

13.5: Backlinks

Backlinks

The second most important set of factors relates to **backlinks**, or links back to your website from other websites. Backlinks can be thought of as votes of confidence from other websites. It's like a popularity contest: The more people endorse you, the more others think you are relevant in a given domain. Or, applied to the Web, the more backlinks to your website, the more relevant search engines think you are in a given domain.

This is important for search engines because if you provide a good user experience and other sites heavily link back to yours, chances are you are doing something that people like. People liking you/voting for you/linking back to you thus become a good proxy for knowing how high you should be ranking for specific searches.

The list of factors above offers three important backlink-related factors, two of which we will discuss:

- **Total referring domains** represents the total number of domains (e.g., [domain1.com](#), [www.domain2.com](#), etc.) linking back to your domain.
- **Total follow-backlinks** represents the total number of links that are allowed for web referencing that link back to your page. Without getting technical, search engines differentiate between types of links on websites so that they only consider "real" votes of confidence. They thus exclude, for example, links back to your website done as part of promotions. Follow-backlinks represent these "real" votes of confidence, whereas nofollow-backlinks represent links that are not taken into account for referencing.

Importantly, backlinks need to be earned organically, meaning that they cannot be incentivized. Paid promotions with bloggers, where bloggers link back to your website, for example, should be tagged as "**nofollow**" links (Dean, 2024). This means that, to create backlinks, firms need to think of strategies that will create links back to their websites without paying people to do so. Other types of backlinks that should be nofollow include links in blog comments, press releases, most social media and forums, as well as links on all of the following social media platforms: Quora, Reddit, YouTube, Wikipedia, Reddit, Twitch, and Medium. Interestingly, although social media backlinks do not directly contribute to the ranking of a website or webpage, they can indirectly do so by increasing web traffic. Google is notoriously secretive about its algorithm and how it ranks websites. Recently, it indicated that it may follow certain nofollow backlinks, and [several examples exist](#) of backlink strategies where webpages shot up in ranking even if the links that contribute to this increase were nofollow links (Dean, 2024).

In addition to these two factors, which generally represent the quantity of backlinks to your sites (i.e., the total number of domains and the total number of links), it is also acknowledged that your website ranking will also depend on the quality of the backlinks.

High-quality backlinks are "natural," meaning that the referring website (the website that links back to you) links back to your website in a way that naturally makes sense in the context. For example, it might use a relevant, natural anchor text. Anchor text is [the clickable text that is underlined for a given link](#) (Wikipedia, 2024d). Most of the hyperlinks in this chapter give examples of natural anchor text. The closer the anchor text is to the keywords on which you want to rank your web page, the better. For example, if you want to rank a web page on how to bathe a cat, it will help if websites link back to your web page with the anchor text [how to bathe a cat](#) (WebMD Editorial Contributors, 2024). High-quality links come from authoritative pages, i.e., pages that rank high on search engines. They also come from sources that are topically relevant to your web page. For example, if you are creating a web page on fitness routines, backlinks from sites on fitness will have a greater impact on your ranking.

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