



Link Building Do's & Don'ts

Introduction

Craig Parker our resident SEO Expert has put together a very comprehensive whitepaper on the do's and don'ts of link building.

Craig runs through all the major forms of link building and gives his suggestions on what you should do and what could trigger flags with the search engines.

The guide comes with a pre-link building checklist to ensure your site is ready, suggestions on auto submitters and software and an explanation about your link profile.

This document will explore different forms of link building and try to outline some basic do's and don'ts.

There is a minefield of advice out there, a lot of it conflicting as time changes so do the rules, when you sit down to read this document remember to keep that in mind that SEO evolves and so do SEO techniques and spending time innovating link building in your own way will always payoff more in the long run than repeating the same patterns over and over again.

That being said of course there are always going to be some core link building methods and SEO principles, hopefully you can learn more about those below.



Preparing for Link Building

One of the biggest mistakes I see people make is rushing off to build 1000s of links before really being ready; link building is one tool in your SEO arsenal, not the *only* one. Make sure you look at the following checklist before starting a link building campaign so you know there aren't things missing from your site, I have filled in the first entry as an example.

If you don't know the answer to some of these questions or need help with some of these early steps please speak to your affiliate manager or take a look on the MoreNiche forum or even search the MN blog for related tutorials, you should be able to find help quite easily.

Task	Check
Initial Site Planning	
I have ensure my site uses at least one revenue model	✓
I have ensured my site has a central theme	
I have identified my niche for keyword research	
I know what platform my site will be on and why (static/Wordpress etc)	
I have sorted a server/hosting	
Keywords	
I have conducted basic keyword research	
I have chosen 10-20 "golden" target keywords	
I have made sure my target keywords are related	
I have double checked the keywords have search volume	
I have double checked the competitors are realistic competition	
I have a related domain name and/or site name	
Onsite Work	
I have used my keyword research to fill in head data	
I have signed up for webmaster and analytics services	
I have ensured my site is accessible	
I have used robots and htaccess to control spidering	
If my site is a rebuild or move, old urls have been taken into account	
I have ensure header tags have been used correctly	
I have ensure the alt attribute has been completed on images	
I have implemented affiliate codes/links/banners	
I have generated relevant sitemaps (text/news/mobile/video)	
I have correctly marked up any available data (rDFA/Microformats)	
I have ensured my golden keywords are used throughout my sites content	
I have SEO/keyword friendly urls	
I have some unique content ready based on my golden keywords	
Post Indexing	
I have checked my site for canonical issues (such as domain and category pages)	
I have a backup in case things go wrong	
I have a content schedule about when to add new content to the site	
I have made sure there is no hidden text or broken divs etc.	
All my titles, meta data and headers are unique to their own pages	
I have ensure I have not strayed too far from my sites central theme	

Beginning Link Building

OK so you have done everything on your checklist, now it's time to move into the link building wilderness, here are a few general do's and don'ts that apply to link building in general.

Do	Don't
Start steady, work up to those first 1000 links over a few weeks or a month	Submit 10,000 directory links the day your site is launched
Put a small amount of time aside each day or week to add new links	Spend 12 hours Monday building links then leave it 30 days before trying again
Stick to your golden keywords and your chosen niche	Start throwing in unrelated keywords as anchor text because they are high traffic
Use anchor text keywords wherever possible	Use the exact same anchor text every single time
Use nofollow links, they are part of a natural profile	Target 100 dofollow blogs in the same hour with the same text
Use small amounts of social media to interact	Spam every article and link to Twitter and Facebook
Vary link targets inside specific pages	Link to your homepage 15 times in one article or post
Use internal link building to benefit you too	Go overboard or try to control PR flow with nofollows
Strike a balance between root and deep links, I tend to aim for 1 in 3 links to deep pages	Build 50,000 links to index.php and 0 to the rest of your site
Create a separate email address for managing link campaigns.	Use this as an excuse to create a false alias and spam without consequence, try to avoid Hotmail etc.

A Few Notes to Start...

A note on auto submitters and software: A lot of affiliates ask me about auto submission software or websites, generally I do not recommend using them. There are a number of reasons for this.

- 1) Google is an algorithm, it works on patterns, recognising them, classifying them and adjusting the index appropriately. If you use an auto submitter you are creating the exact same pattern each time and the exact same pattern as everyone else using that submitter. There is no doubt that this could be easily detected, if you take no other advice from me remember this **natural link profile rarely have predictable patterns.**
- 2) If the software was so good it brought guaranteed results how come the programmer didn't just use it to magically SEO a bunch of their sites to the top and make lots of their own affiliate commissions? SEO is a dynamic field there is no one technique that can get you to the top in any niche, it's about balancing techniques monitoring results and constantly edging forward.

- 3) Your IP will likely be banned from a bunch of services, just like Google many of the websites you'll be spamming can detect your behaviour and ultimately ban your IP. This is going to be a real spanner in the works for when you want to do some real marketing. You never know when this info will get to Google and what they could do with it, especially with current Open ID or similar systems

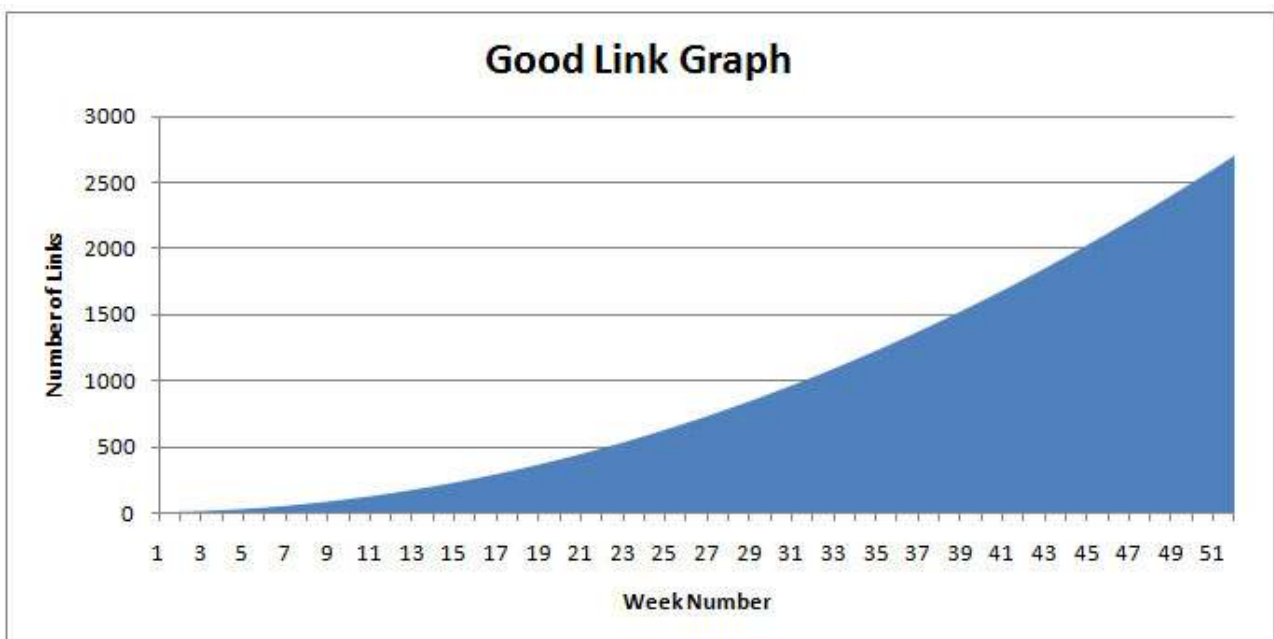
Ultimately auto submission *does* have its place in SEO but it's so conditional and specific to industry, keywords, target website etc that you really shouldn't use it unless you're sure the site can cope with it and 90% of the time you can achieve just as much with manual submission even in smaller amounts.

A note on black and white hat techniques: Black and white hat is one of the most prevalent SEO myths, depending on your perspective and approach almost any SEO (or indeed marketing in general) strategy can be white hat or black hat, there are the Google Webmaster Guidelines as a basic rule set but even many of these are shades of grey.

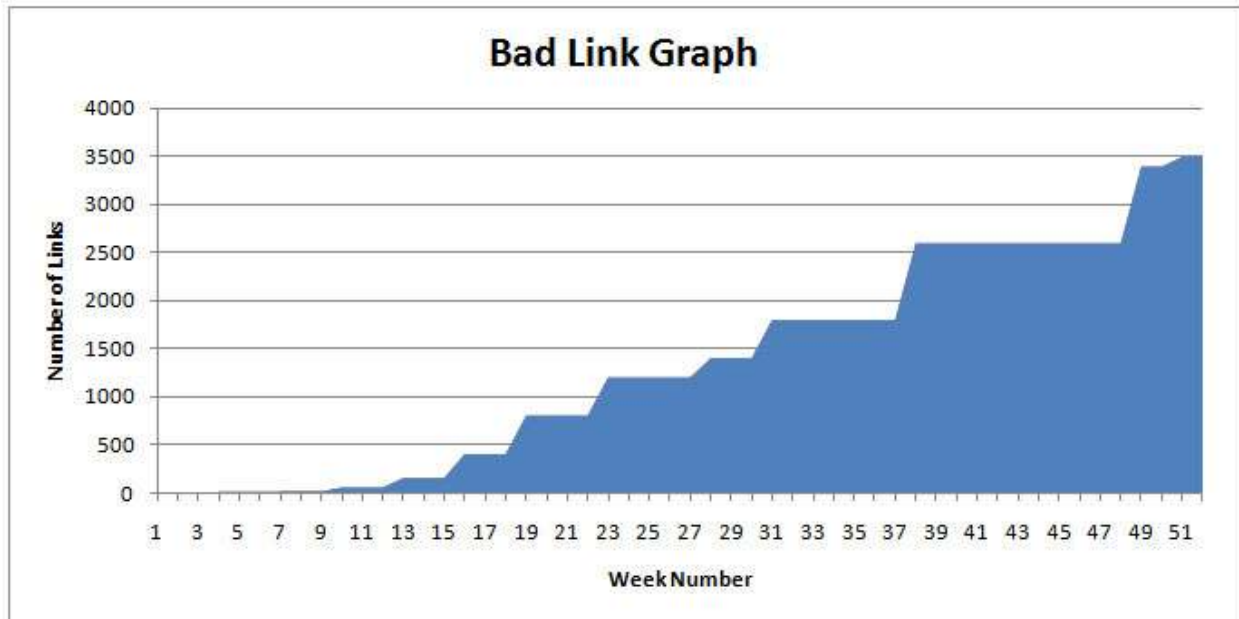
We all want to make money online but you should always respect other peoples work, not because it's better SEO but because it's the right thing to do. Using aggressive or underhand tactics can work but so can playing by the rules, it's a personal judgement but I recommend you always treat others webmasters how you would like to be treated yourself, you never know when the tables will be turned.

A note on Link Profiles: Link profiles are the building of links to your website over time; they are one of the most important aspects of link building and one of the most ignored. When doing link building to a site (especially from launch) it's important to build a steadily rising link graph that gets strong and stronger as time goes on, peaks and troughs are fine to occur every now and again but not systematically on the 3rd week of every month.

It easy to illustrate this point with an actual graph, imagine the figures are cumulative links discovered throughout on year, the axis of the bottom is the week in the year.



If you build poor quality links from sites that delete them over time your link graph will go up and down and also look bad, always aim to build stable, sustainable links to ensure the stability of your link profile.



A Note on Keyword Volumes & Adjustment: Unfortunately no tool accurately reports keyword volumes these days, mostly because it's such a difficult task. When you do your keyword research be sure to keep this in mind, track the traffic increases as the keyword is moving up and try to predict if it really is worth your effort. Early indicators that it may be time to give up on a keyword include much lower inbound traffic than predicted, terrible bounce rates, low pages per visit or low impression to CTR (visible in Webmaster Tools now).

With the constant SERP changes (the most recent being the aggressive intrusion of places results) impressions and clickthroughs are almost always in flux, use webmaster tools and analytics to monitor your target keywords performance and make adjustments to your campaign, there is little point in ranking 1st for a keyword if 90% of the traffic bounces off.

Link Building Methods

You are probably already aware of most of the standard SEO link building techniques, we are going to take a look at each of them now and run through some basic do's and don'ts.

Directory Link Building

An old technique that many people would claim is “dead” in SEO but this is simply not true. Directory submission has certainly evolved since the early days of SEO but it's still a useful tool in your SEO toolbox.

Do	Don't
Work Golden Keywords into the Site Title where possible	Put all 20 golden keywords in the title
Create 5 or so varied sets of titles, descriptions and keyword sets and rotate them/mix them up	Use auto submitters to throw 1000's of copies of the same description to directories
Carefully select niche, related and powerful directories to submit to	Drop links on free-links-bombay-horizon-cake.net which currently has 15,000 pending reviews
Check competitor backlinks for directories which are helping them	Assume that Google will spider the links right away
Consider paying for cheaper niche or powerful directories, especially for a few early deep links	Submit to 10,000 directories for \$100
Look into blog, recipe, product, review, RSS or other vertical directories if it applies to your niche/website	Create crappy blog pages or non maintained feeds just to get in them
Submit to directories that only allow URL links	Worry, if you chose a good domain these are valuable too

Directory link building can be a powerful technique but it needs to be done right, approach the task with control and balance in mind, ensure you are writing varied descriptions and titles for the different directories and really focus on those competitor and niche directories at the start, even if you have to shell out a few dollars.

The absolute last thing to do is submit 1000's and 1000's of links to poor quality directories, examine the sites you are leaving links on and always avoid directories that force you to reciprocal link, not because reciprocal linking is specifically bad but more often than not because these directories are scamming links from webmasters

Social Bookmarking

Social bookmarking is the process of using sites like Digg, StumbleUpon and many more to promote specific content on your site, generally they require other users to work with you in promoting content so you may need to spend some time making friends if you want to see more than the basic link benefit.

Do	Don't
Use social bookmarking to promote interesting content on your site	Show everyone your terms and conditions page
Get in your deep links, post new articles and blog posts you are proud of to SB sites.	Submit your home page
Get the links even if they are nofollow	Assume they are a waste of time just because of that attribute
Use SB to help new content get indexed	Post to the same sites every day with a new article
Submit to social bookmarking in short burst maybe two or three times a month using different SB sites each time	Spam Digg.com 5 times a day with links
Write a range of titles and descriptions just like with directories	Crack that auto-submitter out for 10,000 quick links
Expect that not all your links will make	Instantly repost them 10 times or go voting against competition
Use informative titles with 1 or 2 golden keywords in	Cram 15 keywords into a 150 character title
Use enticing titles (such as top 5 products in my niche)	Set the title to "Keyword 1 by Brian"

Social bookmarking can result in tons of link power and traffic but mostly it's just for the easy links and indexing exposure.

Never go headstrong into social bookmarking assuming you deserve to be first page of Digg because you think so, work to create something different and/or original (expect that to be hard work) and submit that. At the very least create some unique content along the usual social bookmark guidelines (i.e. list articles, how to articles, and make sure they have pictures and are easy to read).

Article Submission

Article submission is the process of writing medium length (400-1000 word) articles on subjects related to your niche and submitting them to various online article directories for links or traffic. In this case we are focusing mainly on the links prospect.

Do	Don't
Use article submission to broaden ranking potential and capture additional traffic	Use it to outrank your own sites, think before you submit
Use lots of different article directories, specialising in niche related or especially powerful ones	Submit it 10,000 articles directories in the same day
Ensure you at least vary the article between sites if not have new content all together	Use auto submitters to drop the same article one very directory
Chop and change anchor text between directories	Forget to use anchors or sue the same one every time
Mix up deep links and root links for maximum effect	Link 3 times to your homepage in one paragraph
Use very powerful portals like Gather and Ezine to build up reputation	Bully or spam a community, respect has to be earned
Use MoreNiche resources combined with article spinners or your own rewriting skills	Just copy and paste the resource up, it's lazy and will have already been done
Write article variations for on and offsite	Put the same article on your site/blog then submit it to directories.
Ensure you select appropriate categories	Waste a submission by putting it in a totally inappropriate category
Read and understand each directories rules on links and be sure to stick by them	Use auto submitters or not pay attention and end up with a banned article or user account.

Just like directory submission, article submission is about find a balance between quality and quantity. Start with your niche and high powered directories and put time into creating content for these, expand your campaign as the weeks go on to some of the smaller directories.

As articles take a while to both prepare, submit and be approved and spidered you definitely need to consider article submission as a long term task, as such it's good to start it early in your SEO campaign with the target of may two sessions per month.

It's also a good idea to keep track of what directories are approving your articles quickly and/or regularly and prioritising these for future submissions.

Blog & Forum Submissions

Blog and forum submissions are a slightly different form of link building that involves commenting on relevant posts or joining in popular forum discussion in order to gain links from powerful niche sites, it should be handled carefully but is still a perfectly good way to obtain links.

Do	Don't
Use search operators and Google blog search to identify targets in your niche	Use lists of forums unrelated to your theme or niche
Pay attention to localisation and potential traffic/customers	Push links onto forums and users before people know you
Comment on blogs with your own or brand name	Stuff name fields with keywords
Read posts and reply with a valid interaction	Post generic "great idea" posts that make you look like a spammer
Engage with bloggers and forum staff to create potential future link avenues.	Upset everyone right away leaving links and slagging other members/contributors off.
Use multiple forums with different signatures, post when you can but consider time vs payoff	Keep changing sig links or post 300 times in one thread

Blog and forum commenting can bring some great SEO results but they can also be time consuming as well pointless if your comments never go live or your threads are deleted. Blog and forum submission may initially seem quite different but the way you approach them as an SEO is the same. A critical way of thinking about it is this;

"I can get a link *if I contribute something to this discussion*"

And not,

"I deserve a link *for joining in this discussion*"

Remember you don't deserve a link from someone's blog or forum just because you posted "I Agree", always read what they were talking about, maybe offer a (polite) alternate perspective or illustrate an example of how something they discuss did/did not work for you.

Additionally if you're a blog or forum administrator treat commenter's and contributors with respect, not every comment is spam and you are much more likely to open communication channel and maybe earn a link back if you give people a chance.

Profile Link Building

Profile link building involves the uses of membership sites across the web and manipulating biographical data such as profiles when you create an account to gain a link back, it's a technique that lost a lot of power recently but still holds some value when used correctly.

Do	Don't
Whenever you genuinely make an account somewhere ensure you fill in relevant bio data and place a link where you can	Go around changing them each time you get a new website.
Know that overdoing profile link building can easily get you banned or penalised	Over do it!
Realise that you need to consider each site separately	Get banned because you didn't read the rules, remember it could cause problems for future SEO
Small selection of the huge range of social sites	Submit to the same sites over and over again in the same pattern.
Keep an eye out for the dofollow ones	Avoid leaving a link just because it's nofollow
Try to get keyword urls if you want the profile to rank	Spam 50 keywords in the account/prolife name
Use keywords in your bio, link it to your site but ensure it reads well.	Make your bio a list of 50 keywords
Remember many forums have profile pages too	Create multiple accounts just for the links
Tailor bios to fit the theme of the site	Paste the same bio into 150 sites
Fill in as many fields as possible	Just add a bio and never think about it again

Profile link building can be of use but you really need to be careful in technique and volume, more than any other technique this is really one in which you need to avoid auto submitters, it's incredibly unnatural to have exactly the same profile on a 1000 services and I have seen people get penalised for this.

As with many forms of link building a good idea is to grow it with your site, start of small with Facebook, Twitter and a few niche relative ones and as time goes on create more and more, each time looking for the most relevant ones you can find and expanding out. You don't have to spend time interacting but I recommend you do give each site a little love, just so your profile looks more natural.

Always remember that some of the bigger social networking sites have a lot of ranking potential, you don't want to close out the SERPs for smaller keywords with profiles instead of your site!

Competitor Analysis

Competitor link analysis is an essential part of any link building campaign, the currently ranking competitors are getting their ranking edge from somewhere so finding and stealing it can bring in a lot of advantages. There are numerous tools to help you evaluate the competition including the SEOBook Toolbar, SEMRush and SEOMoz's Linkscape/Open Site Explorer but if you can afford to splash out Majestic SEO has the best backlink technology.

Do	Don't
Use a range of tools to obtain backlink data to trawl the results	Expect Google's link operator to give you all the information you need
Pull out specific directories/article sites etc for other link building efforts	Stray too far from your niche, sometimes competitors overlap into separate niches to you
Compare multiple competitors and target links that all sites have	Expect to be able to get every one, just do your best

Building links from your competitors backlink profiles can be one of the more tedious link building tasks, it can be time consuming but is really worth it and can cause "leapfrog" effects in the SERPs if you manage to gain a lot of their important links.

Specifically use this tactic for narrowing down potential sites to contact for link building or to find new directories and article sites. It's worth spending a little time each month on this task, catching new links your competitors have gained as quickly as possible.

Link Requests, Guest Blogging & Reciprocal Linking

One of the older forms of link building, link requests are quite simply contacting other website owners and requesting that they take a look at your site and hopefully link back. Due to the sheer amount of abuse many webmaster have become desensitised to this link building technique however as long as you take care you can gain powerful backlinks.

Guest blogging is almost identical bar the fact you provide a set piece of content for the webmaster to place on their blog.

Reciprocal lining is exchanging links between webmasters.

Do	Don't
Be polite, you are requesting some of someone else's time and resource.	Demand a link. Ever.
Explain why they should link to you, can you offer something in return or maybe a link from somewhere else.	Try to trick the other webmaster; most webmasters at least know the basics of SEO and the value of a link.
Ensure you correctly research the site; no one will give you a link if you've not even looked at their site properly.	Get their names/site name/niche wrong in your email, they are highly likely to ignore you
Prepare a range of people to email and slowly work your way down the list	Email the same person 30 times and expect not to upset them
Provide them with all the resources they may need, contact details, HTML code with suggested anchor text and potential image for an article	Email them anonymously from a Hotmail or G-Mail account so you can hide your real identity.
Create a few guest blog posts and use this as an alternate link request strategy	Send 100 webmasters the same guest blog article
Use some reciprocal link exchanges to gain industry relevant, in content links	Recip link with people who just have a page of 100 other reciprocal links.

Even though it has been overdone by spammy companies you can still find some good link partners this way, if you're looking for a way to find some potential webmaster contacts try Google blog search or checking your competitor's backlinks.

If you opt for the guest blogger route then sites like MyBlogGuest can be useful but just putting in a little time on a blog search or Technorati can yield similar results.

Another way to find potential link partners is via webmaster forums and other chat groups; this does however often end up being about reciprocal links. A hundred thousand articles have been through the merits and dangers of reciprocal links so I won't go into too much detail, the answer as always lies somewhere in the middle of good and bad.

Use reciprocal link opportunities but don't exchange with spammy sites for a link in a long list of other links, trade articles or posts and use internal links to pass value, it's much less spammy, and much more likely to benefit both of you.

Press Releases

Much like articles press releases are content that is syndicated offsite with links back to your site. The actual function of a press release is to provide potential news stories for reporters and authors so you really only use press releases if you have newsworthy content.

Do	Don't
Think about using paid services such as PRWeb	Expect to get picked up by a major blogger/reporter with free directories
Ensure it's a well written piece of content about something unique that's happening on your site/about your brand	Submit an article to a press release site
Understand press release formatting, these are easily available online, some services require specific formatting	Add fake contact information to your press release, you never know who'll be calling on your expertise.
Link to your own site where possible, you may have to go without your anchor text	Stuff your content full of keywords until it doesn't make sense.
Pay attention to regional targeting and where the release will be distributed	Use the wrong spellings and language for your target region.

Press releases really are a bit much for the average affiliate site but they are a good way to build valid links. If you are going to go ahead and write a press release do make sure you read the services formatting and content guidelines.

Since press releases are usually meant to go to print and web journalists you need to use your full URL as well as anchor text links, just in case, so ensure you work this into the bio or main body, don't over flaunt the quality of your site or service.

Avoid patronising the reader in press releases, journalists are often on strict deadlines and have little patience for poor or offensive content. On the same note ensure your summary paragraph actually depicts the content of the release, nothing will turn the journalist against you more than a misleading summary followed by a release that doesn't deliver.

If you are really after some media attention then consider manually doing your press release, use a journalist database or a professional contact and personally outreach to the industry, be wary though using services can be pricey.

The bottom line is you need a news worthy story to submit a press release that has any effect, don't just rewrite an article and force it through a PR submission system.

Paid Linking

Paid linking is exactly what it says on the tin, paying, for links. It can be a high risk, high gain technique and these simple do's and don'ts should be able to help you identify where is appropriate. Let's make this clear from the start of this segment however;

Undisclosed paid links are largely against Google Webmaster Terms of Service, manipulating the link index can, and does get people banned.

The Google Webmaster Guideline *do allow* paid linking, they just ask link hosts to notify surfers and the search bot that this is the case, after all paid banner space on a website it technically a paid link and has been around since the down of the internet.

Do	Don't
Consider sponsored/paid links, they can offer a strong SERP boost with minimal time investment	Rely on paid links, you never know when someone will get busted, including you.
Look for where competitors may be placing paid links, can you get a free or paid link here?	"Out" competitors just to get them banned. Its highly unprofessional and will come back around
Consider "premium" memberships in niche directories or organisation bodies related to your site.	Pay for listings in any general directory just to be "featured"
Consider paying for services such as website reviews or press features	Pay for search submission or equally scammy submission service.
Look for other methods of obtaining the sponsored links, sending product samples, free content or other bonuses	Buy paid links in bulk from undisclosed urls

A small paid link budget for most projects is a sound strategy; there are plenty of legitimate ways to obtain strong paid links from niche membership directories or sponsored reviews. It's good to ease a small amount of this type of link building in early on to speed initial results but always ensure you are aware of the Google Webmaster ToS and when you are or are not crossing a line.

Always look out for opportunities where investing a small amount can augment other forms of link building, a paid article submission may be able to earn you traffic as well as a link and a sponsored directory listing in a strong niche directory can be 100x more valuable than the free link.

Link Wheels

Link wheels (sometimes called content hubs or hub link building), are a special link building technique that involves creating content and placing it on offsite blogs or content sinks and then linking back to your own site inside this content.

Do	Don't
Expect to invest time, link wheels can be hard work but they are worth it	Copy content from your own site
Hyper focus the content, choose a niche of your niche i.e. if your selling widgets make the hub about fast red widgets	Pepper the hub with hundreds of themes/subjects and products
Update the hub maybe once or twice a month	Set up a scraper to do it every day/hour
Use in content, keyword focused anchor text back to your site	Shove your URL or links in a footer or blogroll
Create a few hubs to concentrate on	Launch a new wheel every week and forget the first ones
Use other link building techniques to target the wheels and make them stronger	Expect a big bonus from simply putting an article up on hubpages
Experiment with different services to find what works in your niche	Copy too much content between hubs

Link wheels may take a while to get your head around and more often than not they are reserved for larger SEO projects, they can be time consuming but they are effective, especially for targeting medium/long tailed keywords at the side of a few competitors, not only can they give you the push you need but they offer a long lasting link source to one or more of your sites.

One thing to remember is you have to be significantly less careful when building links into your wheel than you would building links to your own sites. This means you can build quicker and in higher volume as the risk of being banned is much lower and the consequences much less serious.

What you do need to be aware of is that each site has its own content, link and usage rules, if you put a bunch of time into a hub only to get it banned then you're going to have wasted a bunch of time so make sure you read the rules, especially if promoting an adult health product, Squidoo and Wordpress.com for example do not usually allow such content.

Link Bait

An easier said than done form of link building involving the creation of a piece of content or media so good it entices links of its own accord. It should really only be undertaken if you are willing to put significant time and resource into research and development.

Do	Don't
Work in a team to come up with a good idea	Write an article and assume that's enough
Put aside time for brainstorming and production	Write it off as a 5 minute job
Check similar industries for ideas that seemed successful	Copy other linkbait ideas exactly and just insert your product/website, it won't work
Explore new technologies, services or communication forms for launching/hosting your link bait	Over complicate things, complex stuff doesn't spread easily
Make it easy to read/use/interact/explain	Bog it down with too much promotional material

As affiliate marketers it really is unlikely that modern forms of link bait will be worth your time, they are frequently expensive to produce and risky but can pay off big time if you do it right. It is of course possible to come up with amazing link bait ideas that cost almost nothing, one of the most famous cases is the "Million Dollar Homepage" this site got a huge amount of press and still receives huge traffic, you just need to think of a really good idea! Good luck there!

A currently popular form of link bait is the creation of infographics (elaborate graphical representations of information) however it will more than likely be a little too much effort for the potential payoff for the average affiliate marketer.

Conclusion

There are many more forms of link building out there, these are just some of the more recognised and easy to use. The best links you can get are the ones your competitors either don't have or can't get, especially when you're in an SEO competitive niche.

If you want sustainable rankings always keep the Google webmaster guidelines in the back of your mind and try to approach link building as ethically as possible.

If you want link building to be easier you need to build relationships with other webmasters that span across niches and websites, many affiliates will own sites in multiple niches and co-operating for an end goal can bring fantastic results. Treat other webmasters with the respect they deserve but remember to keep your own goals in sight.

Finally don't expect link building to ever be too easy, just like everything of value it takes hard work, preparation and patience, I often judge keyword progress on 3 or 6 month basis and while long tail keywords can easily move up in a matter of weeks it means nothing if you don't sustain those rankings and positive traffic levels.