

25 Tips to Master International SEO

Essential steps to higher page rankings & organic traffic



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Introduction

International SEO, or search engine optimization, is vital for any e-commerce business looking to expand to new markets on a global scale. You need to know how to make your website and content as visible as possible so that your online store front can be found by anyone, no matter where they are or what language they speak. This guide will outline and provide actionable steps to ensure that your business is found for the products and services it sells by the audience you want to sell to. Let's not waste another second, and get this list rolling and your knowledge growing!

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#1 What's Your Address?

The first and one of the most important decisions you'll face in directing your SEO is choosing what your domain should be called and what structure you want your international expansion to take. To this point, we explore the ins and outs of different URL structures available.

Country Specific Domain Structure

This set up is more traditional and widely-used, and some argue it's the better set up for country-by-country expansion. Country specific domain structure relies on having a separate domain targeted at each country you operate in. Here's an example:

www.myawesomedomain.co.uk — for all UK sales and services

www.myawesomedomain.com — for all USA sales and services

www.myawesomedomain.com.hk — for all Hong Kong sales and services

This approach works if your company can buy the same domain across each country (other parties might hold your domain ransom in some places) you want to operate in. There are also some instances where your company will need to own physical office space in a specific country to purchase a domain, which could cause issues if you don't plan to own or rent international real estate. Ultimately, this is a simple and effective expansion strategy that allows you to move at your pace and expand one country at a time.

Country Sub Folder Structure

This newer structure relies on having one domain with subfolders targeted at each country and language variation you would like to operate in. Here are some examples:

www.myawesomedomain.com/en-uk — for all UK sales and services

www.myawesomedomain.com/en-us — for all USA sales and services

www.myawesomedomain.com/es-mx — for all Mexico sales and services

This approach allows you to accommodate for every country and language variation you would like to address, all under one domain roof. This strategy has plenty of benefits — one Content Management System (CMS), one site to design, one Webmaster Tools account, one Analytics account, and one site to link build to.

As Google has developed and evolved, it has become sophisticated enough to allow for multiple country and language sub folders, all targeted at different areas of the world, so you don't need to worry about Google penalizing your SEO efforts for duplicate content!

Both country specific domain structure and country sub folder structure will allow you to target your websites all over the globe. While both strategies are used by the biggest e-tail sites on the internet, the choice is down to you and how you see your digital expansion evolving. My personal choice would be a sub folder structure; this process gives you the flexibility and control needed for a global SEO strategy, allowing you to run all of your digital assets from a central hub.

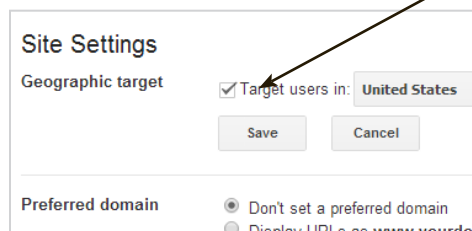
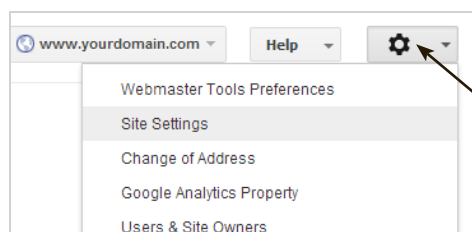


#2 Webmaster Tools: Don't Perform With Your Back to the Stage!

A global strategy doesn't mean that owning a big, global website will suit the needs of everyone. You need to understand the audience you target beyond simply knowing where they live. There are tools and settings that allow you to target each domain/sub folder to the country you want — the most widely used here is [Google Webmaster Tools](#). Although many widely-used search engines have this facility, Google is essential for SEO to enter approximately 95% of the globe.

Webmaster Tools

This suite gives you a host of tools and settings that allows you to set your domain up however you would like, ensuring maximum visibility of your site to Google. In order to tell Google which country you are targeting for each domain or subfolder you need to...



- Register and verify your site with [Webmaster Tools](#)
- Open your site dashboard for the domain and/or sub folder you want to target
- Click on settings in the top right hand corner
- Check the box in 'Geographical Target'
- Select which country you want your domain/sub folder targeted at

The principles are the same for all other search engine webmaster tools, and it's strongly recommended that you complete this task for all major search engines in the countries you operate in.



#3 Languages: Pour Qua? Was? Che? Que? What?

After you perfect your geographic targeting, you also need to think about the languages people speak so you can communicate and connect with your customers properly. To do this, the most widely-used and recommended method is to include a language code within your pages' source code. This code informs the search engines what language(s) you are targeting. A full list of the language codes can be found in this [resource from Google](#).

Multiple languages in the same country

It is extremely important to differentiate languages when there is more than one recognized language used in one country. For example: in Canada, French and English are both widely spoken. You need to ensure that you cater to both parties. Luckily, there are a few ways you can accomplish this.

- Set up a domain for each language in Canada with the same content, but with each different language
- Use one domain for Canada with an option to select which language you want to view the site in
- Offer a sub folder for each language variation

Language targeting is beyond important to engage the customers you're targeting in each country, and allows you to use your content over multiple domains or sub folders without the threat of duplication penalties from Google. This process can become complicated when you address multiple languages in the same country, but if you keep the process simple and always think, 'who am I trying to reach and why,' you can't go wrong.



#4 Site Structure: Tell It How It Is

This point is one of the most simple and fundamental elements of international SEO. Though some might consider it common sense, it's still worth pointing out: name your URLs so that they reflect the content they link to. Sounds simple, I know, but you would be amazed to see how many site owners might use automated code like www.mystupiddomain.com/ddgetrhfyyr12-399-9/.

Looks hideous, right? How many users would want to click on this if it appeared in their search results? What does that URL tell Google? Not much. Not much at all.

Naming your URLs correctly will improve your click through rates from organic search results. It's much better to take the time now to use your URLs to describe the content that it holds e.g. www.myawesomedomain.com/awesome-content-on-awesome-websites/, rather than leaving the code to populate it automatically with random letters and numbers. Use descriptive language always.

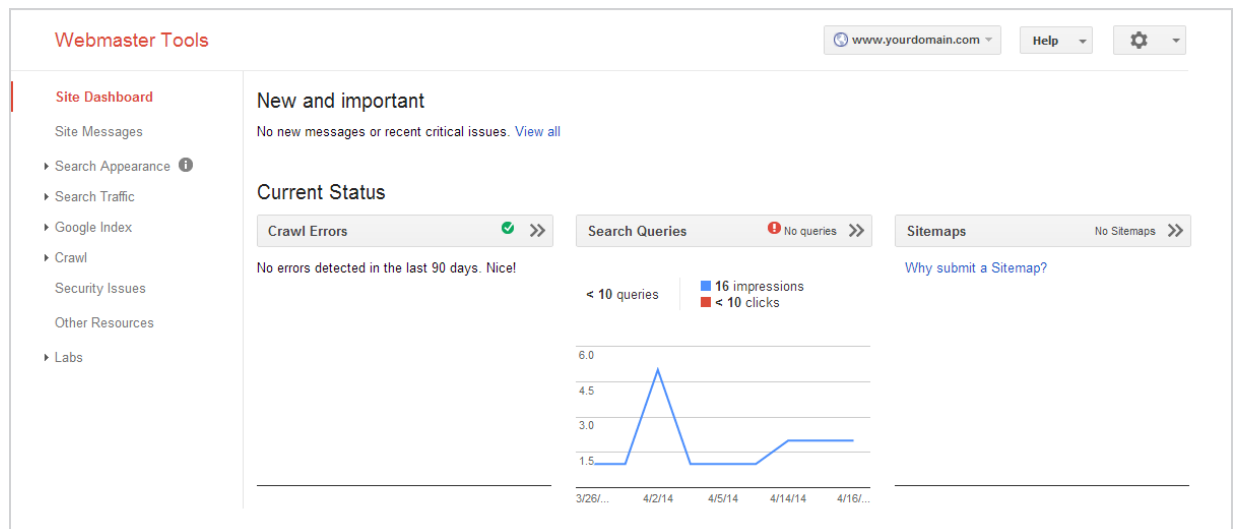
No.	Language Name	Native Language Name	Code
1	Afrikaans	Afrikaans	af
2	Albanian	Shqip	sq
3	Arabic	عربي	ar
4	Armenian	Հայերէն	hy
5	Azerbaijani	آذربایجان دیلی	az
6	Basque	Euskara	eu
7	Belarusian	Беларуская	be
8	Bulgarian	Български	bg
9	Catalan	Català	ca
10	Chinese (Simplified)	中文简体	zh-CN
11	Chinese (Traditional)	中文繁體	zh-TW
12	Croatian	Hrvatski	hr
13	Czech	Čeština	cs
14	Danish	Dansk	da
15	Dutch	Nederlands	nl
16	English	English	en
17	Estonian	Eesti keel	et
18	Filipino	Filipino	tl
19	Finnish	Suomi	fi
20	French	Français	fr
21	Galician	Galego	gl
22	Georgian	ქართული	ka
23	German	Deutsch	de
24	Greek	Ελληνικά	el
25	Haitian Creole	Kreyòl ayisyen	ht
26	Hebrew	עברית	iw
27	Hindi	हिन्दी	hi
28	Hungarian	Magyar	hu
29	Icelandic	Íslenska	is
30	Indonesian	Bahasa Indonesia	id
31	Irish	Gaeilge	ga
32	Italian	Italiano	it
33	Japanese	日本語	ja
34	Korean	한국어	ko
35	Latvian	Latviešu	lv
36	Lithuanian	Lietuvių kalba	lt
37	Macedonian	Македонски	mk
38	Malay	Malay	ms
39	Maltese	Malta	mt
40	Norwegian	Norsk	no
41	Persian	فارسی	fa
42	Polish	Polski	pl
43	Portuguese	Português	pt
44	Romanian	Română	ro
45	Russian	Русский	ru
46	Serbian	Српски	sr
47	Slovak	Slovenčina	sk
48	Slovenian	Slovensko	sl
49	Spanish	Español	es
50	Swahili	Kiswahili	sw
51	Swedish	Svenska	sv
52	Thai	ไทย	th
53	Turkish	Türkçe	tr
54	Ukrainian	Українська	uk
55	Urdu	اردو	ur
56	Vietnamese	Tiếng Việt	vi
57	Welsh	Cymraeg	cy
58	Yiddish	ייִדיש	yi



#5 Webmaster Tools Again

I mentioned earlier that Google (and all major search engines) has a Webmaster Tools section freely available to all domain owners. This section covers some of the benefits you receive from using this tool properly.

Site Dashboard



The first port of call for any webmaster is the dashboard, which provides you with an overview of your site's health.

- **Crawl Errors:** the lower the number (ideally 0) in all three sections of this summary, the better. The errors you really need to keep an eye on are the Soft 404 errors, as these can seriously damage your organic performance
 - **Soft 404s:** These errors are caused when a page that should provide a 404 (page not found) error gives a 200 (page found) response. They are also caused when pages that no longer exist are redirected to a page that Google doesn't deem to be the most appropriate. For example, when a page containing women's jewelry is redirected to an overarching department home page rather than the jewelry category page.
- **Search Queries:** These queries give you a summary of how visible your site has been over the last 90 days.
 - **Impressions:** This is the number of times (estimated, as the numbers are not exact) that your site has appeared in the Google search results.
 - **Clicks:** This statistic tells you how many clicks you have received for the above impressions. These two metrics give you a good indication of your site's organic performance and click ability.

This is a brief overview of Webmaster Tools data. There is a whole world of settings, data, metrics, and testing that you can delve into to better understand your website, its visibility, and organic performance.

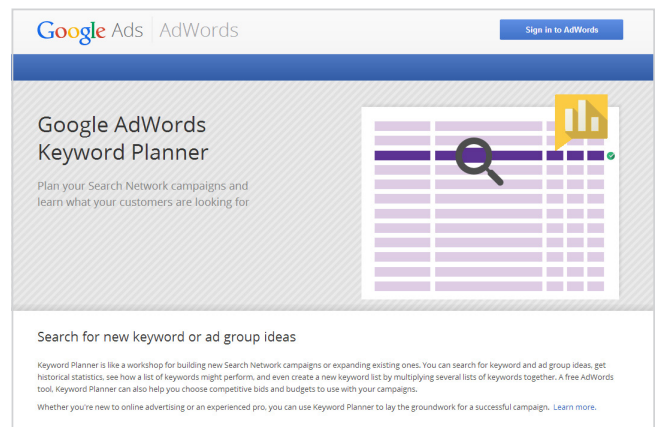


#6 Keyword Research: Which Words Will People Use to Find You Online?

Okay: your site is set up, you know what you sell, and you know to whom you're selling it to. So which words do you use to populate the content on your site? How do you know what your users search for and if those searches will lead them to your site? Most people think that just populating your site with products and descriptions will be enough to make potential customers come running. This isn't usually the case, unfortunately.

Search engines are essentially text crawlers: they read, follow links, and read more. With this key piece of information in mind, we need to include the words and phrases your customers search for to find the products advertised on your site.

There are two resources that will give you an advantage when populating the content on your site. These resources are Google's [Keyword Planner](#) and conducting your own Audience Mapping.



- **Audience Mapping:** Conducting research to understand your current audience, what it does, how old its members are, the products they buy, and the words they use to find them. Once you have this information, you can start researching key phrases.
- **Keyword Planner:** This tool allows you to enter any term, and then retrieves the average number of monthly searches for that particular word or phrase. It also provides you with closely-related phrases to the ones you entered. This then allows you to build a bank of phrases that are related to your product offering, allowing you to include these phrases when you populate your pages with content.

Key word research is essential to understand how to attract customers to your website. If you populate your site with vast amounts of relevant and useful content that include the key phrases, you are creating the best opportunity to attract organic visitors to your site.



#7 Google Analytics for the Globe

Once your site is live and visible to the world, you need to understand your users' behavior and how to start improving your site to increase conversion rates and sales.

[Google Analytics](#) is a free tool, much like Webmaster Tools, but can be used to track all of your data, including visitors, bounce rates, and sales, to name just a few. Analytics can be used for International SEO to understand how behavior can change across different countries — what might work in the United Kingdom in terms of offers and content, might not work so well in the United States.

The data can be analyzed in multiple ways to help you understand your traffic. You can use different approaches to understand the way a user visited your site (organic, paid etc.), the device he or she used, the search engine used, the pages visited, and which (if any) products were bought.

Learn how to use Google Analytics and you will learn not only what your data are, but what they mean. The real value comes when you can start analyzing the buyer journey, top conversion paths, and barriers to conversion to start improving your bottom line.

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#8 Titles, Titles, and More Titles

'Meta' is a word that can cause even the most technical web guru to glaze over. The concept may be boring, but it is one of the, if not thee, strongest ranking factors that Google relies on to understand what your site and its pages are all about.

Every web page — yes, every page — should include a meta title. Each meta title should include the following:

- The most relevant keyword to the content. This should appear as close to the start of the title as possible.
- Your brand. This is usually placed at the end of the title.
- Titles should be kept to approximately 60 characters, or else they risk truncation by Google.
- Every title must be unique — you can be penalized for having large quantities of duplicate meta titles.

The screenshot shows a user interface for editing meta data. At the top, there is a partially visible text field containing "hosted-checkout". Below this, there are three main sections, each with a dropdown arrow on the left:

- Meta Title**: The instructions are "Meta Title". The text field contains "Hosted Checkout - 2Checkout".
- Meta Description**: The instructions are "Meta Description". The text field contains "Standard Checkout and Inline Checkout are simple, hosted".
- HTML**: This section is currently collapsed.

The most effective way to write a meta title is to write in prose for the user, not the search engines. Meta titles are important whether you like to write them or not. You need them, Google needs them to understand what your pages are all about, and your users need them to know what they are clicking on in the search results.



#9 It's All in the Description

IKEA | Affordable Furniture & Home Furnishings - IKEA

www.ikea.com/gb/en/

IKEA online and in-store. Shop for furniture and home accessories, or browse 100's of room ideas. Find our latest products & offers online at IKEA.co.uk.

IKEA's meta description in the search results.

If you keep up to date with the algorithmic shifts that Google continues to implement, then you'll know meta descriptions no longer contribute as a ranking factor in SEO. So why do you need them? Let's take a look.

- Meta descriptions appear in the search results. They populate the section under the meta title, shown in this Ikea example.
- They give the user a description of the page to let him or her know if the page is of interest, therefore increasing click through rates from organic search traffic.
- Each meta description should be around 150 characters and describe the page the user is visiting.
- Each meta description must be unique.

The meta description is not as important in terms of SEO as it was five years ago, but it is still vital in terms of usability and attracting organic visits. Usability and visitors should be the main focus in all of your on-site activity — if you're building a site simply for SEO perfection, then you're going to struggle if you don't keep the users' needs as the number one priority.

✓ #10 Do Meta Keywords Still Matter?

Meta keywords are a list of keywords that a site deems relevant for each page that can be included in the source code. Google used to take these keywords into account when ranking sites, until they were manipulated by various users and Google stopped incorporating them into its algorithms.

Are they useful anymore? Not entirely for Google, but using them is still best a practice. Here's why. There are many other globally-recognized search engines that still take meta keywords into account, and place high priority on these as a ranking factor. It is worth filling in your meta keywords when working across multiple countries where Google isn't necessarily the main search engine used.

✓ #11 Picture Perfect!

Everyone loves gorgeous high-resolution images. They look professional and can support the message of your content. You have to remember, though — search engines are text crawlers. They can't see these beautiful images, or appreciate the subtle hue on your homepage banner. Therefore, you need to communicate exactly what your images contain. This is where the image alt tag comes into use.

```
<div class="col span-1"></div>
▶ <div class="col span-10 center-align">...</div>
<div class="col span-1"></div>
▼ <div class="col span-12">
  
</div>
▶ <div class="col span-4">...</div>
▶ <div class="col span-8">...</div>
<div class="clear"></div>
```

Few sites use alt text for imagery, which completely deters any chance of making images searchable, especially if your site sell a full line of products.

When filling in your alt tags, try to be as descriptive as possible and list what you see. If you sell an 18 Karat gold necklace, then name it '18 Karat gold necklace from myawesomedomain.com'. This will give your images the best chance of being found for exactly what they are.

✓ #12 Beyond Google: Bing, Yahoo, Yandex, Baidu



So we've covered the main meta data that you will need to ensure your site is as visible and relevant for your topic areas as possible, but there are a number of search engines that do things slightly differently.

Google is the global market leader by far, holding just under 70% of the organic search domain at the end of 2013. Google is the leader in terms of algorithm advancement and understanding search terms. The rest of the world's leading search engines may all fall behind Google, but you would be playing a fools game if you didn't consider them in your search strategy.

The safest and most efficient way to do this is to optimize everything I have mentioned above,

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#13 Unique: No One Likes a Copycat

Content is king, and if there is one thing that search engines hate, it's duplicate content. There are many sites that don't even realize that they host duplicate content. For example, you could have pages that are available with a trailing slash (www.mystupiddomain.com/page1/), and the same page without a trailing slash (www.mystupiddomain.com/page1). If you don't realize that both are accessible and you don't change your code to only show one instance of the page, then you can quite easily have a whole duplicate site on your hands. This is just one example of the many duplication issues out there, and this is before we even address the issue of people copying and pasting product descriptions across their entire site!

To ensure your safety with the search engines, you need to make sure EVERYTHING you write on your site is completely unique, and not taken from anywhere else on the web, including your meta data. The only time that you can use the same content is when you are using the same language instance for different regions, as long as you use the HREF Lang tag correctly — this tells the search engines that the content is designed for different markets and should be treated as unique.



#14 Canonical: The What & Why

What is a canonical tag? In its simplest form, a canonical tag tells search engines that the page link it contains refers to an original page, and that page should be treated as the only instance of that page. This is great for a number of applications: when you realize a couple of your pages have duplication issues, when you test homepage variations and don't want search engines to mistake one for duplicate content, and finally, and to save you from being penalized if someone steals your content.

A canonical tag is placed in your pages source code using the code...

```
<link rel="canonical" href="http://www.myawesomedomain.com/" />
```

...pointing to the original page. This tells the search engines that this page is the original, and any other variations it may find should be ignored.



#15 Avoid Keyword Stuffing (It isn't 2004 Anymore)

Remember the days when you would search for something online, and all you would be able to find were short, keyword-stuffed, 300-word articles that failed to deliver any of the information you wanted, and only talked about the key word you had used to search?

This problem was rife in the early to mid aughties as site managers learned that they could game the search engines by writing short content around each keyword they were targeting. The search engines learned and evolved, and it is not quite so simple these days to rank for chosen key phrases.

Please do not use this technique, it will only get you quickly penalized, and has no benefit to the user. Plus, it's soooo 2004!



#16 Write for the User and Search Engines Will Understand You

Present day optimization is aimed completely at the user (as it always should have been). Search engines are smart enough to understand the meaning of words, the topics related to those words, and the semantics of language. This means you do not need to worry about ranking for a particular keyword or set of keywords. If you write lots of content around the topics your products and services revolve around, then you should slowly start to be seen as an expert resource in this area.

The content you write should benefit the user in one way or another. If you sell products, discuss and laud them, give as much detail as you can, and talk about their uses. You will have a high chance of giving the user the answer he or she seeks and getting him or her a step closer to a conversion. Search engines are now smart enough to realize which topic area a website is relevant to by evaluating the content that it contains, not by matching the words used to search and the words a website contains. The more content you write about your topic, the more chance you will have of appearing for a huge range of related terms to that topic.

✓ #17 Relevance & Synonyms: Search is Smart

This guide has touched on the intelligence of search engines already, but it can't be stressed enough that they are smarter than most website architects think. [Google's Hummingbird update](#) from late 2013 illustrates this nicely.



This update incorporated Google's [Knowledge Graph](#) research and allows the search engine to understand the context of the words typed into the search box. Sounds ordinary, doesn't it? If you really think about it, though, this development is ground-breaking.

Google can now understand the difference between Cork (the place in Ireland) and cork (the piece of wood in a wine bottle) and bring the user back relevant results based on the content of the search. Furthermore, Google now understands the relevance of the words on your webpages, so it's essential that you write relevant content for your users, so your site can be found for the terms you want to communicate.

When you write this advice down on paper, it may sound silly, and it may sound like common sense, but you would be surprised by the number of people who forget the importance of their content once their site is built. Ensure that your content addresses your business in a relatable context.

✓ #18 Don't Be Conservative with Your Words

The quality of your content is extremely important, but of equal import is limiting yourself from the wider range of key phrases around your topic that you could also be ranking for. It's that simple: the more topics you write about that are relevant to your product or services, the better chance you will have for appearing in the search results for browsers searching for those topics and key words. This, in turn, should increase your brand awareness, traffic levels, and if your content is quality, transform you into a trusted source for your topic areas in the search engines.



#19 Interlinking: Relevance is Key

Now that you've populated your e-commerce website with extremely engaging and relevant content, it's time to tell the search engines where they can find it. You can accomplish this by linking all relevant topics together.

Here is an example of interlinking in action:

You write a blog post for your awesome sandals-selling site about 'sandals for travel in changing climates' at www.myawesomesandals.com/blog/sandals-for-travel-in-changing-climates/. The post contains useful information for your readers on sandal types, which sandals are best for hot, cold, or wet climates, and what features you should look for in quality sandals. This content should then be linked back to relevant sections of the website (www.myawesomesandals.com/summer-sandals/), so both users and search engines can explore the related products your site sells.

It is also important to now link from your product/category pages to the resource you have just created, so the users and search engines can 'find out more information' on the uses of your products. All this interlinking to content and products aids in increasing your authority as an expert in your topic areas with your users, potential users, and search engines.



#20 Link to Relevant Resources

Since I know you will be writing engaging, relevant content after reading this guide, as well as creating awesome products and developing an awesome marketing team, you will probably be featured on some authoritative sites around the web, and that's fantastic. This is great natural exposure that you should utilize and show off to your users.

When one of your products is featured in a mass publication or in your industry-leading editorial, it is time to shout about it, feature it on your product page, and link back to the resource that has featured your product. This benefits your users, who can dread about how awesome your product is from a third party. This also indicates to the search engines that you are linking to a quality resource that is relevant to your product.

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#21 Link Building is Important

Link building, or recruiting external pages to link to your site, has suffered a bad reputation the last couple of years, with many spammy tactics surrounding the practice. But this doesn't mean that link building is inherently dead. Far from it, link building is still alive, but needs to be executed very, very strategically.

Links still play a huge part in the ranking algorithm, and they still matter and can still be built. The main point to consider is that quantity isn't the only metric search engines use to rank link profiles anymore. Links are now ranked on relevancy, quality, and quantity.

Don't build links with a scattered approach —only build links that use unique, quality content.



#22 Outreach

When you conduct link building, you need the result to look as natural as possible so that, over time, you build a link profile that is varied and relevant. One way of making your link building look natural is to build content links that link to other respected resources, as well as your own site.

Building quality content across the web on respected websites that link to your site and other respected websites gives one of the strongest indications to search engines that your site is also respected, quality, and relevant in the same topic areas. If you approach your link building campaign with this mentality, you will give yourself the best chance to build a strong links profile that is both diverse and powerful.



#23 Build relationships, Not Just Links

Building one link with shareable content is great; you have made progress and exposed your brand to potential customers. But why stop there? Why not get to know your contact, build a rapport, and contribute more regularly with relevant content?

These types of relationships are hard to build; they take time, they take resources, and they occasionally don't work out. But when they do, they are extremely valuable. People remember kindness, they remember names, and they value time. Putting in the time with people, not just their websites, will reap rewards for you. People will trust you and your brand, they will relay this impression to their followers, and favor your brand when competitors inevitably approach their site for a link.

This type of link building verges on PR and traditional brand management, which, if you think about it logically, it should.



#24 Culture Vulture: Link Building Across Multiple Countries

As mentioned before, link building should build relationships and build your brand's reputation, rather than drop a link or two and run. This becomes quite an issue when you conduct your outreach over multiple countries.



The only real way to see results and to build relationships is to use people from the countries you are targeting. You can't use people that don't speak the language. Translation software can be effective, but it can't translate cultural differences. It can't decode how people greet and sign off conversations, abbreviations, and language styles. This is vital when holding conversations and asking for people to place your content on their site.

This method does, however, come with a couple of drawbacks: people are expensive to hire, especially freelancers, and you don't have full control over the process. You have to place your trust in people that are not employed internally to preach your brand message. The reward can outweigh the risk in this case, though, especially if you treat the freelance staff like an integrated member of the team.



#25 Should you pay for links?

Paid links have continually been a controversial practice in the SEO world. The problems arise when you don't inform the search engines that you have paid for them. This development can open you up to a manual penalty. The most public paid links penalty happened in the UK in early 2013, when Interflora (a large online florist) lost its rankings for all of its major terms in the run up to Mothering Sunday ([read about it here](#)).

Interflora sent out dozens of products asking bloggers and journalists to review them. What they didn't state was that some bloggers were even paid money to do so. Google took immediate action, and condemned the practice as manipulative by halving Interflora's visibility for its main search terms. The company eventually regained its rankings, but it was one of the higher profile cases showing that sites need to tell Google when they pay for links.

There are a couple of ways to inform the search engines that you have paid for the link. The first and most obvious is to have it written on the content, with language such as '**this is a sponsored post from [www.myawesomesandals.com](#)**.' This approach should then be supported by a small bit of code that tells Google not to follow this link, and to not allocate any score to this link. This is called making the link 'No Followed' and it looks like this: **rel="nofollow."**

Paid links, when done correctly, can occasionally prove valuable, especially when you have the budget to do so. That said, try to avoid paying for links to ensure natural and organic rankings. The only time this could be viable is when forming a connection with a site is too valuable to pass up, and the benefits of the exposure far outweigh the financial cost.

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