



Strategic Linking in Hospitality: Build a Robust Link Popularity

How to get even more traffic to your website | By Max Starkov and Jason Price

Strategic Linking in hospitality and its important by-product, Link Popularity, are part of hotelier's toolkit for building a robust Web presence and taking advantage of the Direct Online Channel. Strategic Linking achieves two important goals: a) exposes your website to incremental traffic and highly qualified potential bookers, and b) builds your website's Link Popularity, a crucial criteria used by the search engines to determine how to rank the website in the search engine results.

Background:

Strategic Linking is the business strategy to establish links from highly relevant and authoritative websites to your website i.e. to build the "Link Popularity" of your hotel website. Link popularity is an important criteria used by the search engines (e.g. Google, Yahoo, etc) when ranking a website. The higher the link popularity and the quality of the links, the better the chances for a top position in the search engine results.

Link popularity refers to the number and quality of incoming links that are pointing to your website. Outside websites consider your own website important and wish to link. In the search engines' view, incoming links to your website are considered important since each incoming link is a "vote of confidence". Otherwise, why would any site link to your hotel website if it hasn't found something of value? Search engines recognize the number of incoming links in its algorithm that determines placement rankings, which may explain why you may appear on page 10 while your competitor appears on page 1.

Why Strategic Linking Makes Sense?

Strategic linking pursues two important objectives:

Business Objective: Position your website at all touch points with potential customers

Ideally a hotel website should aim to position itself at all direct "points of contact" with potential Internet travel bookers. By establishing links to your website from non-transactional hotel directories, travel sites, key customer segment affinity sites, and demographic oriented services, you are extending your "tentacles" to websites each with a loyal purchasing community. By establishing a link from these sites, you are leveraging these sites' marketing dollars and benefiting from their existing traffic.

Search Marketing Objective: Boost your website's Link Popularity

An important by-product of this strategic linking business strategy is the "link popularity" of the hotel website, a crucial criteria used by the search engines to determine how to rank the website. If other websites consider your website important enough to link to, in the search engines' view your website is considered important as well. Each incoming link is considered a "vote of confidence" for your site. The more qualitative and authoritative sites link to your site, the higher the link popularity and the better the ranking in the search engine results.

Link Popularity Dos and Don'ts

Link popularity is an ongoing process and in this sense a hotel should never stop building its link popularity. Link Popularity is definitely an important step in the creation of "multiple points of entry to your hotel product."

Benefits:

- Improve search engine rankings
- Reach customer segments that are of interest to your property (e.g. family travelers, wedding planners, meeting planners, etc)

- Increases direct online distribution channels - driving traffic back to your hotel website.
- Increased opportunities for a consumer to find and book your hotel which means increased sales (more “tentacles” across the Web)

Things to consider:

- Only relevant links matter: on travel directories, hotel directories, destination portals, CVB websites
- Only property listings with “hot link” i.e. clickable link to the hotel website matter
- Never establish a link for the sake of linking or building your Link Popularity. Always consider if it makes good business sense to have this link, if the audience of the site you link from is appropriate for your hotel, etc.
- A few high quality links (links from relevant and high traffic sites) may outweigh a large link count but from low traffic, low respected sites.
- Link popularity is an ongoing process and in this sense a hotel should never stop building its link popularity and aim to grow its link popularity every year.

Things to avoid:

- Link Farms – these are specialized vendors and SEO companies that create hundreds of irrelevant links to the hotel website from low quality or fictitious, specially developed for the link farm sites. These links from link farm sites have no value in the eyes of the search engines and your site may be “banned” by the search engines.
- Link Exchange – this “mom and pop” old fashioned way of exchanging links with website by approaching them and offering a link exchange is a rather naïve and very time consuming way of link creation.
- Outgoing Links vs. Incoming Links Ratio. Avoid outgoing links as it may hurt your Link Popularity and incoming vs. outgoing link ratio.

Outgoing Links:

Another important issue is the question of the outgoing links. The search engines perceive an outgoing link (i.e. link from your website to another website) as a sign of “weakness” of your website- obviously your site lacks certain content and that is why it needs “help” from another site.

Outgoing links may have negative impact on the link popularity of the website, especially if its link popularity is low. On the other hand the hotel has no control over the websites it links to: they may feature your competition or an online discounter as it is often the case. It is very expensive nowadays to attract traffic to your website, and you do not want to lose it to other websites that easily.

What is the Best Approach?

A few critical steps can launch a successful link strategy. First, determine the high quality sites that are relevant to your hotel product and customer segments, and desirable for your link creation strategy. Such rating tools to help consider include measuring their own link popularity, Google Page Index, and Alexa rating. These can help determine the robustness of one website over another for incoming links. Second, develop a link creation list by category. Then list major and minor players within each of these categories using a rating tool. Third, physically, and often laboriously, reach out and build links, paid or non-paid. You may be surprised how many high quality websites offer free links. Lastly, create a budget as many of the higher quality links have monthly, quarterly, or annual charges. Fees for links from high

quality sites are worth the investment. Here are examples of categories to consider in the link creation process:

- Luxury travel directories
- Online event and Meeting planner services
- Online group travel services
- Online wedding planning sites
- Online honeymoon planning sites
- Online hotel and Travel directories
- Local travel and hospitality services
- Destination and city directories
- Travel guides
- Online golf directories and portals
- Online spa directories and portals
- Gay & lesbian services
- African American travel sites
- Latino travel sites
- Asian-American travel sites
- Family travel sites
- Romantic getaways
- Many more relevant sites

Interpreting Link Count

The actual link count is not a stagnant figure and may at times decrease before it increases. One obvious reason is that the website with the incoming link may no longer exist. It may also explain changes in the search engine algorithms with higher or lower restrictions on what they recognize and value as an incoming link. The general trend should be for overall growth and this may not be in link count alone. At the 2006 Search Engine Conference in New York City, search experts suggest a few high quality links (links from relevant and high traffic sites) may outweigh a large link count but from low traffic, low respected sites.

Conclusion:

Strategic Linking and its by-product, Link Popularity of the hotel website, are important aspects of the Direct Online Marketing and Distribution Strategy of any hotel company. Strategic linking can produce incremental traffic, qualified bookers, and immediate results, while keeping the hotel company in full control of the brand and pricing strategy.

Strategic Linking is an ongoing process. In this sense a hotel should never stop building its link popularity and should aim to grow its link popularity on an ongoing basis. Consider seeking advice from an experienced Internet marketing hospitality consultancy to help you build a robust Strategic Linking and Link Popularity, and utilize the Direct Online Channel to its fullest potential. From experts who can teach hoteliers and their staffs best practices and provide crucial professional development, as well as guide hotel company's direct Internet distribution and marketing strategies, including search marketing and online brand building strategies, e-CRM, website optimization and email marketing strategies and online sponsorships.

