt file

Make sure you’re getting links that help your search rankings.

### ***Write good anchor text***

The words used in your links' anchor text (the text users click) will affect your search rankings. The more links you have with anchor text, the more likely you will have good search results. You want your target search keywords in your link's anchor text.

Getting the anchor text you want is not always easy. You often don't have control, and a webmaster or blogger will use your company's name. That said, using your target keywords in your company's title and domain name will help build better links.

### ***Warning: Vary your anchor text***

Do not ask every person who links to your site to use the same anchor text. Search engines penalize sites that have too many inbound links with the same text, as it skews their results. With search engines, "naturally" created links have more variance.

David Airey, graphic and logo designer, whose site is among the top-ranking results in Google for "creative design," ran a link building campaign that offered \$4,000 in prizes for his blog's one-year anniversary.

He says, "That attracted a lot of links, but Google penalized me for what they deemed 'black hat SEO,' for asking for specific anchor text in the links. I then emailed all the participants, asking them to remove the links to my site. I don't think all of them did, but my efforts were enough to reverse the penalty."

### ***Link to deeper pages***

Getting links to your homepage is great, but there is more real estate in your website. Have websites link to your deeper content to help boost those pages' rankings, as well.

1-800-FLOWERS.com's homepage ranks so well that Katia Adams, Assistant Manager, Interactive Marketing, and her team target the site's deeper content. "It's more beneficial to get people to the collection page [and/or] the product page, if that's what they're searching for," she says.

### ***Have a wide age range***

Have a mix of old, fresh and new links coming in. Search engines are likely to give better rankings to pages that attract links over time, rather than only recently or in the past. This is another reason why link building needs to be an ongoing practice.

## **Tactic #3: Research your market**

As noted in the [MarketingSherpa 2012 Inbound Marketing Handbook](#), valuable links come from relevant sources – the websites in your market.

- Compile a list of websites from which you want a link.
- Peruse the sites and see how, why and where they link.
- Target pages on those sites that have relevant content and not too many competing links.

Many of these sites may be linking to your competition. Once you've compiled a list of websites, dig through the list to find sites that might link back to you. Ask yourself how your competitor obtained the high-value links, and build a strategy to do the same.

Here are a number of free and paid tools used to uncover details of websites that link to competitors (Note: These are not recommendations, but rather an example of the tools that are available):

- [Open Site Explorer](#)
- [Linkdiagnosis.com](#)
- [Backlink Watch](#)
- [SEOattack](#)
- [SEOquake browser extension](#)
- [Searchmetrics](#)
- [SEBook toolbar](#) and their SEO for Firefox browser plugin
- [Link Research Tools](#)
- [AdGooroo](#)
- [Linkdex](#)
- [Majestic SEO](#)
- [Who Links to Me](#)

## Tactic #4: Select good targets

The *2012 Inbound Marketing Handbook* also stresses the importance of targeting websites that provide valuable links. A website's link value is determined by:

- Content on the page
- Topic of the site
- Number of outbound and inbound links
- Amount of advertising
- Reputation with search engines
- Website age

Strive for links from respected, well-established websites that feature relevant topics. The best have few outbound links, no advertising, and a significant amount of content. Below are some universally strong targets:

### Directories

Website directories compile and organize high-value links to sites throughout the Web. But, note that not every directory is trustworthy. Some directories are prone to spam, or have been created solely for SEO purposes, which results in search engines applying less value to them. To tell if a directory is trustworthy, check for rigorous editorial standards, and submissions reviewed by humans.

### **Clients, industry friends and contacts**

Almost anyone with a credible website and relevant content can provide a good link. Consider asking for a link from numerous sources, such as from webpages that mention your site, the website of a conference at which you're speaking, or journalists who interview your company.

Typically, inbound links do not come from one specific source, but many. Blogs, industry trade group postings, articles about you, your own releases that are picked up by news wires, and more are all potential link sources.

### **Social media**

Not all links are created equal, and nowhere is this more apparent than on social media sites. To maintain the credibility of "votes," many social media sites use a "nofollow" tag that tells search engine spiders to not count some links. Though a social media site might use a "nofollow" tag, distributing your links on that site isn't an effort in futility when it comes to your link building.

As your link gets shared across the social sphere, your link and content will come in front of more website administrators. If your content is truly interesting, relevant and valuable, the likelihood for generating new inbound links that count in your favor increases.

### **University, nonprofit and government websites**

These non-commerce sites usually have deep content and no advertising. Their links provide good value, but getting linked to one can be difficult – especially government sites. You must be a valuable resource for their audiences.

### **Blogs**

Linking is ingrained in the blogosphere, as almost every blog post links to another website. High-profile blogs provide the highest-value links, but their authors are often inundated with requests, making it difficult to break through.

Most high-profile bloggers will scoff at a direct link request. It's better to approach them casually with personal email (no templates) and forward a great piece of content you think would *interest their audience*. Relevancy and honesty are keys to reaching bloggers, and participating in the blog's forums will also build rapport.

Search engines tend to quickly pick up blog links. If you need a quicker-than-usual boost in ranking, linking from blogs can be very useful.

## **Tactic #5: Develop a strategy and refine as needed**

After conducting some research and making a list of targets, create a spreadsheet to track:

- Whom you've contacted and how you contacted them
- Which sources provided a link and which did not

- Placement, target and anchor text of granted links
- Links providing the most traffic and SEO benefits

Monitoring your efforts will help refine your contact strategy. You'll quickly realize how best to contact a nonprofit as opposed to a blogger. You'll notice which sources are easy to work with, and which are difficult. You will know which links provide the most value, and whom to later target.

Integrating online tactics is also important to keep in mind. Link building is not a marketing tactic unto itself. It ties into:

- Keyword research – using keywords in your anchor text
- Content creation – creating content that attracts links
- Social networking – spreading content that attracts links
- Website design – organizing your online resources to making linking easier
- Media solicitation – putting links in every press release and asking for links in write-ups
- Partnerships – linking in a reciprocal manner

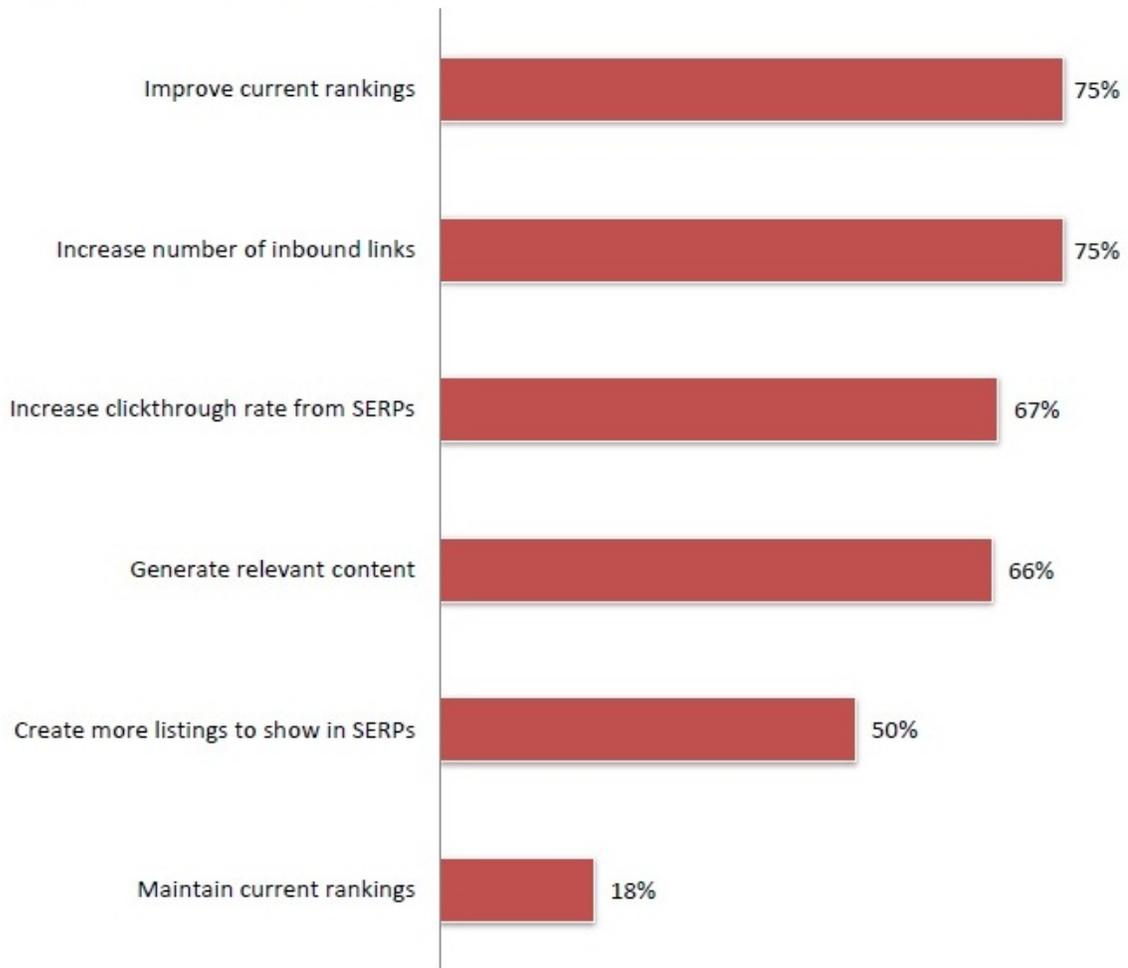
Link building needs to permeate your online strategy. One-time efforts, such as a link bait videos, are helpful, but a long-term integrated effort will achieve better results.

## **Tactic #6: Leverage your social media contacts**

In the MarketingSherpa article, "[Link Building: 5 tactics to build a better SEO strategy](#)," by Adam T. Sutton, several experts stressed social media as a critical tool to generate links.

As the chart below from the *MarketingSherpa 2012 Inbound Marketing Handbook* shows, 75% of marketers who integrate social media with SEO efforts do so with the goal of improving inbound links.

**Chart: Top goals for integrating social media with SEO**



Source: ©2011 MarketingSherpa Search Marketing Benchmark Survey  
Methodology: Fielded April 2011, N=1,530

Depending on the size of your online audience, you can attract links through social media in two main ways:

***Approach #1. Reach the influencers***

If you do not have a significant audience, then you will get better results by promoting your content on a one-to-one basis. Search for the online leaders in your industry, often called “influencers,” and build a relationship with them.

Eventually, you can try to collaborate with influencers. Here are several ideas you could propose:

- Interview them for your blog

- Contribute content to their blogs
- Ask to collaborate on a project

Don't just ask for links. Strive to help them and you will often earn links as a result, says Rand Fishkin, CEO, SEOMoz, an SEO software and resource provider.

### **Approach #2. Engage your audience**

If you have thousands of connections on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, then you earn links by sharing content that these audiences love. Just make sure the content you share is hosted on your website (so the links are attributed to your domain).

Sharing content will also encourage “likes,” “re-Tweets” and similar interactions that are shown to have a positive correlation with higher search rankings.

“If you start getting a lot of Tweets, Facebook likes, Diggs and all of that, you will start ranking really high up on Google for a few days,” says Neil Patel, Co-founder, Kissmetrics, an analytics platform provider. “It's pretty effective when you are going for really big keywords.”

Before connecting with your contacts or making new ones, though, you should make sure to optimize your social media profiles. Your team obviously does not have control over the design of Facebook fan pages or Twitter feeds. You can, however, control the content on these pages. Make sure all of your social media profiles:

- Describe your company using brand keywords
- Link to your website

Search engines index this content and list brands' social media profiles in search results. The links placed in Facebook and Twitter profiles aren't “nofollow” links, meaning they provide link value. Optimizing content on these profiles can help you get more first page search results for your brand.

Also, use your brand name for your account name whenever possible. When you have a one-to-one match for your brand name and Twitter name, you'll appear more often in search results.

## **Tactic #7: Use keywords wisely on social media**

In the MarketingSherpa article, “[Developing a Winning Combination for Social Media Integration: 9 tips from a recent MarketingSherpa webinar](#),” Kaci Bower, Senior Research Analyst, MECLABS, says, “It's important to include targeted SEO keywords whenever you post to social media, to take advantage of real-time search features. This also helps you build keyword relevance around your social presences.”

Bower added an important note about the above: “Just know that these ‘instant’ rankings usually don't last very long, when compared to pages that gained rank status through enduring link building efforts. But it is a viable starting point. You can accomplish this by putting keywords in the page title, URL and the body content.”

For more long-lasting benefits, focus on creating (and promoting) quality content that others will want to share via their own networks.

“Social audiences want to link to good, relevant, useful or entertaining content,” Bower says. “When you regularly generate content [of this sort] -- content that is also optimized with your keywords -- you can use social networks to broadly distribute this content and entice followers to share and publish links. This will help your reputation, establish a sense of authority in your market, and translate into more natural links coming back to your site.”

## **Tactic #8: Repurpose someone else's data**

The article, “[Link Building: 5 tactics to build a better SEO strategy](#),” highlights how many universities and trade groups publish great research that can be presented in ways not easily understood by the general public. You can turn this data into strong link bait.

Start by searching for research on your industry. Google Scholar, for example, will let you search academic publications. You can also use commands in regular searches to target your inquiry. Examples:

- Search for specific types of documents with “type:pdf” or “type:doc”
- Search specific types of websites with “site:edu”
- Search a specific website with “site:example.org”

Once you find good information that is poorly presented, reach out to the organization and ask if it is acceptable to reference the data. You will likely be asked to cite the organization, link to its site, and perhaps follow other usage guidelines. Be careful you do not violate anyone's copyright.

After you get clearance, clean up the data. Pull it into a fantastic article, or use it to create charts or infographics.

### ***Earn high-value links***

The benefits of this strategy, says Rand Fishkin, CEO, SEOmoz, are the high-value links it can earn from universities and other organizations. Be sure to show researchers what you created, because they will likely link to your work.

Also, remember that your goal is to find potential customers, so make sure whatever you create is relevant to their needs. “Infographics, clever data visualization, and cool charts; these kinds of things get shared across the Web in industries of all kinds,” Fishkin says.

## **Tactic #9: Look for good partnerships**

Typically, your partners will link to your site. If partners do not share your level of SEO expertise, send them a short document with some guidelines. Make some suggestions for the best types of pages from which to link, what

content should be on the page, and where the link should target. Be careful to not be overly specific or demanding, and be aware that having too many identical links can bring severe search engine penalties.

The MarketingSherpa article, "[Search Engine Marketing: Bank lifts organic traffic 30%, paid traffic 360%](#)," by David Kirkpatrick, shows how Landmark Bank spent almost a year fixing their website and improving it from an SEO perspective. Once the site structure had been fixed and the content optimized, the team began working on building links to the site.

"We take a two-pronged approach of quality and quantity," explained Andy Craig, Marketing Manager. "Obviously, quality links are a little bit harder to get, but they have a bigger impact, and quantity links are a little bit easier to get."

He added that because banking is a highly regulated industry, Landmark Bank is very careful with its link practices, and that his team looks for good partnerships. "One of the things about us is we are a community-focused bank, so we have an entire section of our website devoted to community links."

These links include libraries and community theater websites. They provide Landmark Bank with reciprocal links, and also offer Landmark Bank's customers a resource for local information.

## **Tactic #10: Don't be too demanding**

In the MarketingSherpa blog post, "[7 Signs That You're Overvaluing Search Engine Optimization](#)," Daniel Burstein warns that directing people to link specific keywords to specific pages on your site will usually backfire on you.

"When you're trying to build organic links with quality content, focus on serving others, not yourself. Focus on generating content that people will want to link to. Because, frankly, I don't care that you're trying to target 'organic turkeys.' I just want to know how to have a delicious Thanksgiving. And if you help me achieve that goal, maybe you'll get my link."

## **Tactic #11: Aim for long term; avoid one-offs**

The experts quoted in "[Link Building: 5 tactics to build a better SEO strategy](#)," stressed the importance of thinking long-term when it comes to link building. A one-time boost is helpful, but you want a stream of links to flow to your website for months, or even years. The best way to do this is to build a full strategy, instead of focusing on solitary tactics.

Blogging and participating in social networks can be part of an on-going strategy. Here are a few other examples:

### **License your content and technology**

Your company may produce information that is valuable and unique. If so, you can invite people to share this resource, but only if they include a link to your website (you can even ask for a specific anchor text, says Rand

Fishkin, CEO, SEOMoz).

Information you can license out may include:

- Monthly research reports
- Images and videos
- Online tools (such as an embeddable calculator)
- Industry awards and contests
- Anything unique and valuable you can share for free

Some companies even create a numeric index to share with the industry. For example, the email marketing vendor Listrak provides the Shopping Cart Abandonment Index, which shows the average rate of cart abandonment across a sample of ecommerce sites.

### **Share your bloggers**

Contributing content to other websites can be an effective way to build links. If you have content creators on staff (writers, designers, videographers) ask them to contribute to other sites or broker exchanges with them.

And do not limit yourself to trade publications, as many companies are starving for content. You can help by repurposing your content into whitepapers and other resources for their websites. You can set a partnership to provide new content each quarter, for example, as long as a company links it to your website.

“It's not just about regurgitating information. It's about writing something unique, which is what most people don't do,” says Neil Patel, Co-founder, Kissmetrics.

### **Encourage creative ideas**

A willingness to try new ideas can help drive your link building over the long term. Do not be afraid to brainstorm and test new approaches.

Jon Ball, CEO, Page One Power, an SEO agency, noted that an e-commerce site he worked with created an online product museum where visitors could view the history of products, a glossary of terms, historical images and other interesting tidbits. Another site created a vintage pop-up book library. Both attracted inbound links.

A good way to find ideas is to consider why people link to websites in your industry. Then, think of how you can target that behavior in a campaign. For instance, people may provide links because they:

- Contributed to the content
- Think the information is helpful, funny or otherwise valuable
- Referenced the information in a discussion, blog or report
- Want to highlight a resource provided
- Follow usage guidelines when sharing other people's content
- Have a partnership with the website

## Tactic #12: Follow the rules

The consequences for breaking the search engines' linking rules can be disastrous. Rankings are the lifeblood of many marketers, and being penalized to a low-ranked position could literally kill revenue.

There are plenty of “black hat” (in violation of the rules) and “gray hat” (*likely* in violation of the rules) tactics that can send your website into obscurity. By employing black hat SEO, you may find great success, and remain undetected for months, or even years. But, being discovered or reported by a competitor could cost you your job or your business. It's much safer to consistently create content to which people will link.

With this in mind, here are three practices to avoid:

### Link buying

Buying links to influence page rank is against [Google's Webmaster Guidelines](#). If search engines discover this relationship, a marketer's website will be almost impossible to find via search.

### Excessive reciprocal links

Trading links with your partners and friends is acceptable, but keep these trades within reason. If the number of traded links grows too high, you risk a rule violation.

### Link spamming, or linking on spam-laden sites

There are places and websites where it is effortless to post a link. These places are spam havens and should be avoided. A link on an irrelevant, link-filled site is more likely to hurt your ranking than to help it. This link sends a clear signal that you're trying to bend the rules.

### Useful Links and Resources:

[MarketingSherpa: Search Marketing: How to Avoid and Remove Google Penalties](#)

[MarketingSherpa Webinar Replay: Choosing the Right SEO Tactics for Optimum Results](#)

# About MarketingSherpa LLC

MarketingSherpa is a primary research facility, wholly-owned by MECLABS, dedicated to determining **what works in marketing** via exclusive case studies, surveys, and results data analysis. Then we publish what we learn so our community of marketers and weekly readers can improve their results and train their teams.

Praised by *The Economist*, Harvard Business School's Working Knowledge Site and Entrepreneur.com, MarketingSherpa is distinguished by offering **practical, results-based marketing** information researched and written by a staff of in-house reporters.

MarketingSherpa features:

- **Best Practices:** 1,000+ brand-side marketer case studies and 3,500+ creative samples
- **Research:** 2,000+ marketing and research abstracts
- **Instruction:** 800+ how-to articles
- **Newsletters:** 230,000+ marketers read weekly case studies on topics such as email, search, social, lead generation, lead nurturing, optimization and content marketing
- **Training:** 100+ live, hands-on training sessions providing practical and proven solutions
- **Summits:** 3 annual vendor-neutral, research-based marketing events

## About MECLABS

MECLABS is a science lab that uses real-world research and training to **help business leaders get better use out of sales and marketing technology and resources**, including Internet marketing, website optimization, and lead management. We have been involved in direct research partnerships with companies throughout Europe and North America since 2001.

MECLABS deploys a rigorous methodology to conduct research. This research is compiled from:

- More than **10 years** of research partnership with our clients
- **1,300** experiments
- Over **1 billion** emails
- **10,000** landing pages tested
- **5 million** telephone calls
- **500,000** decision maker conversations

MECLABS has consulted with companies like Cisco, Johnson & Johnson, *The New York Times*, 1-800-Flowers, and NetSuite to optimize sales and marketing processes and achieve triple-digit ROI gains.

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## Get free case studies and how-to articles from our reporters

Join 237,000 weekly newsletter readers. Receive free, in-depth case studies and how-to articles based on hundreds of hour-long interviews with brand-side marketing VPs and directors in Inbound Marketing every year.

The screenshot shows the Inbound Marketing website. At the top, it says "View with Images | View Mobile Version". The main header features the title "Inbound Marketing" and the subtitle "Social media, SEO, and content marketing". The MarketingSherpa logo is in the top right. A navigation bar includes links for "New Case Studies", "Members' Library", "Research", "Events", and "Training".

The main content area features an article titled "Social Media Marketing: Brand-powered social site is 4th-largest traffic source for nonprofit". The article text discusses the challenges of maintaining content for social networks and mentions a nonprofit organization with 23,000 users. A "Read more" link is provided, along with the note "(Open access until Aug. 28th)".

A sponsored section for HubSpot is visible, featuring the text: "Facebook is the most popular social network, and with more than 750 million users, it can serve as an important marketing tool for any business. Face it - your prospects are on Facebook whether you like it or not. Learn how to start using Facebook to achieve your business goals. Download HubSpot's free ebook".

Below the article, there are "More Recent MarketingSherpa Headlines" with links to "Event Marketing: Regional customer forums improve field events attendance rate by 150%" and "Lead Nurturing: Old names yield 37% of customers".

The right sidebar contains social media links for LinkedIn, Twitter, RSS, Facebook, and YouTube. Below that is a "Research:" section for the "B2B Summit 2011 Final Agenda", listing dates for Boston (Sept. 26-27) and San Francisco (Oct. 24-25), and listing keynote speakers: Flint McLaughlin, Kristin Zhivago, and Jay Baer. A "Reserve Your Seat" button is at the bottom of the sidebar.

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