

SEO MADE EASY

Everything
You Need
To Know
About **SEO** and
Nothing More

Evan Bailyn

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**Everything
You Need
to Know
About SEO and
Nothing More**

Evan Bailyn

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800 East 96th Street,
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SEO Made Easy: Everything You Need to Know About SEO and Nothing More

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About the Author

Evan Bailyn is an Internet entrepreneur and the author of *Outsmarting Google* and *Outsmarting Social Media*. He is primarily known as a search engine optimization expert, having used his ability to rank at the top of Google to build and sell five businesses, including one of the largest children's websites online.

Currently, he offers marketing services through his company, First Page Sage. Under Evan's tutelage, clients have established multimillion dollar businesses, become *New York Times* bestsellers, clinched top sports awards, and won key elections. As the founder of the Evan Bailyn Foundation, he helps to promote emotional awareness in children and adults.

Mr. Bailyn has been interviewed on ABC and Fox News and featured in *Forbes*, *New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Advertising Age*, and *Money Magazine*. He is a frequent speaker, having keynoted numerous national conferences.

Dedication

*To my wife Sasha, whose support has made me the person I am today.
To my brother and business partner Brad, who always has my back.*

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Introduction

If you own any other books on search engine optimization, throw them out. They belong to the mass of misinformation that has been swimming around for years, keeping people from making their websites truly appealing to search engines. And no surprise, Google loves it.

What I am about to share with you are the real, gritty, tried-and-true tactics that have made my websites consistently show up at the top of Google for 9 years and have made me a millionaire. My relationship with Google is love/hate. On the one hand, I am astounded by the brilliance of a company that makes my life easier every day and continues to come out with innovative products that push the level of communication and organization in our society to new heights. On the other hand, they have done everything they can to darken the picture of how to make great websites get the exposure they deserve.

One thing I should make clear from the beginning: I don't do any black hat stuff. For those who aren't familiar with search engine jargon, that means I don't partake in unethical schemes or employ any tactics that do nothing more than fool Google into thinking my websites are more valuable than they actually are. No, what I have done is become intimately familiar with Google's rule book—the one they would do anything to hide from the public—and play by those rules *very closely*.

You see, outsmarting Google is not a matter of being a mathematical genius like many of the people they employ. It's a matter of looking at Google's intentions as a search engine, studying the accepted rules of SEO (search engine optimization), and then patiently trying every method that comports with and breaks each of those rules until you've brewed the perfect concoction. That can take years, of course, but reading this book should take only a week.

I first got started with search engines in 2004 after dropping out of law school to start my own company, a college essay counseling service. Soon enough, I learned that I had no idea how to acquire customers. Search engines were already pretty mainstream, and it was a fair guess that people were going to use them to find pretty much everything in the future—including college essay counselors. So I decided to focus on them head-on. Short on money, I spent 8 months sitting in front of the computer reading about SEO on an online forum called *webworkshop.net*. In researching for this book, I see that the forum is now defunct. Back in 2005, when I was on it every night from 11 p.m. to 4 a.m., it was a hive of eager amateurs mixed with some so-called experts all trying to figure out how certain sites showed up at the top of the search results and others weren't even in the first 1,000 results. The amount of ignorant nonsense that was spewed in that forum could fill the Library of Congress. But a few valuable tricks slipped in.

Instead of racking my brain trying to figure out which information was credible and which wasn't, I spent a lot of my time researching the people on the forum. I would Google their usernames and connect them to their business websites and then see whether those websites ranked for the keywords that they were obviously targeting. Most people's websites, including the moderators of the forum, were either nowhere to be found or hanging around in the top 50 search results. But a couple actually had top 10 rankings. I was on those guys like *white on rice*. I would go back and read every post they had ever written, trying to figure out what they knew. I looked for commonalities among them. Soon enough, I found a couple of phrases that seemed to matter like "anchor text links" and "meta title tags." And I wrote myself a little playbook filled with my best guesses of what made Google happy.

Around that time, I had about \$6,000 in the bank, at the bottom of which was a ticket to go back to Long Island, live at home, and start looking for 9-to-5 jobs. Running out of money was my greatest fear. I had spent \$650 buying and

developing a website for my college counseling business. I had spent another \$500 buying a few other websites to play around with and teach myself about the way sites relate to each other. Having studied the Google founders' original research paper, which established the idea of Google, I knew that they believed that the relationships between websites were the best way to determine the value of each individual online property. That is, if websites were people, who would be the most well liked? Is it the guy who simply knows the most people? Or the guy who has the most powerful friends? It certainly isn't the guy who just moved to town and doesn't know anybody. Soon it became clear that Larry Page and Sergey Brin, who went on to found one of the most successful companies of the last decade, thought of the Web as a big popularity contest.

My \$500 bought me three crappy websites, but more than anything, it bought me an education. Apparently, gone were the days when all you had to do to get a top ranking in the search engines was write your keywords a thousand times on your home page. Search engines, especially Google, had gotten much smarter, and now all that mattered was how many times other websites linked to you and how they linked to you, and when, and why. I hadn't the foggiest idea how to make my website show up at #1 in Google yet, but I did know one thing: It had everything to do with links.

That brought on a painful 6 months of trying every way of linking from my three test websites to my college essay counseling website. By day, I handed out flyers at Penn Station trying to make up the cost of my office rent, and by night, I linked. In that stretch of life, I linked in big letters, small letters, bold letters, italic letters, invisible letters, and no letters at all. I linked from the top of the page, bottom of the page, side of the page, and not on the page at all. I linked at 9 a.m. each day and every other Tuesday. I linked in plain text, images, and Flash; on every page of the website and on only one; on the home page and in the site map; and from each website to every other website. Damn, was it boring! The worst, and most devilishly clever part of it all was, Google updated its rankings only once per week, so every little permutation of linking I tried required a week of saint-worthy patience. And yet, none of it was working. My website had never showed up in the top 100 results—and it seemed like it never would. Every day felt like walking through complete darkness, swinging my arms around in the hopes that I would hit something. I was very near giving up by the time that momentous Monday morning rolled around.

That Monday, just the same as every other day, I typed college admission essay (my keyword of choice) into the search box of Google. Thousands of times I had done this, and thousands of times Google had come up with the same search results, a tired collection of established companies and institutions of higher learning. But that day, to my shock and delight, the #1 result was *my* website.

“Oh my god! Oh my god! I did it! I cracked Google!” My neighbors in the tiny office suite poked their heads in to see what the racket was. Annoyed that it was nothing more than an overzealous 24-year-old screaming at his computer, they went about their business as I hugged my brother and business partner, Brad.

From that point on, my business got a steady stream of customers. And in the following years, armed with the power to rank at the top of the search results for any keyword, I started lots of different companies. Now, five sold businesses and lots of experience later, I still work side by side with my brother, but we apply what I discovered back then (which I’ve honed greatly) to other people’s businesses to make them money. My reputation as a search engine guru has spread, making its way to the ear of an editor at Pearson Education. And that is how this book came to life.

Now that you know a little of my history, sit back and get ready to learn what Google is hiding.

What’s In This Book

This book contains everything you need to know—no more, no less—to get your website to rank on the first page of Google’s search results. The 12 chapters of *SEO Made Easy* are organized as follows:

- Chapters 1 and 2 explain the system underlying Google’s algorithm, TrustRank, and the five ingredients of successful Google optimization. By themselves, these two chapters could bring a novice up to proficiency in this area.
- Chapters 3, 4, and 5 cover specific strategies to get your website to rank at the top of the results, discussing links, aging, and the ultimate ranking strategy—the Nuclear Football.
- Chapter 6 is the technical chapter. It lays the foundation for you to understand the best free traffic measurement tool in existence—Google Analytics.
- Chapters 7 and 8 are all about clarity and contain interesting information about optimizing for Google that will help clear away common myths and misunderstandings.
- Chapter 9 tells you what you need to know to rank on Yahoo! and Bing.
- Chapter 10 is a particularly important complement to search engine optimization, detailing the best ways to convert your search engine traffic into revenue for your business.

- Chapter 11 covers the role of social media in Google and the ways in which social media and search engines will soon meld together to form a new basis for discovering information, products, and services.
- Chapter 12 is a self-contained tutorial on how to use SEO to start your own business.

Who Can Use This Book?

SEO Made Easy: Everything You Need to Know About SEO and Nothing More was written for all knowledge levels, with a special emphasis on the novice marketer. More than anything, it was written for people who are seeking simple and direct information about how to get their websites to rank at the top of Google's results. I have assumed a blank slate and built a picture of the search engine's algorithm from the ground up, using simple language and analogies. I also have tried to keep the book moving along quickly, never getting too philosophical or bogged down with dense material. This book was meant to be like celery—crisp, easy to eat, and nutritious—and yet, even those who have years of experience in online marketing should find a fresh perspective in these pages. I hope you enjoy the read.

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Using Time to Gain Trust

No matter how many links and pages your new website has, it will not be able to rank on the first page for any competitive keyword for a couple of months. This core principle of Google optimization nearly put me out of business at one time. It just didn't make sense. I had great content and lots of links; why wasn't my website even in the top 100 results? The answer: because in the world of Google, you just have to wait. I picture an old farmer sitting on the back of a truck, chewing on a piece of grass, saying, "Life ain't fair, kid." It's just one of those rules.

The Sandbox

A mandatory ranking delay for new sites is the kind of SEO principle that doesn't make sense for most websites but benefits the entire ecosystem. Google instituted the sandbox, or the waiting period that all new websites must incur before they can rank properly, to keep fly-by-night spammers out of the index. As mentioned in Chapter 2, "The Five Ingredients of Google Optimization," if you were doing a lot of Googling in the early 2000s, you might have noticed many spammy sites in the search results. These sites were set up for the purpose of making money quickly and unethically, and then shuttering their online doors after just a few weeks. Using link farms (vast, interconnected networks of low-quality links), these sites were able to rise to the first page quickly due to Google's then-weaker algorithm. Many of them took a lot of money from people before Google discovered and banned them.

Because of this group of scammers, we all have to suffer. As I was saying, the sandbox nearly broke me when I was first learning about SEO. It took a full year for my college consulting website to finally see the light of Page 1. If another three months had gone by without reward for my work, I would have run out of money. Thankfully for all of us, Google has found other ways to identify spammers, and today the sandbox is a shadow of what it once was.

In addition to the number and quality of links pointing to your website, the age of those links is also important in determining your site's TrustRank. On the day a link to your website is published, Google awards your site only a portion of the total TrustRank that link possesses. The rest of its TrustRank is earned later on, as the link settles in as a permanent part of the website hosting it.

With all the waiting webmasters have to do, I thought it would be helpful to offer an outline of the typical journey a well-managed site takes before it is able to rank for the most difficult keywords.

Prepublishing Period

What you do in the time period before publishing your site to the Web is crucial. The moment Google learns there's a new kid in town, it starts sizing him up. One of the biggest distinctions Google will make on Day 1 is whether your website is a resource or a commercial site. If you are purely publishing a blog, Google gives your site special favor; if a commercial site, it starts at the bottom like everybody else's, rising up as it earns TrustRank.

I learned of this distinction in early 2011, while creating a community for a client of mine. This particular client wasn't concerned with commercial gain at the start of our campaign; he just wanted to amass an audience interested in the general theme of his company's services. So, we built and designed a beautiful blog on the

WordPress platform for him, publishing great articles each day. We were thrilled to see the community grow steadily right from the start, reaching about 35,000 visitors per month by the second month of the campaign. This was unusually generous of Google; they were allowing thousands of keywords to rain traffic on a site that had barely been around 60 days. Well, the client was thrilled—so thrilled that he decided it was time to start offering his company’s services on the site. We minimized the blog on the home page, making room for information about his services. On the same day that we compromised the purity of the blog by adding a commercial element, the traffic took a nosedive. Fifteen days later, it had halved (see Figure 4.1).

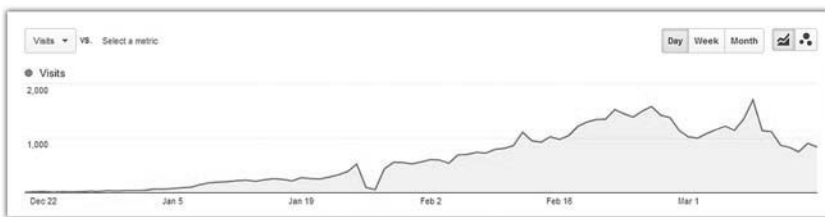


Figure 4.1 A chart showing the traffic of a site that was originally built as a noncommercial blog, which was then converted to a more commercial site around March.

At first we were confused, but then I started noticing similar trends in other clients for whom we had created blogs simply for branding or exposure. The interesting thing is that Google did not make the reason for the demotion immediately clear. Rather, it slowly reduced the number of keywords the site showed up for over time, even allowing a big spike in the midst of the decline. This is typical Google. If they made their algorithms too clear, more people would be able to decipher them.

0–1 Months: The Period of Nothingness

Whether your site is classified on Day 1 as a resource or a commercial entity—and the vast majority are considered commercial, including nonprofit websites seeking donations—your first month is unlikely to be a high-traffic one. Google is waiting to see what will happen with it, stealthily collecting data to understand your site’s content production and link-acquisition trajectories. Make no mistake that, although few people may arrive at your website from organic search, your actions during this period will affect your site’s future traffic. This is exactly the time when you need to get busy building links. If you do not build links in the first few months, your site will continue to be stagnant until you do build links.

2–4 Months: Behold, a Brave New World

After your site has been around for a couple of months, it has the opportunity to rank for some fairly competitive keywords. The number and competitiveness of keywords depends on the TrustRank you've built thus far. In my company's own campaigns, we usually see an up-and-to-the-right traffic trend begin to form in the first few months, with several hundred different keywords sending traffic by the third or fourth month. This is not time period where you should expect to rank for your most difficult keywords unless you've built a *lot* of great links (think 40 to 50) and you've got a very niche business.

4–6 Months: The Winds of Trust

If you were building links in a casual, nonaggressive way for the past few months, your site will now be able to rank for a number of valuable keywords. It could even rank for some competitive ones. If you've been an animal about link building (50 to 100 links), you could already be on Page 1 for some of your most valuable terms. However, you will almost definitely not be dominating your industry. Yet.

6–12 Months: Dropping Anchor

For the average, hardworking webmaster, this will be a time of great prosperity, where your consistent hard work building links, crafting meta page titles, and optimizing your website for conversion pays off. At this point in a site's life, it very well may have built enough TrustRank to prove out the viability of SEO for your business. Although your site still won't rank for huge terms like `mesothelioma` or `airline tickets`, it could rank for slightly longer tail terms such as `jewelry store los angeles`, `personalized china`, and the like.

1–2 Years: Welcome to the Land of Trust

If you've followed the advice in this book, this stretch will be an exciting one for your business. Your traffic graph has seen its biggest lurches upward, and is now moving up in a slower, more steady fashion each month (taking seasonality into account, of course). Google's door is now 100% open to you, and as long as you keep all of your methods above board, your site has the opportunity to rank for pretty much any keyword. Google now views your site the way society views a young, roguishly handsome businessperson—as impressive and capable of great feats but not as well respected as he will be later on in his career.

2–4 Years: A Seasoned Citizen

By now, your site should have a number of old, trusted links and be a shining member of its community. Not only is it ranking well for uncompetitive and competitive keywords alike, but your site is also a highly sought-after influencer—a site from which any other site would feel privileged to gain a link. These are the good times. With a history of building links in a natural way and continuing to attract links on a regular basis, your site may rise in search results as you please. Your site joins the ranks of those “unbeatable” websites that are always on the first page for the most competitive keywords in an industry.

May this list keep you oriented on the sometimes-dizzying road to top rankings. After publishing *Outsmarting Google*, I got emails from a number of people who experienced a trajectory very similar to the one in this list. I hope you do, too.

How to Estimate the Value of a Link Based on Aging Factors

Given how equipped you are to gain new links by this point, it’s a good time to show you how to use aging factors to analyze the value of each link you obtain. Chapter 1, “Trust: The Currency of Google,” provided a cheat sheet for determining the TrustRank of a website: Simply Google the keywords in the home page’s meta page title and see whether the site ranks anywhere on the first few pages of results. Because the meta page title tells you which keywords a site wants to rank for, finding out whether it does in fact rank for those terms gives you an indication of its TrustRank. This test does require some judgment, though. If the keywords in the home page’s meta page title are extremely competitive, it might still have a lot of TrustRank even if it shows up on Page 10. For instance, a site that ranks on Page 10 for the keyword `online degree` probably has a ton of TrustRank. However, if a site is attempting to rank for `online veterinary degree` (I truly hope such a thing doesn’t exist), and it shows up on Page 10 for that keyword, it probably has very little TrustRank.

Determining the age of a website is another way to guess at a site’s TrustRank, and hence the value of a link from one of its pages. Generally speaking, links from older websites are more valuable. The huge caveat to that statement is that, if the website hasn’t attracted any inbound (coming in from other websites) links over its long life, its outbound links (going out to other websites) will have no value to your website. However, it is easy enough to look at the links pointing to a website and see whether many of the web pages hosting those links look old (see Figure 4.2).

So how do you determine the age of a website in the first place? You can use the InterNIC whois lookup, located at <http://www.internic.net/whois.html>, to see when a domain was established.

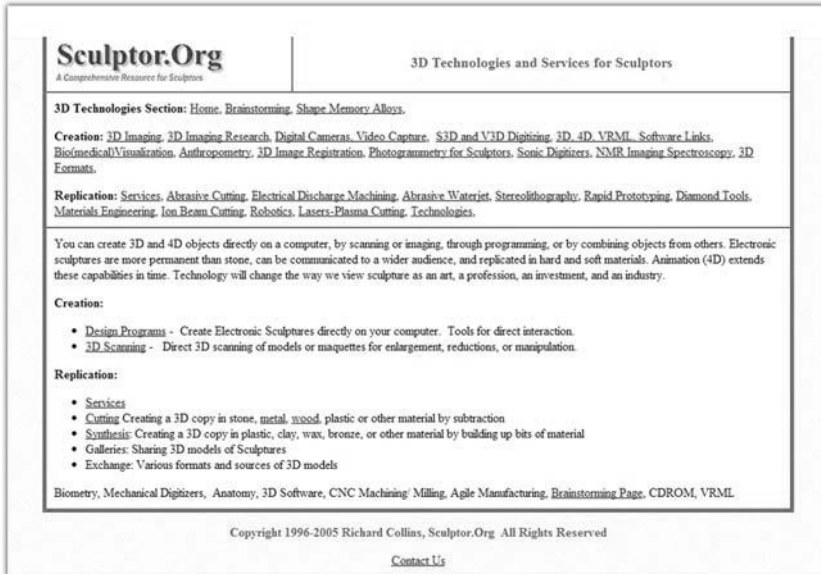


Figure 4.2 A website with a dated look. It is a good bet that the links on this page are many years old.

Although it might seem that the most valuable sites are the oldest ones according to the whois database, keep in mind that it is not the age of the domain that confers TrustRank, but the age of the website that sits on top of the domain. So if you see that a domain was registered in 1997, don't drop everything to gain a link on that site, because it is possible that the domain was parked for 10 years before a website was built. Even if a website was built right from the start, if the website was later taken down and the domain was parked for any substantial period of time, Google will have perceived that the domain was transferred to a new owner and reset whatever TrustRank it earned in the past. So before giving a site credit for being well aged, you should ask, "Has a website been continuously running on this domain since it was registered?" And note that if a website has in fact been running, uninterrupted, for many years, it retains its TrustRank no matter how many redesigns of the site occurred; Google expects that. Google resets the TrustRank of a website only if the domain has been parked.

If you really want to be thorough in investigating a website's potential value as a linker, you can attempt to determine the age of that website's own inbound links.

Just to reorient you, when we go down this road we are dealing with three different sites. The first is your own website. The second is the website you want to obtain a link from. And the third is one of the websites that links to the website you want to obtain a link from. You are looking into the age of that third website's links to

estimate how much TrustRank that second website has, to see if you'd like it to link to the first website—your own (see Figure 4.3).

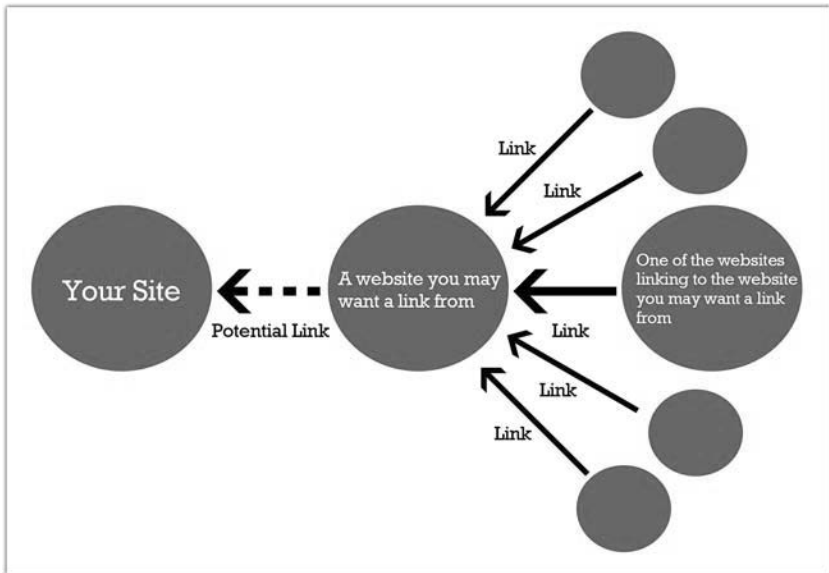


Figure 4.3 A visualization of the three sites you need to keep in mind when you are trying to estimate the TrustRank of a link from another website.

To evaluate the TrustRank of another website, you need to find the links pointing to it. There are two main ways to do that:

- Google its URL**—Googling the URL of a web page enables you to see what other pages reference it. Assume you are interested in the age of the links to <http://www.sculptor.org/Children/>. Googling this URL brings up the page <http://42explore.com/sculpture.htm>. This page (as of the time this book went to press) features [sculptor.org](http://www.sculptor.org) and contains a link to <http://www.sculptor.org/Children/>. At the bottom it states, “Updated, 04/01.” So we can assume this link is 10 years old. Are we certain this link was not added later? Of course not. But based on the statement at the bottom of the page and the lack of any evidence to the contrary, it would be a reasonable guess. If other pages that reference <http://www.sculptor.org/Children/> display similar clues, we could guess that at least some of those links really are quite old. Based on this fact alone, we can conclude that a link from <http://www.sculptor.org/Children/> would be valuable.
- Use a link-checking tool**—You can use any good link-checking tool such as ahrefs.com or Google Webmaster Tools to locate the web pages

that link to the website you're evaluating. Let's assume we're interested in investigating the home page of cartoondollemporium.com as a potential link partner. Plugging that URL into ahrefs.com shows thousands of pages that link to the site. One of those pages is the following:

<http://www.allthingsprincess.com/PrincessInternetTools.html>.

Looking at this page, I easily spot the link to Cartoon Doll Emporium under "Princesses Clipart and Graphics." This page contains a note at the bottom that says "Copyright 2007-2009." It also has some broken graphics on it, indicating that it probably *hasn't* been updated since 2009. Therefore, it can reasonably be assumed that this link is several years old. As with Googling a URL, there is no guarantee that a date published on a website is accurate, but all things considered, it makes for good evidence that cartoondollemporium.com has at least one well-aged link.

Determining the age of a web page's links is similar to determining the age of an antique. Most of the time you will not know for certain, but you can search for various clues that will each increase the chances that the link is from a certain date. We already saw two: a notation about the last time a page was updated, and a copyright date at the bottom of a page. Here are some other clues about a link's age:

- The link is within the text of an article that has a date somewhere in the URL. For example, <http://www.10weablog.com/?m=200801> is a page that was likely created in January 2008.
- The link is in a blog or article that lists the date of publication somewhere on the page.
- The link is on a page that allows comments with dates on them.
- The page containing the link has a PageRank of 4 or higher on the Google toolbar. (A page usually will have been around for a while before it receives a high Google PageRank.)
- There are dates anywhere on the page containing the link. You might find, for example, a contest that states that entries may be submitted no later than January 5, 2014.
- There are references on the page containing the link to events that can be traced back to a certain point in time. For example, a reference to Donald Trump running for president probably indicates that the page was created in 2010 or 2011, the period in which he was discussing a run. (Let's hope there are no other such periods.)

If none of those methods work for you, it is also possible, although tedious, to use archive.org to determine when a site added the link in question. There you can look through archives of almost any website to pinpoint the general stretch of time when a new link appeared on a particular page.

If you're just looking for the quickest way to determine whether a site has a good number of old links but you don't want to spend a lot of time on it, simply look at the number of *unique domains* linking to it using a link checking tool that allows that function. If you see links from at least, say, 50 different domains listed (ignore spam and social media pages), the site probably has good link history and thus a good TrustRank.

Link Aging and Link Churning

Whether you've built a website from scratch or are working on one that someone else created, it is important to make sure that you not only build new links but also maintain the old ones. When forging a relationship with a potential linker, always try to lay the foundation for a long-term relationship. People and websites change, and if a reason arises for your link to be removed, you'll want to find a friend in the site's webmaster rather than an indifferent businessperson.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Google trusts links that have been around awhile more than it trusts brand new links. Once a link has been around for some time—say, 6 months—it earns its full linking power, counting maximally toward your site's overall TrustRank. After that point, it is in your best interest if the page it is hosted on remains exactly the same as it was when it was published. Google does have some tolerance for sites either archiving or removing very old links. In fact, I've been surprised to find that once a link has earned its full linking power, removing it sometimes does not affect the overall TrustRank of the site it links to. I believe this rule comes from Google's understanding that links naturally tend to get pushed back into a website's archives after a while, especially in the case of blogs. These links may not be easily findable anymore on their hosting site, but they were earned just the same. The main problems concerning link removal come in two forms:

- **When links are removed or changed within the initial trust-earning period (that is, the 6 months)**—Google's attitude toward the permanence of links is what I imagine a construction company's attitude toward drying cement would be. As long as the cement is given time to dry and harden, you can do whatever you want to it for years afterward. But if you tamper with it before it's dry, they have to break it up and redo it from scratch. (Okay, we know that construction companies are a lot less diligent about this kind of thing than Google, but let's go with it for the sake of the analogy!) Google's least favorite action within

that initial “drying” period is changing the text in a text link, because this usually indicates paid linking behavior.

- **When links are mass removed**—Although Google doesn’t diminish your site’s TrustRank if an old link here or there is removed, it does take notice if a boatload of old links are taken down all at once. This is seen as an indication of foul play, likely the expiration of paid links or links that have been otherwise arranged in some unnatural way.

If your site does gain and lose links quickly for whatever reason, that is called link churning, and it’s a bad thing. Because I’ve met so many companies who have had the misfortune of working with an “SEO expert” who engage in shady practices that result in link churning, perhaps this is a good time to address Google’s many levels of *distrust*.

Levels of Distrust

Google has several levels of distrust that it can apply to websites: sandboxing, a penalty, de-indexing, and blacklisting (see Table 4.1). Except for sandboxing, you can avoid all these acts of distrust by being discerning about the sites from which you receive links and the manner in which you acquire them. In the hierarchy of Google distrust, penalty status is less severe than deindexing and *much* less severe than blacklisting.



Note

In Table 4.1, I refer often to Google Webmaster Tools, a free website provided by Google to track the way Google looks at your site. I mentioned it in Chapter 3, “How to Reel in Links,” in the context of measuring links. You can find it at <http://www.google.com/webmasters/tools>.

Table 4.1 The Guide to Google Distrust

Act of Google Distrust	Cause	Effect	Road to Recovery
Sandboxing	A site is new or has never built links before.	Google will not allow your site to rank in its top 100 results for any competitive keyword until the site has built some inbound links and at least 2 months have passed from the start of the link building.	Build links. Wait.

Act of Google Distrust	Cause	Effect	Road to Recovery
Link Penalty (The Penguin Penalty)	Building unnatural-looking links (for example, links that all say “converter cables” in their link text) or having a substantial percentage of your links removed at one time.	Google moves your website off the first few pages, sometimes even out of the top 100, for your main keywords.	Remove the offending situation if there is one, and wait. Google may inform you that your site is being penalized in your Webmaster Tools panel. Once you make your linking pattern more natural, it will take a few months for your rankings to return. If you have paid or otherwise unnatural links pointing to your site, you can also use the Disavow Links tool, also located in your Webmaster Tools panel, to divorce your site from those links.
Content Penalty (The Panda Penalty)	Your site contains poor-quality content (content that is meant to siphon traffic from Google more than to serve visitors).	Google levels your site’s TrustRank score, lowering your site’s rankings across the board; pages on your site containing poor quality content may also be excluded from Google’s index.	Remove all low-quality content and wait. Building high-quality links also helps your site to heal from a Panda penalty.
De-Indexing	Your site contains links to “bad neighborhoods” such as gambling, pills, or adult websites; or your site engages in offensive SEO tricks such as link farming or keyword stuffing.	Your site does not appear in the search results for any searches. It does not even show up when you type your domain name into Google. If your site is de-indexed, you might be notified by Google in your Google Webmaster Tools panel.	Visit your Google Webmaster Tools panel and fill out the form that allows you to submit your site for reconsideration. Giving a good reason, such as your site having been hacked or your being the hapless victim of a sketchy SEO firm, may result in reinstatement.
Blacklisting	Your site has engaged in black hat SEO tactics such as writing code that shows search engines different content than your site’s visitors see; or your site is considered spammy or scammy.	Your site does not appear in the search results for any searches. You might be notified by Google in your Webmaster Tools panel.	You can try submitting your site for reconsideration in the Webmaster Tools panel, but Google probably will not allow your site back into the index. It is best to buy a new domain name and disassociate with the offending practices if you care about receiving traffic from Google.

Of course, I hope that Table 4.1 serves as a casual point of reference rather than a necessity. Cutting corners with links and content is a short-term fix, but leads to a long-term problem. And while there's nothing more effective at raising your rankings than a systematic link-outreach campaign, there is one way to bypass a lot of that work: buying an old website. I recommend this approach because I have personally experienced the benefits of owning a site to which someone has already attracted links and which has already aged. However, buying sites is an art and should not be undertaken until you have read the next section.

How to Find an Old Website Worth Buying

Unlike death and taxes, there is one way to avoid the sandbox, and that is by buying another website that has already earned its TrustRank. If you have never bought a website before, please do not be intimidated by the process. It's easy. You do not need to purchase an actual web business to get an old website; you just need to buy the website itself. Therefore, you don't have to worry about doing extensive due diligence. But let's hold off on that for a moment. First of all, what is the real goal of purchasing a website for SEO purposes?

People with SEO knowledge buy websites not just to avoid a few months of sandboxing but rather to avoid years of link building. The only websites you want to consider are ones that are many years old and have lots of links, and are therefore enjoying their golden years of trust. It's kind of like marrying into a rich family— instant power! If you know precisely what you are looking for and engage in a systematic process of inquiring about the availability of websites, you will eventually find one that fits your criteria nearly perfectly. Although it does require time and effort to find a suitable website, that time and effort is a fraction of what you would have to undergo to build up a similar quality site from scratch.

So, how do you start? First, go to Google and type, in quotes, "this website is for sale". That search query should bring up a few hundred sites whose owners have listed them for sale. You will quickly eliminate most of them because they fall into one of five "don't buy" categories:

- **Parked websites**—A parked website has no functioning website on it and exists solely to make money through low-quality ads (see Figure 4.4). Usually it will have stock pictures on it, text ads plastered over the middle of the page, and an invitation to purchase the website on the side or bottom. These domains are essentially spam and cannot be obtained for any reasonable price anyway. Skip them.
- **Irrelevant websites**—If you find a website for sale that has nothing to do with your business whatsoever, it cannot be used as your main business website. It probably can't even be used as a sister website to get

visitors interested in your main site because Google will already have it classified as being about a particular subject matter and will not allow it to rank for keywords of another subject matter. For example, if you own a pet store and you find a website called customtissueboxes.net that has been selling monogrammed silver tissue boxes for the past 4 years, you do not want to buy the site. Although it would be excellent for someone who has a tissue business, home accessories business, or silver knick-knacks business, it is too different from a pet store to have any use to you. The same principle applies to sites that contain your keywords but in a different context. For example, a site about salsa dancing is not a good home for your fresh-made salsa business.



Figure 4.4 A typical parked domain. When looking for websites to purchase, skip these low-quality pages.

- **Relatively new websites**—People put sites up for sale shortly after registering them, often because they think they have a good domain name. Of course, a website that is less than a year old with few links is precisely what you are not looking for because it will not have high TrustRank. Again, to find out a site's age, use the public whois lookup at <http://www.internic.net/whois.html>. (Just search for the words *creation date* on the Internic domain page, and you will see the date the website was registered.)

- **Linkless websites**—Even if a site is 10 years old, if it has not accumulated links in that time, it's as dead to Google as a completely new website. Before purchasing any website, look up its links on ahrefs.com or another link measurement tool.
- **Websites with poor-quality links**—Probably the most deceiving type of website you'll encounter in your search is the one that is on topic, is a few years old, and has a number of links. Seems perfect, right? Well, the only issue is that those links are not of a good quality. I've assisted many prospective purchasers and this comes up a lot. You should be able to look through the links to a website and feel confident that each link was earned based on merit, not purchased or arranged.

If a site is relevant to your business, has had a functioning website running continuously for at least 2 years, and has at least 20 high-quality links, it is worth purchasing at the right price.

A second, and often better, approach to purchasing websites is to sort through websites that already rank for your keywords. Let's say you sell t-shirts. Type `t-shirts` into Google and look through the top 100 results. This method eliminates any chance of the site being classified in the wrong category and thus being unable to rank for your keywords—it already does rank for your main keyword. It also makes looking up the site's links fairly irrelevant because whatever number of links it has was clearly enough to earn it a decent ranking for your main keyword. In short, these 100 sites are all worth buying if you can get them for reasonable prices.

From this pool of prospects—such as the “this website is for sale” pool mentioned earlier—a few traits should turn you away immediately:

- **The domain name doesn't make sense for your business, or you don't like it**—If a site has a domain name you just can't live with, it's a no-go. As badly as you want to get a site that already has ranking power for your main keyword (and, if you don't already have a high ranking website, you should really want one of these sites), you can't ignore branding. For example, if you sell car parts and you stumble across a site for sale that is on the first page of Google for car parts but its name happens to be `kidstoycarparts.com`, you'll have to throw it back. Everyone will be confused by your name.
- **The ranking web page is part of a larger website**—You will undoubtedly find many search results that are web pages on a larger website that does something more general. For example, I wouldn't be surprised if a page on eBay were one of the results for a search of car parts. Obviously, you can't buy eBay. (Bill Gates, if you are reading this book, that doesn't apply to you.)

- The website is clearly an active business**—Let’s not forget that, in this scenario, you are looking to buy a website for SEO purposes. Many website owners will be confused by this, saying, “Why do you want to buy the website I spent the last 8 years building?” Answering this question correctly can sometimes land you a fantastic new website. But there are far more times when attempting to purchase a site owned by an active business will be a waste of your time. Try to minimize these kinds of encounters by avoiding websites that are clearly being used for business. If you find that a site is well maintained and the copyright at the bottom is up-to-date, skip it. The real opportunity is in looking for sites that say “copyright 2008” at the bottom or something similar, indicating that they are being ignored. A website that hasn’t been updated in years is a gem because it means there is a chance you’ll find a tired, busy webmaster at the other end of your email who is willing to part with his now-ignored web property (see Figure 4.5).

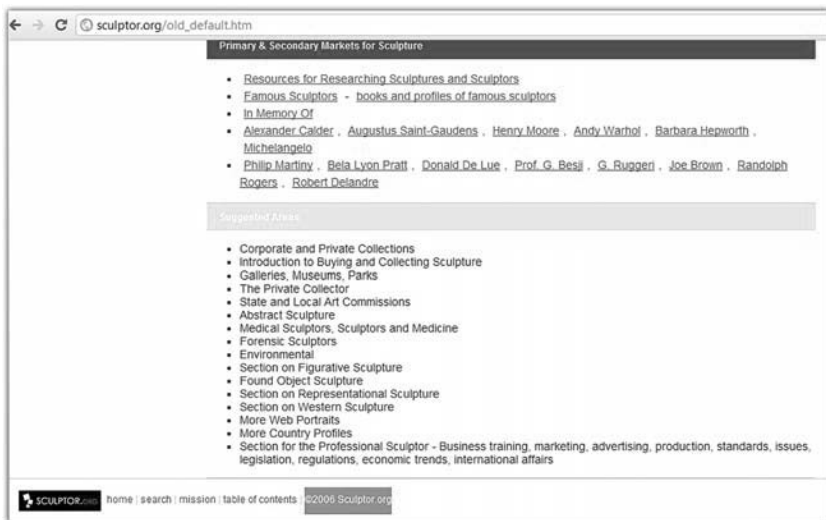


Figure 4.5 A website that ranks in the top 100 for the keyword *sculpture*. This is a good prospect to buy because it looks like it hasn’t been updated in a while, judging from the years-old copyright at the bottom.

Ultimately, most of the 100 sites you look through will not be for sale for a reasonable price. However, buying websites is a game that is won with ingenuity and the power of the nudge. After you have a short list of websites that would be valuable vehicles for your business, think about each site and try to get a sense of the personality of the human being who owns it.

Let's suppose you sell watches. Say that you're doing a search for *buy watches* and you notice an old site that hasn't been updated in a while that is dedicated to the joy of collecting antique watches. Before reaching out, you should be having this kind of thought process:

1. The guy who owns this site is probably passionate about watches.
2. He might have a collection of his own, passed down from his relatives.
3. Maybe he discovered some old watches in his grandfather's attic when he was a kid, and the fascination began.
4. Either way, this guy created a site about watches without actually putting anything up for sale, so he's got to be a devoted hobbyist.
5. If I tell him I want to buy his personal project so that I can get a higher search engine ranking and sell my wares, he'll probably be turned off.
6. Instead, I should think about whatever interest I have in antique watches and communicate that interest to him, telling him I'd like to buy the site partly to continue what he started.
7. If he asks whether I will be selling watches, I'll tell him that I will, but that I'll keep a special section of the site in honor of his work that contains everything he's created and some of my own contributions. Everyone is happy.

As you can see, quite a bit of projecting and creative thinking was involved in determining the best way to obtain the website. If you are not prepared to think in this way, you'll have to think with your wallet. Of course, for some people, money is the only factor, and in cases like those, you should pay only what you can reasonably afford. Overpaying for a website is rarely a good idea because starting a site from scratch is still a viable option. In fact, it can be a valuable exercise in creating great content and building links, which you will need regardless of whether you buy an already-trusted site.

In the end, if you can get an old website for a livable price, go for it; but if you can't, it'll probably force you to adopt some better marketing habits anyway.

How the Buying Process Works

When you and a webmaster have agreed on a price, it is time to get the purchase process underway. I've purchased many websites and have seen the process completed in as little as two days; however, the average length of time from initial email to domain transfer is probably 2 to 3 weeks. Here is how the process generally works:

1. **Informal agreement**—Whether by email, telephone, or in-person meeting, you need to establish a “meeting of the minds,” which is a casual agreement where both parties understand each other’s responsibilities in the transaction. Most likely, your main responsibility is paying money. The seller’s main responsibility is transferring the domain, website, and rights to the content. This agreement generally occurs after both parties have had a conversation or two and gotten comfortable not just with each other, but with the idea that the other party will follow through on his or her promises.
2. **Letter of intent**—Sometimes a letter of intent (LOI) follows an informal agreement. An LOI is an agreement to agree; it’s a statement of the major terms of the final agreement that seems to say this: “Here is what we’re agreeing on, generally speaking. Once we determine that we’re on the same page, we’ll draft up something fancy and official.” People use LOIs so that they don’t waste time and money drafting formal agreements only to find that the major terms of the agreement are in dispute. In place of an LOI, I prefer to just shoot over an email with the basic terms, but some people prefer to do things the old-fashioned way.
3. **Contract of sale**—When it’s clear that you and the seller are both cool on the main points of the transaction, it’s time to make it formal. You may want to search Google for a contract for sale of a website. I usually use a contract template that I originally found online and have since modified. If the contract contains any elements you aren’t familiar with, Google some of the language to learn more about it. Aside from the main points about transferring ownership of the domain and content, most of the agreement is boilerplate that is meant to protect both parties from unlikely (but possible) occurrences. If in doubt, it is never a bad idea to seek legal counsel to ensure that the sale is handled properly.
4. **Due diligence**—After the agreement has been signed by both parties, you’re almost there. Now the buyer just has to make sure that the seller hasn’t been hiding or neglecting to mention anything important about the website. This is what due diligence is for. Due diligence, in this context, is the process whereby the buyer (and sometimes the seller as well) looks into the website in a more detailed fashion, often accessing domain records, financial statements, and outstanding advertising, business development, and service contracts. If you were to find, for example, that there is an advertising contract in existence that contains a clause prohibiting the sale of the website to a new entity (that is, you), that would be a deal-breaker. The sale of a website for SEO purposes does not usually involve extensive due diligence, and the transaction proceeds without too many speed bumps.

5. **Escrow/money transfer**—Ah, the most important part. Either at the same moment as, or just before, the domain and the web content residing on that domain are transferred to you, you must pay the seller. Typically, a seller requests a wire to his or her bank account because that method of money transfer is nonreversible and occurs within hours. PayPal and credit cards, on the other hand, are disputable, and checks take a few days to clear. But if you can pay by check, that's slightly safer from your perspective because, in the unlikely scenario that you are sold snake oil instead of a website, you can stop your check.
6. **Domain transfer**—The final part of the website buying process is receiving the domain. You need to have an account at the registrar with which the website you're buying is currently registered. As soon as the seller executes a domain transfer, you should see the domain listed under your domains when you visit your account page with that registrar. That event signifies that the transaction is complete with only one caveat, which is that the pages on the website are exactly the way they were before the transfer, and the domain is not parked or empty at the time of purchase. It is important that the seller acknowledge that, in addition to the domain, you are buying all the pages of content on the site in the exact structure in which you first saw them (that is, pages haven't been deleted or renamed). Part of what you are purchasing is Google's trust in the pages on the website that have been in the same place for months or years. You are also purchasing the peace of mind that the links pointing to the website will not disappear anytime soon, which is why many buyers include a clause in their contract stating that the seller has no reason to believe that any inbound links will be taken down after the purchase. If all is in working order, your purchase is complete, and you can start using your "new" Google-trusted website.

Common Pitfalls

Purchasing an old website is not without its perils, of course. Before forking over the cash for what appears to be an instant ticket to the first page of Google, you should beware of a few situations.

Beware When Shopping the Online Marketplace

One of these pitfalls concerns buying sites on an online marketplace. A few big marketplaces are known for selling websites, and a number of forums have active site marketplaces. Type `buy website` into Google, and you'll find most of them.

As you're flipping through the listings, tantalized by the high PageRanks, age, and cool domain names advertised, keep in mind that many people sell their websites for one specific reason: There's something wrong with them. This is not to say "be paranoid," but rather "be cautious."

I've come across many burnt buyers who innocently purchased old websites with great content and domain names only to find out that the websites didn't show up in any Google searches. The sites had been de-indexed or blacklisted, which is why the sellers were so anxious to sell them.

Sites That Have Nothing to Do with Your Business

Another common error new website purchasers make is buying websites that have all the right characteristics but have nothing to do with the product or service they sell. Even if you get an old website with old links, if you try to take down the previously operating website and replace it with something completely different, Google is going to get the idea that the website was recently repurposed and thus will do the only sensible thing from their point of view: reset its TrustRank. To them, the site might have been trusted in the past, but that was another life.

A complete change in content often signifies a rebirth. You can get away with changing your Christmas website to a Hanukkah website, for instance, but not with changing your Christmas website to a life insurance site.

Avoiding Expired Domains

My last warning is to avoid expired domains. These are exactly what they sound like: domains that go back into the great big ocean of available domain names because their owners have either decided to abandon them or forgot to renew them.

Mostly, the companies that specialize in expired domains are trying to profit off people's forgetfulness. I won't get into the details of this shady business, but suffice it to say that it's not a good way to acquire an old website, because the moment the domain expires, it becomes parked, and that means its TrustRank goes bye-bye.

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