



The State of Link Building Report 2021

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Introduction



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Welcome to the State of Link Building 2021 Report from Aira.

This is our second annual report and I'm pleased to be able to share the collective wisdom of over 250 professionals from the digital marketing industry, along with the insights from over 20 experts who took time to review the results and comment on them. Combined, we have a wealth of information available for you to look through and hopefully use to shape your plans and actions when it comes to link building.

This year, we added more questions to try and get more insights into the world of link building. Specifically, we asked our respondents for their views on:

- The ecommerce industry and link building.
- Content-led link building, which like 2020, was the most popular approach to building links. We did a deeper dive into this and pulled out some great insights.

Despite the turbulence that 2020 and the beginning of 2021 have thrown at us, all signs

are that link building is alive and well as an SEO tactic and whilst still very competitive, it remains one of the most effective ways to grow organic traffic for an online business. This appeared to be the case whether link building was handled via agencies, freelancers, or kept in-house. In fact, only the minority of agencies and freelancers said that they'd seen demand for their services reduce over the last 12 months.

Looking ahead, the majority of people still feel confident that links will remain a strong signal that Google uses, even looking ten years into the future. Alongside this, many felt confident that their link building was effective at driving results which hopefully means that the future is bright for all link builders.

Want to chat about the results? My social handles and email are on the left-hand side.

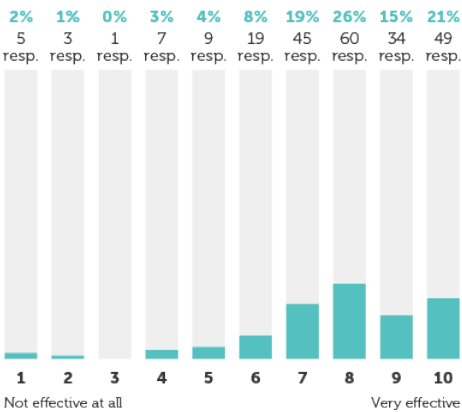
Enjoy!

The Impact of Link Building

Open to all respondents, this section focused on the impact of link building on organic search, both now and in the future.

On a scale of 1-10, how effective do you think link building is in influencing organic search rankings?

When it comes to the effectiveness of link building on organic search rankings, most people leaned toward links being effective, with 21% saying that links were very effective at influencing organic search rankings. If we extend the scale out slightly and include those who answer 8 and 9 out of 10, then 62% of respondents believe that link building influencers rankings.



What the experts think...



Dan
Hodsden



Measuring the effectiveness of off-site activity remains a perennial topic of debate among not only SEOs, but PR's, brand marketers and just about anyone that this complex activity touches.

It's perhaps little surprise that those taking part in this study typically see link building at very least as effective in terms of impacting search rankings and 21% of the team deem it to be very effective.

What is clear, particularly in instances where a websites technical and on page optimisation is comparable with that of a competitors, brands that achieve a stronger link profile through effective off-site activity will often win out.

It's refreshing that so many people in the space actually agree on something! That, to some degree or another, links still influence rankings. I would personally argue that if people are finding links aren't moving the needle for them it's either the wrong sort of links or they're in a space where they all have phenomenal amounts of links already and a handful here or there is a drop in the ocean.



Stacey
MacNaught



Do you think links will be a signal that Google uses in their ranking algorithms in five years time?

When it comes to Google’s use of links as a ranking signal in the years to come, 85% of respondents felt that it would still be a signal in five years time.



What the experts think...

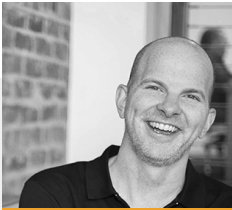


Areej
AbuAli

Woah! I voted ‘Yes’ as well but I didn’t think so many others would. It’s good to see that a large number of us are on the same page.



As Google has been using links now for 25 years—and they currently continue to be a very strong ranking signal—it’s reasonable to assume that they will still be in use in 5 years.

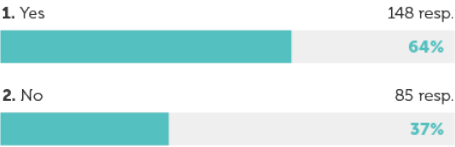


Cyrus
Shepard

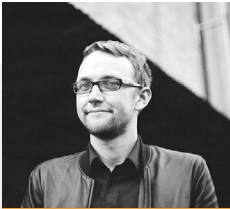


Do you think links will be a signal that Google uses in their ranking algorithms in ten years time?

There appears to be slightly less confidence if we look ten years into the future, with 64% of people believing that links will be a ranking signal then.



What the experts think...



Volodymyr Kupriyanov

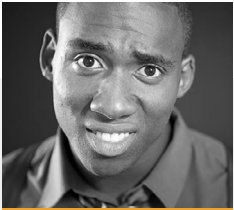
“ ”

Seems hard to imagine that links won't be used at all. If Google is going to use links to discover the web it needs to crawl, surely they're going to count towards something, no?

Bill Gates once said:

“Most people overestimate what they can do in one year and underestimate what they can do in ten years.”

I think in this case, many marketers are underestimating what kind of change could happen with the internet in the next 10 years. Will links be a signal to Google in 10 years? I mean... My rational brain says yes but my intuition says the world is going to look a whole lot different. We'll see.

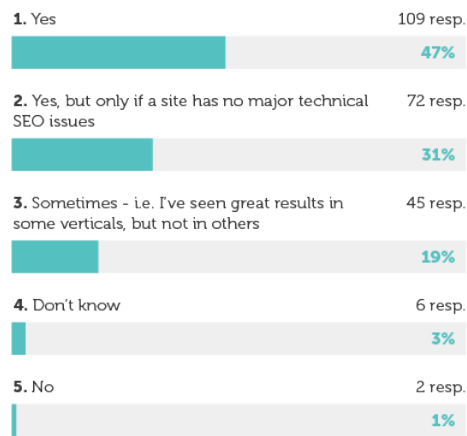


Ross Simmonds

“ ”

Do you believe that link building positively influences rankings?

Designed to force the issue a little, we directly asked respondents whether they felt that links positively impact rankings or not. Confidence was high with 47% saying yes, followed by 30% who said yes but only if there were no other major SEO issues at play.



What the experts think...



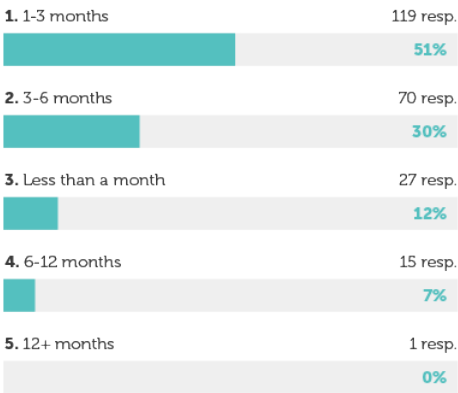
Areej
AbuAli

How did “but only if a site has no major technical issues” not win? I always think of link building as the ‘bonus’ that websites get after they’ve built out a proper technical and content foundation. In my experience, if your site is technically broken, then it doesn’t matter how many awesome links you build.



Assuming no other major technical, content or penalty issues; how long does it typically take for you to see the impact of link building on rankings and traffic?

The question of how long it can take for links to have an impact on rankings and traffic is a common one and we found that over half (51%) of respondents felt that an impact could be seen within 1-3 months.



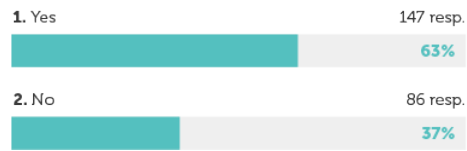
What the experts think...

I'm glad this question caveats 'no other technical/content/penalty issues'. Nevertheless, 1-3 months feels optimistic for me (at least based on the websites I've worked on). I've come to find that it takes at least 6 months of consistent link building work to start showing impact.



Do you think that buying links can positively influence rankings?

Buying links is clearly against Google Webmaster Guidelines and a controversial tactic, so we wanted to get views on its effectiveness. The majority of respondents (63%) said that they believe buying links does positively influence rankings.



What the experts think...



Cyrus Shepard

Personally, I see paid links work all the time - especially for larger brands where the quality of the content can justify the link. And I hate saying this. A philosophical question may be: does Google care about whether a link is paid, or do they care more if using the link makes their search results worse?





**Hannah
Smith**



I think what's most interesting about this is that 63.1% of respondents think buying links positively influences rankings, and yet only 26.6% of respondents actually buy links.

For what it's worth, I'm sat firmly in the same camp too - I think that buying links can positively influence rankings, and yet, I don't actually do so.

I'm guessing that potentially this is a risk vs reward thing; and/or link buying is outside the scope of many respondents, but I can't help but feel like it says something really interesting about our industry :)

I still see paid link building working in all sorts of spaces and that can be really frustrating for clients that don't want to engage in that activity and really want to pursue the sort of sustainable and more creative strategies we're all engaging in.

But I don't see this as an issue that's going anywhere. I genuinely believe it still works. I run tests that tell us it still works and see it in competitor analysis all the time.

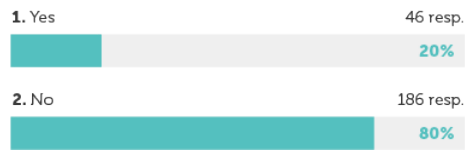


**Stacey
MacNaught**



Would you report a competitor if you see them breaking Google guidelines?

Continuing on the topic of tactics being against Google Webmaster Guidelines, we asked whether respondents reported their competitors for breaking them. The majority (80%) said that they didn't do this to competitors.



What the experts think...



Areej
AbuAli

It's probably not something that's straight forward as we think it is, proving it, gathering evidence, taking up the time and resource - is it worth it?



Firmly in the "no" camp here for me and I'm not surprised most of us are. Anyone who started in SEO pre-Penguin probably engaged in it. I did loads of it in 2009 to 2011. So I'm not in the business of outing others still doing it. It might not be a strategy I particularly want to engage in myself, but I don't see it as my place to police everyone else's activity.

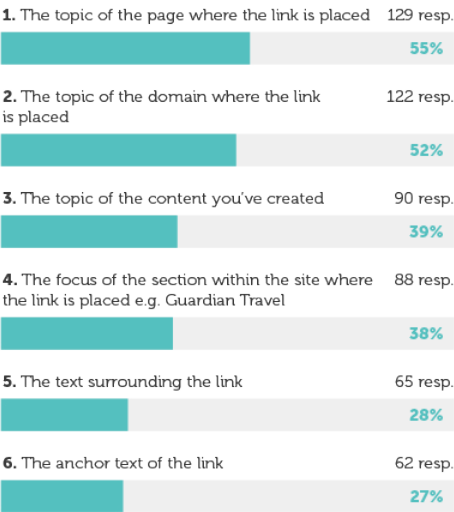


Stacey
MacNaught



What factors do you think are most important when determining whether a link is topically relevant or not?

Coming back to the topic of relevance, we asked respondents what top three factors go into determining if a link is topically relevant or not. The most popular factors were the topic of the page where the link is placed (55%) and the topic of the domain where the link is placed (52%).



What the experts think...



Aoife O'Connor



This is interesting, I definitely feel sometimes clients can focus too much on the domain rather than the page.



Cyrus
Shepard

Wow. I'm totally surprised that "anchor text" performed so poorly in these results, even beneath "text surrounding the link." In part because anchor text remains a confirmed ranking factor, while these other influences are less defined in Google's use.



This is quite a big topic of conversation at the moment in the industry. I'm interested to know though, if people feel like it's the topic of the domain that makes a link relevant or not - what topic does a site like The Guardian or Stylist or BBC News have? They covers such a broad range of topics that I'm not sure that argument stacks up.

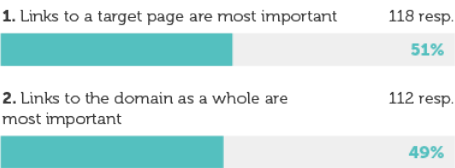


Louise
Parker



Do you believe that links directly to a target page (such as a product or category page) are necessary in order for that page to rank? Or is the onus on the strength of the domain as a whole?

Here, we wanted to learn if respondents felt that in order to rank, a page needed links directly to it or if it was more about the domain strength as a whole. Opinion was pretty evenly split here with links to a target page marginally winning with 51% of the votes.



What the experts think...



Cyrus
Shepard

In terms of the “domain” effect of link building impacting the entire site, a wise man once said “A rising tide raises all ships” (I think it was Rand Fishkin).





**Hannah
Smith**

Not the result I was expecting!

In my experience, in most instances you don't need external links direct to product or category pages in order for those pages to rank. As such, I'd expected to see "links to the domain" win out by a clear margin here.



I'm quite surprised by this result, for me and my clients a category link is the holy grail!

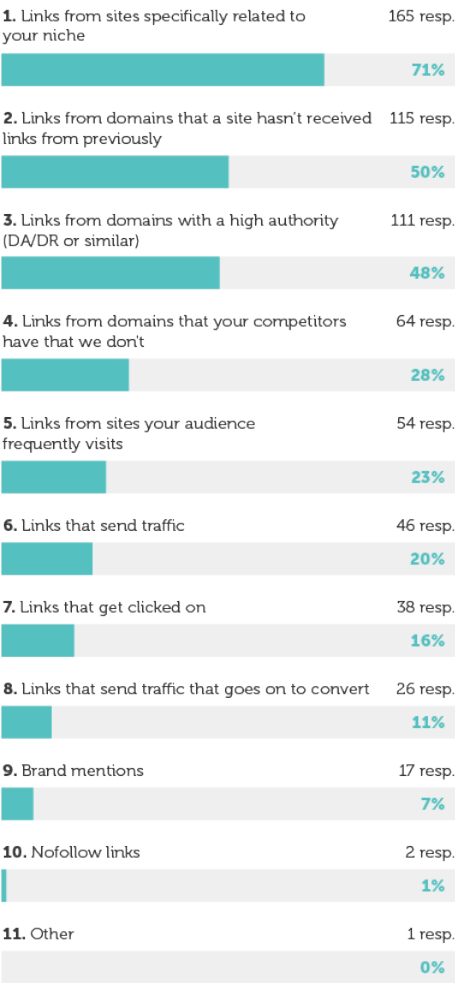


**Louise
Parker**



What attributes of a link do you focus on when it comes to positively influencing organic search rankings?

Respondents were asked which three link attributes they focused on the most when it came to influencing rankings i.e. which attributes were strongest. The most popular answer here (71%) was links from sites specifically related to the niche of the website getting links. Next, it was a fairly even split between links from domains where you hadn't got links before (50%) and links from domains that had high authority (48%).



What the experts think...



Areej
AbuAli

With brands I've worked on, a large focus was on 'closing the link gap' between us and our closest competitors.



Personally, I am a huge fan of "links that send traffic" and "links that get click on." Google's systems are designed to reward the most relevant links to users, and actual user engagement with the links you build can send a clear signal that these links are indeed important.

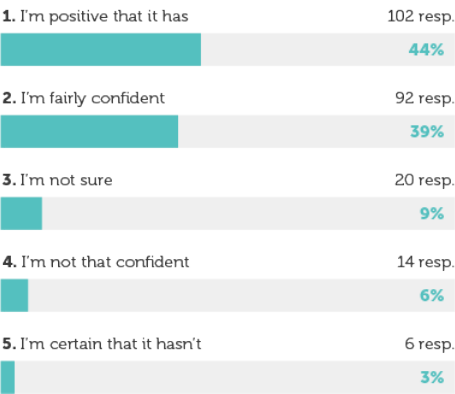


Cyrus
Shepard



How confident are you that your link building is delivering results?

We pushed respondents again on the effectiveness of link building and their confidence levels with link building delivering results. 44% of respondents felt positive that link building has delivered results and 39% felt fairly confident.



What the experts think...



Louise
Parker

It makes me sad that people aren't sure or confident that their work is making a difference and I wonder whether that's because their link building isn't being tied together with SEO results. It's so easy to just get the links and move on, but really it's the rankings and organic traffic we're all doing it for so it's so important for these results to be investigated and shared with the team..as well as the client.



It's great to see that majority of respondents are confident that their work is driving results for their clients or brands. The value of link building is something that is often difficult to quantify to the c-suite so my hope is that a lot of the marketers who are confident in the results are also able to articulate the reason their work is so important. It's great to talk about rankings, SERP visibility, DA50s, etc.. But it's even more important to talk about how those rankings resulted in an impact on the bottom line.

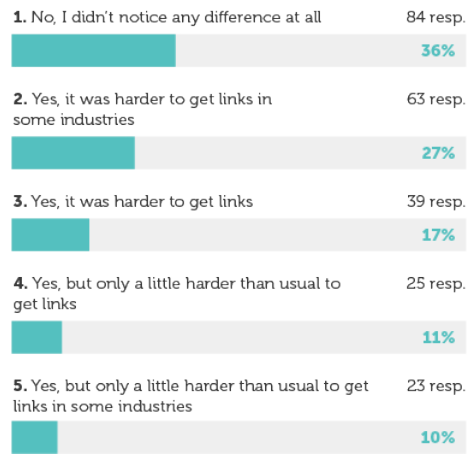


Ross
Simmonds



Over the last year, have you seen any impact on your link building results as a result of the pandemic?

We took the opportunity to gauge feelings on how much the pandemic has affected link building. 36% of respondents didn't notice any difference at all but 27% then said it was harder but only in certain industries.



What the experts think...



Aoife O'Connor

I definitely agree with some industries being much harder, I think the more niche it is, the more affected it was by furlough which goes back to the age-old problem of not doing campaigns that are too hyper-relevant in terms of themes.





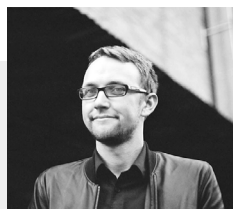
Saffron
Shergill



I think the pandemic has certainly affected link building, with the news agenda becoming completely saturated with Coronavirus content early last year. This meant PRs were required to change strategies entirely and in some industries did make it harder to get links as publications became less responsive to certain types of content.

As the year progressed, however, I feel the pandemic opened new opportunities for newsjacking and lighter pieces of content, as readers began to get sick of the same stories. Overall I feel there has been an increase in difficulty for some industries but this has presented a new challenge in creating campaigns which can break through the noise.

I don't do outreach myself, but PR people I worked with in the last year, especially in the US reported greater difficulty in getting links to general interest pieces that had little to do with the pandemic. It's as if there had to be a COVID angle, otherwise, the piece wouldn't be picked up.



Volodymyr
Kupriyanov



Link Building Techniques and Tools

Let’s begin with the tactics, tools and techniques that are most popular right now. The questions in this section focus on the day-to-day side of link building and sought to learn more about how link building is done in 2021.

What techniques do you use for link building?

As we saw in 2020, the most popular technique was content marketing to specifically generate links (76%). Over half (54%) of respondents said that they carried out competitor analysis to generate links, whilst 50% use brand mention reclamation as a technique.

Guest posting has dropped down the list a little compared to 2020 with 42% of respondents saying they used it, compared with 51% last year. Respondents who said that they used paid links stayed the same as last year with 27% saying they used this tactic.



What the experts think...



Rand
Fishkin



Shocked to see digital PR / influencer outreach so low. The effectiveness of PR for earning the kinds of links that move the needle is, IMO, unmatched. Not that other tactics can't work, just that few can match the ROI of digital PR.

In terms of efficacy (and likely this is what's driving popularity), it's hard to argue that content marketing is among the top techniques currently in play among link building teams. Content marketing (which regularly blurs the lines with more traditional PR content and data studies) offers direct value when presented to well targeted prospects. In a sense, the game and the value are both known among the participants and so it is generally a matter of whether the link building team delivers enough value (and relevance) to earn the link placement or coverage. Compare this to guest posting, which has seen a decrease in popularity, largely because the guest post doesn't offer the intrinsic value of high quality content. Therefore, in that space, you're seeing the overall reception to guest posts decline as the tactic is used (and often abused) by an increasing number of SEOs, combined with a rise in the amount of bloggers who want direct monetary compensation for guest blog posts on their site.



Stephen
Panico



It's great to see that creating "link-worthy" content is still the chosen tactic for the majority of us in this space. There is only so much we can do in terms of link reclamation and unique, interesting content is definitely the way to go in such a cluttered landscape.



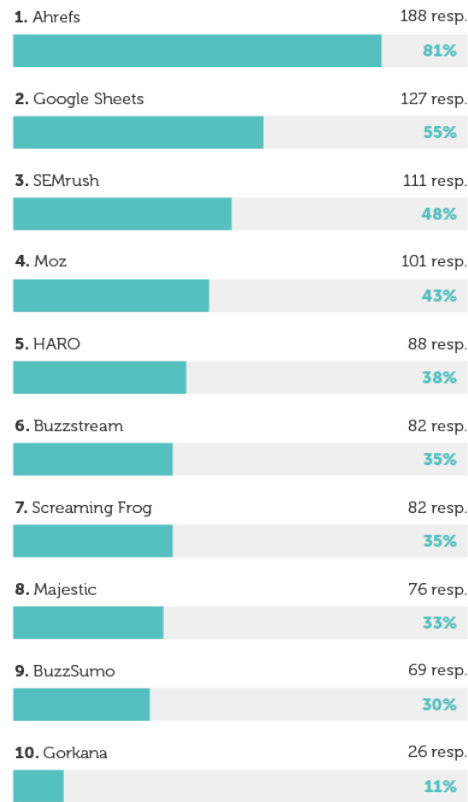
Clare
Dyckhoff



Do you use any of the following tools for link building purposes?

At this point, all respondents were directed back to the next few questions relating to tools that they use for link building purposes. For this question, we wanted to know what tools people used the most and the spread of different tools.

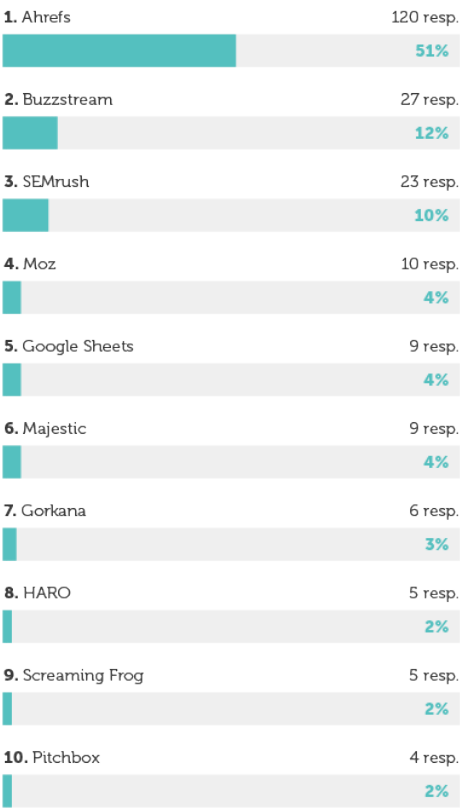
When it comes to using tools for link building, the clear winner again this year was Ahrefs which is used by 81% of respondents. Following behind was a fairly close split between Google Sheets (55%), SEMrush (48%) and Moz (43%).



If you could only use ONE tool to help with link building, which one would it be?

We pushed our respondents a little harder here and asked them which one tool they would use above all others. Again, Ahrefs came out on top with just over half (51%) of people saying they'd choose this tool above all others if they could only pick one.

In a big change from 2020, coming in next was BuzzStream which 12% of respondents named as the tool they'd pick if they only had one choice. Last year, 5% said that BuzzStream would be the one tool that they'd pick.



What the experts think...



**Saffron
Shergill**



Personally, Buzzstream is the tool I use above all others and the one I would find it difficult to do my job without. I feel that once you start using Buzzstream, you become incredibly reliant on it since it speeds up the outreach process so significantly. I am actually surprised the result for Buzzstream is not higher.

This was a mean question ha! But I'd have been in the Ahrefs camp as well, I think because the value in understanding what assets across high performing sites are building links is huge. This lends itself to all kinds of link building longer term from helping guide PR strategies to knowing what sites to reach out to to build any kind of relationship and understanding what resources are most often linked to.



**Stacey
MacNaught**



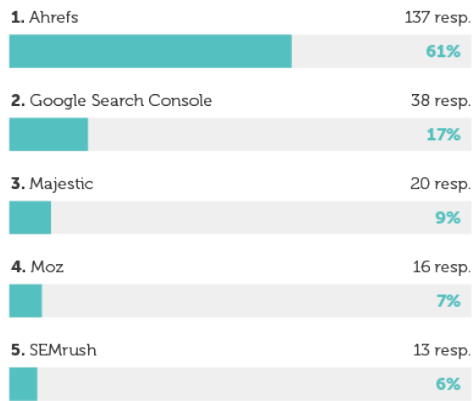
**Dan
Leibson**



AHREFs mindshare here is staggering.

In terms of your usage of link indexes, which of the following tools do you trust the MOST when it comes to link data? i.e. quality and quantity combined.

When it comes to link data, Ahrefs again was the clear winner here with 61% of respondents saying that they trusted their data the most when it came to link building. This was followed by Google Search Console with 17% and Majestic with 9%.



What the experts think...



Louise Parker

Completely agree with this one - find Ahrefs my go to for both tracking what links we're securing for our clients but also have a sneaky look at where our competitors are getting their links from too.



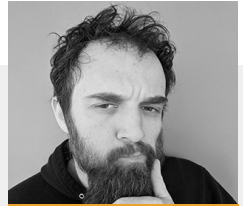


Rand
Fishkin

“ ”

Poor Moz. They might have the proveably best index, with the largest numbers and best correlation, but they’ve never been able to convince the market that’s true. I think those few years where they weren’t as good as others still lingers in link builders’ minds. Changing brand perception might be even harder than building a new brand!

It seems like Moz banging constantly about the chonkyness of their index is not resulting in much traction. Curious if SEMrush will explode here with all their cash.

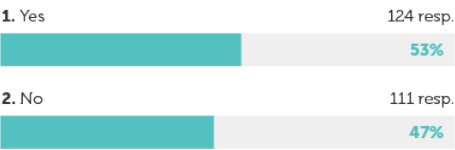


Dan
Leibson

“ ”

Do you maintain a Google Search Console Disavow file for the domains that you're responsible for?

This year, we asked respondents to tell us if they used a Disavow file or not in Google Search Console. Answers were fairly evenly distributed with Yes being the most popular by only a narrow margin.



What the experts think...



Azeem
Ahmad



Disavowing in GSC is another one that I've personally seen draw both positive and negative feedback across social media. Those who've taken part in questionable link building techniques in the past may find value here.

My observation is that more recently, that opinion of the disavow tool has swayed towards negative, with marketers feeling that it potentially isn't as useful as it used to be - but is that a sign that people aren't using it as effectively as they could be?

With that being said, of course Google knows more than us about the links pointing to our domains, so blindly disavowing has the potential to cause harm. I can see why this has split opinion here.

Very surprising result, given Google's advice that most sites don't need to disavow, and their touted ability to simply ignore bad links. While I was once personally a big proponent of the Disavow Tool when it first came out, personally, I hardly every use it today.



Cyrus
Shepard

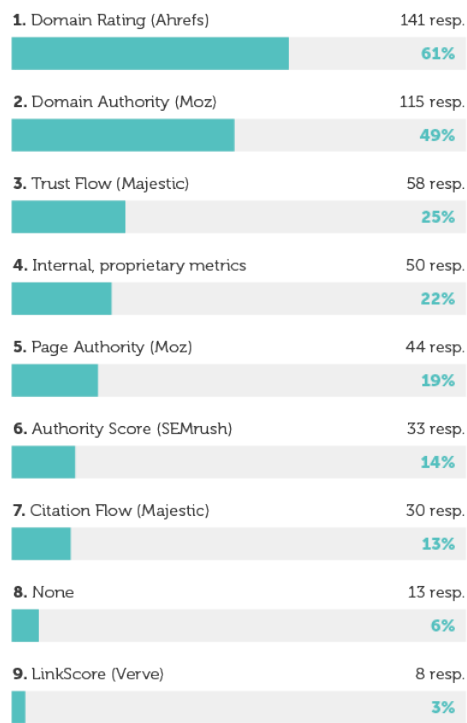


Link Building Measurement and Reporting

How do people measure and report on link building activity in 2021? This section of questions focuses on the metrics that we use, as well as the KPIs which we measure our work on.

Do you use any of the following metrics to measure the authority and / or quality of a link?

When it comes to measuring the authority or quality of a link, the most popular metric used by respondents (61%) was Domain Rating from Ahrefs. This was followed by Domain Authority from Moz with 49% of respondents using it.



What the experts think...



Cyrus
Shepard



As someone who works closely with companies that produce these metrics, our best advice is typically to focus on page-level metrics when link building over domain-based metrics.

This is a tricky topic. We all know the weaknesses of standalone metrics like this and we've probably all seen plenty of examples where a high DR/Da does not correlate with great results at all.

But we have to report, right? And while I'll always try and steer away from these metrics, you sometimes simply have to just deal with the fact that some sort of simple, tangible measurement metrics has to be a part of the process.

I'm not sure there's a single great way to report on the quality of a link and so much of "quality," is completely subjective. I do wonder if, over time, we'll see more people devising their own internal metrics.



Stacey
MacNaught



Tom
Capper

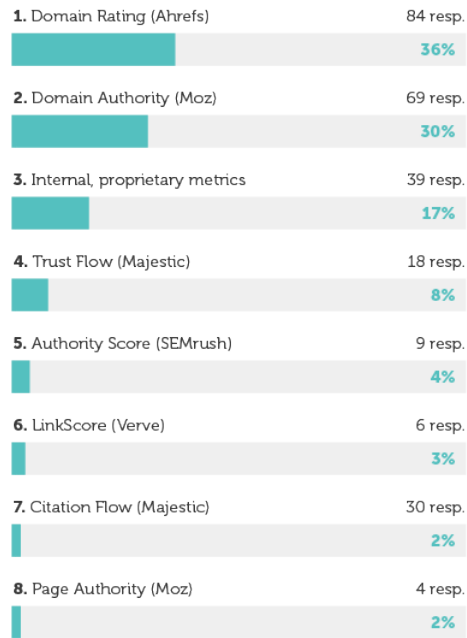


At Moz we'd tend to recommend people use Page Authority above Domain Authority to evaluate a page that might link to you.

Keep in mind that deep or orphaned pages on authoritative sites can have just as low a PageRank as a prominent page on an obscure domain.

If you could only choose ONE metric to measure authority and / or quality of a link, which one would it be?

We then pushed respondents to select just one metric that they would use if they could only select one. Again, Domain Rating from Ahrefs was the winner here with 36% of the votes, again followed by Domain Authority from Moz with 30% of the votes.



What the experts think...



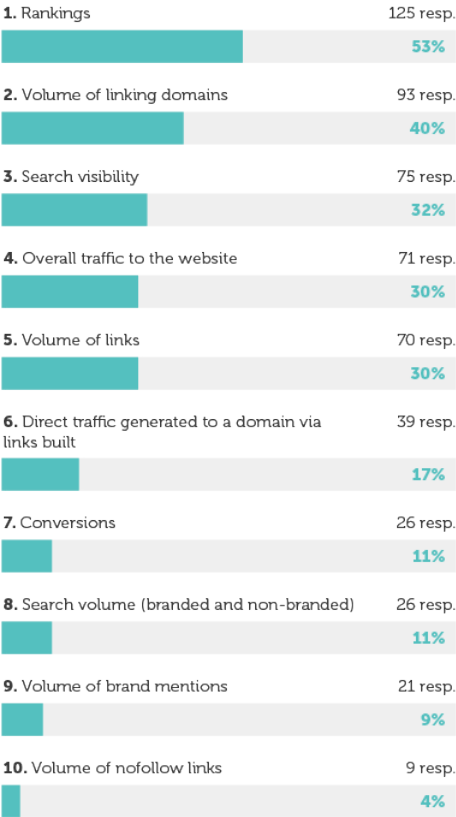
Dan Leibson



Glad to see no real dominant leader here. These are all various forms of smoke and mirrors so until there is some kind of industry standard, I'm happy to see link builders use what works for them.

What is the primary KPI you use to measure the effectiveness of link building?

Next up, we asked respondents which three KPIs they used to measure the effects of their link building work. The most popular response (53%) was rankings, followed by the volume of linking domains at 40%.



What the experts think...



Volodymyr
Kupriyanov



A bit odd to see rankings so high up, considering digital PR is likely only responsible for boosting one ranking factor - links, while site rankings are affected by a myriad of factors, a lot of which are outside our control.



**Stacey
MacNaught**



This will always depend on what sort of agency/team is responding, I think. An out and out PR agency might well have no responsibility over rankings or traffic of any kind, for example.

This highlights the real importance of tying everything back to an objective. If someone is going to be measured on links only and they achieve links but nothing improves in terms of overall SEO performance, you get this situation where someone is giving themselves a pat on the back for hitting their targets while the client/business owners are just out pocket for the project with no return.

Very happy with this result - rankings and organic traffic is what we're doing all this work for so it's great that people are joining up their work with the actual SEO impact.

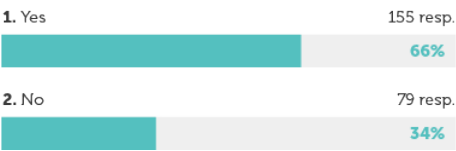


**Louise
Parker**



Do you report on nofollow links (including sponsored and ugc attributes)?

Here, we were keen to learn if respondents reported on nofollow links or not and 66% said that they did. This is an increase from the results of our 2020 survey where 48% of respondents said that they reported on nofollow links.



What the experts think...



Louise
Parker

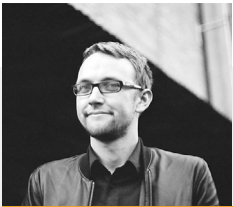
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Although it's great the majority are reporting on nofollow links, a 1/3 of people not is such a shame.

I'm very much in the camp that I think the SEO impact of nofollow links are negligible, but I still report on them as they still can get traffic and if the link has been placed through digital PR then it's likely the coverage is still a fantastic piece of PR coverage.

If achieved, no-follow links should also be reported, maybe with a caveat that they are no-follow, but the client ought to know the campaign results in full.

Especially if a no-follow link happens to be a link from a great publisher (as they sometimes do), why not report it? It may not count towards the KPI, but chances are your PoC or their bosses might actually enjoy seeing their company linked to from a big publisher.



Volodymyr
Kupriyanov

“ ”



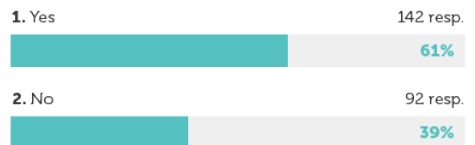
Cyrus
Shepard

Today any link, regardless if it is nofollow or not, is now a potential ranking “hint” for Google, so it makes more sense to report nofollow links in 2021. To be fair, even “followed” links are probably only hints.



Do you count nofollow links, including sponsored and ugc attributes toward your overall link target?

Leading on from this, we asked respondents if they counted nofollow links toward their overall link targets. 61% said that they did include nofollow links in their overall link target.



What the experts think...

I'd agree with this, we still count nofollow links as part of our link target. HOWEVER I think you have to be conscious that if you're building links to boost your rankings, nofollow links are likely not going to help much with that. Because of that, if I was seeing a large % of nofollow links for a campaign, I'd perhaps continue outreaching past the target to redress the nofollow/follow balance.



Louise
Parker



Do you report on brand mentions (i.e. no link) which occurs as a result of link building activity?

Leading on from this, we asked whether respondents also reported on brand mentions and 66% of them do.



What the experts think...




Saffron Shergill

This is a surprising statistic to me since I feel that brand mentions are still worth reporting to a client, even if they are not a primary KPI. Brand mentions can build awareness and visibility for the brand, be used for link reclamation and provide an opportunity to pick up organic links from other relevant sites.



I think it makes sense to report on all types of links (including nofollow links) and mentions and differentiate by the value assigned to each (which has the potential of changing over time). I would definitely include them in reports and evaluations of campaign performance.



Kerstin Reichert



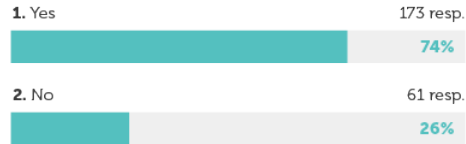
Alex Cassidy

Regardless of whether you believe it affects results, report on everything that has happened as a consequence of your campaigns. Social, print, or mentions, brands are built in multiple channels, and whether it happened deliberately or accidentally, it still happened as a result of your work!



Do you think that brand mentions influence organic search rankings?

This question drilled into whether mentions of a brand (i.e. no clickable link) could influence organic search rankings. 74% of respondents said yes, they felt that brand mentions would influence rankings.



What the experts think...



Tom
Capper

“ ”

I'd love to know whether the people responding “No” here are only thinking about a direct effect (i.e. Google looking for mentions to use as a ranking factor).

Even in the absence of a direct effect, brand mentions are a valid way of bolstering the visibility of your brand, which filters through into organic rankings in a myriad of indirect ways.

I'm with the 'Yes' crew!



Louise
Parker

“ ”



Areej
AbuAli

“ ”

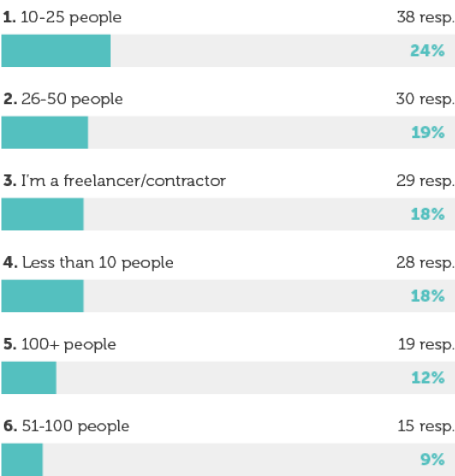
Wow I'm really surprised at these results! Personally I don't talk about brand mentions influencing search rankings.

Agency and Freelancer Specific Questions

Those who described themselves as working for agencies or freelancers/contractors were shown the next series of questions. 54% of respondents fell into this section which meant that up to 129 respondents answered the following questions.

What size of agency do you work for?

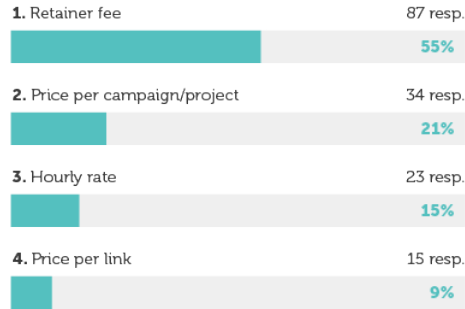
Taking out freelancers and contractors, the most popular size of agency was 10-25 people in size at 24%.



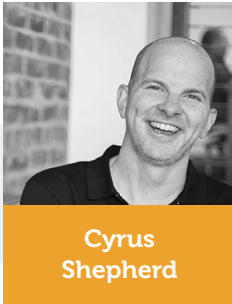
What kind of pricing model do you use for your clients?

We wanted to find out what pricing models agencies and freelancers used when it came to charging for link building services. Multiple answers were allowed here to account for different pricing models for different projects.

The most popular answer was a retainer fee at 55% of responses. The least popular form of charging for link building services was cost per link at 9%. These responses were very consistent with what we saw in our 2020 survey.



What the experts think...



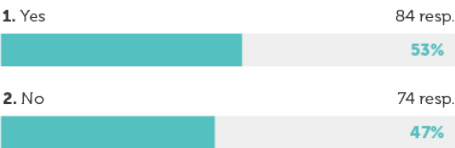
At 15%, the share of agencies/freelancers charging per link is worryingly high, considering it's not something anyone can credibly guarantee.

Cost-per-link pricing—while understandable—often incentivizes the wrong things. It's far better, in my opinion, to pay for time and expertise.



Do you set a target in terms of number of links for each client or campaign?

A new question for 2021, we wanted to learn about setting targets for link building either at the campaign level or client level. Responses were fairly evenly split here, with yes getting the slight majority with 53%.



Do you provide any services on a performance-based model?

On the same theme of pricing models, we asked agencies and freelancers whether they used performance or bonus models for link building. The vast majority (80%) said no with only 20% saying that they did work on an incentive model.

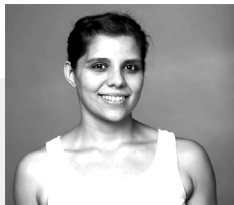


Do you offer your clients any kind of guarantee for link volumes or metrics?

The majority of agencies (73%) said that they do not offer any kind of guarantee when it comes to the volume of links they build, or metrics associated with links.



What the experts think...



Gisele
Navarro



It's great to see that 27% of agencies share the risk with their clients and offer a guarantee 🙌

When we first introduced the guarantee back in 2014/2015, we had many conversations with potential clients who confused it with buying links or with a bare minimum situation. The former led to conversations around 'which sites we could guarantee links on' and the latter revolved around the cost per link based on the minimum we guaranteed.

It took some education to explain what we were trying to achieve with guaranteeing a minimum number of hard-to-get links but we can see today that clients are a lot more likely to not only understand but also ask openly about the guarantee from the get-go.

The way I see it, it's only fair that we define clear and measurable KPIs we will be accountable for, especially when it comes to content-led campaigns. The days of "sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't" are over as more clients look for consistency and in some cases, define their own metrics to measure the value of links.

If I'm not mistaken, guaranteeing links is often associated with suspicious link building tactics, but that might not always be the case.

Occasionally, you hear clients say that "another agency we spoke to gave us a guarantee", but upon probing it comes to light that a guarantee is 10 links or something like that. Well, maybe if you don't promise the world, but promise a target you know that you/your team can achieve for a given client in a given industry - maybe you should just go for it.

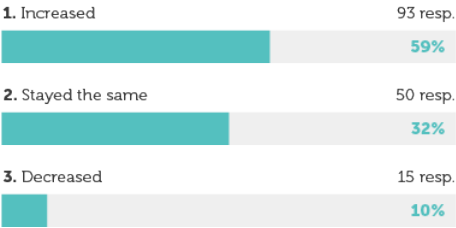


Volodymyr
Kupriyanov



In your experience, how has the demand for link building services changed over the last 12 months?

Whilst it has clearly been a strange 12 months and this should be taken into account, the majority of agency respondents (59%) said that demand for link building services has increased. Only 10% said it had decreased over the last 12 months.



What the experts think...



Alex Cassidy



Although certainly instigated by the pandemic, this felt like the result of a skills-based sea-change that has been predicted for a number of years. Most of the in-house decision makers I've been dealing with asking for these services are new to the role and already have experience with SEO. I'm having to have less conversations about why this is important, and more about how best to achieve it.

This tallies with my experience, the demand for our digital PR team is really high at the moment and you can tell this is the case in other agencies too as there's so much recruitment going on at the moment.



Louise Parker





Saffron
Shergill

I wholeheartedly agree with this and think we have seen a real shift in demand for digital pr over the past 12 months. The industry is growing at a rapid pace and this has been highlighted in the recruitment efforts of agencies across the sector. Businesses are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of link building for their strategy and this is being reflected in the increase in demand we are seeing today.



Which of the following industries do you think are the hardest to build links in?

Another new question for this year was trying to get insights into which industries were the hardest from a link building perspective for agencies. Respondents said that the healthcare and pharmaceutical industries were the hardest to build links in, with 33% saying this. This was followed by Law (28%) and Accountancy, banking or finance (26%).



What the experts think...



**Saffron
Shergill**



The pandemic has really shifted the landscape for link building in the healthcare and pharmaceutical industries. I am not surprised to see this industry voted as the hardest to build links to since any campaigns released in the past year have had to strike a balance between being relevant to the current news agenda whilst also being sensitive to the devastation which the pandemic has caused.

Law being listed as the second hardest is interesting to me because my first client in Digital PR was a law firm and I have always found this to be one of my easier client to build links for. With the broad range of services generally offered from law firms, there are often opportunities for newsjacking, particularly in the employment sector.

I'm really surprised that healthcare came out on top here. It's one of my favourite spaces to build links in because things like healthcare and legal are areas where journalists are often very much not qualified to comment and definitely need experts.

So the fact this was deemed the hardest sector to build links in amongst respondents surprises me. And on the other hand, I'd say I have a harder time with areas like computing and IT where the survey's respondents don't often find it as tricky.

I think it highlights the fact that we all have different experiences, we're probably using different tactics and approaches.



**Stacey
MacNaught**



Which of the following industries do you think are the easiest to build links in?

On the opposite side of the coin, we also asked agency respondents to tell us which industries were the easiest to build links in. According to 29% of our respondents, the easiest industry to build links in is Leisure, sport or tourism. This was followed by retail (24%) and Marketing, advertising or PR (20%).



What the experts think...



**Stacey
MacNaught**



I'd have had healthcare at the top of this one again. And hats off to the almost a third of respondents finding it nice and easy in tourism, which I've found harder than healthcare for some time!

This list is indicative of the pandemic affecting different industries, and about a tactical approach regarding relevancy. Sports links from sports journalists can be difficult because of the volume of content available throughout the year. With the pandemic halting play, PRs were able to exploit the gap in the crowded schedule. Otherwise a year with the Olympics, Euros and regularly scheduled leagues should have been more difficult to gain links in, not easier.



**Alex
Cassidy**

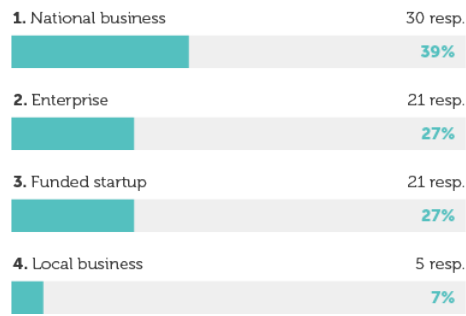


In-house Specific Questions

This section consists of questions answered only by respondents who classified themselves as in-house marketers. 33% of respondents described themselves as in-house marketers which equate to 79 possible respondents to the next series of questions.

Which of the following best describes the company that you work for?

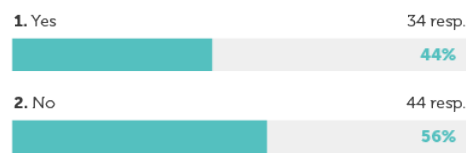
This year, we also wanted to learn more about the type of businesses that in-house marketers worked for. We began by asking what type of business best described them. The most popular response (39%) was national business, followed by Enterprise and Funded startup, both at 27%.



Do you use external agencies, freelancers or contractors for link building?

Responses were fairly evenly distributed here but tilted slightly towards in-house marketers not using external agencies or freelancers for link building at 56%.

This is a slight reduction compared to 2020 where 63% of in-house marketers said that they didn't use agencies for freelancers for link building.



What the experts think...



Clare
Dyckhoff



This is interesting to see. I was expecting a lot of in-house teams to outsource their link building efforts, especially if testing the waters before building a business case for a full time person. As this is such a solid part of SEO strategy, it'll be interesting to see how this number shifts next year once a lot of companies have hopefully steadied financially after the past year.

Working in-house, I've found it much more scalable to hire an external agency as our Digital PR one stop shop rather than build out the internal team. Reason being, is that budget-wise, it's difficult to get resource for data analysts, designers and devs to support on campaign work internally.



Areej
AbuAli



Regardless of whether off-site activity is outsourced or delivered with the resources available in-house one thing remains true, there is no substitute for the time that must be invested to deliver great results. Therefore it's unsurprising to see a relatively even split in the results between both approaches.

On the one hand to truly see the benefit of working with a third party they must be fully integrated into your brand, it's processes and customer goals. It's a common misconception that outsourcing to a third party is an easy way to guarantee results. High quality off-site SEO is so ingrained with other marketing channels it's not simply a case of paying a retainer and waiting for the links to roll in.

With the in-house approach on the other hand you may need to spend time upskilling team members in outreach to deliver against your preferred strategy for achieving great coverage and links. As outreach requires significant time and effort to deliver it can so often be the optimisation that is deprioritised when the client is accountable across the whole spectrum of SEO.



Dan
Hodsdon

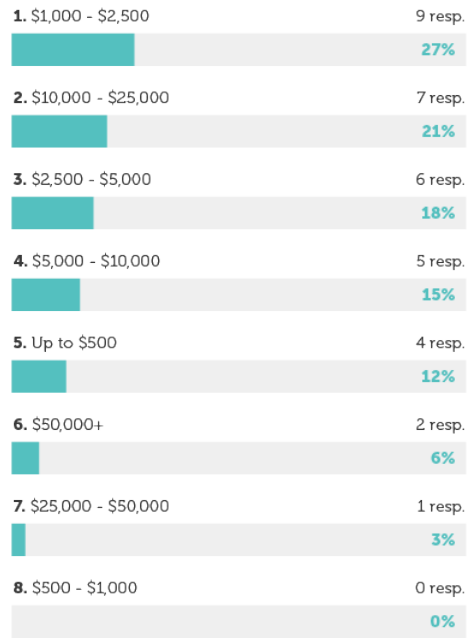


How much budget do you invest in link building each month for external suppliers?

Those who answered yes previously (34 respondents) were then asked how much budget they invested in link building per month.

The most popular answer was a budget of \$1,000-\$2,500 per month (27%) but this was closely followed by a large step up at \$10,000-\$25,000 per month (21%). We should note that the absolute number of responses here is fairly low but nonetheless, interesting to see.

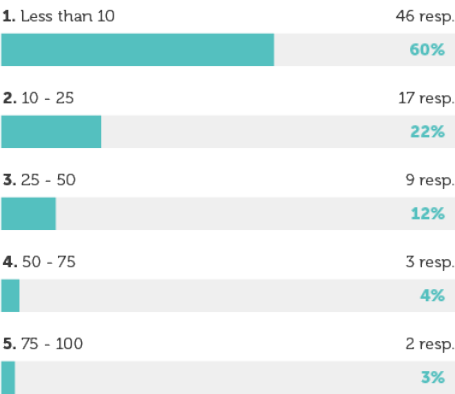
Overall, very few (12%) spent less than \$1,000 per month with external agencies or freelancers on link building.



What percentage of your overall marketing budget is dedicated to link building?

To add some more context to the previous answers, we then asked what percentage of overall marketing budget is dedicated to link building. This question was open to all in-house respondents, to capture answers from those who use budget but not on external suppliers.

The most popular response was less than 10% of overall marketing budget (60%) which is almost the same as the answers we received from respondents in 2020 (61%).



What the experts think...



Irina
Nica



More than 50% say they spend between 0 and <10% of their budget on link building. I think that makes sense since the majority of professionals stay away from buying links.

At the same time, I think it's misleading for someone who's thinking of starting a link building campaign for the first time to think that it's going to cost almost nothing.

The reason why someone links back to a website is that they found something of value there, that's worth sharing with their friends, readers, followers etc. So there are two things that need to happen for someone to link back to you: you need to produce something of value and you need to make sure others see it.

Producing something of value always has a cost. Sometimes that means spending time and calories, not actual budget, but there is a cost. Depending on the existing resources and goals (not all links are equal, it depends what you're looking to get); sometimes it's better to keep the activity in-house, or it makes more sense to actually carve out budget and have an agency do the heavy lifting.

Promoting that valuable resource is also really important. That can happen organically. For example, at HubSpot, I see that we do get a lot of mentions (and backlinks) organically because relevant content ranks well in search results. That creates a sort of flywheel where we don't need to actively promote a piece to get new backlinks (even in this case, there is a cost of keeping that content up to date and relevant). But if visibility in SERP is not something you can rely on, then again, you need to spend time and effort looking for relevant opportunities.



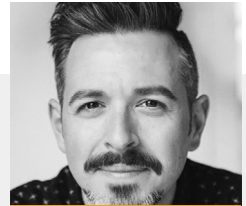
**Hannah
Smith**



I was surprised to note that 23% of respondents indicated that they have no budget at all for link building, when 71% of all respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that Google are still heavily reliant on the link graph from a ranking perspective.

I wonder if perhaps this is at least in part due to the challenges associated with concrete measurement for this type of activity - i.e. it can be very difficult to prove ROI from link building, and as such, perhaps, it's hard to make the case for investment in this area. As an industry we clearly still have work to do on this front.

Link building's perceived importance in SEO and web marketing remains extremely high, yet budgets remain remarkably low. It seems that businesses would still much rather pay per acquisition (so long as it's measurable) than put money into higher ROI but harder to prove channels. I think there's a competitive advantage to be had for those who don't fall into this trap.

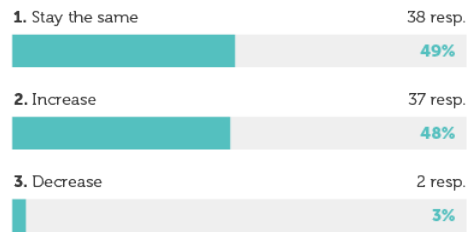


**Rand
Fishkin**



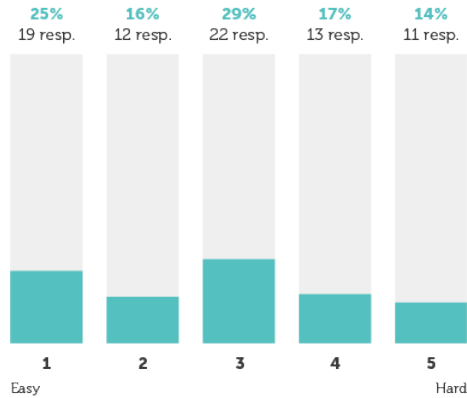
Following on from this, are you expecting this to increase, decrease or stay the same next year?

We then dug a bit deeper into budgets and asked how this may change or not change over the next year. Nearly half of the respondents (49%) said that they expected their budget to stay the same, whilst closely behind was 48% of respondents who expected it to increase. Very few (3%) expected their budgets to decrease. This is a continuation of the trends we saw in 2020 and almost perfectly mirrors the answers we saw a year ago.



Working in-house, to what extent do you struggle to get buy in and budget for link building activities?

A new question for 2021 was drilling into the challenges faced by in-house marketers when it came to getting budget sign-off for link building activities. Responses were fairly evenly spread across the difficulty levels here.



What the experts think...



Areej
AbuAli

In my experience, getting the 'initial' buy in was extremely difficult because it required a full education on the importance of Digital PR. But once it was signed off and I had resource onboard - it was very easy to maintain sign off for renewal and embed it as part of my SEO process.



What's interesting here for me is that almost as many people rated it (fairly) easy (2), as they did extremely hard. My interpretation of this, demonstrates that there is still a long way to go to convince some businesses about the value of link building.



Azeem
Ahmad



Content-led link building

This year, we wanted to take a deeper dive into the most popular method for building links - content. All questions below were shown to respondents who stated that they use content as part of their link building process.

Do you produce content with the goal of generating links?

For the 89% of respondents who said that they produced content with a goal of getting links, we gave them a specific set of questions with the goal of getting specific insights about what is the most popular way to build links.

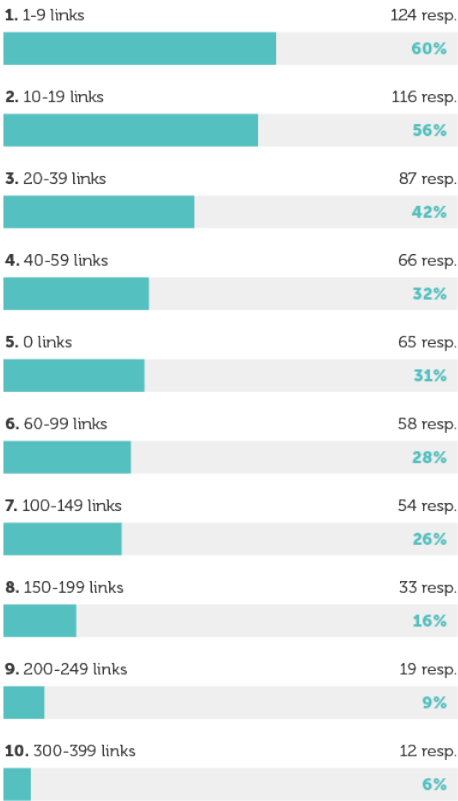
Those who said that they used content marketing to generate links were then shown a series of questions specifically about this technique. We saw in our 2020 report that this was the most popular tactic for generating links and this trend continued in 2021.



If you do create content specifically to generate links, in the past 12 months have you created a campaign that generated:

Here we were interested in learning how the number of links a content campaign typically gets. Over half of respondents (60%) said they'd run a campaign that generated 1-9 links, closely followed by campaigns that have generated 10-19 links (56%).

Reassuringly for some of us, 31% admitted that they'd run campaigns in the last 12 months that had generated zero links.



What the experts think...



Azeem
Ahmad



What's interesting about this answer and the one before it, is that 9/10 people are creating content with the goal of generating links, yet 31% (almost a third!!) are launching campaigns that get zero links. Later in the survey, (the majority of) respondents stated that if campaigns don't hit link targets, they move on to another campaign.

My observation here is that this is a potential missed opportunity. The most difficult part of this process (in my eyes) has been done, simply moving on to other campaigns doesn't help respondents understand why they weren't getting links.

This is really refreshing to see and I think it is an important statistic for new entrants to the industry to be aware of. We often don't hear about these campaigns from other agencies on social media, which is understandable as we tend to shout about our biggest successes, but this demonstrates that not every campaign generates 50+ links.



Saffron
Shergill



I think it will be reassuring for many people to see that almost a third of respondents have launched campaigns that achieved 0 links.

I think we can often spend time comparing our own results and campaigns to others that we see sharing their successes on the likes of Twitter. This can naturally lead to worry that we're not good enough if all of our campaigns don't generate the same results. But its important to remember that they're shouting about their highlight reel, and not the reality of all campaigns.

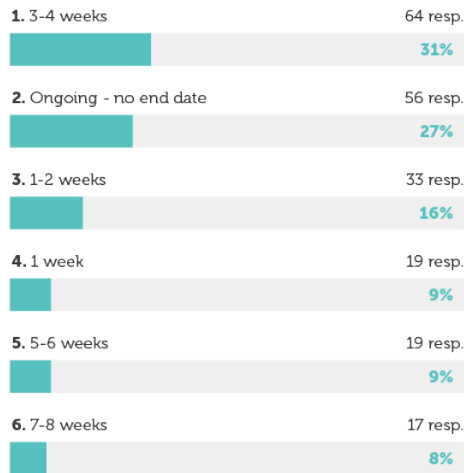


Laura
Crimmons



After you've launched a piece of content, how long do you typically continue to outreach that campaign?

The most popular response here was to outreach a campaign for 3-4 weeks after launch which 31% of respondents said. Closely behind this was 27% of respondents who said that campaigns had no end date and that outreach would continue on an ongoing basis.



What the experts think...



Stacey
MacNaught



I'm a big fan of "no end date." And I'm really pleased to see a reasonable number of respondents adopting that approach.

I think this figure will be higher again next year as I do believe we'll see a shift more into thinking about this sort of content as an on going key piece of the puzzle as opposed to a standalone bit of work here and there. And when outreach is on going, we get to look at the value over the long term as opposed to just looking at the value over a short period of time.

Personally, I like to look at the value of content over a year rather than just a few weeks. Not always something clients are on board with though, granted!



**Saffron
Shergill**



The outreach time for a campaign can depend on a number of factors, including how big the retainer of the account is, what the nature of the campaign is, and how the outreach of the campaign is performing. I do, however, find it interesting that the most popular response is to outreach a campaign for 3-4 weeks after launch, since I personally feel that this is quite a short time frame. Ideally, we want to be creating evergreen content which we have the option to update later down the line and outreach again.

I always considered about 4 weeks the norm when I worked at Distilled. However, I now prefer the approach I've seen other agencies take where they keep looking for new opportunities to outreach the campaign.

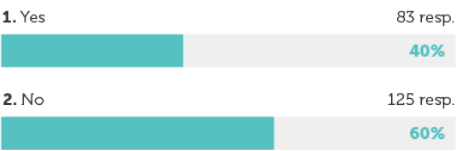


**Mark
Johnstone**



Do you set link targets for each campaign that you launch?

When it comes to setting targets for content-driven link building campaigns, 60% of respondents said that they didn't set targets.



What the experts think...



Wondering if these are internal targets or targets set with the client. I'm a big believer in internal targets, as they help learn from success/failure and see what works/doesn't, but setting link targets_ for each campaign with the client sounds a bit tedious and makes our work easier to judge as pass-fail, when the outcome of content marketing / digital PR, esp. over a long period of time is a bit more nuanced than that. Plus, there are so many examples of campaigns being appreciated both by people/teams that made them and the clients despite those campaigns not hitting their targets.

This is an interesting result. When I've worked in link generation in the past, clients have wanted to see up front what we hope to achieve (though we know we can't 100% predict anything). Successful link-building to me is about successful content, working well on relevant sites, not "x links from x sites" - so this is refreshing to see!





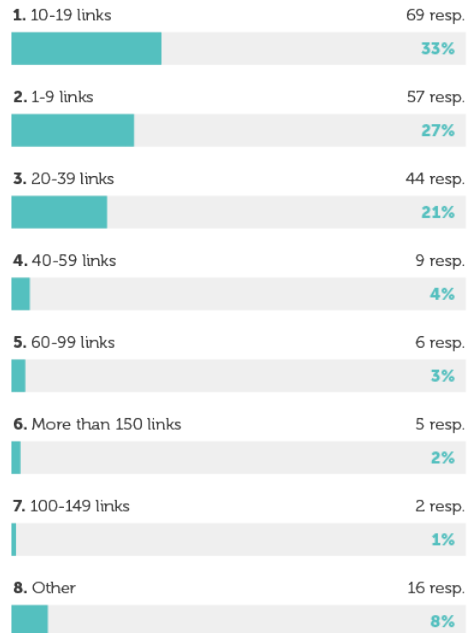
Kerstin
Reichert

It is quite curious to see that 60% of campaigns are launched without set targets. While it is understandably difficult to tie links to performance KPIs (ie sales, signups) I'm intrigued that especially for content-driven campaigns there isn't a goal in terms of quality (and quantity) and reach.



Typically, how many links does a campaign need to have in order to be deemed a success?

In order to be deemed successful, 33% of our respondents said that a campaign needed to deliver between 10-19 links, followed by 1-9 links. This means that overall, over half (61%) of respondents expect a campaign to reach 1-19 links in order to be deemed a success.



What the experts think...

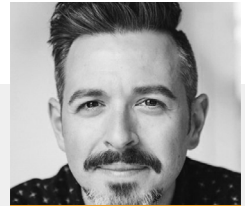


**Hannah
Smith**



I was really heartened to read this. I'd strongly agree that a campaign that generates 10-19 links (assuming those links are from high tier or otherwise authoritative sites) should be considered a success. This stuff is much harder than it looks :)

Very strange to see a quantity of links as a metric or goal... The correlation with a positive business outcome and real ROI is so tenuous, and so antiquated.



**Rand
Fishkin**



When creating targets for content campaigns, I tend to aim for an average link count over a number of campaigns, typically 3 or 4. There is a risk/reward aspect to this type of content. It's like investing in the stock market. A good financial advisor wouldn't tell you to put all your money into one company. You smooth out the ups and downs by investing in a number of pieces of content.



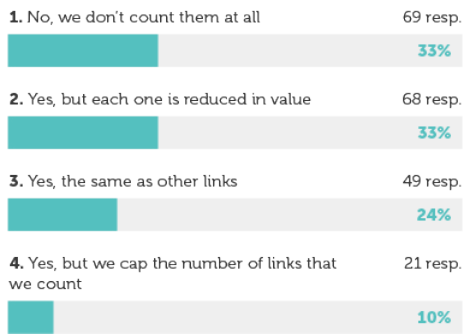
**Mark
Johnstone**



Do you count syndicated links toward your overall link target?

When it comes to links that are created as a result of syndication, 33% of respondents said that they didn't count these links at all. The remaining 67% said that they do count them in some form, with 33% saying they reduced them in value somehow.

24% said that they count syndicated links in the same way as other links.



What the experts think...



Such a good question! I think the best approach to syndicated links is to just be totally transparent with your client. Explain both how they might not be as valuable in terms of SEO, but also how they are still valuable in terms of reach, traffic and brand awareness (so more PR metrics).



If you're reporting on link numbers and being held to a link number target, either by a client or internal manager, then that's likelier to result in people reporting syndicated links, I think.

We often find lots of these syndicated pieces fall out of the index altogether after a time.





Aoife
O'Connor

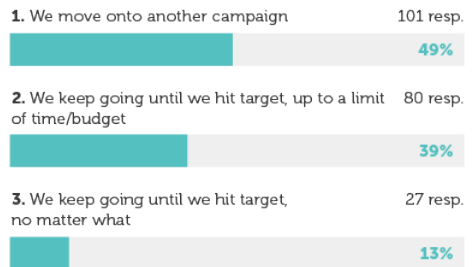
I find it interesting that such a high percentage do not count syndicated links toward their overall link target. I wonder if this is driven by the agency or the client i.e. do neither of them sees any value at all in syndicated links?



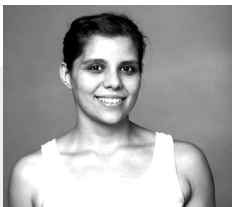
If a campaign misses the link target, what is the usual course of action?

When it comes to campaigns that miss link targets, the majority of our respondents said that they either move onto a new campaign (49% or they keep going but with a limit of time/budget (39%).

Fewest people (13%) said that they will keep going no matter what until they hit the link target.



What the experts think...



Gisele
Navarro

A word of advice to those who keep going no matter what: don't risk burnout by pushing a failed campaign that shows no signs of improvement.

Going back to the drawing board will replenish your mental energy and give you the opportunity to learn from what didn't work the first time.





Alex
Cassidy



Moving on to a different campaign is difficult because it means admitting defeat. But, it certainly softens the blow when you have results for the second and third campaigns that you did because you pivoted instead of stubbornly continuing.

Knowing when to move on is definitely a good skill to have. I'd recommend keeping a backlog of campaigns you can come back to and revisit, tweak, change your angle and try again.

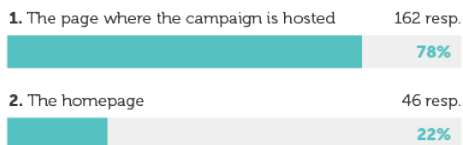


Kerstin
Reichert



After you've launched a campaign, where do you find that websites link to the most?

When it comes to content-driven link building, the majority of respondents (78%) said that when links were acquired, they usually pointed toward the page where the campaign was hosted.



What the experts think...



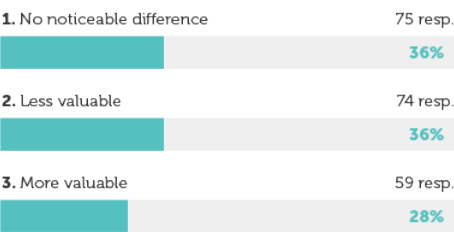
Areej
AbuAli

The result here is fascinating because my experience working for a brand has been the opposite. The majority of our campaign links pointed to the homepage.



Do you think that links to the homepage of a domain are more or less valuable than links to a campaign URL when it comes to driving increased rankings and traffic?

We were then interested in the effect of links pointing to different areas of a domain on organic rankings and traffic. There was no clear winner here with answers being split pretty evenly across there being no noticeable difference or links being less valuable.



What the experts think...



**Gisele
Navarro**



Links that reference a campaign but lead readers to the homepage are terrible user experience... What are people supposed to do?

I guess the question revealed here is "...when it comes to driving increased rankings and traffic for what?"

If you're building links to a separate content piece, I could totally imagine that the homepage is linking out to a better selection of commercial pages, therefore is a better link target.



**Tom
Capper**



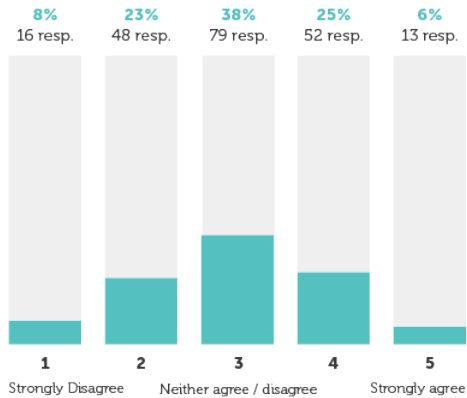
**Mark
Johnstone**



In terms of rankings, links to the content will do better than the home page IF the content is topically related to terms we want the site to rank for. If not, it's much of a muchness. It's a link to the domain.

Links generated from off-topic campaigns positively impact traffic and rankings.

Next up, we asked respondents for their opinion on whether off-topic content campaigns would positively impact traffic and rankings. 38% of respondents were on the fence with this one and in total, 81% were on the fence or slightly off it by either slightly disagreeing or slightly agreeing.



What the experts think...



Dan Hodsdon



Topical relevance remains one of the most divisive components of an effective off-site strategy. There are strong arguments for and against and it's interesting to see them so visibly apparent in these results.

If a brand operates in an industry with a limited reach then going off-topic may be an effective way to deliver results, but for those with a broader audience it's not just authority or volume but relevance of coverage and links that will put you above competitors.

In my experience focussing the majority of off-site activity 'on topic' and playing heavily in relevance will ultimately deliver more effective customer touchpoints and allow SEO activity to better integrate with other marketing channels such as PR and Brand.



**Hannah
Smith**



These are not the results I was expecting here at all :)

It feels to me as if most people are kind of on the fence with this one.

Alternatively of course it may be that people have limited experiences with actually doing stuff like this, and so they just don't know.

In my experience many clients are wary of producing off-topic campaigns, although I think this potentially has more to do with the understandable unease around creating things which are off-brand, as opposed to pure SEO or ranking considerations.

For what it's worth, I'd strongly agree that off-topic campaigns positively impact traffic and rankings, but whether or not a company chooses to engage in this type of activity is another debate entirely :)

I think there is regularly a disparity in expectations between outreach teams and clients/stakeholders that often touches on this topic of tangentiality. Often businesses thin in terms of the AIDA funnel, and therefore believe that only directly related content will benefit them. However, there is another step above (or outside) the traditional funnel which is this somewhat nebulous concept of authority. You can map the benefits of increasingly more closely related content to this funnel pretty well with that addition. A very tangentially related topic will likely not drive a tremendous amount of traffic, but with links from the right publications it can drive authority. Placements in industry pubs around topics that aren't directly related to a business can drive traffic, but potentially fewer leads, and so on down the funnel. All of these approaches can earn links, but the business impact of those links can be drastically different, and a disconnect in expectations can mean anything from frustrated clients to the perception that a program simply isn't working.

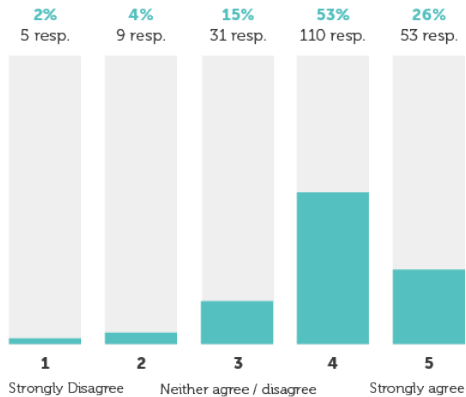


**Stephen
Panico**



Links generated from tangentially related topics (e.g. topics which interest a company's customers, but aren't strictly product or service related) positively impact rankings.

To try and drill into this a bit more, next we asked respondents about campaigns where the topics were related to a product or service but not necessarily directly related. Results here were a lot clearer with 79% of respondents saying that agreed or strongly agreed that campaigns using related topics would positively impact rankings.



What the experts think...

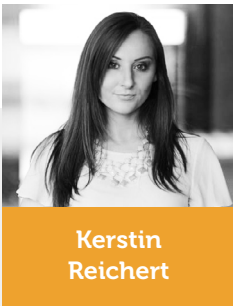


Hannah Smith



This is closer to what I'd expected in terms of responses, however I'd have gone harder here - I'd strongly agree that campaigns on tangential topics positively impact rankings.

While links from unrelated topics can certainly drive results (for now), personally I'd also want to see a close topical relation to the brand and product I am running the campaign for. Good links should be beneficial to the brand overall, align with the brand message and/or product, have a good level of reach in regards to the right audience and drive awareness.



Kerstin Reichert





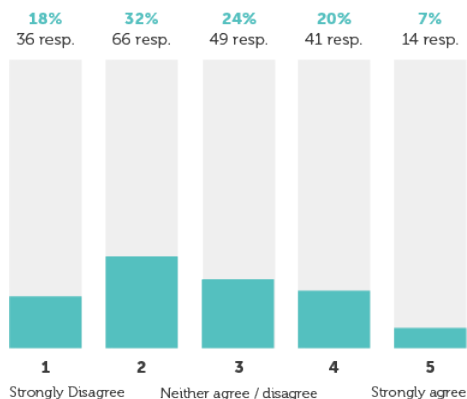
Cyrus
Shepard

As an SEO, I'd personally pay 5-10x more (in effort, money, or both) for a topically relevant link than one that was irrelevant.



Only links generated from content which is very closely related to a company's product or service will positively impact rankings. Off-topic, or tangentially-related content has no impact on rankings.

And to finish up on this theme, next we asked about the impact of closely related content to a company's product and service and whether topics closely related to a company's product or service doesn't impact rankings. The majority of respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed (50%) that such content has no impact on rankings.



What the experts think...



Hannah
Smith



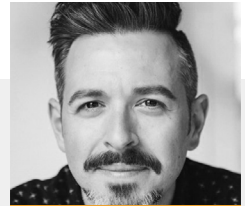
Now this is super-interesting.

Essentially it's just the reverse of this question:

"Links generated from off-topic campaigns positively impact traffic and rankings."

And yet, the results are quite different - more people either strongly disagree or disagree here, than either strongly agreed or agreed previously.

Nice to see this evolution in thinking from the field. Brands can be built anywhere people pay attention, and Google's far more likely to care about the quality of the source than the raw relevance of the domain's audience or content.

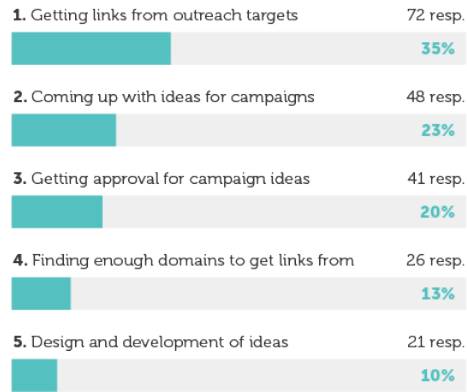


Rand
Fishkin



What is the most challenging part of the content-led link building process for you?

Looking at the process for building links using content, 35% of respondents said that the most challenging part was getting links from outreach targets. Next up was coming up with ideas for campaigns which 23% of respondents found the most challenging.



What the experts think...



Areej
AbuAli

Fascinating! I have a feeling that the results might be skewed to “getting links” because a large number of participants are Digital PRs.

Personally, as someone leading the SEO Team for a brand, my most challenging part is resource and budget approval that building out a Digital PR function/getting agency resource is a worthwhile investment.





**Clare
Dyckhoff**



Interesting to see that securing the links came out on top here. I was expecting limited resource/time or finding enough domains to get links (in niche areas particularly) to be the biggest challenge. Then again, there's a fine line between following up on cold leads and coming across as persistent/off-putting.

This right here is the reason why trying to scale content-led link building campaigns is a waste of time. I've read people saying what we do is a numbers game but it's not.

No matter how many emails you send or how many sites you add to your target list, if your content is not link-worthy then you will struggle getting links. Grab all the time and effort you're dedicating to scaling link building and put it into the content you're producing.

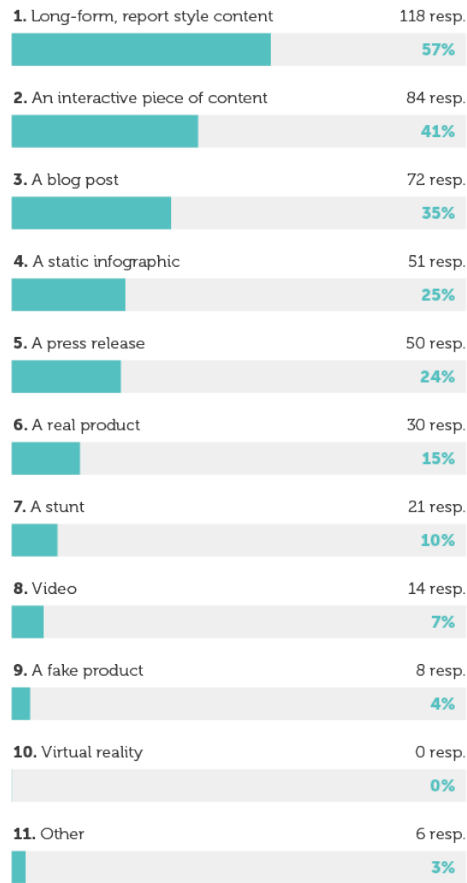


**Gisele
Navarro**



When it comes to the execution of your idea, which of the following do you find to be the most effective in generating links?

There are many ways to bring an idea to life and we were keen to know what types of execution are most effective in generating links. 57% of respondents said that long-form, report style content was the most effective, followed by interactive content (41%) and blog posts (35%).



What the experts think...



**Irina
Nica**



Whether a long-form report or a blog post, creating great content that readers love is still the most effective way of building backlinks. In my experience, the content that typically gets the most backlinks is the one backed by original research and data. But it's not just about publishing a few piecharts and graphs. The key is to help readers find meaning in the data you present by telling a compelling story. A good story is often one that's related to recent events that made the headlines, or provides context on an issue that affects a wide range of readers in your industry. For example, in 2021 we'll continue to see stories and data about the impact of the pandemic and working from home getting mentions and backlinks.

For years we've seen marketing gurus talk about how the length of content doesn't matter but it's interesting to see that 57% of the respondents pointed to long-form report style content as being the most effective in generating links. The reason why I believe this style of content generates the most links is because it often brings new insights to an industry that are rooted in data. In addition, if the content is long-form - it often will have multiple data points or key facts referenced throughout the article. The increased number of data points offers more opportunities for people to see and identify relevant angles and stats for them to use in their own work.



**Ross
Simmonds**



I find this result particularly interesting. We often see big interactive campaigns or stunts winning awards for link building and content marketing. Yet here we see that long form content is actually voted as the most effective. This should be reassuring especially for those lacking the budget for expensive interactive campaigns.



**Laura
Crimmons**



Ecommerce and Link Building

For 2021, we wanted to dive deeper into the world of ecommerce link building. We asked in-house marketers whether they described the website they worked on as ecommerce and if they said yes, we showed them a series of ecommerce-specific questions.

Would you describe the website you work on as ecommerce?

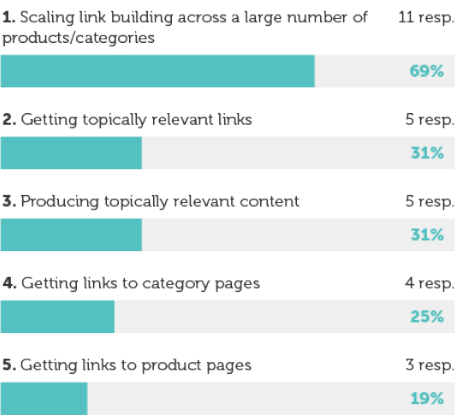
For 2021, we also wanted to understand more about the state of link building for ecommerce marketers and respondents to say if they worked in ecommerce or not.

For the 21% of respondents who said they did, they were shown some additional questions specifically for ecommerce. Whilst a small sample size, we still felt that these results should be shared, but the small sample size should be kept in mind.



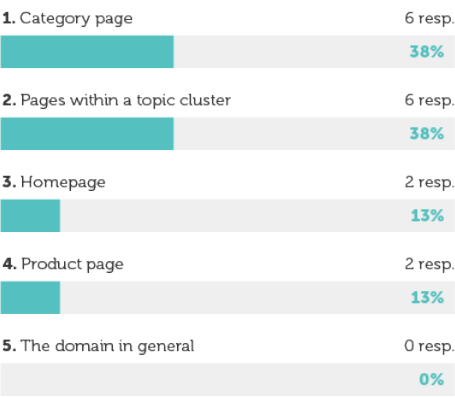
Working in ecommerce, what would you say are your biggest challenges when it comes to link building?

The biggest challenge faced by ecommerce marketers was scaling link building across a large number of products/categories. 69% of respondents marked this as a challenge, followed by 31% of respondents stating that getting topically relevant links and producing topically relevant content were the next biggest challenges.



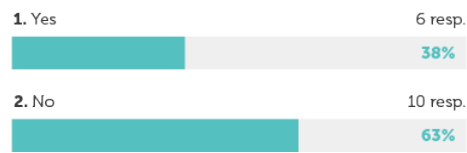
For an ecommerce website, where do you most actively try to build links to?

We wanted to learn if ecommerce marketers actively tried to build links to certain areas of their website. The most popular responses, both with 38% of the votes were Category pages and pages within a topic cluster. No respondents indicated that they just cared about getting links to the domain as a whole, with no one marking this option.



Do you ever give away products as part of a link building strategy?

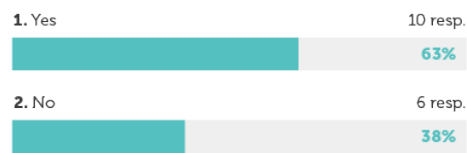
The majority of respondents (63%) said that they do not give away products as part of their link building strategy.



Do you find this to be an effective tactic in driving increases in organic rankings and traffic?

We then asked those who did give away products for link building purposes about the effectiveness of this tactic. Note that this question was asked to respondents regardless of the answer to the previous question to cover anyone who has used the tactic previously.

The majority (63%) of respondents said that it was an effective tactic for driving increases in organic rankings and traffic.



Methodology and Respondent Demographics

Methodology

The survey opened on 18th February 2021 and closed on 31st March 2021. During this time, 253 individuals responded to the survey which was run via TypeForm. Whilst most respondents answered the same set of questions, there was some custom logic included which meant that some respondents didn't see all questions.

For example, those who described themselves as in-house marketers answered several questions which were customised to them. This is why not all questions will add up to 100% of respondents, along with the fact that the majority of questions were optional.

The results were visualised automatically via TypeForm and these initial results were shared with expert contributors in the weeks following the closure of the survey. Expert contributors were asked to comment on questions and answers which they found particularly interesting.

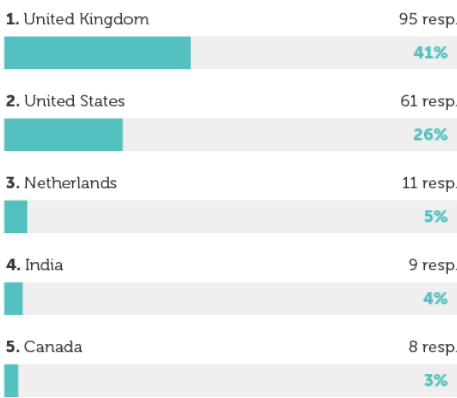
Demographics

Below is a breakdown of key demographics which we asked respondents.

Location

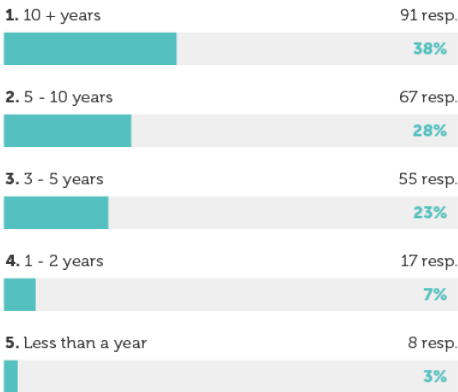
The survey received responses from 253 people across 36 different countries.

The majority of respondents (67%) were based in the United Kingdom and United States, followed by Netherlands (5%), India (4%) and Canada (3%). The other respondents were spread relatively evenly across the remaining 31 countries.



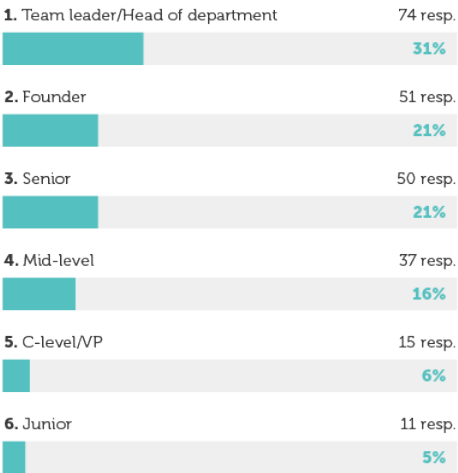
How many years have you been working in digital marketing?

Respondents were asked to choose the best fit for who they worked for. We deliberated a little bit about where freelancers/contractors should fit because they could cross between agency and in-house, but we decided to keep them separate to get a cleaner view of results. This year, people who work at agencies made up just over half of respondents (54%) whilst in-house respondents followed behind at 33%. Freelancers and contractors made up the remaining 13%.



How would you describe your role?

Next, we wanted to learn the kinds of roles that respondents had and we saw results tilted toward senior roles, with Team Leaders/Heads of Department, Founders and Seniors making up nearly three quarters (73%) of respondents. Only 5% described themselves as Junior which fits with the previous question on length of time working in the industry.

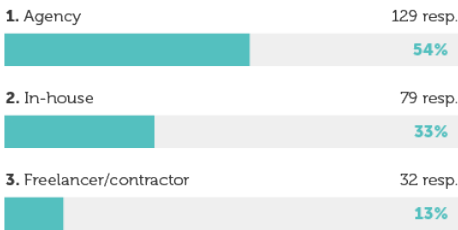


How would you describe who you work for?

Respondents were asked to choose the best fit for who they worked for. We deliberated a little bit about where freelancers/contractors should fit because they could cross between agency and in-house, but we decided to keep them separate to get a cleaner view of results.

This year, people who work at agencies made up just over half of respondents (54%) whilst in-house respondents followed behind at 33%. Freelancers and contractors made up the remaining 13%.

At this point, respondents were taken in two different directions based on their answers to the question above. Agencies and freelancers were given a different series of questions to in-house marketers. Later on, they come back together.



Contributors

Thank you to all of our expert contributors who took the time to review the results and give their thoughts and feedback:

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