

The Small Business Backlink Checklist

A Practical Guide to Finding Quality Backlinks, Building Authority & Planning Your First 30 Days

Free SEO Resource | October 2026 | Prepared by Touchstone Infotech LLP

WHO IT IS FOR

Small-business owners, founders and marketing managers with little or no SEO experience.

WHAT YOU NEED

A website, a free Google Search Console account, a spreadsheet and a few focused hours a week.

HOW TO USE IT

Work through the sections in order. Tick the boxes on screen in most PDF readers, or on paper.

SECTION 01

Understanding backlinks

What is a backlink?

A backlink is a link on another website that points to a page on your website. People can click it to reach you, and search engines can follow it to discover and understand your pages.

Example: a local food blog's guide to the best bakeries in your city links to your bakery's seasonal menu page. That is a backlink to your website. The clickable words, such as "Riverside Bakery seasonal menu", are the **anchor text**.

Why do backlinks matter?

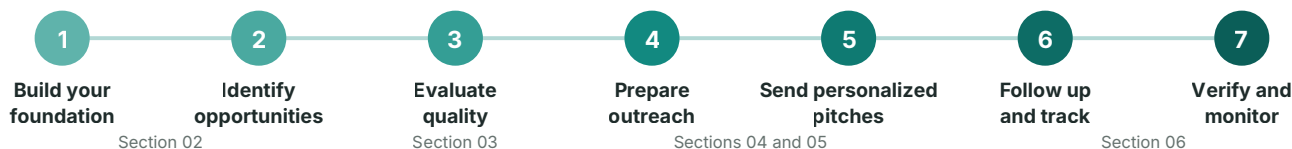
- **Discovery and ranking signals:** search engines use links to find pages, and links from relevant sites are one of many signals they may consider.
- **Credibility:** a reference from a respected source shows that others value your business.
- **Referral traffic:** readers who click arrive already interested in the topic.
- **Brand visibility and industry recognition:** mentions on trusted sites keep you in front of customers and show you are an established part of your sector.



WHAT BACKLINKS CANNOT GUARANTEE

Backlinks do not automatically produce rankings, traffic or leads. Link-building outcomes vary depending on industry competition, content quality, website authority, relevance and outreach effectiveness. Quality backlinks can support organic visibility, but no individual link guarantees ranking improvements. Likewise, backlinks, citations, brand mentions and credible coverage may support broader online discoverability, but visibility in AI-generated answers, such as ChatGPT or Google AI Overviews, is not guaranteed.

The seven-phase process



Before you begin

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ I can access my Google Search Console account, or can set one up. | ☐ I have a spreadsheet ready to track outreach. |
| ☐ I know which pages I most want to strengthen. | ☐ I can set aside regular time each week for this work. |
| ☐ I have a useful resource worth referencing, or a plan to create one. | ☐ I understand that results vary and are not guaranteed. |

Types of links

Type	What it is and why it can help
Editorial backlink	Chosen by a writer or editor because it helps readers. Often the most valuable kind.
Business citation	A directory or platform listing of your business details. Helps people confirm who you are.
Partnership link	From an organization you genuinely work with, such as a supplier or association.
Sponsored link	Placed in exchange for payment or other compensation. Must be labeled as sponsored.
Nofollow or UGC link	Marked so search engines do not treat it as an endorsement. Can still send visitors.

Link attributes

Attribute	In the code	Meaning
Followed	No attribute	Standard link that may pass ranking credit.
Nofollow	<code>rel="nofollow"</code>	Site does not want to pass credit to the page.
Sponsored	<code>rel="sponsored"</code>	Ads and paid or compensated placements.
UGC	<code>rel="ugc"</code>	User-generated content, such as comments.

To check a link, right-click it and choose your browser's Inspect option.

Nofollow, sponsored and UGC links are not worthless. Legitimate links can bring referral traffic, visibility and enquiries regardless of any ranking effect. Never ask a publisher to remove a required sponsored label or disguise a paid placement as an editorial link. Google's [spam policies](#) treat buying or selling links for ranking purposes as link spam.

SECTION 02 | PHASES 1 AND 2

Find and prepare link opportunities

PHASE 1 Build your foundation

- ☐ **Set up Google Search Console** to see search performance, indexing status and the Links report, which lists sites linking to you.
- ☐ **Select 3 to 5 target pages** that matter to your business and that others could reasonably reference, such as a detailed guide or a page with original information.
- ☐ **Review content quality.** Update outdated information, add practical examples and remove thin sections.
- ☐ **Check basic technical SEO.** Target pages should work well on mobile and show as indexed in Search Console's URL Inspection tool.
- ☐ **Prepare one genuinely useful resource**, such as a guide, checklist, calculator or original data. Service pages can earn links too, but editors usually reference informational content more readily.
- ☐ **Claim legitimate citations** such as Google Business Profile, Bing Places, your industry association and chamber of commerce, with consistent business details everywhere.

Citations and editorial backlinks are different. Citations help people and search engines confirm your business details. Editorial backlinks are references a publisher chooses to make. Directory listings do not replace editorial links, and low-quality directories that list any site for a fee are best avoided.

PHASE 2 Identify opportunities

Treat everything you find here as a lead to research, not a guaranteed link. You will screen each one in Section 03.

Competitor backlink research

- ☐ Pick 2 to 3 competitors that rank for your customers' searches.
- ☐ Run each through a backlink tool and note relevant linking sites.
- ☐ Prioritize sites that link to several competitors.
- ☐ Log each site once. Paid gap tools (Semrush, Ahrefs) are optional.

Other places to look

- Industry publications and newsletters
- Associations and member directories
- Local partnerships (label any sponsorships)
- Resource pages on your topic
- Unlinked mentions, via Google Alerts
- Broken links, via Check My Links
- Expert comment for journalists
- Suppliers and customers you work with

Search examples

Search query	May find	Search query	May find
"your industry" "resources"	Resource pages	"your business name" - site:yourdomain.com	Your mentions
"your topic" "recommended resources"	Curated lists	"your topic" "contributor guidelines"	Contributor sites

Replace quoted words with your own terms. Check a contributor site's editorial standards before pitching.

Tools for small businesses

Tool	Access	Tool	Access
Google Search Console	Free	Ahrefs Backlink Checker	Free, limited preview of a paid tool
Google Alerts and Sheets	Free	Moz Link Explorer	Free, limited with a Moz account
Check My Links (Chrome)	Free finds broken links	Hunter.io	Free, limited finds public work emails
Semrush	Paid limited free account	Plans and limits change. Check each provider's current terms.	

SECTION 03 | PHASE 3

Evaluate backlink quality

About authority scores. Domain Rating (Ahrefs), Domain Authority (Moz) and Authority Score (Semrush) are third-party estimates, not Google ranking scores. A high score alone does not make a link valuable: topical relevance, genuine credibility, editorial context, a real audience and natural placement matter more.

The five-point screen

Award one point per true statement. This is a screening aid, not a ranking formula: serious spam concerns override the score.

1	Relevant. The website is relevant to your business or audience.	1 point ☐
2	Credible. It appears legitimate, with real authors, contact details and content written for people.	1 point ☐
3	Editorial context. Your link would sit within useful content where it makes sense for readers.	1 point ☐
4	Real audience. It has readers likely to value your content, shown by regular publishing.	1 point ☐
5	No link schemes. No paid followed links, large-scale link exchanges or other manipulative practices.	1 point ☐

0 to 2 Generally low priority	3 Investigate further	4 Worth prioritizing	5 Strong prospect
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WARNING SIGNS

- **Link farms:** unrelated articles that exist mainly to host links.
- **PBNs:** private networks of sites run by one owner to create links.
- **Manipulative paid schemes:** undisclosed followed links for sale.
- **Irrelevant placements:** links inserted where they make no sense.
- **Suspicious outbound links:** many keyword-heavy links per post.
- **Link sellers:** sites that exist mainly to sell backlinks.

Sponsored content is not automatically a warning sign: many legitimate publishers label sponsored placements clearly.

Indexing: a `site:example.com` search is only indicative. For your own site, use Search Console's Page indexing report.

SECTION 04 | PHASES 4 AND 5

Prepare and send outreach

A small number of well-researched, individual messages is usually more effective, and more respectful, than a large generic campaign.

- 1 **Choose a prospect** that scored 4 or 5 on the screen.
- 2 **Read the relevant article in full** and note what it already links to.
- 3 **Define the reader benefit** in one sentence. If you cannot, skip this prospect.
- 4 **Find a public editorial contact**, usually the author or editor.
- 5 **Check your resource** is live, current and easy to read on mobile.
- 6 **Send a concise request** that is easy to accept or decline.

PROTECT YOUR SENDER REPUTATION

- Send from your own business domain, using your real name.
- Ask your email provider to confirm SPF, DKIM and DMARC are set up, so receiving servers can verify your emails.
- Send at a steady, modest pace, with plain emails and no attachments.
- Never send the same pitch to a long list of websites.

RESPONSIBLE OUTREACH

- Comply with applicable email and privacy laws.
- Honor opt-out requests and stop contacting anyone who declines.
- Never use purchased or scraped mailing lists.
- Use honest, accurate subject lines.
- Respect publisher preferences, such as "no guest posts".

Outreach preparation checklist

- ☐ I have read the full article I am contacting them about.
- ☐ My resource genuinely adds something for its readers.
- ☐ I am using a public, appropriate contact channel.
- ☐ My email mentions a specific detail from their content.
- ☐ I am not offering payment for a followed link.
- ☐ I have logged this contact in my tracking sheet.

SECTION 05 | PHASE 5

Email outreach templates

Starting points only. Personalize every message with a specific detail and your own explanation of the reader benefit. A template sent unchanged is easy to recognize and easy to ignore.

Template 1: Suggesting a valuable resource

Subject: **Resource suggestion for your article on** [topic]

Hi [First name], I read your article on [topic] and found your point about [specific detail] useful.

We recently published [resource name], which covers [what it adds, such as updated figures or a free template]. It may help readers who want to [reader goal]: [URL]

No problem at all if it is not a good fit.

Best regards, [Your name], [Role], [Business name]

Template 2: Reporting a broken link

Subject: **A broken link on your** [page title] **page**

Hi [First name], while reading your [page title] page, I noticed the link to [resource name] no longer works.

If you need a replacement, our guide on [topic] covers similar information: [URL]. Either way, I thought you would want to know.

Best regards, [Your name]

Template 3: Requesting attribution for a mention

Subject: **Thank you for mentioning** [business name]

Hi [First name], thank you for mentioning [business name] in your article on [topic].

If it would help your readers, would you consider linking the mention to [URL], so they can find the [product / service] easily?

Thanks again, [Your name]

Do: keep it brief, mention one specific detail, explain the reader benefit and make it easy to decline. **Avoid:** exaggerated claims, false familiarity, pressure, offering payment for a followed link or requesting keyword anchor text.

SECTION 06 | PHASES 6 AND 7

Follow-up, verification and monitoring

PHASE 6 Follow up respectfully

- ☐ If there is no reply, one polite follow-up after about a week is generally reasonable. Avoid repeated messages.
- ☐ Reply in the same email thread so the context is clear.
- ☐ Stop contacting anyone who declines, asks you to stop or still does not reply after a follow-up.
- ☐ Thank everyone who replies, including those who say no.
- ☐ Record every contact, follow-up and outcome in your tracking sheet.

PHASE 7 Verify and monitor

- ☐ Confirm a new link works, points to the right URL and record its attribute and anchor text.
- ☐ Judge its relevance and referral potential: will your customers read this page?
- ☐ Each month, review new and lost links in Search Console's Links report or a backlink tool.
- ☐ Review organic traffic and visibility for target pages, plus referral visits in your analytics.
- ☐ Measure relevant enquiries and conversions, such as forms, calls or sales.

Interpreting results: rankings change for many reasons, including competitor activity, search engine updates and seasonal demand. Ranking improvements cannot automatically be attributed to an individual backlink, so look at trends across several months.

Link building mistakes to avoid

- ☐ Buying followed links or joining link networks
- ☐ Chasing links only for a high DA or DR score
- ☐ Sending the same email to large lists
- ☐ Pitching pages that offer nothing new
- ☐ Repeating keyword-rich anchor text
- ☐ Bulk listings on low-quality directories
- ☐ Asking publishers to remove sponsored labels
- ☐ Contacting people who have declined

SECTION 07

Your first 30 days

Focus on preparation and a small, well-run outreach test. Numbers are suggested activity levels, not expected backlink results.

WEEK 1 Prepare

- ☐ Review existing backlinks in Search Console
- ☐ Identify 2 to 3 relevant competitors
- ☐ Select 3 to 5 useful pages
- ☐ Improve or prepare one link-worthy resource

WEEK 2 Research

- ☐ Identify approximately 15 to 20 potential websites
- ☐ Evaluate relevance and credibility
- ☐ Prioritize prospects scoring 4 or 5

WEEK 3 Outreach

- ☐ Start a small, personalized outreach campaign
- ☐ Record every contact
- ☐ Track replies and feedback

WEEK 4 Review

- ☐ Send appropriate follow-ups
- ☐ Verify any earned links
- ☐ Review progress
- ☐ Plan next month's opportunities

SECTION 08

Tracking template and glossary

Website	Contact or editor	Target page	Your resource	Score (0 to 5)	Contact date	Follow-up date	Response	Link status	Notes
cityfood.example	Food editor	Best bakeries guide	Seasonal menu page	4	3 Nov	10 Nov	Positive	Live, followed	Example row

Backlink

A link on another website pointing to a page on yours.

Referring domain

A unique website linking to you. Ten links from one site count as one.

Anchor text

The clickable words in a link, giving context about the linked page.

Editorial link

A link an editor chooses to include because it helps readers.

Nofollow

An attribute indicating the site does not want to pass credit to the linked page.

Sponsored

An attribute for ads and paid or compensated placements.

Domain Rating (DR)

Ahrefs' third-party estimate of backlink profile strength. Not a Google metric.

Domain Authority (DA)

Moz's third-party score estimating ranking potential. Not a Google metric.

Organic traffic

Visitors arriving from unpaid search results.

Google Search Console

A free Google service showing search performance, indexing and links.

SECTION 09

Your backlink building action checklist

- ☐ Review Google Search Console and its Links report.
- ☐ Choose 3 to 5 target pages and improve one resource.
- ☐ Claim and correct your legitimate business citations.
- ☐ Build a prospect list and score it with the five-point screen.
- ☐ Prepare your tracking sheet.
- ☐ Send a first small batch of personalized emails.
- ☐ Follow up respectfully and record every outcome.
- ☐ Verify earned links and note their attributes.

Monthly maintenance routine

01 Review new and lost backlinks	02 Identify new relevant opportunities	03 Update important resources	04 Check outreach responses	05 Monitor organic search performance	06 Repeat what provides real value
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Successful link building is not about collecting the largest number of backlinks. It is about earning relevant references from credible websites and creating content that deserves to be shared.

Further reading from Google: [Spam policies](#), [Qualify your outbound links](#), [Search Console Links report](#). This guide provides general educational information. Search engine policies and tool features change, so check official documentation for current guidance.