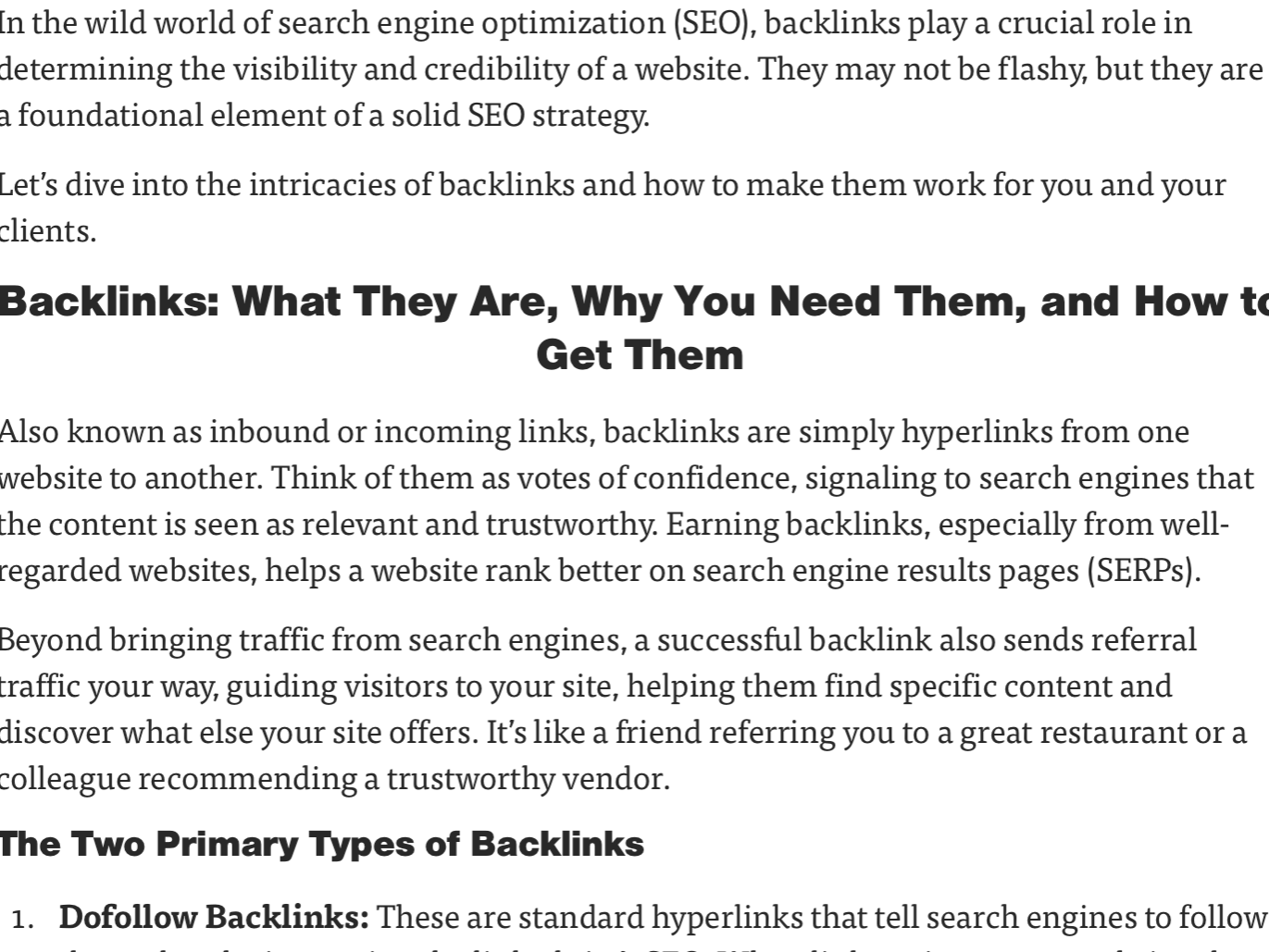


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Understanding Backlinks: The Backbone of SEO

By JonnaJerome August 19, 2024

10 minute read



In the wild world of search engine optimization (SEO), backlinks play a crucial role in determining the visibility and credibility of a website. They may not be flashy, but they are a foundational element of a solid SEO strategy.

Let's dive into the intricacies of backlinks and how to make them work for you and your clients.

Backlinks: What They Are, Why You Need Them, and How to Get Them

Also known as inbound or incoming links, backlinks are simply hyperlinks from one website to another. Think of them as votes of confidence, signaling to search engines that the content is seen as relevant and trustworthy. Earning backlinks, especially from well-regarded websites, helps a website rank better on search engine results pages (SERPs).

Beyond bringing traffic from search engines, a successful backlink also sends referral traffic your way, guiding visitors to your site, helping them find specific content and discover what else your site offers. It's like a friend referring you to a great restaurant or a colleague recommending a trustworthy vendor.

The Two Primary Types of Backlinks

- Dofollow Backlinks:** These are standard hyperlinks that tell search engines to follow them, thereby improving the linked site's SEO. When links point to your website, they pass on what's referred to as link equity, or "link juice," which helps improve your site's visibility.
- Nofollow Backlinks:** These links include a rel="nofollow" HTML tag that tells search engines not to follow them. They do not pass on the "link juice" to the destination site but are still valuable to obtain because of that referral traffic I just mentioned.

As a visitor, you won't see a difference between these links. You can click on, copy, or use a nofollow link like any other on the web. However, when it comes to SEO, there's a big difference.

Dofollow Links: Why They Matter and When to Use Them

On your own website, use dofollow links when you want to refer to the content or business you're linking to as a valuable resource. With your endorsement, many of these recipients will want to align themselves with you and return the favor. An immediate example of this is what I am doing in this article. I have included multiple dofollow links pointing to sites with good resources for copywriters.

Earning dofollow links from other sites bolsters your website in these ways:

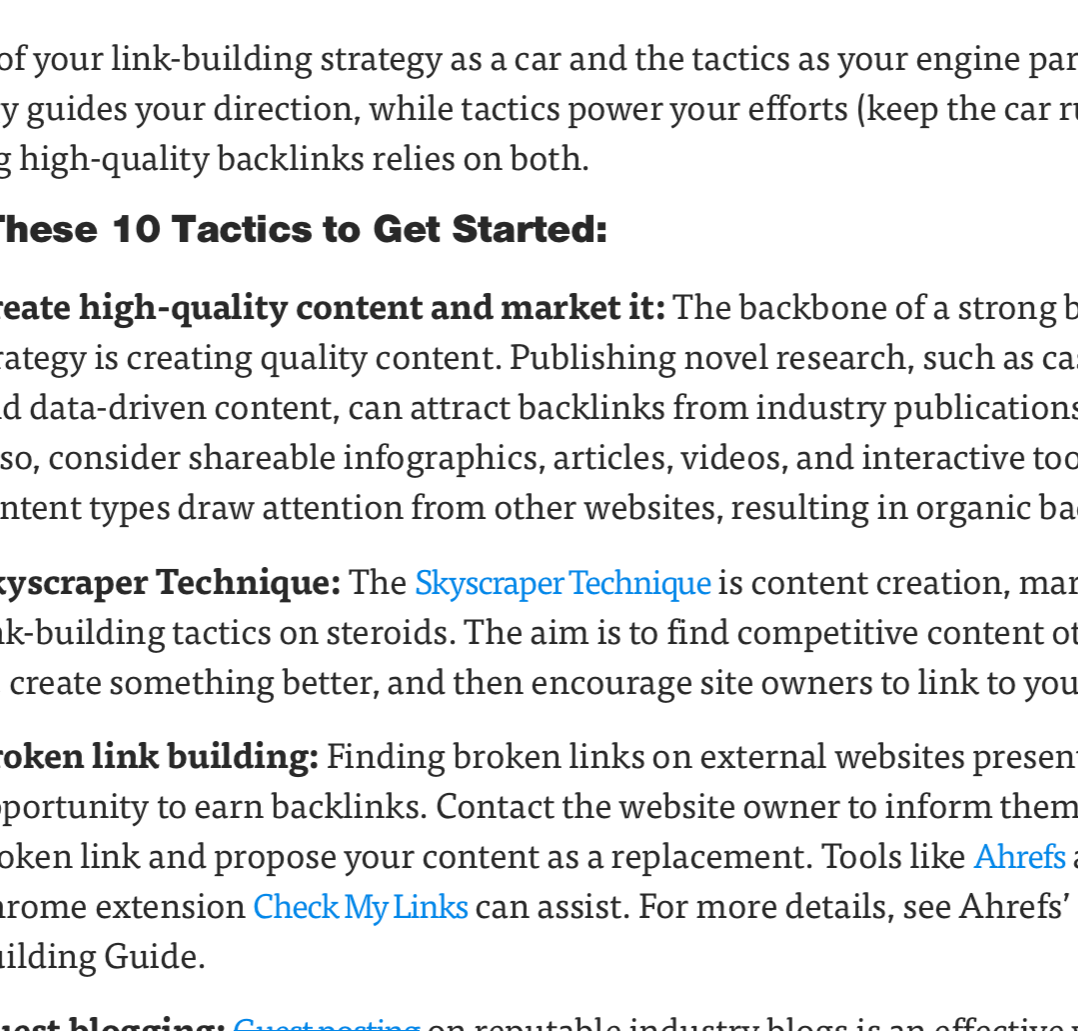
- Boosts rankings:** Search engines use backlinks as one of their primary ranking factors. Because dofollow links pass on SEO value, getting them from reputable sites helps your site rank higher.
- Builds credibility:** When high-quality websites link to you, it signals to visitors and search engines that your site is also trustworthy and authoritative.
- Increases organic traffic:** Dofollow links from popular sites lead visitors to yours, improve your domain authority, and are key factors in ranking for competitive keywords.
- Helps search engines index faster:** Search engines use bots to crawl webpages. When your site links with others and vice versa, these bots can discover and index your content faster, improving overall SEO performance.

Nofollow Links: Why They Matter and When to Use Them

Use nofollow links when you don't want to pass SEO value to the linked content. Why would you not pass on the "juice"? Isn't that just mean and antisocial? Sadly, a world without nofollow links can result in what I call Spamalot. I can't resist linking to [SIRLINKSALOT](#)'s website at this juncture. It's an excellent read on how to effectively use backlinks for SEO.

There are valid reasons you may wish to use nofollow tags instead. Here are a few:

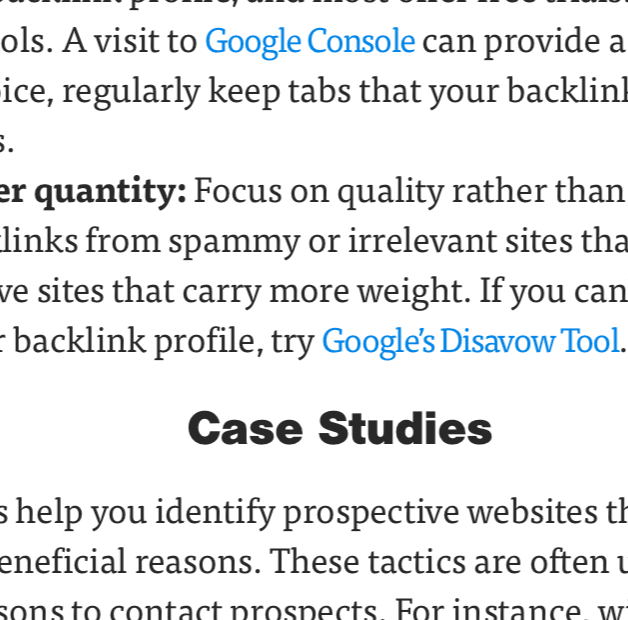
- To avoid user-generated content (UGC) spam and scams:** Adding a nofollow attribute (rel="UGC") to comments or forum posts prevents spammers from using your site for self-promotional links to boost their SEO, as these links won't provide search ranking benefits. Google does not differentiate between your content and visitors' comments on your website, so be sure to moderate contributions carefully before publishing.



- You don't want to endorse a link:** There may be a page you don't want to endorse so much as discuss an aspect of. For instance, maybe you need to link to a gambling website for context but don't want to indicate you encourage gambling. Having control over your links gives you power over your site's reputation.
- Improve backlink diversity:** A website with only dofollow links may appear manipulative to search engines, potentially triggering red flags. By having a balance of nofollow links, your site demonstrates a more organic growth pattern.
- To adhere to guidelines regarding sponsored, paid, or affiliate links:** Nofollow links are often used for advertising and sponsored content to comply with search engine guidelines.

Google introduced nofollow links in 2005 to combat link schemes. Google prefers links to be earned. According to their [Webmaster Guidelines](#), sponsored, affiliate, or purchased links should use the nofollow attribute (rel="sponsored" and rel="nofollow").

As a writer, you may add link attributes yourself or guide a web developer on those that should be nofollow. For more details visit [Search Engine Land](#) and [HubSpot](#). Web builders offer options to simplify this process without writing code:



Understanding the appropriate use of the various backlink types will help you build a comprehensive and effective link strategy. Certain kinds of content often benefit from specific types of links. Here's how to identify them:

Dofollow	Nofollow
Editorial: A reputable blog mentions your site and includes a link within the content. IE: "According to an article on YourSite.com , the best practices for SEO are constantly evolving."	Blog Comments: Many blogs use nofollow attributes on links left in comment sections to prevent spam. IE: "Great post! Check out my site at YourSite.com ."
Additional website page content: Website pages that include logical links to valuable resources within the topic range are considered quality backlinks. IE: "A guide on SEO strategies includes a resource about Top 10 SEO Tips for 2024 on YourSite.com ."	Paid Ads: Links that are part of paid advertisements or sponsored content often use the nofollow attribute to avoid search engine penalties. IE: "This post is sponsored by YourSite.com ."
Guest Posts: Writing a guest post for another website and including a link back to your site. IE: "For more tips on digital marketing, visit my blog at YourSite.com ."	Social Media Posts: Links posted on social media platforms are usually nofollow by default. IE: "Check out my latest article on SEO: YourSite.com ."
Forum Signatures: Participating in forums where you can include a link to your site in your signature. IE: "Check out my latest post on SEO strategies at YourSite.com ."	User-Generated Content: Many websites that allow user-generated content, such as forums or Q&A sites, use nofollow links to prevent spam. IE: "I found this useful resource on YourSite.com ."
Directory Listings: Submitting your website to online directories that provide dofollow links. IE: "Your business is listed on a local Business Directory with a link to YourSite.com ."	Press Releases: There's some gray area, but generally press releases should be used for sharing news and information rather than link building to comply with Google's guidelines on link schemes. If used, it's usually to a direct web address. IE: "Company XYZ announces new product launch. For more details, visit YourSite.com ."
Social Media Profiles: Adding your website link to the bio or profile section is prime real estate for backlinks on social media accounts. IE: "Visit my website at YourSite.com for more information."	Widgets and Infographics: Links included in widgets or infographics that others can embed on their sites often have the nofollow attribute. IE: "Embed this infographic with a link to YourSite.com ."
Resource Pages: Getting your site listed on resource pages or lists of recommended sites is an excellent dofollow backlink. IE: "Check out this list of top marketing blogs, including YourSite.com ."	Directory Listings: Some online directories apply nofollow attributes to the links they provide. IE: "Your business is listed on Local Business Directory: YourSite.com ."

How Do You Earn Backlinks?

Think of your link-building strategy as a car and the tactics as your engine parts. The strategy guides your direction, while tactics power your efforts (keep the car running). Getting high-quality backlinks relies on both.

Use These 10 Tactics to Get Started:

- Create high-quality content and market it:** The backbone of a strong backlink strategy is producing quality content. Publishing novel research, such as case studies and data-driven content, can attract backlinks from industry publications and blogs. Also, consider shareable infographics, articles, videos, and interactive tools. These content types draw attention from other websites, resulting in organic backlinks.
- Skyscraper Technique:** The [Skyscraper Technique](#) is content creation, marketing, and link-building tactics on steroids. The aim is to find competitive content other sites link to, create something better, and then encourage its owners to link to you instead.
- Broken link building:** Finding broken links on external websites presents an opportunity to earn backlinks. Contact the website owner to inform them about the broken link and propose your content as a replacement. Tools like [Ahrefs](#) and the free Chrome extension [Check My Links](#) can assist. For more details, see [Ahrefs' Broken Link Building Guide](#).
- Guest blogging:** [Guest posting](#) on reputable sites in your industry is one of the best ways to earn backlinks. You can include links to your site in the content or author bio. Consider adding a specific section to your website highlighting your guest blogging experience, testimonials, and related website links.
- Outreach and networking:** Building relationships with influencers, bloggers, and industry experts can lead to reciprocal backlink possibilities. Reach out to people you know first, then move on to those you follow and admire. Do your research via LinkedIn, websites, newsletters, industry events, and other social media. If feasible, offer content at no charge. It's harder to turn down a proposal that involves no risk or cost. If your site or source is up to snuff, the right people will find this offer attractive.
- Social sharing:** Share your content on social media platforms to increase its visibility and chances of other websites linking to it. Engage with your audience, join relevant groups, and promote your content to encourage shares and backlinks.
- Directories and listings:** Submitting your website to reputable directories and business listings can provide valuable backlinks. Be sure these directories are relevant to your industry and have good domain authority.
- Competitive advantage:** Effective backlink strategies can help you outperform competitors. Analyzing your competitors' backlink profiles will give you insight into potential opportunities. Identify where your competitors are getting backlinks or falling short. And consider if it makes sense for you to target similar sources. It's always wise to do a [competitor analysis](#).
- Resource pages:** Many websites have resource pages that link to valuable content on a particular topic. This is an excellent place to pursue getting a link placed. Identify these sites within your industry and reach out to the webmasters, suggesting your content as a valuable addition.
- Interviews and testimonials:** Participating in interviews and providing testimonials or showcasing your services can earn you backlinks. Sites conducting the interview or showcasing your testimonial will almost always include a backlink to your website.

Monitoring and Maintaining Your Backlink Profile

Once you've acquired backlinks, it's important to monitor and maintain your backlink profile to ensure its health and effectiveness.

- Use backlink analysis tools:** We have mentioned several tools that help you glean insights into your backlink profile, and most offer free trials. I recommend starting with quality free tools. A visit to [Google Console](#) can provide a lot of information. Whatever your choice, regularly keep tabs that your backlinks are coming from reputable locations.
- Assess quality over quantity:** Focus on quality rather than the number of links. Disavow toxic backlinks from spammy or irrelevant sites that can harm your SEO, and stick to authoritative sites that carry more weight. If you can't remove toxic pages or domains from your backlink profile, try [Google's Disavow Tool](#).

Case Studies

Link-building strategies help you identify prospective websites that might link to yours for various and mutually beneficial reasons. These tactics are often used together. Different tactics offer unique reasons to contact prospects. For instance, with broken link building, you're helping to fix dead links. The Skyscraper Technique is key to developing the strongest outreach strategies.

Let's dive into several case studies and the specific techniques used in each scenario.

CASE STUDY 1: Backlinko

Strategy overview: Backlinko, an SEO training and link-building service provider, significantly improved its rankings using the Skyscraper Technique for link building.

Key Tactics

Skyscraper Technique, content marketing:

- Backlinko researched popular content within their niche, created something even better, and marketed that content to people who could promote it.

Thought leadership:

- By applying these methods, Backlinko published an in-depth (and off-referenced) guide on "Google's 200 Ranking Factors."

Results: Backlinko's guide was more comprehensive than existing content on the topic, which you presented to industry leaders. This earned them respect (and credibility) as a thought leader. They attracted numerous backlinks from authoritative sites in the SEO industry, leading to an uptick in organic traffic and improved search rankings for related keywords.

CASE STUDY 2: Buffer

Strategy overview: Buffer, a social media management platform, effectively used guest blogging to build high-quality backlinks and increase its online presence.

Key Tactics

Guest blogging and content marketing:

- The team at Buffer wrote valuable content and went on to get it placed as guest blog posts on well-known industry sites such as Mashable, Fast Company, and Lifehacker.
- Each guest post included backlinks to Buffer's website. This approach drove direct traffic from the guest posts and boosted Buffer's domain authority, helping it rank higher.

Results: The strategic use of guest blogging and content marketing enabled Buffer to grow its user base rapidly and establish itself as a trusted resource in the social media management space.

It worked so well that they established a guest posting program for their site around content marketing. That means, fellow copywriters, you can [submit your writing](#) to be considered for some nice backlinks!

CASE STUDY 3: HubSpot

Strategy overview: HubSpot excels at inbound marketing by creating valuable content that organically attracts backlinks from authoritative sources.

Key Tactics

Content marketing:

- Publishes comprehensive guides, e-books, and research reports on marketing, sales, and customer service. These resources are extensively cited by other websites.
- Their blog covers diverse topics relevant to their audience, generating a steady stream of backlinks from various niches.

Guest blogging and thought leadership:

- Team members contribute guest posts to reputable industry blogs, building thought leadership and earning valuable backlinks.
- HubSpot hosts webinars, podcasts, and interviews with industry experts, which are shared and linked to by participants and their followers.

Strategic partnerships:

- Collaborates with influential brands and companies on co-authored content and joint marketing campaigns, resulting in reciprocal backlinks.

Results: HubSpot's backlink strategy built strong domain authority and search engine rankings, driving substantial natural traffic to their website.

Case Study 4: Neil Patel

Strategy overview: Neil Patel leverages his personal brand and expertise in digital marketing to create a powerful backlink strategy centered on comprehensive content, data-driven insights, and extensive outreach.

Key Tactics

High-quality content:

- In-depth articles, case studies, and guides on SEO, content marketing, and social media. These pieces often include actionable insights and real-world examples, making them highly shareable and link-worthy.
- Updates older posts to keep them relevant.

Guest posting and influencer collaborations:

- Frequent guest posts on other high-authority sites that maintain his visibility and earn quality backlinks.
- Collaborates with other influencers and marketers, sharing insights and co-creating widely distributed content.
- Conducts and publishes [original research](#), which is cited in the SEO community.

SEO and marketing tools:

- Offers free tools like Ubersuggest, attracting backlinks from users who find them valuable.

Results: Neil Patel's comprehensive content and proactive outreach have built a strong backlink profile, raising his brand through search engine rankings and online presence.

Common Themes

These case studies share common themes of creating superior content, marketing that content, leveraging strategic partnerships, and developing community engagement. Each brand tailors its approach to its strengths and audience to achieve backlink profiles that enhance their authority and SEO.

Managing Your Link Equity

Remember that link equity (or link juice) refers to the value a hyperlink passes from one page to another. To manage your equity effectively, prioritize dofollow links for high-value pages to boost SEO, and use nofollow links for less important pages, those vulnerable to spam, or untrusted content to prevent passing on SEO value.

Nofollow links may seem less valuable at first glance, but they offer two key benefits: They still bring interested visitors to your site, and they protect you from potentially harmful referrals. Think of them as doormen. Many popular websites, like Medium, Reddit, Quora, YouTube, and Wikipedia use the nofollow tag for outbound links.

Search engines consider many factors beyond link juice and page rankings. Social signals from platforms like X and Facebook, though nofollow, are also valuable. Links, whether nofollow or not, build trust.

The Future of Backlinks

Backlinks have traditionally been a cornerstone of SEO, signaling a website's authority and relevance. Factors such as AI and machine learning have made search engine algorithms more sophisticated, prioritizing quality above all else.

Ethics

Emerging techniques for acquiring backlinks are becoming more innovative and ethical, moving away from manipulative tactics like buying links or using [link farms](#). Search engines are constantly evolving to combat black-hat tactics to reduce spam and emphasize genuine links. As algorithms improve in understanding contextual relevance and user intent, backlinks will be more integrated into a holistic view of website authority.

User experience (UX)

UX and engagement metrics will be increasingly important for backlink value. Search engines are prioritizing factors like page load speed, mobile-friendliness, and site functionality. Backlinks from sites with high user engagement indicate popular and valuable content. Improving user experience will strengthen backlink strategies, making it more effective than simply scrambling high numbers of backlinks.

Relationships

SEO experts predict backlinks will become more successful by concentrating on building genuine and mutually beneficial relationships to earn links through high-value content.

Branding

There is a growing focus on building brands authentically by choosing links that benefit your business directly and connect you within your industry. This strategy optimizes link equity distribution to enhance the visibility and authority of your key pages while protecting your site's overall SEO health.

All these factors should be considered to adapt strategies effectively. By maintaining a healthy backlink profile and actively seeking new opportunities, you can achieve better SEO success and sustained growth for your websites.