

# Search Engine Optimization and Links

By Allison C. Shields

**L**awyers have begun to see the necessity and value of quality websites,<sup>1</sup> and law firms are trying to maximize those sites using search engine optimization (SEO).

Unfortunately, many lawyers know little about SEO. They don't know what to ask of potential SEO service providers and are unaware of the potential effect of some commonly used SEO tactics on their practice, reputation, or website viability.

Recent updates to Google's algorithm—specifically with respect to how websites link to one another—have made it even more important for lawyers to be well-informed about the strategies their SEO providers use<sup>2</sup> to boost their firm website's search engine rankings.

Not surprisingly, some so-called search engine optimization “experts” take advantage of lawyers who know little about technology in general or search engine marketing specifically. Some of these companies are using SEO tactics<sup>3</sup> that are questionable at best. Those tactics may have yielded short-term results in the past, but they can get a firm penalized, which can cause long-term headaches, particularly in light of the new Google updates.

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## What's So Important About Links?

Your link-building strategy is one of the most important search engine optimization strategies that can be employed to improve visibility of your law firm's site on the web.<sup>4</sup> Why are links important? Because linking is one of the ways connections are made on the Internet. As a result, when a search engine “spider” (a computer program) sees a lot of links to a specific piece of content, it is logical to assume that the content is relevant and trusted; otherwise, why would so many other sites link to it?

The problem is that some webmasters, web developers, and “SEO experts” try to manipulate the system by building link farms and planting irrelevant links, making the sheer number of links to a particular web page or piece of content a less reliable measure of quality and authority.

## Google Algorithm Changes—Panda and Penguin

As with all Google updates, the new updates (called Panda and Penguin) are designed to return more high-quality search results. These updates concentrate on identifying—and penalizing—duplicate or plagiarized content and artificial link building.

In the past, some SEO strategies included building pages using other people's content; creating pages with the same or similar con-

tent and linking back and forth to generate additional numbers of links to a site; and link farms, which contain lists of links solely to try to improve the search rankings of those sites, with no relevant or useful content.

As one consultant said, “The new Google updates are aimed to pointing out sites using SEO to alter page ratings and are focused on banning such sites from the engine's results. Over optimizing is now a threat for any web page.”<sup>5</sup>

## What Does Google Want to See in Linking Strategy?

Links are still important, but not just because they are links. Google wants content that is rich, genuine, valuable, and informative. Links should be a natural part of the content and lead to other relevant content.

## Effect of Google's Recent Updates

The latest Google updates have also resulted in some strange behavior by those intent on making a buck from people who may not know any better—some of whom may be lawyers. Some companies may take advantage of the change to charge businesses for “reputation management” or anti-piracy services allegedly aimed at ensuring that a firm does not get penalized by Google for bad links.<sup>6</sup> These companies use

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scare tactics and charge website owners to remove even legitimate links from the web.

Now, don't get me wrong; it may behoove some individuals or companies to hire anti-piracy experts to keep an eye on the Internet for copyright infringement or plagiarism, and if your firm was one that engaged in bad link-building behavior, even inadvertently, you may need to remove some links to your site. The fact is, if you have a website or other information about you or your firm posted on the Internet, there is little you can do to prevent someone else from linking to your site. As long as the link

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is legitimate, there is absolutely no reason to panic or think your firm might be penalized as a result of such a link. To the contrary, this is exactly the kind of genuine, natural link to relevant content that Google respects. Indeed, it's hard to know why any business would want to remove this kind of link from the web.

On the other hand, this could have been the result of what is known as a "negative SEO campaign" in which a competitor hired the anti-piracy company in an attempt to have legitimate links to its competitor removed from the Internet, thereby reducing its search engine rankings.

If you are one of those who *did* engage in bad linking strategies (or your SEO company did so on your behalf), you may become a victim of another group seeking to make some money from the new Google updates: those very same "spammy" websites or link farms where your bad links reside. Some of these websites may have even charged you for posting links on their site in the first place, and several are now charging businesses to remove the links from their sites.

On a broader note, here are some of the top SEO reasons websites are penalized by Google:

- **Poor quality backlinks:** Unrelated backlinks—often the result of paying for links, using link farms, or exchanging links with anyone who asks, regardless of relevance or value to your audience—is the best way to drop your Google ranking.
- **Lack of fresh content:** This is why static websites don't perform well. Your ranking today won't be your ranking tomorrow. Search engine results are constantly being updated—your website needs to be as well.

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- **Over optimization:** Write for the actual *people* you want to visit your site—not for search engines. If your copy is stuffed with keywords and doesn't flow, Google knows you're trying to manipulate the system.
- **Poor SEO:** Some SEO strategies still work. If your site is low in the rankings, there are some basic steps you can take that might help improve them, including using title tags, descriptions, header tags, and image alt tags.
- **No social standing:** Social media has become an increasingly important factor in SEO. The rationale is similar to linking—receiving links, likes, comments, or other engagement on social media is “social proof” that the content linked to, liked, or shared is trustworthy and authoritative content. As a result, that content receives a higher ranking. Bottom line: if your site is getting hits from social media sites or is talked about on social media, Google will take notice. On the other hand, if no one is

talking about you, Google may assume that no one cares or your site does not contain valuable content. If that's the case, there's no point in returning your site as a search result.<sup>7</sup>

### How Can You Get Real Link “Juice”?

As one SEO strategist, J. Walker of GNC Web Creations, notes:

The fastest way to increase natural incoming links, is to provide people with something they WANT to link to. Provide the kind of site that they WANT to tell their site visitors about (articles, free services, quality content, quality blogs, etc.). Once you are doing this, you can easily ask people to consider linking to your site.<sup>8</sup>

As the emphasis is increasingly placed on genuine, informative content and natural links, it will be more and more difficult for law firms using “build links quick” strategies to artificially improve their website rankings.

Instead, reaching the first page of results on Google will be the product of hard work and quality content, some of which may only be able to be generated by lawyers rather than outside SEO companies. Links will need to be built as a result of other individuals or companies on the web finding the law firm's site content informative and helpful and linking to it naturally, rather than planting links on unrelated sites.

This takes time. Beware of any SEO expert who tells you they can generate a lot of links to your site in a short period.

The best approach may be the human approach, as articulated by UK marketing consultant Jim Connolly:

- Write for human beings, not for search engines or computer programs.
- Engage naturally with others by writing about what they care about.
- Focus on building a community rather than building a list.
- Respond to the people who engage with you.
- Provide valuable content—if others think it's worthwhile, they'll share it naturally.<sup>9</sup> ■

*This article was originally published as a two-part blog series; see [http://legalease.blogs.com/legal\\_ease\\_blog/2012/07/seo-and-linking-strategy-for-lawyers.html](http://legalease.blogs.com/legal_ease_blog/2012/07/seo-and-linking-strategy-for-lawyers.html) and [http://legalease.blogs.com/legal\\_ease\\_blog/2012/08/link-building-strategy-and-seo-part-ii.html](http://legalease.blogs.com/legal_ease_blog/2012/08/link-building-strategy-and-seo-part-ii.html).*



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### FOOTNOTES

1. See generally Legal Ease Blog, *Think You Don't Need a Web Presence?* <[http://legalease.blogs.com/legal\\_ease\\_blog/2005/12/think\\_you\\_dont\\_html](http://legalease.blogs.com/legal_ease_blog/2005/12/think_you_dont_html)>. All websites cited in this article were accessed September 24, 2012.
2. See generally Legal Ease Blog, *What Should Lawyers Look for in an SEO Strategy?* <[http://legalease.blogs.com/legal\\_ease\\_blog/2010/12/what-should-lawyers-look-for-in-an-seo-strategy.html](http://legalease.blogs.com/legal_ease_blog/2010/12/what-should-lawyers-look-for-in-an-seo-strategy.html)>.
3. See Legal Ease Blog, *Beware of Underhanded SEO Strategies That May Hurt, Rather Than Help* <[http://legalease.blogs.com/legal\\_ease\\_blog/2010/11/beware-of-underhanded-seo-strategies-that-may-hurt-rather-than-help.html](http://legalease.blogs.com/legal_ease_blog/2010/11/beware-of-underhanded-seo-strategies-that-may-hurt-rather-than-help.html)>.
4. For a list of link-building strategies see Jon Cooper, *Link-Building Strategies—The Complete List* <<http://pointblankseo.com/link-building-strategies>>.
5. MachoArts, *Beware of Linking—Good Updates 2012* <<http://machoarts.com/beware-of-linking-google-updates-2012>>.
6. See Legal Ease Blog, *Online Reputation Management: A Cautionary Tale* <[http://legalease.blogs.com/legal\\_ease\\_blog/2011/08/online-reputation-management-a-cautionary-tale.html](http://legalease.blogs.com/legal_ease_blog/2011/08/online-reputation-management-a-cautionary-tale.html)>.
7. David Mercer, *Panda & Penguin Friendly SEO: A business guide to recovering from Google's algorithm updates* <<http://www.business2community.com/seo/panda-penguin-friendly-seo-a-business-guide-to-recovering-from-googles-algorithm-updates-0174716>>.
8. GNC Web Creations, *Website Linking Strategies* <<http://www.gnc-web-creations.com/linking-strategies.htm>>.
9. Jim Connolly, *How to build a massively valuable blog, using a more human approach!* <<http://jimsmarketingblog.com/2012/07/23/how-to-build-a-massively-valuable-blog-using-a-more-human-approach/>>.