

Gaining Exposure Online

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There are many facets of online website optimization and online marketing. One critical element to focus on for organic optimization of your site (showing up in the free search listings) is link development. Link development is the process of gaining links from other websites to yours.

The link development process is often compared to a popularity contest. Search engines want to rank the best resource sites at the top of the search results. Having many links pointing to your website tells the search engines that others see your site as important, or popular, within your industry.

But here's a word of caution. As with many optimization techniques, webmasters around the globe have tried to trick the search engines by creating counterfeit links, building link networks, or buying numerous, bogus links—all in an effort to boost their apparent popularity. Because of this, engines continually update their algorithms, so only the most legitimate linking strategy will truly work.

One more caveat: the number of links to a site is not necessarily the goal for building popularity. Instead, the popularity of each of the sites linking to yours adds critical value.

Think of it this way, how popular would you be if 100 of your neighbors told the world about you? Now, how popular would you be if Oprah told the world about you? With a single connection from a global icon, your

popularity would go through the roof. It's the same way in link development. Get links wherever you can, but you'll do better if some of them are from other popular resources related to your industry.

How Do I Get Links?

I recommend starting by getting your site listed in as many industry-related directories as possible, then work on adding quality content to your website. Quality content will help build natural links (links you don't have to request or pay for).

Some additional steps for getting started:

- When writing content for your site, think about how you can educate the visitor. The more information the better. It builds brand trust, and other sites will naturally link to you.
- Focus on ease-of-use for your visitor. The easier it is to find information, the more likely someone will buy from you; therefore, make navigation (links) easy to understand.
- Submit your site to as many directories as possible. Start with the Yahoo! Directory (not the search engine) and Dmoz.org.
- Request links from local sites, directories and organizations.
- Use E-media to enhance your link building and marketing efforts. E-media stands for "electronic media." It is similar to traditional marketing, like television, radio, or print—but online. The most common channels for E-media are e-mail marketing, banner ads and video ads.

E-mail marketing is considered a form of direct marketing, but it should only be used for customer retention and marketing to prior customers or people who have "opted in" to receive e-mails from you. Buying or renting lists is considered spam and can get your e-mail address blocked by major Internet Service Providers. In short, your e-mails will be blocked or dumped into the recipient's junk box.

Because of CANSPAM laws, you're going to want to use an e-mail provider. Do not attempt to send e-mails from Outlook or any other standard e-mail application. E-mail service providers like Blue Hornet or Constant Contact have filters in place to ensure your emails get to your customer's inbox. They also offer critical backend metrics so you can see who opened your emails, which links they clicked on, and other important marketing details.

Banner Ads

Placing banner ads on a heavily visited website is the online equivalent to paying for a billboard on your local highway or thoroughfare; only online, your potential customer can click on the banner and be sent directly to your website.

There are programs available, like www.abcbanners.com, which allow you to design and build banner ads on your own. This may be an option if you want to try this method out with very little cost. If you're a bit more confident and want to ensure a professional design, you may want to

have a web designer handle this for you. It will cost quite a bit more, but you're more likely to be pleased with the outcome.

At a cost anywhere from \$50 to \$1,000 per month or more, banner ads may not be the most profitable marketing channel for your business. Like anything, it should be tested with a small budget. But in my experience, banner ads drive a great deal of clicks, with very little actual ROI (Return on Investment).

Video ads have recently gained a great deal of popularity. They can be used for many purposes, but the main idea is that they are creative, informative, fun or humorous. Go to YouTube to get an idea of how many times people view videos. It's mind-boggling. Posting your video to YouTube is recommended for great exposure, but it's not always necessary. Start with a video on your website. If you market to glass shops you may want to place a how-to video on your site to showcase the proper way to ship, handle or install a product.

If you're a glass shop you may want a video that showcases your topnotch installation services, or plays your television commercial (if you have one). You could even display a video of the last weekend shop-party your boss threw. The point is, there are endless possibilities; videos are engaging, and web users love them.

But remember, E-media methods are not direct sales tools. They are important marketing channels, and each has the ability to drive substantial traffic to your site. They will also help build brand recognition and customer loyalty; two critical elements to sustain future success in your business.