Outreach for SEO

An in-depth review of SEO outreach strategy and techniques

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Because outreach can make or break a company's SEO results, we created this Outreach White Paper to help company leadership evaluate an SEO agency's ability to formulate a winning outreach strategy and execute it to perfection with the right processes and techniques.

In SEO campaigns, the primary goal of outreach is to create valuable backlinks from off-site websites to the client website. These links improve organic rankings and expose the company to new audiences, driving highly qualified organic and referral traffic to the client. Often, outreach has the secondary goals of extending brand awareness and strengthening credibility.

Outreach is more important than ever to successful SEO:

- Backlinks continue to be the strongest ranking factor in the Google search algorithm. Without a strong backlink profile, a company website is competing for organic traffic at a significant disadvantage. Result: Leads and sales are ceded to competitors.

- As the Google algorithm has improved its ability to detect, ignore and penalize unethical link-building practices, companies must earn links by creating and marketing high-quality content, which necessitates sophisticated outreach communications and processes.

- As more SEO agencies have responded to Google's algorithmic improvements by focusing attention on content link building, the supply of content greatly exceeds demand. Outreach specialists must use great skill to identify strategically valuable publishers and then to persuade them to accept and promote their content.

The outcome of effective outreach: Greater organic search engine visibility and potentially explosive growth in high-quality website traffic, sales leads and online revenue.

OVERVIEW OF OUTREACH STRATEGY

While some think of outreach narrowly, as the process of pitching content to off-site publishers, true outreach is much broader, touching many aspects of SEO, as well as the client's sales, marketing and branding strategies.

The goal of SEO outreach is link building — that is, creating backlinks to the company website that enhance its organic visibility on Google and other search engines. As the outreach campaign progresses, the company's improved visibility attracts more qualified traffic, increasing lead and online revenue production. Also, the backlinks themselves drive referred traffic from the host websites back to the company website — creating a whole new stream of qualified traffic and opportunities for conversion.

With all of this in mind, the SEO agency's outreach team must cover six very important bases:

1. **Link Building Best Practices** — Knowing precisely what Google considers to be a good link and a bad link.

2. **Target Markets** — The types of buyers the client is trying to reach and what motivates them to do business.

3. **Publishers** — Identifying and vetting credible, authoritative websites and blogs with the same or similar target markets.

4. **Content Development** — Determining what types of content will appeal to off-site publishers, and making sure content published off-site is consistent with and highlights the company's important sales, marketing and branding messages.

5. **Publisher Communication** — Persuading publishers to accept content with links, as well as building strong publisher relationships.

6. **Review and Analysis** — Evaluating the SEO performance of backlinks, publishing websites, and traffic/lead/revenue generation.

All of the areas listed above describe the outreach process at a high level. In the following sections, we look at the most important technical considerations within each area that are necessary for successful outreach.

Strategically, the most important drivers for outreach are:

· **Relevance** — Publishers must be relevant to the client, and content must be relevant to the target audience and connected to the client's business in some way.
· **Value** — Earning high-quality links necessitates content and/or a company value proposition strong enough to interest relevant publishers.
· **Creativity** — Even with high-value content, a highly competitive link-building arena necessitates using an imaginative approach to grab the attention and respect of top-tier publishers.

WORTH NOTING: These elements of relevance, value and creativity are highly prized not only by publishers, but also by Google and target audiences.

Google wants its search engine users to discover relevant, valuable and interesting content — and this is exactly the type of content likely to persuade a company's targeted prospects to inquire or buy. This example is one of many that illustrates how SEO, marketing and sales operate in harmony when executed properly.

DETAILED REVIEW OF THE OUTREACH PROCESS

In the previous section we identified six elements of the outreach process. For successful outreach implementation, SEO agencies must be proficient in each. In the following sections, we provide guidance and insight to help you assess an SEO agency's outreach campaign process from top to bottom.

1. Link Building Best Practices

Backlinks are an extremely important factor in the Google search algorithm. As such, creating good links improves a company's organic visibility — but creating bad links worsens visibility or has no effect. Thus, clearly understanding what makes a backlink valuable is extremely important to the outreach manager. Key metrics to review include:

· **Relevance** — Is the content relevant to both the linking page and the linked-to page? For example, a plumbing company publishing an article about crop circles on a science blog is not relevant to the linked-to website (the plumbing company). Google will interpret such a link as a "black hat" SEO tactic intended to manipulate its algorithm, and will ignore it or even penalize it.

· **Trust** — Is the linking website a legitimate domain in good standing with Google? Obtaining links from websites that have been penalized by Google, or that engage in dubious practices such as displaying non-relevant links, does more harm than good. Strong signs of trustworthy websites include old domains, following Web design best practices, frequent content updates, and .edu or .gov domains.

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- **Popularity** — Do the website and/or linking page attract a high volume of traffic? Does the website generate a high volume of social media content shares and mentions? Does it have a high volume of quality backlinks? Popular websites offer strong fringe benefits to SEO-focused outreach campaigns by extending brand awareness.

- **Linking Habits** — Does the website/linking page have an inordinate number of outbound links? Does the website/linking page have irrelevant links or links that appear to have been purchased? These are signs the website may not be in good standing with Google.

- **Citation Flow** — The number of links pointing to a website. The raw number of links pointing to a target website indicates influence and popularity.

- **Trust Flow** — The quality of links pointing to a website. The quality of the links pointing to a website indicates influence and trust. Link quality is determined by using the same criteria detailed in this White Paper.

- **Citation/Trust Flow Balance** — If a website has thousands of links (citation flow) but only a handful of quality links (trust flow), the website may have low value as a publishing site due to lack of trust.

- **Spam Score** — A measurement utility offered by Moz that identifies potential spam flags on a website.

- **Domain Authority** — Does the overall linking domain have high authority in terms of domain age, popularity, size and other factors?

- **Page Authority** — Does the linking page have high authority in terms of its ranking, popularity and other factors?

- **Website Diversity** — Targeting off-site publishers should not be based on monolithic criteria. Google looks for a "natural" distribution of backlinks; if all of a client's backlinks come from websites of uniform size, popularity, etc., Google may interpret the link profile as being a pure SEO manipulation. Target websites should always be relevant and trustworthy, however.

- **Anchor Text Diversity** — In a similar way, overly consistent use of keywords in backlink anchor text sends a suspicious signal to Google. Current best practice is to mix anchor text with keywords, company name, URLs and other varied wording.

Agency Evaluation Tip: SEO agencies use various online tools and internally developed analytics to quantify and measure these various link-building criteria. Asking for documentation on the methodology used to evaluate links — not necessarily to understand the technical aspects of the methodology, but at least to make sure a methodology exists — is worthwhile.

2. Understanding Client Target Markets

When the time comes to create and market a client's content for link-building purposes, the SEO agency must use creative as well as technical inputs to target publishing websites and develop appropriate content. Often, SEO agencies are technically proficient but lack the creative ability to put their technical skill to use for outreach.

Keep in mind, relevance is an extremely important factor to persuade publishers to accept content, and for potential customers to read and act on that content. Thus, if the SEO agency lacks a clear understanding of the client's products and services, what drives new business and what drives customer retention, published content will strike readers as inauthentic, irrelevant and therefore untrustworthy. Whatever SEO gains accrue from the backlinks will be negated because of no traffic and no conversions.

Beyond client considerations, the SEO agency must also gain a clear understanding of the client's market. Since off-site publishers usually reject overly self-promotional content, determining effective topics often involves a discussion of broad industry-related issues rather than client-specific information. For example, a packaging company may have a hard time marketing an article about its own line of tamper-resistant boxes, but have great success marketing one about tamper-resistant packaging strategies in, say, the pharmaceutical sector. To conceptualize, create and market a topic like the latter one, the SEO agency needs to know how the client fits into the big picture.

Further complicating the outreach picture: Content strategies may need to be less direct than the example noted above. For instance, an auto insurance agency may not find a receptive market for articles about auto insurance, as the niche is already crowded with content and the content cannot help but be seen as self-promotional. A better strategy may be to write about an indirectly relevant topic such as automobile safety, or even more specifically, automobile safety for teenage drivers. A strategy along these lines may serve branding objectives as well as SEO — provided the SEO agency understands them.

Agency Evaluation Tip: An SEO agency proficient in outreach insists on thorough client discovery in the initial phases of its SEO campaign. Without covering all the points detailed above, the agency will not be successful in marketing content — let alone managing or collaborating on its creative development.

3. Identifying and Vetting Relevant Publishers

In addition to the technical vetting considerations detailed in Link Building Best Practices above, a number of other techniques are used to create a hit list of potential off-site link-building opportunities. These include:

- **Insider Knowledge** — The SEO agency gathers input from the client's staff to discover influential websites, blogs and social media sites in the client's industry and related niches.

- **Search Engine Queries** — By conducting a variety of advanced, specialized searches on Google and other search engines, the SEO agency can quickly identify publishers that have a strong organic presence and that accept outside contributions.

- **Competitor Backlink Analysis** — By reviewing the backlink profile of competitors — especially strong SEO competitors — the SEO agency can quickly determine relevant, quality publishing sites with a track record of accepting guest content.

- **Social Media Monitoring** — The SEO agency conducts keyword searches to identify influential industry bloggers, thought leaders and influencers. This research leads the agency to open lines of communication with the online publications they write for and read.

- **Referrals** — Once communication with potential publishers begins, an SEO agency can identify highly qualified publishers simply by asking for referrals. Publishers with a niche know their peers inside and out, and the competition is usually friendly, so they don't mind helping agencies by providing referrals.

Agency Evaluation Tip: At one point, guest blogging, a common form of off-site backlink generation, received some bad press because of spamming — in particular, publishing low-quality, non-relevant content purely as a link-building ploy. Today, guest blogging remains a strong SEO strategy but must be conducted using high-quality content to create relevant links. Proficient SEO agencies understand this and emphasize it in their sales presentation.

4. Content Development

A. THE CREATIVE PROCESS.

While developing topics and content usually involves collaboration between the SEO agency and the client, the agency usually spearheads the creative process according to the following four-step process:

1. **Thematic Development** — Determining the "big picture" themes the client wants woven (or not woven) into the content. Frequently, these themes have to do with branding; for instance, a green manufacturer will want to emphasize themes dealing with sustainability/conservation, and a luxury retailer will want to avoid topics that suggest low prices/discount merchandise.

2. **Topic Development** — Determining specific topics to be pitched to publishers. This is in many ways the "secret sauce" of successful outreach campaigns. Several techniques are discussed later in this section.

3. **Content Production** — Producing online content (articles, infographics, slide presentations) requires contributions from copywriters, editors, Web designers and/or Web developers. Often, clients provide technical inputs and SEO agencies polish them into finished content. Editing and review duties can be done collaboratively as well. Note also that some outreach content can and should be on-site content. For instance, the outreach campaign could involve creating a highly detailed, widely relevant infographic for the client website, followed by email outreach to relevant publishers, alerting them to the content and requesting them to link to it.

4. **Content Performance Review** — Collecting publisher feedback about content, along with analyzing content metrics (more on this later) enables the SEO agency to continuously improve thematic focus, topic development and content quality, especially in terms of relevance, usefulness, newsworthiness and significance. This final step makes the difference between stagnant outreach and dynamic, high-impact outreach.

Agency Evaluation Tip: Because content development is collaborative and involves a lot of players and communications, SEO agencies need a documented process for content development, overseen by a trained production manager. If the agency lacks either of these, chaos is likely to ensue, leading to shortcomings in content quality.

B. THE SECRET SAUCE: TOPIC DEVELOPMENT AND PITCH TACTICS.

As mentioned earlier, the competition to get articles published is fierce. To capture the interest of publishers and get results for clients, SEO agencies must consider client and publisher needs when formulating topics and structuring outreach campaigns. Here are examples of proven techniques:

· **Updating an outdated post** — The SEO agency scours a target publisher's website for a successful post that is out of date, then pitches the idea of having the client provide an updated article.

· **Missing category** — The SEO agency looks for a gap in a target publisher's content offerings, and then pitches the idea of filling it with content (or a series of content pieces). Example: A packaging design blog that lacks a category for sustainable packaging.

· **Missing topic within a category** — The SEO agency looks for a gap within a target publisher's category of content, and then pitches the idea of filling it. Example: A packaging design blog with a category for sustainable packaging, but lacking content for tamper-resistant sustainable packaging.

· **Expanding on a thinly covered topic** — The SEO agency looks for topics on a target publisher's website that are under covered, and then pitches the idea of elaborating on them with an article, infographic, etc.

· **Rebuttal/opposite side of an argument** — Publishers are often interested in sparking conversation. Accordingly, the SEO agency looks for opinion pieces on a target publisher's website, and then pitches the idea of offering an alternate view.

· **Targeting engaged publishers on social media** — The SEO agency identifies people who have interacted with the client's content on social media (for example, sharing a link, mentioning the brand) and asks them if they have interest in publishing an article crafted specifically for their website/blog.

· **Hot news and trending topics** — With ongoing social media monitoring and client communication, the SEO agency can identify hot news stories and trending topics within any market niche, and then pitch content that provides factual information and/ or expert opinion and analysis to target publishers.

- **Seasonal or holiday-themed content** — Topicality is extremely important to publishers and readers, so content pitches involving seasonal and holiday themes, such as "Sustainable Packaging Ideas for Christmas," often carry exponentially more weight with publishers than the same topic with no holiday tie-in. In this regard, SEO agencies must plan well in advance: The time to pitch Christmas-related content is likely to be 30-90 days before the holiday. As always, an organized outreach process is key.

Agency Evaluation Tip: Topic development and pitching tactics make or break an outreach campaign. A skilled SEO agency cites examples of successful pitch campaigns, including both a synopsis of the pitch tactic and the performance metrics.

5. **Publisher Communication**

   For effective outreach, mass *customization* must be the SEO agency's philosophy. This is a challenging approach requiring both personalization and scalability. Both are exceedingly important.

   - **Personalization** — Canned email pitches are common, but notoriously ineffective. Publishers respond to pitches that demonstrate an understanding of their unique needs. Taking a personal approach requires research, strategy and skillful execution — all of which take time and experience.

   - **Scalability** — Because even a single client requires scores of pitches month in and month out, the SEO agency must have the staff and processes in place to conduct research, formulate and deliver pitches, and follow-up on pitches on a large scale — a scale that grows as campaigns become more and more successful.

   Let's explore both areas in detail.

   A. PERSONALIZATION TECHNIQUES.

   - As discussed earlier, effective outreach involves a careful review of publisher websites to identify their specific content needs.

   - Email pitch templates can be standardized to a degree, but must be individualized to communicate an understanding of the website's content needs and to incorporate the publisher's contact name.

   - Researching publisher backlink requirements is critical. Certain publishers do not accept self-promotional links, links in the body of an article, or links of any kind. Pitching (or worse, creating) content that ignores publisher link guidelines will not only be rejected, but also will create ill will.

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- Pitch content should be carefully edited to ensure that company and contact names are spelled correctly and that the pitch contains no grammatical or stylistic errors. If a pitch itself is poorly written, what conclusion will the prospective publisher come to about the quality of the content being pitched?

- Follow-up emails must be personalized. Publishers are busy; if they do not respond to a pitch, this does not necessarily mean they are not interested. Follow-up is essential, but canned follow-up emails can undermine an otherwise successful pitch.

Agency Evaluation Tip: Ask for samples of the SEO agency's pitch and follow-up emails. In this case, a picture (i.e., sample) is worth a 1,000 words.

B. ATTRIBUTES OF A SCALABLE OUTREACH PROCESS.

- Several outreach functions must be covered by the SEO agency, including publisher research, SEO research, pitch strategy, pitch composition, follow-up scheduling and tracking, and pitch outcome analysis/continuous improvement.

- A high-caliber SEO agency manages and executes all of the above activities in-house. Relying on freelancers might work on a small scale, but creates too many disruptions in communication and scheduling to succeed on a medium or large scale.

- An SEO agency with outreach experience in a given niche can get a client in the same or similar niche up and running quickly, since it has already established relationships with key, relevant publishers.

- An SEO agency with strong outreach experience outside the client's niche can also get the client up and running quickly, since it has had time to refine its process and has a thorough grasp of outreach best practices.

Agency Evaluation Tip: An SEO agency should be able to quantify the number of pitches and content placements it executes over any given time period. A prospective client should understand how many overall pitches and placements its campaign would need as a percentage of the agency's whole. This gives prospective clients a feel for whether the agency has the bandwidth to support it.

6. Review and Analysis

Expert review and analysis of outreach performance is key to successful outreach and SEO campaigns. Certain data points related to outreach are concrete, such as the number of direct backlinks created, whereas others are quite difficult to peg, such as the number of social shares a piece of content has received. Nevertheless, tracking data to get a fuller picture of results is important. Experienced SEO agencies know how to weight data to compensate for margins of error. Important data to review includes:

- **Backlinks created** — The number of links produced directly and indirectly from each outreach placement is the starting point for any outreach analysis. Direct links are backlinks from the publishing website; indirect links are backlinks from other websites that reproduce or mention the placed content.

- **Social shares** — Social sharing of placed content is an important measure of reach, and also correlates to indirect backlink creation. Social sharing data is collected through various online monitoring tools; however, the accuracy of social share data is sometimes fairly high, but other times understated.

- **SEO keyword performance** — Backlinks from placed content should point either to the client's home page or to strategically important interior pages associated with high-value keywords. As backlinks are created, home page links should lift overall domain authority, and interior links should lift the organic ranking of the associated pages. If those two things are happening, the outreach campaign is being productive.

- **Pitch to placement ratio** — If a campaign generates 500 pitches and receives one placement, serious flaws most likely exist in the outreach strategy or execution. Agencies must monitor this on a monthly basis or more frequently.

- **Placement quality performance** — Along similar lines, if placements are occurring with only second- or third-tier publishers, weaknesses probably exist in the outreach strategy, execution, or the content itself.

Agency Evaluation Tip: Reviewing an SEO agency's monthly outreach/SEO reports provides tremendous insight on how thoroughly it is monitoring its own campaign activity. Careful monitoring means that improvements/tweaks can be made promptly if necessary.

OUTREACH FAQS

1. **WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SEO OUTREACH AND PR?**

   SEO outreach incorporates many PR best practices, as both involve selling publishers on talking about clients, and creating content that influences client target markets. The main difference between the two disciplines: PR is primarily concerned with content that improves a client's image; SEO outreach is primarily concerned with improving a client's organic search engine visibility to generate website traffic, leads and revenue. The SEO impact of a PR campaign is incidental or non-existent; the PR impact of an SEO outreach campaign is positive but not the focus.

2. **ARE THERE GOALS BESIDES BACKLINKS AN SEO OUTREACH CAMPAIGN SHOULD PURSUE?**

   A well-crafted outreach campaign incorporates branding messages and leads to social sharing of content. These outcomes result in more brand awareness, greater brand affinity and strengthened credibility. While backlinks are generally the most important KPI of an outreach campaign, in the long run, clients measure outreach effectiveness in terms of traffic, and lead and revenue generation. Outreach campaigns that produce backlinks in quantity and of quality correlate most with those items.

3. **CAN OUTREACH BE DONE EFFECTIVELY IN-HOUSE?**

   Successful outreach campaigns require expertise and time — a great deal more time than many companies realize. If an organization has a well-staffed SEO team, content strategists, copywriters, editors, Web designers, Web developers and PR personnel, it may be in a position to execute outreach internally. Lacking any of those elements, however, the company will get better, faster results by engaging a competent agency.

ABOUT STRAIGHT NORTH

Straight North is an Internet marketing agency that helps growth-minded, small and middle-market firms generate online sales leads and e-commerce revenue. With an in-house team of over 60 full-time marketers, we have the depth and breadth to manage complex, multi-front campaigns that deliver continuously improving results.

Our services include SEO, PPC, display advertising, email marketing and responsive websites.

We are the only online agency that validates and reports sales leads in real time. This unique capability gives clients the ability to evaluate campaigns with unmatched accuracy, as well as monitor their leads with unmatched speed.

With clients throughout the United States, we have offices in Chicago, Charlotte, Baltimore and Washington, DC.

Our SEO experience goes back more than a decade, and we have achieved game-changing results for clients in a wide variety of B2B and B2C niches. Please review these case studies for examples:
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