
Linking Matters

www.linkingmatters.com

How To Create An Effective Linking Strategy To Promote Your Web Site

Written and Designed

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About Us

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Introduction

Linking Matters is a free resource that helps web site owners, managers and consultants to run an effective linking strategy. The report contains step-by-step instructions as well as extensive links to articles and resources.

The report is also available online at www.linkingmatters.com. Check the site for updates and to check how our own linking strategy is progressing.

Linking Matters follows the classic linking approach:

1. Create valuable content
2. Link to other valuable content
3. Ask for links from quality, relevant sites.

LinkingMatters.com is also an experiment. We built the site to test our linking strategy, publish our methods and share our results.

The performance of this site will therefore be a measure of the success or otherwise of our strategy. We've started off with no inbound links and are using only our linking strategy to promote the site – we'll report our progress every week.

Done well, a linking strategy can be a rewarding part of your overall marketing activities: done poorly, it can cause a lot of grief.

- So is a linking strategy worth the effort?
- If it is, how can you boost your link popularity?
- How much time and money should you spend?
- What are the pitfalls and how do you avoid them?
- What results should you expect?
- Where do you start?

We hope to give you the answers to these questions both in this report and on the accompanying web site.

We are also keen to hear about your experiences, so please complete the linking survey on the site.

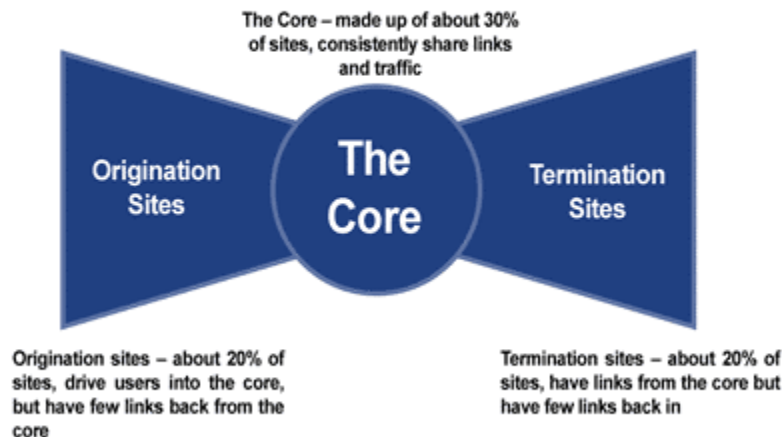
And if you have any interesting stories to tell, we'd love to hear them.

1. Why Linking is Important

The hyperlink is at the heart of the web - it allows people to move quickly from one document to another or from one site to another. This simple concept creates a powerful communication tool that can be harnessed to deliver your business or organisational objectives.

The importance of linking is well demonstrated in research from AltaVista, Compaq and IBM in 2000. They found that sites could be classified in a number of ways: **the core** made up of sites that shared links and traffic (about 30%); **origination sites** that directed people into the core (about 20%); **termination sites** that had links from the core but few back in (about 20%) and **isolated sites** that had few links and little traffic (about 30%). This, they called the Bow-Tie Theory:

The Bow-Tie Theory of the Internet



Source: AltaVista, Compaq and IBM, 2000
Image © www.linkingmatters.com 2003

Learning how linking works and how you can create an effective linking strategy will help your site become part of the core and should be an important part of any online marketing plan.

This report describes a methodology for planning and implementing your own linking strategy. You may choose to do it yourself or if you have the budget, work with appropriate specialists to complete your plan. The report links to extensive articles on linking, free online tools, specialist software and companies that provide linking services.

"Creating an effective linking strategy should be an important part of any online marketing plan"

We also include a summary of our own linking strategy and we will tell you how successful we have been in generating links week by week.

However, some words of warning. Generating inbound links to your site is not enough - you must generate **quality inbound links**. There is no magic trick to this - it demands

hard, systematic work - but the rewards can be well worth the effort. If you are up for that challenge, this report and this site will help you.

What are the benefits of an effective linking strategy?

Here are some of the main benefits:

(i) Following a link is one of the most popular ways for people to find new sites. If a site or a writer that you respect gives a link to further resources, then because of that respect you're likely to follow it. Therefore, the more inbound links you have to your site, the greater the opportunities for people to find your valuable content.

(ii) Search engines give sites with good inbound and outbound links a higher ranking. The logic goes that if you provide outbound links to other material you are providing a valuable service: and, if other sites link to you then you must have content of value.

(iii) By providing links to other material you don't have to re-invent the wheel and create it yourself. In writing this report, we provide lots of links to additional material. We see this as a valuable service to our readers and it also makes good use of the material we collected in researching and developing the report.

(iv) Having a linking strategy forces you to ask the fundamental question, "Why would anyone want to link to you?" The answer of course is that you provide something of value: you need to be clear about what that value is.

(v) Inbound links help to build trust. If people see that a popular or respected site links to you, then their level of trust in what you say and what you offer is likely to be higher.

(vi) Perhaps most importantly, you become part of a community. In every field of activity on the web there will be a number of key sources. Linking to them and providing valuable content that they can link to will make you a part of a powerful virtual network.

2. What is a linking strategy?

A linking strategy is a methodology that builds appropriate inbound links to your site and helps you achieve your overall business objectives.

In order to build a linking strategy, you must have good content on your site. You should also publish outbound links that your site users will find valuable. Finally, you should have a target list of external sites from which you can request links.

In other words, you need to have funds in three banks – a content bank, an outbound link bank and an inbound link bank.

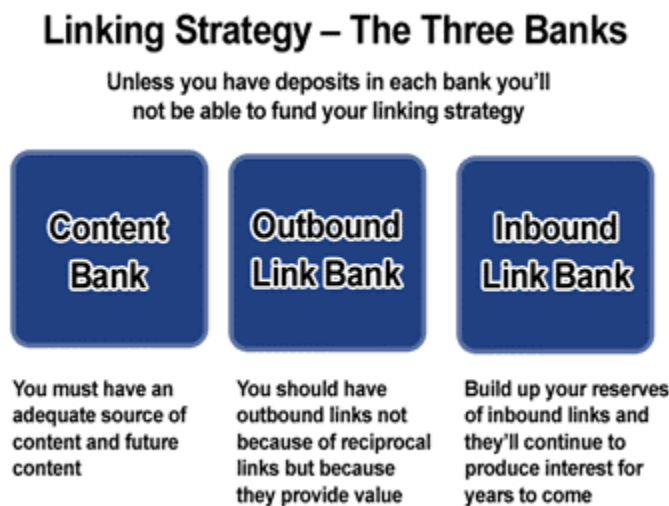


Image © www.linkingmatters.com 2003

Linking strategy is not a trick as many get rich quick merchants would have you believe. Links for the sake of links have no value whatsoever. Indeed, they can damage your rankings. So forget about link farms and other such nonsense. A small number of inbound links from great, relevant sites will be much more valuable than many links from low-traffic, irrelevant sites.

The basic principle is 'create good content, link to great content and great content will link to you'.

"Create good content, link to great content and great content will link to you"

An effective linking strategy can move your site up from the minor leagues to the premier division.

But you should not become obsessed by linking strategy alone. Treat linking as one important aspect of your online marketing. Decide how much time and effort you are prepared to invest in relation to your other marketing activities and be disciplined about your approach. Monitor your results and adapt your strategy as necessary.

At the very least, you should put the basics in place by making your site link friendly and publishing content that will be attractive to your existing customers as well as those you hope to attract through linking.

Once you have the basics in place, the natural momentum of the web will take over and your link popularity will grow organically.

How do top sites score on link popularity?

We looked at US and UK sites in specific sectors - retail, travel, finance, health and entertainment.

Here are the US results:

Retail Sector					
	Total	AltaVista	Google	Hotbot	MSN
Amazon.com	29,467,793	11,458,720	50,500	8,979,100	8,979,473
Dell.com	444,603	128,499	12,500	150,800	152,804
AmericanGreetings.com	41,586	6,148	2,690	15,300	17,448
Landsend.com	32,679	5,201	2,620	11,900	12,958
Toysrus.com	31,788	6,116	10,700	7,400	7,572

Travel Sector					
	Total	AltaVista	Google	Hotbot	MSN
Expedia.com	377,065	70,345	9,330	148,000	149,390
Travelocity.com	234,926	61,811	14,000	79,100	80,015
Amtrak.com	81,903	18,490	10,300	26,300	26,813
Ual.com	78,333	14,332	8,920	26,100	28,981

Finance Sector					
	Total	AltaVista	Google	Hotbot	MSN
Fool.com	199,425	23,386	11,100	78,300	86,639
Schwab.com	72,132	33,590	4,400	16,500	17,642
Fidelity.com	41,981	9,413	3,660	14,000	14,908
Insweb.com	27,373	6,171	2,410	8,900	9,892

Health Sector					
	Total	AltaVista	Google	Hotbot	MSN
webmd.com	299,943	35,800	7,060	123,800	133,283
cancer.org	144,021	33,363	13,700	48,200	48,758
drugstore.com	132,368	54,735	4,490	31,400	41,743
medlineplus.gov	39,994	7,764	18,300	6,600	7,330

Entertainment Sector					
	Total	AltaVista	Google	Hotbot	MSN
imdb.com	1,537,783	381,336	28,600	563,700	564,147
ticketmaster.com	298,027	58,188	10,900	113,900	115,039
allmusic.com	178,553	53,214	6,780	57,900	60,659
classmates.com	53,653	15,577	3,830	16,100	18,146

Here are the UK results:

N.B. UK domain names often have two forms - for example www.easyjet.co.uk and www.easyjet.com link to the same site. We therefore tested both .co.uk and .com domains and added the results to give an overall score.

UK Retail Sector					
	Total	AltaVista	Google	Hotbot	MSN
blackstar.co.uk	136,554	34,422	6,390	42,100	53,642
tesco.co.uk	23,564	8,466	4,620	4,400	6,078
jungle.co.uk	11,991	6,407	1,060	2,200	2,324
blockbuster.co.uk	1,241	279	156	400	406

UK Travel Sector					
	Total	AltaVista	Google	Hotbot	MSN
easyjet.co.uk	30,045	4,615	6,700	9,100	9,630
ebookers.co.uk	28,073	4,530	5,620	8,062	9,861
www.thetrainline.co.uk	15,075	3,142	2,670	4,500	4,763

UK Finance Sector					
	Total	AltaVista	Google	Hotbot	MSN
www.theaa.co.uk	37,982	8,741	5,260	11,400	12,581
www.barclays.co.uk	11,350	2,340	2,170	3,300	3,540
thisismoney.co.uk	11,118	1,851	4,820	1,900	2,547
www.egg.co.uk	9,347	1,932	2,380	2,400	2,635
assertahome.co.uk	2,472	600	620	476	776

UK Health Sector					
	Total	AltaVista	Google	Hotbot	MSN
www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk	43,456	10,379	7,980	11,500	13,597
cancerresearchuk.org	9,791	2,024	4,810	1,300	1,657
comicroelief.co.uk	5,219	727	2,460	933	1,099
www.surgerydoor.co.uk	4,303	774	1,280	1,100	1,149

UK Entertainment Sector					
	Total	AltaVista	Google	Hotbot	MSN
www.bbc.co.uk	2,192,112	496,178	213,000	743,500	739,434
friendsreunited.co.uk	12,796	3,085	2,030	3,700	3,981
the-fa.org	9,968	2,287	1,990	2,700	2,991
4thegame.com	5,864	549	2,710	900	1,705

What should you do about linking strategy?

As a site owner, what are your options in thinking about your link popularity?

You could:

Do nothing - it's a choice sure and if your site is essentially brochure ware, then it could well be a reasonable choice. However, if you really want your site to become part of the web and start delivering results, then doing nothing is not an option.

Find out more about linking strategy by reading our material, following the links to other material and trying out some of the exercises. After that you should be able to make an informed decision as to what to do next.

Do your own campaign by following the step-by-step process we've designed. This option will give you a great education about linking and will give you a valuable insight into your industry sector on the web.

Use specialists to do the job for you. If you have the budget, this is an excellent option. You'll gain from the knowledge these professionals already have and should be able to make an impact in a much shorter time.

Hire someone to do it for you. Again, if you have the budget, this is an excellent option. Bringing the skills in-house should sharpen your overall marketing activities.

3. Some Linking Myths

(i) Link popularity is a magic trick

The basic concept of link popularity is simple. If someone links to your site, you get a point. If you link to another site they get a point.

But not all sites are equal and therefore not all links are equal. A link from a high traffic industry portal is worth infinitely more than a link from a low-traffic free-for-all site. So the birth of Google's PageRank and other search engine algorithms.

PageRank is a measure of how 'useful' Google believes a site to be. PageRank influences the value of each link and it has a multiplier effect. A link from a site with a PageRank of 7 will be highly valuable; a link from a site with a PageRank of 0 will be worthless.

A link from a high traffic industry portal is worth infinitely more than a link from a low-traffic free-for-all site.

Google, AltaVista, Excite and Hotbot all use variations on link popularity when ordering their results.

(ii) The more inbound links to your site the better

This sounds plausible. The more links to your site, surely the greater the chance that new people will find it?

But if people never see these links, they might as well not exist - they are not worth even minimal effort. Developing an effective linking strategy is not about getting as many links as possible: it is about putting your resources into getting quality links that will drive traffic to your site.

(iii) You can always fool search engines

A great deal of time is spent by many people trying to fool search engines. Their efforts may be successful for a time but search engines are on constant alert against dubious practices and will take action against them. So a type of arms race develops where the weapons and defenses against them get ever more sophisticated.

History has seen the rise and fall of keyword spamming, free-for-alls, link farms, hidden links and others. The effort involved is huge and the success if any is transitory.

It is much better to concentrate on giving the search engines what they really want - great content, well-organised, well-published and linked to other relevant material. Concentrate on that and you will be rewarded.

(iv) You can get away without great content

Suppose you were the greatest search engine marketer that ever lived. You could use every tool at your disposal to its maximum potential and drive huge amounts of traffic to any client site that paid you.

But these huge numbers of people are looking for something - they want their needs to be addressed and their wishes fulfilled.

They need to have the content or functionality that they are looking for – if they don't find it, their experience will be empty and meaningless. If you can't give people what they want, you are wasting your time and theirs.

(v) The main benefit of link popularity is in search engine optimisation

Link popularity will certainly affect your search engine performance but that is only part of the story.

By implementing a linking strategy you attract more visitors, provide additional content and resources for them, you learn more about your industry online and your competitive position within it, you build trust and you become part of an online community.

These benefits can bring much greater reward than search engine ranking.

(vi) Once you've done your campaign you can leave it

An effective linking strategy demands an ongoing commitment. Not only must you maintain your links, you must add to them. Once you have covered the basics, a natural momentum will be created whereby new sites will link to you without being asked. But this alone is not enough.

You should continue to provide content and resources for the sites that already link to you and you should spend some time every week looking for new links.

As your knowledge and experience grow you will be able to further develop and expand your linking strategy.

(vii) Software can do the job

Software will not automate the process of human interaction that is at the heart of an effective linking strategy. No amount of artificial intelligence will produce possible link partners as accurately as you can yourself with some thought and methodology.

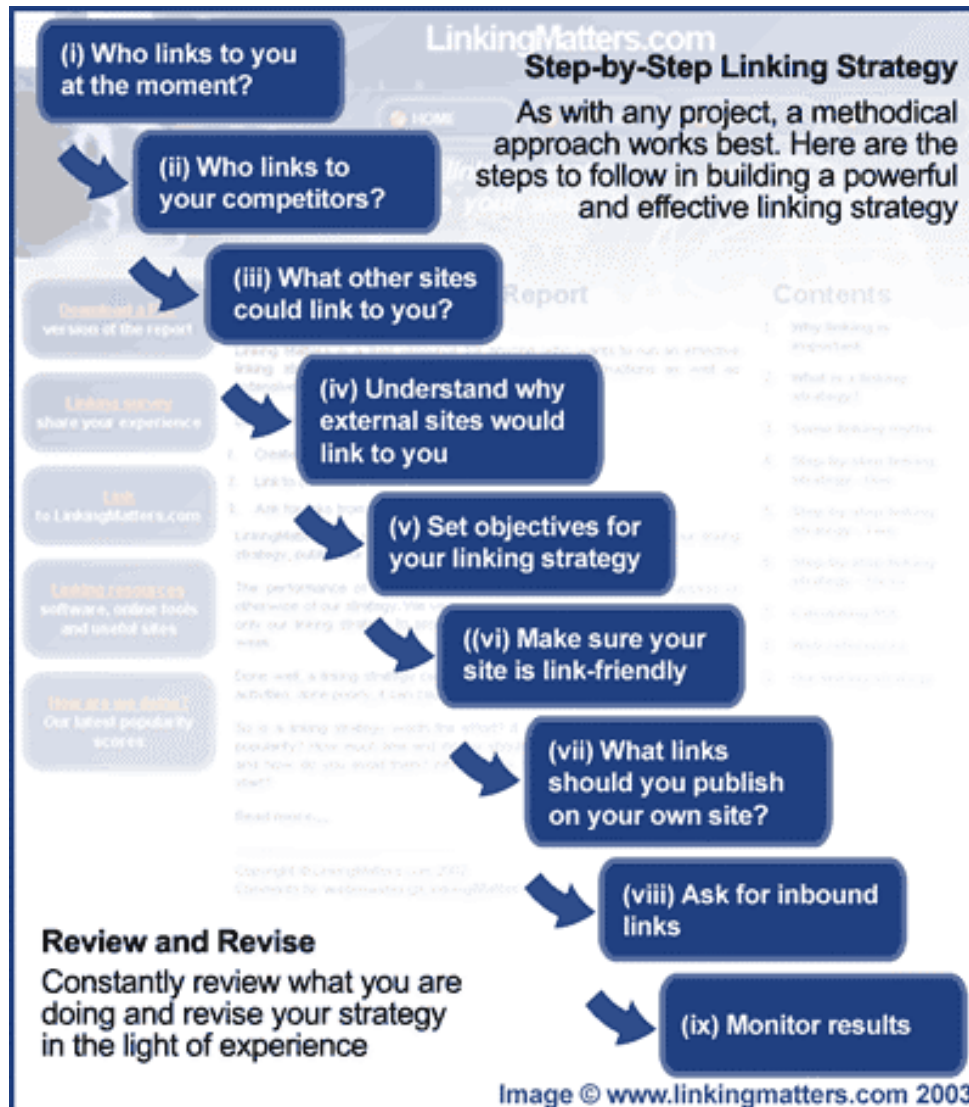
This goes doubly for the link request email. Internet users have become very savvy when it comes to bulk emailing; anything without their name in the body of the email will go straight to the trash can.

By picking a few good sites, emailing them individually with details of exactly what you can offer and where you think a link might fit in with their existing content, you will not only get a greater response rate, but the links you get are sure to be far more valuable.

However, there are a number of software options that can greatly support if not automate the link-request process. These are primarily Arelis and Zeus, both of which have similar functionality. They find relevant sites using your chosen keywords and save them in a database from which you may automatically send out link requests. They also automatically create a reciprocal links page if you wish.

4. Step-by-Step Linking Strategy - Part One

The amount of time and effort you invest in a linking strategy depends on what you expect to achieve. You may decide to spend a few days, a few weeks or even a few months. No matter how long you decide to spend, the steps you follow should be the same – it is just the level of detail that will be different. So here's the outline process and the resources you will need.



Workbook

A collection of 10 worksheets to help you plan and implement your linking strategy is available from www.linkingmatters.com

The best way to work is to quickly read through the process, then download the workbook and then spend time on each of the steps.

(i) Who links to you now?

You can find out easily using either Google or AltaVista or one of the online link popularity checkers.

In Google, enter:

link:www.yourwebaddress.com

Then click 'Google Search' and the pages that link to you will appear.

It's a good idea to download the Google toolbar that will allow you to check the link popularity of any site you are visiting.

In AltaVista, enter:

link:www.yourwebaddress.com - host:yourwebaddress.com

Alternatively, go to a site such as www.linkpopularity.com where you can test three search engines at once. You can also register for monthly updates if you wish.

Now check the results by visiting any sites that link to you. What type of sites link? Why do they link? What other links do they provide?

By trawling through sites that already link to you, you'll learn to understand why and incorporate this into your linking strategy.

(ii) Who links to your competitors?

Now have a look at who links to your competitors. One way to do this is to use a piece of free software you can find at www.checkyourlinkpopularity.com Download the software, enter the web addresses of your competitors and you'll get a chart like this:

Domain	Total	AllTheWeb	AltaVista	ADL Search	HotBot	MSN Search
www.ctzzbook.com	0	0	0	0	0	0
www.page1book.com	3,460	8,375	259	298	0	528
www.bookpool.com	41,675	32,501	3,481	1,490	0	4,203
www.booksamillon.com	114,466	62,213	28,911	8,210	7,595	7,469
www Barnesandnoble.com	636,321	501,195	42,518	15,300	42,063	35,255
www.amazon.com	43,576,658	25,843,454	8,802,330	48,400	0	8,882,674

What can you learn from looking at your competitors?

A lot.

First, you'll see how many sites link to them, the quality of those links and from that you can get an idea of how good they are at online marketing. From your competitors link popularity scores you can set a benchmark against which to measure your own improvement.

Second, you'll be able to draw up a target list of sites that link to your competitors and should be a good potential source of inbound links for your own site.

Third, you'll get a good idea of external sites that play an important part in your industry. By doing a link popularity test on top sites that link to your competitors, you'll find even more potential link partners.

You can use the software to check the links of each competitor on each search engine. Just select a domain, right click and select the search engine you want. You will then find a listing of the inbound links

The links that you find will be of different quality. How do you evaluate them?

To demonstrate, let's look at one example.

Suppose you own a small luxury hotel in London. You have drawn up a list of direct competitors online and decide to do a link popularity test on each.

'One Aldwych' is one hotel that offers facilities similar to your own.

You can use the free software to check all your competitors at once or you could go to Linkpopularity.com. You decide to go to Linkpopularity.com and find they score 23 on AltaVista, 74 on Google and 15 on Hotbot.

Link Popularity Report		
URL: http://www.onealdwych.com		
Altavista	23 links	For a detailed listing of all sites linking to your URL, click on the hypertext to the left.
Google	click to view	
Hotbot	15 links	

Click on the hypertext and you'll get the addresses of the sites that link to onealdwych.com.

On Google, this appears as:



How valuable are these links?

Take the first one:



This turns out to be Wealth24.com which describes itself as "the only wealth management and luxury shopping directory on the web". The site not only links to hotels but also many other luxury goods and services.

Moving down the list of sites, we find one from ntlworld.com:



This turns out to be a 'celebrity fridge' profile of author and broadcaster Alan Titchmarsh. Scan the article and you find he lists the Indigo restaurant at Onealdwych as his favourite restaurant.

Yet another link is:

[Travel Intelligence | One Aldwych](#)
For advice on this hotel, to check availability or to reserve a room contact the team at Travel Intelligence on +44 (0)20 8740 8333, or email us by clicking ...
www.travelintelligence.net/awsd/hotels/htls_697.html - 14k - [Cached](#) - [Similar pages](#)

This turns out to be very interesting. A web site set up by over 70 travel writers to inform and inspire travelers. Scan the home page and you find comments such as:

"Articles written by extremely well-informed travelers who nominate their favourite places as well as their new discoveries. An invaluable and constantly illuminating site which makes both planning and taking journeys more exciting" The Telegraph

How would you rate these three competitor links?

One way is to do a link popularity test on each of the sites and see how they rate. But the most important thing is to review the sites yourself - you need to visit those that look interesting.

Wealth24.com offers lots of links to luxury services only one of which is hotels. It would be probably be easy to get listed but unlikely to produce much traffic.

Ntlworld.com has very little to do with hotels and the link only appeared as part of a celebrity interview - unlikely to be of link interest.

Travelintelligence.net on the other hand is an online magazine directed at a specific travel audience. Provided the site itself has quality traffic, a link here would be very valuable - but probably would take a bit of PR effort to secure.

So you create a worksheet like:

Web site	Description	Page Rank	Priority
www.wealth24.com	General wealth portal	6/10	Medium
www.ntlworld.com	Telecommunications company	8/10	None
www.travelintelligence.net	Travel magazine	7/10	High
... and so on			

Your Progress

At the end of this stage, you should have completed worksheets 1 and 2. You will have a good understanding of who links to you and your competitors.

All worksheets can be downloaded from
<http://www.linkingmatters.com/DownloadPDF.html>

5. Step-by-Step Linking Strategy - Part Two

(iii) What other sites could link to you?

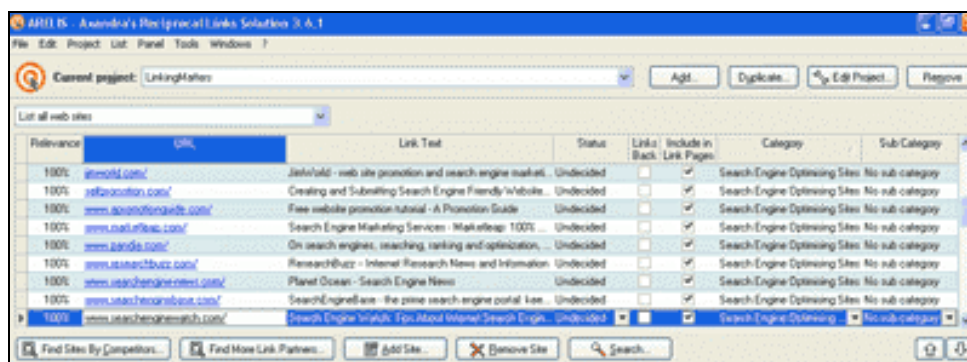
Steps (i) and (ii) will have identified interesting sites that either link to you or to your competitors. But this list is probably not exhaustive.

You can add further sites by:

- Conducting a link popularity test on all the interesting sites you have identified. Trawling through the results is sure to add more important and relevant sites to your list. For example, scan the links that come in to travelintelligence.net and you'll find such directory sites as www.travelair.co.uk and www.travelgate.co.uk. Such sites can be a rich source of further links.
- Checking the content of the sites you have identified for further links.
- Visiting industry specific and general portals. About.com is a great place to start. The site publishes over 700 internet guides to different topics and is one of the highest traffic sites on the web. For the hotel example we used in the previous section, the guide found at <http://hotels.about.com/mbody.htm> would be very useful. Trawl through this and you'll find more potential linking targets. After about.com, look at Yahoo!, dmoz and other portals.
- Conduct searches on Google, AltaVista and other search engines using your own keywords. Trawl through the results looking for relevant sites.

Add promising target sites to your worksheet. This should now give you a fairly exhaustive list of sites. This sounds like hard work - and it is. But the results will not only give you targets for your linking strategy but it will also give you valuable insight into your industry online.

You can use software to organise and speed up the process. Arelis from www.axandra.com is designed specifically to conduct a linking strategy. Note that this software still recommends visiting every site and composing an individual email request to each target.



The Arelis screen above allows you to manage a complete linking strategy on your desktop. A trial version is available for free with licenses starting at just under \$100.

(iv) Understand why external sites would want to link to you

The simple answer is because you are able to provide something of value to their visitors that *also enhances their own site*. Without that value, no worthwhile external site will link to you.

You therefore need to think about both their site and the visitors to their site.

Here are some reasons why external sites will link to you:

- You provide a product or service of interest to their visitors. For example, [BizTrip](#) provide many links to online travel resources.
- You provide a service that enhances their web site directly. An online retailer may include a direct link to a [currency converter](#) online.
- You have published an article, research report or white paper of benefit to their visitors. Debbie Weil's [WordBiz](#) newsletter provides links to great external resources (as well as publishing some of her own)
- You provide an extensive library of links on a particular topic.
- You have a strategic relationship or partnership.

So where do you fit in? Which of these reasons are suitable for your site? What significant value do you already have? What can you create? What will it cost you and what results can you expect?

(v) Set objectives for your linking strategy

Your objectives should be related to what you want to achieve overall in your business or organisation. Achieving business results should be the bottom line.

At the basic level you could set yourself objectives such as:

- To generate at least **x** inbound links to your site
- To raise the PageRank of your home page from 2 to 7 (say) - thus making your site more attractive to search engines.
- To generate **y%** more visitors to your site
- To outperform your top 3 competitors in link popularity.

These are reasonable objectives to have, but they do not address your core business or organisational objectives. Think of your linking strategy in terms of your overall objectives. How about:

- To raise the sales conversion rate on your site by **x%** through attracting more qualified leads

-
- To understand and make contact with the top online resources within your industry
 - To persuade at least 50% of those online resources to provide a link to your site
 - To find at least 3 strategic partners that will give you access to new markets.

All of these things are possible through an effective linking strategy and will bring long-term benefits to your business or organisation. Implementing the strategy will open up a new range of challenges and opportunities and teach you a lot about how the web really works.

Armed with that knowledge and experience you will learn how to refine and achieve linking objectives that really deliver business results.

(vi) Make sure your site is link-friendly

Put yourself in the position of someone thinking of linking to your site – would they find it easy to do so?

Most external sites will want to link directly to documents but site owners may prefer to have people come through the home page. You have to weigh up the pros and cons but you should come down on the side of offering best value to your target sites.

Your site should be organised so that it is easy to link either to the home page, major sections or individual documents. This means that:

- Each important document or function should have its own URL. Frames or javascript will cause problems and should be avoided. If you can't avoid them, you'll have to find an acceptable workaround.
- Important sections of your site should have their own titles and descriptions.
- You should avoid using multiple URLs if at all possible. Some sites may use their corporate web address and brand address to direct people to the same home page.
- You should not insert unnecessary registration requirements that block access.

Your Progress

At the end of this stage, you should have completed worksheets 3,4,5 and 6. You will have a list of target sites and an understanding of why they would link to you. You will also have some solid business objectives and will know how to make sure your site is link-friendly.

All worksheets can be downloaded from
<http://www.linkingmatters.com/DownloadPDF.html>

6. Step-by-Step Linking Strategy - Part Three

(vii) What links could you publish on your own site?

Publishing links to external sites is an essential part of a linking strategy. You should provide links that will be of real benefit to your users. The logic is that if you provide valuable links, you establish your site as a valuable resource and users will be more likely to bookmark it and return.

However, many sites are wary of providing outbound links - they are afraid they may send people away and they'll either forget to come back or get sucked into something much more interesting.

This concern is understandable but it underestimates the intelligence of users. They will almost certainly be looking for other resources on the web. If you help them, they're going to spend less time on search engines, where they really could get diverted. By providing relevant resources, you help to keep them focused and increase rather than decrease the relevance of your site.

You should link to:

- Specific documents
- Online magazines
- Communities
- Specific functions such as currency converters.

Reciprocal links should only be given where there is clear relevance. Avoid links just for the sake of links.

(viii) Ask for inbound links

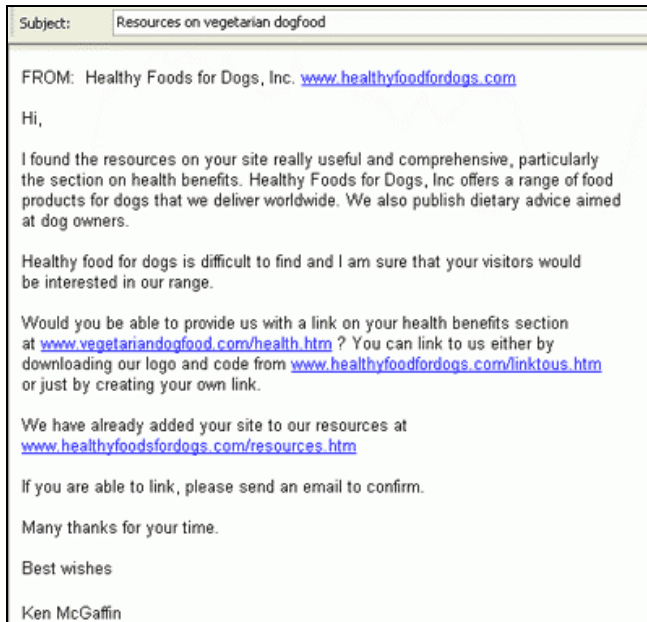
By now you should have identified between 50-100 target sites that could potentially link to your own. Now it's time to ask them for a link.

You should have a clear idea of why each of the target sites would want to link to your own, and from which page on their site you'd like a link. You need to treat each target site individually - sending out a blanket email will not produce results.

Send them a short linking request that should include:

- A named contact, if you can find one
- The address of the page on their site that you'd like a link
- A summary of the benefits their visitors will gain
- Some simple linking code
- A request to get in touch.

The exact email will differ depending on the nature of the target site but here's an example:



You need to keep a record of the requests that you send out. Be sure to thank any sites that provide a link and respond promptly to any queries.

(ix) Monitor results

Monitoring results is an important part of any strategy and linking strategy is no different. As a baseline you should measure:

- Any increase in your link popularity
- Your performance benchmarked against your competition
- Percentage of your target sites who decide to link to you
- Any new sites that link to you without being asked
- Impact of new links on your site traffic - by measuring referring sites.

Keep an eye on results day-to-day and conduct a formal review on a monthly basis. Modify and develop your strategy as required.

Your Progress

At the end of this stage, you should have completed worksheets 7, 8 and 9. You will have a good idea of how to craft a link request and send it. Worksheet 10 will help you monitor results.

All worksheets can be downloaded from
<http://www.linkingmatters.com/DownloadPDF.html>

7. Calculating ROI

Though it may sound simple, calculating an accurate return on investment (ROI) is not an easy thing to do. You will need answers to questions that include:

- Did any additional sales or results come directly from the linking campaign?
- Did the linking campaign have an impact on the effectiveness of other marketing initiatives (e.g. search engine optimisation)?
- Were prospects generated through the campaign more likely to buy than others?
- Were prospects more likely to buy again and convert to long-term customers?

To find accurate answers to these questions requires measurement tools and the staff to use them. You could get yourself into an 'Alice in Wonderland' dilemma, "Does the return on investment in measuring return on investment justify the expense?"

The answer to this dilemma depends on who you are and how you manage your business. If you already do sophisticated measurements on your site, you'll probably be able to answer these questions without too much difficulty.

However, if you do not take sophisticated measurements on your site, then you have some choices to make.

At the very basic level, you could implement your linking strategy and just observe whether your traffic or sales go up. This might be sufficient for your needs, but you could do more. How about taking the opportunity to do some more work on measuring what is happening on your site and how that relates to your business performance.

In paragraph (ix) of Section 6, we described the types of measurements you should take as part of your linking strategy. You now have to relate these to business objectives.

You will need to know:

- Conversion rate – the % of new visitors to your site who turn into customers
- Average value of first sale
- Average repeat purchase over 12 months
- Average profit contribution for each sale
- Estimated life-time value of each customer
- Number of new visitors generated by the linking campaign (look to your log-files or analytics for referring sites)

Now, with this information you can calculate three measures for the ROI of your linking campaign.

ROI₁ covers the first three months of the campaign

ROI₂ covers the first twelve months of the campaign

ROI₃ covers the life-time value of customers generated by the campaign.

ROI₁ - The first three months

Let's take the example of an online retailer whose conversion rate is 3%; first time sales average \$150 and net profit is a healthy 20%. Suppose the linking campaign generates an additional 5,000 visitors in the first three months.

Number of new customers = new visitors*conversion rate
= 5000*3%
= 150

Amount of new sales = new customers*average first sale
= 150*\$150
= \$22,500

Amount of profit generated = new sales*20%
= \$4,500

The retailer has employed a freelancer to do the campaign for 10 days @\$300 per day - \$3,000 in total. The campaign therefore produces a profit of \$1,500 or an ROI of 1.5 in classic direct marketing terms.

Not a bad result at all.

ROI₂ - The first twelve months

Now suppose that 50% the retailer's first time customers come back and within the first year make another \$300 worth of purchases. These figures should also be factored into ROI.

So the retailer generated 150 new customers from the linking campaign. 50% of these come back to spend another \$300 over the year.

This generates sales = (50%*150 customers)*\$300
= 75*\$300
= \$22,500
= \$4,500 additional profit.

So overall, the additional profit for the first year is \$9,000 for the original investment of \$3000. Therefore the total profit is \$6,000 giving an ROI of 3.0 – very healthy indeed!

But it could get a lot better.

With email marketing, you have a one-off hit per mailing. But with a linking strategy, the links are likely to stay where they are generating new visitors to your site all the time. So if we generate 5,000 new visitors in 3 months, we could expect 20,000 in a year. From our ROI₁ calculations, this would generate 600 new customers spending an average of \$150 on their first purchase giving additional sales of \$90,000. Add to this another \$90,000 from 300 repeat customers and our campaign will have generated an additional \$180,000 in sales or \$36,000 profit. That gives an overall ROI of 12.

ROI₃ - Life-Time Value

Life-Time value is notoriously difficult to calculate, but is certainly good marketing practice to think about the long-term relationship that you want to have with your customers. So here is a very simple calculation to illustrate.

In the two scenarios above, our retailer generated 300 additional repeat customers spending \$300 per year. Repeat customers tend to stay loyal – what if 50% of them stayed with the retailer for another 5 years?

That's worth 150 (long-term customers) x \$300 (annual sales) x 5 years = \$225,000 in sales.

These calculations are very rough, but they do demonstrate the value of long-term repeat customers. If your linking strategy can play even a small part in generating these levels of repeat purchase, then it will pay for itself many times over.

8. Web References

8.1 Linking Strategy

The Road to Link Popularity

<http://www.clickz.com/article.php/891831,63.236.73.247>

General article on link popularity together several tips to improve popularity scores including redesigning your site to promote linkability.

The Five Major Flaws of Link Popularity

http://www.clickz.com/linking/build_links/article.php/836371,63.236.73.247

Eric Ward makes no secret of his enthusiasm for linking but here he gives some important words of caution. Ward maintains there are "right and wrong reasons to pursue links, right and wrong ways to ask for them and right and wrong reasons to want them in the first place".

Increasing Hits by Improving the Link Popularity of Your Site

<http://www.promotionbase.com/article/288,64.39.28.1>

Sumantra Roy's guide starts with the methods you shouldn't be using – namely 'Free for All Pages' and 'Reciprocal Link Services'. She then goes on to describe some alternative methods in order of increasing importance, finishing with top dog – submitting to the directories.

The Right Way to Improve Link Popularity - Traffick.com

<http://www.traffick.com/article.asp?aID=41,64.225.36.56>

Recognises Link Popularity as an important SEO strategy and one of the best ways to improve your visibility and rankings. But do it the right way!

Link Popularity - by Spider-Food.net

<http://spider-food.net/link-popularity.html>

Spider-food.com gives some useful advice on how to rank higher and avoid risk when increasing your link popularity. Also covers many search engine topics.

Linkability – Why do some sites have it while others don't?

<http://www.ericward.com/articles/linking.html,207.217.96.30>

According to Eric Ward, "most brand web sites fail to provide the type of content that engenders, inspires or encourages other sites to link to them". In short they have no linkability. Here's why.

Marketing - 10 steps to building links to your site - Microsoft bCentral

<http://www.bcentral.com/articles/marketing/134.asp>

According to Craig Fifield, link building is the online equivalent of word-of-mouth advertising. And just like its offline cousin, it's the most effective way to get new business.

What Your Link Request Should Contain and Why

http://www.clickz.com/linking/build_links/article.php/831971,63.236.73.247

Eric Ward gives excellent advice on writing a compelling link request. The article gives a typically bad example from 'StupidCompany.com' together with a linking request that he used successfully for a client. Advice not to be ignored!

131 (Legitimate) Link Building Strategies

<http://sewatch.com/searchday/02/sd0711-linktips-long.html>,63.236.73.97

Robin Noble, Eric Ward and John Alexander have collaborated to produce an excellent and comprehensive resource. As well as sound advice from the three wise men, there are numerous quotes and tips from search engine professionals. Essential reading.

Do's and Don'ts for Building Your Site's Link Popularity, an article at Search Engine Workshops

<http://www.searchengineworkshops.com/articles/linkpop.html>,64.55.202.67

Robin Noble advises that a high link popularity is sometimes all it takes to achieve top ranking, "It's crucial, in many cases, to the success of an online business".

'Like Links? Begin With Top-notch Content' by Marcia Yudkin

http://www.linkagexpress.com/like_links.html,216.71.54.185

Author Marcia Yudkin describes how she generates traffic to her site by posting substantive content and getting it linked.

Marketleap SEO 101: Link Popularity and Analysis – Everything You Need to Know

<http://www.marketleap.com/help/seo101/linkpopularity.htm>,216.91.112.69

The concept of link popularity sounds good but the results are often mixed. Marketleap emphasises the need for good content and describes several critical targets in any link popularity campaign.

WorkZ.com - Link Analysis Can Help (or Harm) Your Web Site

[http://www.workz.com/cgi-](http://www.workz.com/cgi-bin/gt/tpl_page.html,template=1&content=1758&nav1=1)

[bin/gt/tpl_page.html,template=1&content=1758&nav1=1](http://www.workz.com/cgi-bin/gt/tpl_page.html,template=1&content=1758&nav1=1),64.39.29.237

Two main link analysis factors affect your site's ranking: the authority factor and the hub factor. Poor quality sites with unrelated content have a negative effect on both factors.

A link Too Far: Understanding Link Depth Origination

<http://www.clickz.com/article.php/832921>

Eric Ward explains the problems presented by search engine crawlers going no deeper than three directory levels on any site - relevant information for both inbound and outbound links.

Easy Linkin'

http://www.clickz.com/linking/build_links/article.php/841651

One of the key ways to encourage links is to provide a links instruction page. Eric Ward explains the principles and gives some useful examples.

Links and Power: The Political Economy of Linking on the Web

<http://cmc.uib.no/jill/txt/linksandpower.html>

Search engines like Google interpret links to a web page as objective, peer-endorsed and machine-readable signs of value. Links have become the currency of the Web. With this economic value they also have power, affecting accessibility and knowledge on the Web. Interesting article that sees links as a pseudo-monetary unit - but be careful how you spend your money!

8.2 PageRank and Search Engines

Google Technology

<http://www.google.com/technology/index.html>

PageRank is very briefly explained by Google themselves. You'll find a much more detailed report on 'PageRank Uncovered' below.

PageRank Uncovered by Chris Ridings and Mike Shishigin, edited by Jill Whalen.

<http://www.supportforums.org/PageRank.pdf>

This 55-page report probably represents more than you ever thought you wanted to know about Google's PageRank. Explains when PageRank is important and when it is not, and suggests that the importance of PageRank on Google may already be declining. The report recommends that you should always concentrate on "on the page" factors and anchor text first and PageRank last. Describes the concept of a threshold where further work on PageRank is pointless, contrasting two different approaches. Not exactly light reading, but highly informative and useful.

Interview with Craig Silverstein

<http://www.ibizinterviews.com/craigs1.htm>

Craig Silverstein, Chief Technology Officer of Google tells it like it is. His advice – avoid spam techniques and deceptive cloaking, embrace content and community.

How Search Engines Use Link Analysis

<http://www.searchenginewatch.com/subscribers/more/linkanalysis.html.63.236.73.97>

Today, the search engines look beyond sheer numbers. Since all links are not created equal, the engines attempt to rank the importance of each link, and to understand the context of the link.

SearchDay - How Search Engines Look at Links

<http://www.searchenginewatch.com/searchday/02/sd0613-links.html> *Representatives of Google, Fast, and Ask Jeeves/Teoma shared inside information about page ranking and linking analysis at the Search Engine Strategies Conference in Boston. Suggests that for best results, you should optimize all pages, don't mix with bad company, and make sure link text says something important. A useful summary leading to a longer article if you subscribe to SearchEngineWatch (not a bad idea!)*

Link Development Forum

<http://www.webmasterworld.com/forum12/index.htm>

*It is no secret that today's search engines are link happy. Many search engines count the number and quality of links to a site. Exchanging and acquiring links can be a tricky but rewarding process. This busy forum covers topics around link building but **does not** cover the actual exchange of links. Useful source.*

The Bow-Tie Theory

<http://www.business2.com/articles/web/0..15135.FF.html>

The Bow-Tie Theory emphasises the importance of links on the internet and describes four groups of sites, the most important of which is the core made up of about 30% of sites on the web. The core is made up of sites that are well linked with both inbound and outbound links and as a result will have higher ranking and higher traffic. An effective linking strategy should help you become part of the all important core.

Winners don't take all: Characterizing the competition for links on the web.

<http://modelingtheweb.com/modelingtheweb.pdf>

Academic paper that describes the supposed 'rich get richer' behaviour of the web with a relatively small number of sites receiving a disproportionately large share of hyperlink references. Qualifies this view and maintains the importance of specific categories or communities of sites on the web.

Google Loves Blogs: How weblogs influence a billion Google searches a week

<http://www.microcontentnews.com/articles/googleblogs.htm>

Weblogs are perfect for Google: frequently updated web sites crammed chockfull of tasty links. Argues that weblogs influence over a billion searches every week and that their power will only grow over time. But many people don't know what a weblog is - perhaps this article is the place to start.

8.3 Finding Links

A Technique For Selecting Sites For Link Requests

<http://www.ericward.com/articles/linkingtargets.html,207.217.96.38>

Competitors or potential link partners? Eric Ward describes 'piggybacking', one of his favourite approaches to finding new link partners.

How to find 1000's of sites to exchange links with

<http://www.promotionbase.com/article/194,64.39.28.1>

Describes a methodology on how to find potential link partners using two freeware tools, WebFerret and 2BPop. Broadly similiar to our own strategy, but using different tools. In an example of bad linking practice it links directly to a downloadable freeware tool, but has no link to the writers of the software.

8.4 Legal

Linking Legalities ... What You Need To Know

<http://www.ericward.com/articles/linking.html>

Some web sites have threatened to sue or are actively suing other sites for linking to them. Ward sees this as foolishness and believes that every linking dispute can be easily solved without recourse to the courts. He describes the only three instances where linking to someone else's content could be deemed illegal.

Linking Custom and Etiquette

<http://www.openly.com/link.openly/etiquette.html>

Article begins with two quotes from Tim-Berners-Lee, "There is no reason to have to ask before making a link to another site" but by the same token, "You are responsible for what you say about other people and their sites, on the web as anywhere". Eric Hellman goes on to give a very clear description of three types of linking - cooperative, commercial and obnoxious. Includes links to other articles on the legal aspects of linking.

Frequently asked questions (and answers) about linking

<http://www.chillingeffects.org/linking/faq.cgi>

What are your rights when other website owners object to your site's links? Explains the major legal issues and describes some interesting cases. Result of a joint project of the Electronic Frontier Foundation and Harvard, Stanford, Berkeley, university of San Francisco, and University of Maine law school clinics.

Germany: deep linking lunacy continues.

<http://www.theregister.co.uk/content/archive/14646.html>

The news search engine, www.newsclub.de has been accused of copyright infringement by a large German publishing company. According to Christian Kohlschutter, there is no in-frame linking, each headline contains the name of the publisher and users are directed to the original publisher's site. Lunacy indeed.

Internet, Copyright and Linking

<http://www.freepint.com/issues/070199.htm>

According to Charles Oppenheim, the basic principles regarding the internet and copyright are very clear - the internet is NOT a territory where no law applies. Discusses the 'Total News' and 'Shetland Times' cases.

Monitoring

Measuring Link Popularity

<http://searchenginewatch.internet.com/webmasters/popularity.html,63.236.73.97>

Danny Sullivan explains how to measure link popularity across some of the most popular search engines.

Linking Clipping

<http://www.ericward.com/articles/092702-linkclipping.html,207.217.96.38>

Would you like to know whenever a site creates a new link to you? Of course you would! Using a free tracking service, www.trackengine.com and some nifty ingenuity, Eric Ward shows how you can build a linking alert service in just five minutes.

Miscellaneous

Articles about search engine marketing written by Robin Nobles and John Alexander

<http://www.searchengineworkshops.com/articles.html,64.55.202.67>

Useful collection from Nobles and Alexander that covers link popularity as well as other search engine marketing techniques.

Warning!! Link Farm Ahead

http://www.searchengineguide.com/krause/2002/1219_kk1.html,64.69.64.133

Are you sick and tired of receiving 'I just visited your website. I linked to it on this page. I would love it if you would link back to mine' emails? Kim Krause explains why the gig is up.

'Trading Links - Any Real Value?'

http://www.linkagexpress.com/trading_links.html,216.71.54.185

Trading links (or reciprocal linking) has its detractors. Gail Hornback argues that it has some value and offers five tips on how to go about it.

Link Popularity and its effect on search engine rankings

<http://www.rankwrite.com/linkpopularity.htm,66.232.23.91>

Explains the need to have a 'common thread' between sites for linking to be effective. Whelan also believes from personal experience that if your site is well written and provides a lot of useful information, you won't have to search out links at all.

9. Our Linking Strategy

LinkingMatters.com starts from zero inbound links.

Therefore every link that we manage to secure will be as a result of our linking strategy – and will provide a good measure of how effective a linking strategy can be.

We'll publish regular updates on our site and you'll be able to see the progress or otherwise that we are making.

A linking strategy should be pro-active and it should integrate with other marketing activities. However, we felt there were some tactics we could use to promote the site and others that we could not. We wanted to make sure that any successes could be attributed to the linking strategy we had put in place.

We therefore decided we could not:

- Conduct a comprehensive search engine marketing campaign
- Do any paid-for advertising
- Do a full-scale public relations campaign.

We decided we could:

- Do a full linking strategy
- Create a link page to make it easy to link to us
- Submit the site to major search engines and directories
- Publish a news release on the site and send it to a few journalists we know
- Write a feature article about what we're doing and place it in appropriate journals
- Encourage our users to talk about the site
- Give talks and seminars about our methodology
- Talk to as many people in pubs as possible!

Our linking strategy kicked off in earnest on February 6th, 2003. To see how we're doing, check out <http://www.linkingmatters.com/HowAreWeDoing.html> .

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