
Exchange Links and Get Customers for Free

Let's see. You've done the basics. You've created a well-designed Web site that markets your company and your products. You've listed it on the major search engines so that Web surfers can find you. But you still aren't getting quite the number of visitors you expected. How can you lure more customers to your Web site without spending a fortune?

by Deborah Whitman

Let's see. You've done the basics. You've created a well-designed Web site that markets your company and your products. You've listed it on the major search engines so that Web surfers can find you.

But you still aren't getting quite the number of visitors you expected. How can you lure more customers to your Web site without spending a fortune?

Many small businesses are trading referrals with other businesses on the Web, just like they do in the offline world. When I was planning an event last year, the caterer spontaneously handed me business cards for a florist and a photographer she'd worked with and really liked. Those kinds of referrals happen all the time in the real world. Make them work for you online as well.

Creating reciprocal links

In the Web world, referrals usually take the form of reciprocal links. You agree to put a link for another company on your site in exchange for it linking to your business on its site.

To negotiate reciprocal links, you identify companies that might be willing to trade links with your business, and e-mail or phone them to suggest the exchange. Then craft a page (or pages) on your site to feature your reciprocal links. You can position this page based on how you set up your links. I've seen businesses call it "Cool Links," "Nearby Attractions" or "Businesses We Like." InnStyle, a Pennsylvania company that sells linens to the bed-and-breakfast industry, has one of my favorite ways to feature a links page. It calls its page "Links for Innkeepers," positioning the page as a clear benefit to its customers.

Reciprocal links can help your Web site in two ways;

- They can deliver traffic directly to your site
- and they can improve your ranking on search engines such as Google that use link intensity as a proxy for your site's popularity.

Small businesses report differing levels of success with the amount of traffic these links generate directly. Some say reciprocal links bring a large percentage of traffic. Others say it's only a trickle. But figure that since you never know which visitors may turn into buyers, even a small flow of free traffic is a good thing.

What kinds of businesses should you seek out to exchange links with? Here are six suggestions.

1. Companies that offer complementary products or services. One of the more popular ways to do reciprocal linking is to trade links with companies that offer complementary services — things your customers need in addition to your product or service as part of the same experience or solution. An obvious example is a bed and breakfast or hotel featuring links to nearby restaurants and local attractions. The Inn at Occidental, a four-star bed and breakfast in Sonoma County, Calif., shares links with several nearby wineries and a spa, for example. A nursery might trade links with reputable gardening service providers or tree service firms, or a cabinet company might trade links with a flooring

company, on the assumption that a customer will need both when remodeling a kitchen.

B & H Cedar Log Homes, in Fredricksburg, Va., has an extensive list of links to other sites that customers might value when building a log home. The company directs customers to log furniture manufacturers, gardening and landscaping sites and pool and spa sites. Owner Sandy Helms says he's been putting the links together for six to nine months, and while traffic from the links is relatively small, it only takes a few log home sales to make the links pay off. He views them as "a service for the people who surf our site," and credits the links with helping to drive his No. 1 position in Google's search results for log homes.

2. Unrelated companies that serve your customers. You can also share links with other companies that target your same customers, but serve very different needs for them.

Arte Americas in Houston, for example, sells art prints and other products decorated with artwork by Hispanic artists. The company's site shares links with a dozen or so others serving the Hispanic market, including Picosito.com, QuePasa.com and Chorizo Links. Owner Charlie Pena says, "I've gotten a lot of visitors and hits because of the links. It's worked out really well."

InnStyle's "Links for Innkeepers" features reciprocal links to about 12 other companies offering an array of services for the bed-and-breakfast trade, including an insurance company that specializes in B & B coverage, a soap manufacturer and a coffee company. Founder Susan Sternthal says the links aren't her best traffic generator, but they are "one more vehicle to bring people to your site. That's what you need."

Sternthal makes a point of keeping her list of links short and relevant to her customers. By being selective and choosing businesses you feel good about recommending to your customers, the links can be a great service, as well as a free way to reach new customers.

3. Local businesses. Some businesses share links with other local businesses, even when there is no complementary service or shared niche customer base. For example, a local dry cleaner might put up links to a nearby printer, camera shop or coffeehouse. Harpoon Brewery in Boston trades links with local businesses such as Tatnuk Booksellers and the Boston Ski and Sport Club. Montana-based Ballou Woodcarving promotes a number of other Montana businesses by trading links. Such links may not provide as much traffic as links to complementary businesses, but if they are not time-consuming to arrange, they can still bring new customers.

4. Your suppliers and distributors. Companies whose products you sell, or that sell your company's goods, also are good to trade links with. Suburban Wholesale Lighting, in Paoli, Pa., provides links to vendors whose lighting products it sells, as well as to local building contractors who purchase and install lights from Suburban. Many of the businesses provide reciprocal links back to Suburban. Suburban gets only a small amount of traffic from the links its suppliers post. But if Web surfers are looking for a lighting distributor near Philadelphia, they can find Suburban on many lighting vendors' sites.

5. Chamber of Commerce and other community organizations' sites. Some chambers of commerce and convention and visitor's bureaus have online directories of businesses, which typically are populated with local members. Bullard, innkeeper at the Inn at Occidental, says he gets a significant number of online visits from various chambers of commerce. Check with other organizations to which you belong to see if they have an online directory.

6. Competitors. Odd as it may sound, it may make sense to share links with competitors in some circumstances. The Inn at Occidental has a page on its Web site called, "Inns We Like," which links to about 20 other high-end bed and breakfasts in California and Arizona, including several within a 20-mile radius of the Inn at Occidental. When I asked innkeeper Bill Bullard why he would do that, he replied that in a market where inns all tend to fill up on weekends, competition isn't his biggest concern, and these links are some of his better online traffic generators. One nearby inn sends him more than 500 online visitors a year.

A good way to jump-start your thinking about who you can trade links with is to use Alta Vista or Google to see which companies link to your competitors. In either of these search engines, you can type "link:" before a URL to discover which Web sites link to a particular site. (For example, you can see who links to InnStyle.com by entering

"link:Innstyle.com")

By investing time instead of money, you can help build your Web site traffic with reciprocal links. After you have a dozen or so links up, you may find that businesses will start to contact you to suggest creating reciprocal links. One businessman says he gets one or two reciprocal link requests each month. Once you put link trading into motion, it may take on a life of its own.