

Eric Ward: Link Marketing Consultant

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“No matter how much you spent on it, a web site is invisible until somebody links to it.”

—Eric Ward

One important part of online marketing is link building—that is, building a series of links from related sites to your site. Links are important not only because they drive traffic, but also because they help your site’s ranking on Google and other search engines.

FACT SHEET: ERIC WARD

CEO, EricWard.com
(www.ericward.com)

Owner, URLwire
(www.urlwire.com)

When it comes to link building, you can’t do any better than engage Eric Ward. Eric founded the web’s first link-building service way back in 1994, when the web was still wet behind the ears. One of his first link-building campaigns was for Amazon.com, which itself was wet behind the ears back then. Since then, Eric has helped to build links for a large number of websites, from PBS.org to Medical.com. He has written a number of columns about the topic, and continues to be an in-demand consultant.

Building Links to Your Site

Eric was involved with the Internet before the Web exploded, back when information was accessible by Gopher and Archie and other services that only we oldsters still remember. Here, Eric shares his history with the Web and his strategy for building strong links to a web site.

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Let's talk about your history. How did you get into online marketing?

I would love to make it sound as if I was prescient and realized that the Internet was going to explode, so I sold the farm and hung out my shingle. The truth of the matter is I was a victim of good luck and bad luck at the same time.

I was working in the field of advertising for a company that had really clever vertical advertising properties, but who weren't the smartest money managers. That company ended up going out of business, and I was without a job. I was in my late 20s and I knew I didn't want to work in traditional advertising, so I decided to take what little severance and savings I had and go back to grad school at night—without really knowing exactly what I wanted to do.

In visiting various departments and programs, I kept coming back to meet again and again with a woman who was, at the time, the dean of the college of library and information science, of all things. I ended up getting accepted into the grad program for library and information science.

It just so happened I was in night school at the time that the first graphical web browser, Mosaic, was released. Up until then, my fascination with the Internet was limited to Gopher, WAIS, USENET, Archie, Veronica, FTP, and Lynx, because that's all we had. All the information sites at the university level were Gopher; instead of `http://www.harvard.edu`, it was `gopher://harvard.edu`. I was at the University of Tennessee here in Knoxville, and few if any companies had web sites yet.

As I was taking those courses and learning more and more about the Internet, the dean of the college of library science ended up offering me a position. She was invited to become the vice chancellor for computing and telecommunications, on an interim basis—which was what we call now a CIO [chief information officer]. She took that position and asked me to come to work on her personal staff, as her research associate. My unstated goal was to help the university understand that it was time to migrate from Gopher to the Web. She figured I with my background probably would be pretty good for that, with sales and marketing. My passion for the Web was pretty obvious, even to her.

Anyway, I took that position and continued to go to night school, and was taking a night-school class called "Entrepreneurship in the Information

Profession.” The grade in that course was based upon creating a fictitious business. You were to spend the semester researching, putting together a business plan, and then at the end of the semester you would present your idea. It was all supposed to be made up, kind of like a business-school project.

So I was riding around town, researching Internet service providers, looking for anything I could find out about online marketing. I kept noticing new web sites would

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launch and I’d think to myself, “Who knows they launched?” They’re nothing but a bunch of files on a computer, no different from a Microsoft Word file; it just so happens these are HTML files on a computer that’s connected to the Internet, therefore anybody can get to them. But ultimately, they can only get to them if they know they exist and somebody links to them or somebody gives you the URL. Otherwise they’re invisible.

That made me wonder if there was a role for communications, public relations, publicity for these web sites. Who can help them become known to the world? In discussing this with a local Internet service provider, I asked him, “Does this sound like an idea that has any kind of merit?” This idea is like a web-based public relations service or publicist.

And they were like, “Yeah, we have to do that now for the clients that we’re putting on the web. It’s part of the package we sell them, but it’s not one of those things that we’re really organized in. If you’ll do that for us, that would be great. We’ll just pay you to do that.” That made me realize that, gosh, my idea’s not bad.

So the semester went on and I worked on my business plan and I realized, man, this idea can work. I was doing that more and more for local companies here in Knoxville, smaller sites, very first launches, everybody getting their feet wet on the Web, 1993, 1994, in that time period. Making a couple hundred bucks for doing a miniature promotional campaign for these web sites.

One of the other things I had done during that semester was I had joined one of the very first, if not the first, Internet marketing discussion lists, run by a fellow named Glenn Fleishman, who is one of my Internet marketing heroes. What I didn’t know when I joined that discussion list was that lurking on

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that list as a member was a fellow by the name of Jeff Bezos, who was getting ready to make some noise on the web, as well.

One day, on the discussion list, I put a post out there saying, “I wanted to let the group know that I really appreciate all the information you’re sharing. I work at the University of Tennessee in graduate school and I also offer a service to do publicity for web sites. There’s nobody out there doing this yet, and there’s no reason I couldn’t offer this to you guys on the list, rather than just offering it locally.”

I’ll be darned if I didn’t get an email back from Jeff Bezos, asking if we could talk on the phone. I distinctly remember covering the receiver with my hand to tell my girlfriend at the time, now my wife, “This guy says he’s gonna sell books on the Internet. I don’t think that’ll work. Do you think that would ever work?” I thought he was crazy. Who knew?

To make a long story short, he hired me as the very first publicist and link builder for Amazon.com’s web site. Now, he would have been successful no matter who he hired, but I’m sure glad that he hired me!

“Link building is the fundamental essence of the web.”

As I announced to that Internet discussion list the services I offered, and as I helped people like Jeff Bezos and some other now very famous sites, I got a reputation for being very meticulous

about what I do, very white hat, not a spammer, understanding the rules of the game, doing it politely and properly and doing it well—succeeding for my clients. As the Internet frenzied and really took off in earnest in the mid- to late-’90s, people would hire me because they had heard good things about me. Within a couple of years, by 1995 or so, I was doing this full-time.

Let’s talk about link building, which is what you do. What is link building, and why is it important?

Link building is the fundamental essence of the web. If you go back to Tim Berners-Lee, who wrote the hypertext [transfer] protocol (HTTP), his goal was for documents to be able to link to other documents, so that researchers, academics, and scientists could find documents more easily. So the basic essence of the World Wide Web is that it is a web of links, where anybody can link to anything. For any web page, any web site, all these

years later, that fundamental essence of the web is still there. You can ask the question, “Does a web site exist if nobody links to it?”

Link building is that process of looking at any given piece of web content—an entire website, an individual web page, an image file, a podcast. Ultimately, all these things are files, whether it’s HTML, PDF, Flash, GIF, or JPG, or even an MS Word document. Ultimately they’re files that are on computers that are connected to the web, and links can be pointed at those files. My job is, for my clients, to help them recognize—based on whatever their content is about—what its linking potential truly is.

There’s a hundred different ways to build links. There’s what some people call the white hat approach, where you have a web site devoted to a particular topic, so you reach out to people who care about that topic to let them know about that site, in hopes that they’ll link to it or write about it on a blog or whatever. Then there’s black hat, which is trying to fool the search engines or sending out a million emails with links in them, saying “Buy Viagra today, click the below link.” That’s the junk stuff that’s made the Internet an ugly place. But ultimately they’re trying to accomplish the same thing, which is get a link in front of a mouse—meaning, get the link in front of somebody who can click it.

What are the strategies that you recommend for a site building links?

My nickname in the industry is Link Moses, for two reasons. One, I’ve been around longer than anybody. And two, I’m pretty vocal about staying white hat and making the Internet a more useful place, not less useful. The approaches that I recommend are always centered upon the content itself that the client has created.

On the high-end content side you have somebody like PBS.org, who is launching new web content every week. One week they may be launching web content for their PBS Kids site, for Arthur the aardvark reading content for kids, then the next week they might launch content for the science of a tsunami. Whatever content they’re creating will appeal to a certain audience on the web. If PBS is launching content about volcanoes, I can go onto the web and do a search to see what are the web sites out there now that point to other volcano-related content. What people out there are blogging about volcanoes? Or teaching volcano-related subject matter in a

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classroom? Who are the key online influencers about topics related to geography or volcanoes? There will be an audience of writers, reporters, teachers, bloggers, librarians, even discussion lists that focuses on that topic.

What I'll do is politely engage with these influencers to let them know that PBS has launched new content that may be of interest to them. I'll try to build links from the audience that make the most sense from a subject's standpoint for any given piece of content.

Is this a hands-on thing, or is it somehow automated?

For me, every bit of it is hands-on. There are parts of the process that you can use tools to help. Google, for example; if I'm doing a project for the Discovery site devoted to asthma, for example, I can do a Google search for asthma web sites, asthma content, asthma links, asthma resources on the web. Google is a tool that helps me get closer to that potential target site.

“I personally do not believe in automated link requests.”

But at that point, then, it's still me and my web browser, looking at those sites, making that qualitative decision. Do I feel that this is a site that is good quality? Could I reach somebody that

could make a decision about editing a link on their site to my client's site? Then I reach out to them. Sometimes I'll pick up the phone; I won't even use email. But for the most part I use email.

I personally do not believe in automated link requests. The thing I say at the conferences, when I talk about them, is any link that you can get because you have sent it to “Dear webmaster, please link to our site,” is not worth it; it does not have any value. Any link you can get that way is useless, and anybody that would give you a link upon receiving an email addressed to them in that way obviously doesn't understand what they're doing and must not have content that would be useful.

I hate to say it, but it's the truth. I get them every day, “Dear webmaster, please link to us.” And I delete 'em.

Obviously, some links are more valuable than others.

Absolutely—depending on how you define value.

For example, some people are interested in building links because they feel it could help their search engine rankings. And to some extent, that is

absolutely true. Each of the four largest and most popular search engines all do some sort of linking analytics or assessment or analysis to determine when I do a search or you do a search on any given phrase, the sites that they rank highest will have something about their links pointing to them that the engines feel they can trust. So yes, you can try to improve your rankings via link building.

But there are also other types of valuable links that the search engines could never have found. Those are the more ephemeral or current events type of links. Maybe they're a link that can't be crawled because there's something about the URL that makes them impossible for the engines to even get to.

A link that is sent via email in the form of a newsletter, say a Yahoo! Picks of the Week, let's say that ends up in 500,000 people's inboxes. Well, that's a pretty useful link. If one out of every five people click that, you're looking at 100,000 visitors to your site the day that hits their inboxes. But that's also a link that the search engines don't even know exists. They can't crawl my personal inbox.

So when you're out trying to get links, how aggressive should you be?

I wish I could give you a statement that would be a perfect fit for all web sites. But the reality is, every web site needs a specific approach or tactic.

A great example would be if you have an e-commerce site that's purely product, and it's a generic type of product that doesn't really have a lot of loyalty to the seller—for example, tennis rackets or golf clubs. I know that I want a specific brand of racket or golf club; I don't know that I care where I buy it. I just want to know that I can trust the merchant, then I'm looking for a good price. Why would anybody link to that kind of content? There's 500 stores out there where I could buy the same exact tennis racket. So why is anybody going to link to one of those stores over any other store? You're going to have to be extremely aggressive and probably pay for those links.

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That's a much different style and approach than when Paramount launched the web site for *Indiana Jones 4*. They really don't have to do a lot of aggressive link building. First of all, you've got built-in fan loyalty to Harrison Ford and to the movie franchise of Indiana Jones. With nothing more than a minimal link-building campaign—that will go viral almost on its own—you will have reached the majority of the most influential venues that will provide links that you were probably going to get anyway.

“For a majority of sites, [link building] is an ongoing process.”

Every site has its own linking potential, depending on its focus and its subject matter. Some sites need a heck of a lot more than others. I have clients to whom I've said, “You don't need to build links; don't spend money with me—you don't need it.”

I was in a consult with a *Sports Illustrated* site. I said, “Guys, you have content here that every teenaged kid in America is gonna love. All you've got to do is put an announcement out there to a few strategically influential places, and watch this catch fire on its own.” That's hard, sometimes, to tell them, but it's the truth.

You mentioned something earlier about paying for links. Is that a big factor?

There's any number of ways to build links to your site. Paid links just means money has changed hands. It could be as simple as I write a check to somebody or PayPal them some money and he puts a link to my site on his site, because he's selling them. I might do that for any one of a number of reasons—some of which are considered to be spam and black hat, others of which are considered to be perfectly acceptable.

If I'm a plumber and I am looking for some used tools that typically are very expensive, I do a search on Google for used plumbing tools and I land on a web site that's called UsedPlumbingTools.com (if such a site exists). If anybody sells used plumbing tools, wouldn't it make sense for them to buy a link on UsedPlumbingTools.com so they could reach me, the plumber, looking for that tool? Sure; it's a perfect match. It's not about search rank, it's not about algorithms, it's about the demographics of the audience that's at that web site. Who goes to UsedPlumbingTools.com? I dunno, how

about plumbers looking for used tools. That's a natural, logical place to buy a link.

If UsedPlumbingTools.com, the web site, decided that they were going to buy links from ESPN.com or CNN.com, because they thought that was a high-value site and maybe that'll help their search rank, that's where you're starting to venture into the more gray and black hat areas. How many people that visit CNN.com every day are looking for used plumbing tools? You haven't bought the link because you're interested in finding that perfect match demographically. Now you're just after traffic and/or search rank.

And the engines, specifically Google, do not like that. They don't like it when you try to manipulate their rankings algorithm.

Is link building something that just happens when the site is new, or is it an ongoing process?

It depends on the site, but for a majority of sites, it is an ongoing process. Now, there will be some types of content that are such high quality, so good within their niche compared to the others, that they will attract links and continue to attract links; there is a snowball effect for some content. Once you get out there with a new site and people are learning about it, finding out about it for the first time, linking to it, telling other people about it, sharing it, bookmarking it, it takes on a life of its own and it will start to attract links. Some people call it trickle-down linking; there's ways that links beget more links. Then you'll hit that point where the majority of people who ever were going to know about it and link to it will have done so.

Or you launch a web site and maybe there are only 50 people out there who care and will link to it, and as they learn about it, they'll do so. Well now what do you do? Really all you can do is try to stay up with your niche online; continually look for new resources, web sites, blogs, RSS feeds, newsletters, whatever's devoted to it, so that you can continually make sure that your site remains in the online public eye. Even though, in many cases, it will, it won't for every type of content—depending, again, on how competitive your niche is.

What are some of the common mistakes that you find companies making when they're trying to put together links?

First and foremost is the belief that there is some strategy or tactic or approach that you can use, that anybody else could use, in any sort of cookie-cutter

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manner. You'll see web sites selling link-building services and packaging them together, like "We'll build 300 links for \$3,000." It's comical to me to think that any web site, without even knowing who the potential client is, can say that this 300-link package has any use.

What if my web site is about a narrow topic; what if it's about the mating habits of the brown bat? How many web sites are there out there devoted to that? There might not even be 300 *potential* links for that content. Likewise if your web site is devoted to the latest Britney Spears problems dot com, you might need 5,000 links to make any impact there, because that's a very popular topic.

The idea that there's a link-building package that is just perfect for you and for everybody else is crazy. Yet it's out there and being sold every day, by people who often don't realize what they're selling isn't effective. They make the mistake of thinking that, "people are buying it, it must be a great service. Let's keep selling it."

"Ultimately, it's a very human process to build links."

I have so many clients who come to me and have told me, over and over, they've tried this, they've tried that, they tried this and it didn't work, what did they do wrong? It's not that they've

done anything really wrong—it's just that they forgot that their content is designed to reach a very specific audience—and therefore they need a very specific link-building campaign.

So mistake number one is you cannot cookie-cutter-approach link building. Mistake two is automating parts of the process that you really should not. Ultimately, it's a very human process to build links. At the end of the day, you're trying to get a person to do something that will help you. Why would you try to automate that? In some ways this is public relations—it's human relations. Don't automate that. Don't say "To whom it may concern" or "Dear Webmaster." Take the time to find out the name of the person who runs the web site and address them as such—"Dear Mike," not "Dear Webmaster."

When I see "Dear Webmaster, I was just looking at your web site and I thought it was great," I know that the very first thing this person did was to lie to me. My web site is EricWard.com, my logo says Eric Ward, and there's a picture of me there. If you really were visiting my web site, your email would say "Dear Eric." There's no way you could miss that. So to say

“Dear Webmaster, I was just looking at your site” is a lie. And the worst thing you can do, in my opinion, is to start a relationship out with a lie.

That makes sense. Now, what kind of advice would you give to a company that’s trying to build links to their web site?

Piece of advice number one: There is absolutely no relationship between the money you spend to build links and the quality of the service you’re going to get—whether you hire a consultant, hire a link builder, or buy links. Just because somebody is willing to sell you link-building services for \$25,000 that somebody else will sell for \$1,000 does not mean the \$25,000 services are any better. Absolutely not.

I’ve got an inbox filled with horror stories from people who have spent a fortune for nothing. Sadly, a lot of these services play upon people’s ignorance. A lot of times it’s big companies and older marketing folks who didn’t grow up on the web, who suddenly are in charge of web marketing, who have been told that links matter, and who trust other people to not take them. It’s sad, but it happens.

So price is not indicative of quality. You have to ask questions and dig deeper.

I don’t want it to sound self-serving, but sometimes the best thing you can do is spend a very little amount

of money to have somebody who knows what they’re doing look at your site and give you some advice on what a link-building program for your site really ought to look like. And I don’t mean just me. There are other people who can do that. Don’t be too eager.

Take more time to do your link building than you took to build your site. People spend six months launching a web site and want links for it in a month. There’s no reason to shortcut the most important process of all. No matter how much you spent on it, a web site is invisible until somebody links to it. So don’t shortcut that most important process.

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So what’s the future—where are we going to be five or ten years from now, regarding link building?

Nobody can know for sure, but based on what I’ve seen over the past 15 years, links are too useful and valuable to analyze for the engines to ever give up—to say, “There’s just too much spam in links now, the golden

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goose has been killed, we're not going to do link analysis." I think the engines will always be able to glean something from the worldwide collection of billions of links.

But what will happen is, the overwhelming majority of the links on the web will not be trustworthy, because there are just so many spammers. For every Library of Congress web site, there's gonna be a thousand sites devoted to make money fast, porn, pills, and casinos. Every day on the web there's millions more crappy links, useless links. The engines will have to continually get better and trust an ever-shrinking percentage of those links for their analysis.

The joke in the librarian world, where I came from, was librarians were asleep when the web happened; two grad students created the web's first library, Yahoo! But in some ways it's like "Revenge of the Librarians," 15 years later, because thousands of librarians have been slowly, methodically vetting and cataloging the web in every imaginable topic. And you can't buy links from them, and you can't steal links from them, and you can't scam links from them; you'll get a link because you have good content and they recognize that and it's a fit to their site devoted to your topic. I think it's wonderful that the engines can come back and forever know they can trust those links.

So where will we be in another 10 years? Probably analyzing a smaller collection of completely trustworthy links—and ignoring the vast bunch of junk that's out there.

Sound Bites

It may not be as sexy as social networking or mobile marketing, but link building is at the core of any successful web site. If you want to build high-quality links to your site, follow this advice from link builder extraordinaire Eric Ward:

- Link building should be personal—you can't automate the process.
- Search for sites that contain content relevant to your site; links from general-interest sites are worth less.
- Contact a site's webmaster directly, by name, to ask for his link.
- Don't forget non-website links—such as links in email newsletters and blogs.
- In some instances, you may have to pay for a link.