

Understanding web page linking - links, backlinks, nofollow

I would have thought all this was obvious, but I see from reading forum posts and comments at some of my other posts that people are confused, so let's take it from square one.

What is a link?

A link is an HTML hyperlink. It is what is behind the things you can click on to go to another page. If you looked at the HTML source of a page, you would see that these are created with HREF (HTML Reference) attributes in a A (Anchor) tag. For example, if I wanted to create a link to my site, It might look like

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<a href="http://aplawrence.com">Click here to go to my site</a>
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All you would see is the " Click here to go to my site ", but if you did click, your browser would load my web site home page.

Follow, No Follow

A basic link like that example is a "follow" link. That means that when a search engine reads that, it can be "followed" - the search engine can visit my site and it can count this page as one among all the pages that link to my site.

To make that a "nofollow" link, I would construct it to look like this.

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<a href="http://aplawrence.com" rel="nofollow">Click here to go to my site</a>.
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That tells a visiting search engine that it should NOT count this page as one which points to my page.

Nofollow is still a link

Understand that when a human visitor clicks on a link, it behaves identically whether it is "nofollow" or "follow". That is important because people concerned with SEO (Search Engine Optimization) will say that "nofollow" links are not desirable. It is true that a "nofollow" link does not help you gain better rankings with search engines, but it is every bit as valuable for potential human visitors.

Ideally, you would prefer that links to your site not have the "nofollow" attribute, but every link has potential value. Consider also that a "follow" link from an unimportant page could mean very little, while even a "nofollow" link from a site that gets millions of visitors daily would be very good to have.

Organic vs. Paid or Traded

An organic link is a link created by someone else. It is called "organic" to convey the idea that it occurred naturally. If I happen to read one of your pages, like it, and create a link (follow or nofollow) to it from one of my pages, that is an organic link.

A link is not organic if you paid me to create it. That is, appropriately, a "paid link".

A link is not organic if it is tit for tat. If I link to you only because you have linked to me, that is "link exchange" or "reciprocal linking".

Google and other search engines like organic links. They do not approve of paid links or link exchange.

Some link exchange schemes get quite complex. To evade the search engines easily noticing the tit for tat exchange, people will make chains of exchanges: Bob links to Mary, Mary links to Phil, Phil links to Bob.

Reciprocal linking can be a source of confusion also. As Matt Cutts explained:

"At some level, natural reciprocal links happen, but if you do it way too often, it looks artificial. My advice is to go with your gut and if you're worried, you can use nofollow."

What he means is that if you and I both write about Unix, it isn't unexpected that we link to each other now and then - without any realization that this is happening. It's when we start doing it on purpose that we are in danger of ticking off Google.

So how does Google tell the difference? They can't, really, so they have to look at it statistically. That is, if they see that a lot of the people you link to are also linking back to you, maybe you were swapping links so they should not consider those links as valuable. How many is too many? Only Google knows.

Why?

Let us pause for a moment. Why do people create true organic links?

There are two reasons. One is that the link is beneficial to their readers. The other is that an appropriate context link also adds value to the page that has the link. If your page is about [Ding Bat Bolts](#) and you link out to another site about Ding Bat Bolts, that helps the search engines believe that your page really is about those very special bolts.

So why do people buy or trade links?

They do so strictly because every link increases the count of pages that point to their page. They are buying (or trading) to gain credibility with search engines. That is why the search engines disapprove of this activity. The search engines would prefer that every link be a genuine expression of value.

Why? Why does the search engine care if you paid me or traded with me?

This is important to understand. Search engines want to deliver the best possible results. If someone searches for Ding Bat Bolts, the results should match the searchers expectations. If Google gives lousy results and Bing does better, people will start flocking to Bing. Google obviously prefers that they not do that, so they have tremendous incentive to deliver meaningful results.

Are you with me so far? Hold that thought.

Now, how does Google determine which pages are the best results for the Ding Bat Bolt search? Well, in several ways, but one important way is the count of the number of other pages that have "follow" links pointing to it (especially if those links include text that references Ding Bat Bolts). That count was and is the basis of Google's famous Page Rank algorithm. PageRank itself is not that important any longer, but the links that PR measured still are.

So, let's put it together. The search engines want to deliver the best results and one of the ways they judge those results is by counting links. Therefore they don't want to count paid links or traded links. Simple, isn't it?

Your linking - Internal Links and cross-site links - backlinks

Unfortunately, we have to muddy the waters a bit. There is another type of link that can be created. It is a link you create yourself on one of your pages that references another page of your own.

These links also have value to search engines. If they are made within your site, the search engine plainly knows that these are not organic links. If I have a page at my main site that links to another page on the same site, it was obviously not organic.

It has value, though. Again, if I mention Ding Bat Bolts and link to another of my pages that has Ding Bat Bolt information, that link increases the engines confidence about the value of my page to someone searching for those bolts.

What if the page I link to is at another website that I also own? That looks very much like an organic link, doesn't it? There might be clues that could help a search engine realize that it is not organic - for example, if I used the same AdSense or Analytics id at both sites.

Am I doing anything wrong? Not necessarily. For example, let's say that my monolithic site about Unix was split into several different sites - one for Linux, one for BSD, one for SunOs, one for Solaris, one for SCO and so on. It could make sense for me to have a central site for things that are common to all Unix systems. I might use that site for articles about shell scripting, common Unix utilities and so on. It would be very natural for me to link all the outer sites to the central site.

If you think about what the search engines want, it is easy to see that they like this kind of linking if it helps them determine what the best Ding Bat Bolt sites or best Unix sites are. At the same time, they don't want to be deceived. It is easy to see that it sometimes could be hard to know the difference.