



Exchange links and lure new customers — for free

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Let's see. You've done the basics. You've created a well-designed website that markets your company and your products/services. You've listed it on the major search engines so that web surfers can find you.

But you still aren't getting quite the number of visitors you expected. How can you lure more customers to your website without spending a fortune?

Many small businesses are trading referrals with other businesses on the web, just like they do in the offline world. When I was planning an event last year, the caterer spontaneously handed me business cards for a florist and a photographer she'd worked with and really liked. Those kinds of referrals happen all the time in the real world. Make them work for you online as well.

Creating reciprocal links

In the web world, referrals usually take the form of *reciprocal links*. That is, you agree to put a link for another company somewhere on your site in exchange for it linking to your business on its site.

To negotiate reciprocal links, you identify companies that might be willing to trade links with your business, and email or phone them to suggest the exchange. Then craft a page (or pages) on your site to feature your reciprocal links. You can position this page based on how you set up your links.

Reciprocal links can help your website in two ways. They can deliver traffic directly to your site, and they can improve your ranking on search engines such as Google that use *link popularity* as a proxy for your site's popularity and thus, ranking. Small businesses report differing levels of success with the amount of traffic these links generate directly. Some say reciprocal links bring a large percentage of traffic. Others say it's only a trickle. But figure that since you never know which visitors may turn into buyers, even a small flow of free traffic is a good thing.

What kinds of businesses should you seek out to exchange links with? Here are 6 suggestions:

1. **Companies that offer complementary products or services.** One of the more popular ways to do reciprocal linking is to trade links with companies that offer complementary services — things your customers need in addition to your product or service as part of the same experience or solution. An obvious example is a golf products maker who links to resorts, golf-clothing sites, golf cart makers, or golf vacation agencies.
2. **Unrelated companies that serve your customers.** You can also share links with other companies that target your same customers, but serve very different needs for them.

InnStyle's "Links for Innkeepers" features reciprocal links to about 12 other companies offering an array of services for the bed-and-breakfast trade, including an insurance company that specializes in B & B coverage, a soap manufacturer and a coffee company. Founder Susan Sternthal says the links aren't her best traffic generator, but they are "one more vehicle to bring people to your site. That's what you need."



3. **Local businesses.** Some businesses share links with other local businesses, even when there is no complementary service or shared niche customer base. For example, a local dry cleaner might put up links to a nearby printer, camera shop or coffeehouse. The key is to promote a number of other local businesses by trading links. Such links may not provide as much traffic as links to complementary businesses, but if they are not time-consuming to arrange, they can still bring new customers.
4. **Your suppliers and distributors.** Companies whose products you sell, or that sell your company's goods, also are good to trade links with. Provide links to vendors whose products/service you sell, as well as to companies who purchase and use these services (i.e., a hair salon or company that makes special hair care products).
5. **Chamber of Commerce, local business listing sites and other community organizations' sites.** Some chambers of commerce and convention and visitor's bureaus have online directories of businesses, which typically are populated with local members. It is very possible to get a significant number of online visits from various chambers of commerce. Check with other organizations to which you belong to see if they have an online directory. In addition, there are a plethora of FREE sites that specialize in local business listings (try www.local.google.com). Check with these sites about getting your site, business, or service listed on their site.
6. **Competitors.** Odd as it may sound, it may make sense to share links with competitors in some circumstances. The Inn at Occidental has a page on its website called, "[Inns We Like](#)," which links to about 20 other high-end bed and breakfasts in California and Arizona, including several within a 20-mile radius of the Inn at Occidental. When I asked innkeeper Bill Bullard why he would do that, he replied that in a market where inns all tend to fill up on weekends, competition isn't his biggest concern, and these links are some of his better online traffic generators. One nearby inn sends him more than 500 online visitors a year.

Just remember, make a point of keeping the list of links short and relevant to your customers and be selective in choosing businesses you feel good about recommending to your customers. Reciprocal links can be a great service, as well as a free way to reach new customers.