

Raising Red Flags

How to tell if your agency is using risky link building tactics

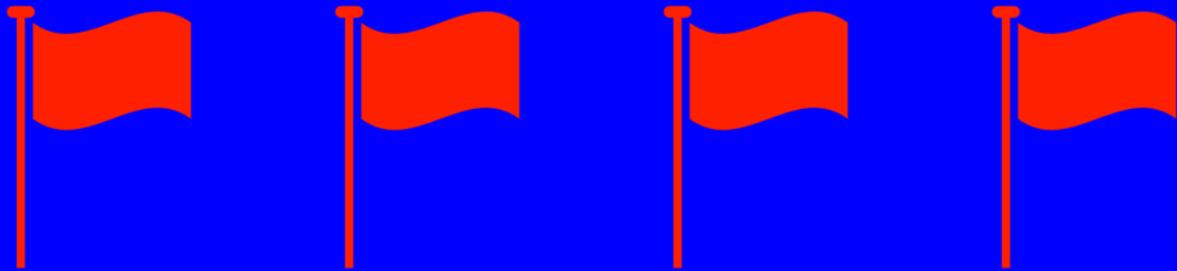


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Introduction

As a business owner or marketing manager, you have a full plate. It's tough to stay up to date on the always evolving SEO techniques and Google algorithm updates. That's why you hired a digital marketing agency. But not all agencies are equal. Some use outdated and disreputable techniques to improve website's rankings. It's imperative you recognize these red flags.

Read this guide to learn the signs of what our industry calls "Black Hat SEO."

Why is it important to avoid Black Hat SEO?

At first glance, Black Hat SEOs' promise of fast results are tempting. However, these shortcuts can and will backfire. In the long run, these techniques are ineffective and a waste of money. More importantly, these techniques can land you in Google's doghouse and will lead to severe penalties, resulting in a drastic rankings drop and less conversions for your business. In extreme scenarios, Google will delete your entire search presence, making it impossible for customers to find you via search.

Watch to watch

To be confident that your SEO strategy isn't secretly hurting you, follow the best practices outlined in this guide. We'll first show you how to check the backlinks to your company's website and then we'll outline common red flags that should raise concerns about your company's SEO tactics. At the end of the guide, we'll explain proper, or White Hat, practices.

Finding your backlink profile

Use a backlink tool to discover the external links pointing to your site.

How to check your backlink profile

Two simple and free options:

- [WebMeUp](#)
- [Backlink Watch](#)

Some available paid backlink checkers (some may have free trials):

- [Cognitive SEO](#)
- [Ahrefs](#)
- [SEOclarity](#)
- [MOZ Link Explorer](#)
- [Majestic SEO](#)

1. **Simply type your domain into your chosen backlink checker.**
2. **Filter the list to only view external links (other sites linking to yours).**
3. **Review the list of returned backlinks.**
4. **Visit the sites, review the credibility and how the links are used, and decide if they raise red flags.**

Now that you have your backlinks, it's time to learn about SEO red flags and why these black hat practices are frowned upon.

Overview NEW

[Track in a Campaign](#)

Get the data you need to do better link building research, smarter content ideation, and link prospecting - in less time.

No. 1 Reporting a high number of links each month

Quality always trumps quantity with link building. In today's SEO landscape, you can rank better by earning a few high quality links.

The Flag

If you're receiving a huge amount of new links, be wary, they may be low quality and may mean that your SEO agency is submitting your URL to different link farms, which can hurt your site's ranking and credibility.

A high number of links used to be the best way to rank for certain keywords. Strategists submitted to hundreds of directories, which would then link to your site. However, these directories are underused and thin (lacking substantial content) and are now devalued by Google.

Google knows how many links your site earns. If your site receives many low-quality links in a short time period, Google will notice and potentially levy a search ranking penalty.

No. 2 Posting large quantities of blog comments

Links in blog comments are not inherently bad. If a subject matter expert at your company wants to engage in meaningful conversations on blog posts, that's a positive way to increase dialogue and brand perception. However, spamming blog comments with links is no longer a recommended method of link building.

The Flag

Be on the alert for spammy comments written on your behalf (your company name or website URL) on sites that use exact match (unnatural looking or all the same keywords) links to your website.

No. 3 Low quality guest posting

If your SEO company spends time writing articles and submitting them to other sites, it falls under the umbrella of “guest posting.”

What to watch

Guest posting is not inherently bad, but the practice is prone to abuse. Writing high quality content for a high-quality site that isn't your own is a great way to earn a reputable link. However, guest posting can become problematic with the following issues.

Spinning/spun articles

Spinning an article is when an SEO agency posts a slightly different version of the same content in multiple directories for backlinks.

Article spinning doesn't provide high quality content, and this strategy can spin out of control quickly.

Duplicate content

Submitting and publishing the same post to multiple websites produces less value for your site, and in extreme cases can prevent your pages from ranking.

Thin content

Thin content includes online articles that are short in length (less than 500 characters), general in nature or high level.

As a result, they add little to no value for web users or searchers. Search engines value fresh, timely content.

Low quality hosts

Syndication sites are websites dedicated to hosting and publishing content for the sole purpose of backlinks. These sites have no true followers and Google will penalize your site for collecting backlinks from these hosts.

No. 4 Buying links

The Flag

If your SEO agency devotes budget to buying links, your Black Hat SEO radar should go off. Paid links are a gray area and what constitutes a paid link is often debated. [Watch this video](#) from Google's former head of web spam Matt Cutts for more details on the factors Google uses for identifying paid links.

Google frowns upon paid links because the links are an attempt to manipulate search engine results. Cutts even likens buying links to buying reviews on Amazon. Focus on building strong relationships with relevant, authoritative sites in your industry and sharing valuable content that provides credit to your site as the source.



No. 5 Exact match anchor text

In an effort to cut down on keyword stuffing, Google penalizes sites that have too much exact match anchor text in their backlink profile. Anchor text is the word or words in a link on a webpage. Exact match anchor text includes any broad category level term such as shoes, cars, sports and vacation.

Exact match anchor text is a red flag because these keywords are competitive and have high search volume but using them alone does not help a user find his or her desired information.

Is there a better way?

Branded anchor text includes your company name or website name with what your service. For example: “Microsoft Computers”.

More descriptive terms as anchor text, also known as long tail anchor text, may be rewarded by Google. For example, descriptive link text like “Blue 2019 Ford Focus” is much more preferable than “Car.”

Anchor text examples by type

Exact match anchor:

- Video games
- Cars
- Mortgage loans

Branded anchor text:

- Microsoft
- Honda

Long-tail anchor text:

- Chicago Bulls warm-up pants
- Rose gold iPhone X

No. 6 Blog networks

Blog networks were a popular strategy for digital marketers. SEO strategists paid a small amount and in exchange their link was posted on a multitude of sites all over the web. These sites were usually owned by the same person or group, had thin content and hosted spun content. The most famous blog network was Build My Rank, which was subsequently penalized by Google.

What's the solution?

All efforts should be taken to remove any backlinks from blog networks. These blog networks can be hard to contact and you may have to disavow the links using Google Search Console.

How do I identify a blog network?

When attempting to identify a blog network, consider the following:

- Are multiple sites hosted on the same IP?
- Do the sites have duplicate content?
- Are multiple sites designed using the same theme and navigation?
- Does their backlink profile interlink?

No. 7 Press releases

Press releases used to be considered one of the best forms of link building but with Google's Penguin and Panda updates, some press releases are categorized as link schemes. In Google's eyes, these press releases were disseminated for the sake of circulating a company's name and earning backlinks.

What to Know

If a press release has strong content and legitimately desires to alert journalists of important news, it won't be punished by Google. If a press release is sent to weak syndication sites and is filled with spammy links, it'll be punished. Put your press releases in front of influential people and media, not search engines.

Strategies for strong link building

There's plenty of SEO tactics but remember that Google is always rewarding white hat strategies and penalizing black hat methods.

It's imperative to ensure that the links pointing back to your site are from reliable sources with quality information. When building your backlink profile, remember these **five takeaways**:

- 1. A healthy backlink profile needs to be diverse, not only in the anchor text but also in the types of links you're gathering**
- 2. Everything in moderation. Blog comments and press releases aren't bad once in a while but they're not tactics to use to earn a large amount of links**
- 3. Guest posting can be great if the articles are helpful, in-depth and hosted on reputable sites**
- 4. Being linked as a resource on a reputable site is always helpful**
- 5. Penalties or link devaluation may occur when the majority of backlinks follow the same pattern. This happens when most links have identical characteristics.**

If you have a troubled link building past, Google provides an opportunity to improve. Google allows site managers to disavow negative links. Google instructs site managers to contact the webmasters of those linking sites and ask for link removal. If they refuse, you can submit a list of these links and webmasters to Google, which will add them to your blacklist and will stop including these links in your backlink profile.

SEO Wrap-Up

Your SEO agency is an extension of your marketing department. If they're using outdated or Black Hat methods, you need to know and act accordingly.

While you may not stay attuned to every algorithmic update or new best practice, it's critical you're aware of the red flags outlined in this guide. Staying informed and knowledgeable about how your SEO agency is marketing your company will help you protect your company from potential penalties and other consequences of improper SEO techniques.

If your SEO agency implements some of these red flag tactics and doesn't acknowledge the potential pitfalls, it's time to start searching for a new SEO agency.

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