

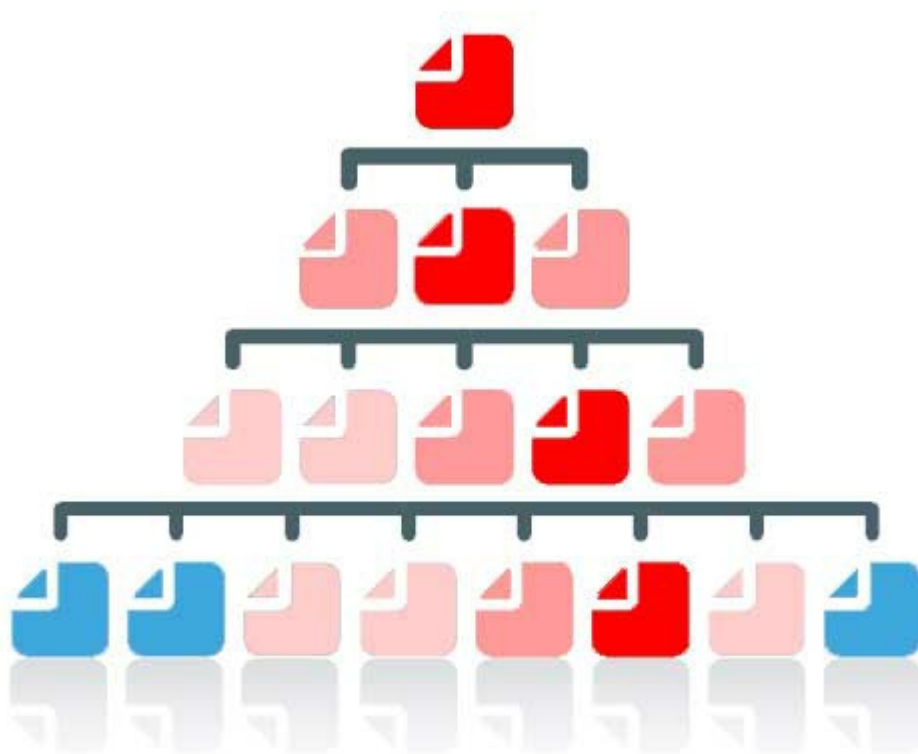
How To Optimize A Website Structure with Internal Links For SEO



How To Implement Internal Linking

Traditionally, one of the most important things you could do on a website to highlight your important content, was **link to important pages** often, especially from important pages. This was always important from a CRAWLING and RANKING point of view – and while I still essentially use this ideology, things have changed.

I used a ‘links-are-lasers’ analogy way back then, which I still think about today.



1. Links Are Lasers
2. Linking To A Page Heats Up A Page
3. Pages Get Hot Or Cold Depending On Number & Quality Of The Links To It
4. Cold Pages Don't Rank For Sh*t
5. Hot Pages Rank!

That was certainly how I used to think about link building and internal site structure. That is how I used to visualise how pages built up ‘ranking ability’ that could be spread about a site.

There was a time when you could very specifically structure a certain page to rank using nothing but links – and while you can still do that in 2017 in the end, Google will pick the page on your site that is **MOST RELEVANT TO THE QUERY** and best meets **USER EXPECTATIONS**.

That is – you can link all you want to any one page, but if Google has a problem with that page you are trying to make rank, or thinks there’s a better page on your site (with a better user satisfaction score, for instance) – it will choose to rank that other page, before the ‘well linked’ page. From my observations, at least. Sometimes it will flip flop between pages, when there are multiple pages on the site targeting the same term.

In 2017, Google is much more interested in the end-user quality of the *page* ranking, and the trust/quality score of the actual *website* itself, than the inbound links pointing to a single page or a clever internal keyword rich architecture holding content up.

As John Muellor points out in the above official video:

“we do use internal links to better understand the context of content of your sites”

...but if you are putting complicated site-structure strategy before high-quality single-page content that can stand on its own, you are probably going to struggle to rank in Google organic listings in the medium to long-term.

How Building Internal Links Used to Work

This is how I used to optimize sites – and to be clear – I still come at a site structure from this point of view – although any optimisation I do anywhere in 2017 is going to be very light and very random to avoid Googles filters.

I focused on optimising the main pages in the structure e.g. the pages we need to rank fast (esp on a new site).

I prioritised internal links to these pages (all the time remembering [first link priority](#)) – and it appeared, by doing so, Google did judge these pages as ‘important’ pages on my site – at least from a links point of view.

Links from other websites heated up the pages on your site that was linked to, AND that Pagerank and link equity is was spread across to the pages that page, in turn, linked to.

By making sure you linked to other relevant pages from these hot pages, you spread the heat – or LINK EQUITY as it became more commonly known, throughout the site. I would also always link to important pages from a home page, especially if these pages are not likely to attract many natural links.

Your home page is where your link equity seemed to ‘pool’ at one point.

The above process helped your entire site rank for a lot of keywords.

You could achieve benefits with secondary navigation arrays (which can be a good user experience signal in 2017) and links in text content.

How you build internal links on your site is going to depend on how large your site is and what type of site it is. Whichever it is – I would keep it simple in 2017.

I would err on the safe side these days, and vary your anchor text as much as possible – WITHIN TEXT CONTENT, rather than relying on a site-wide navigation array to beef up raw links to every page on the site.

Whatever you do, avoid anything that is easily detectable as too manipulative – Google does not reward lazy linking in 2017. It PENALISES IT OR IGNORES IT.

How To Do Internal Link Building in 2017

Lightly – by building only sensible & descriptive links to relevant pages.

I silo any relevance or trust mainly through links in a flat architecture in text content and helpful secondary menu systems and only between pages that are relevant in context to one another.

I don't worry about perfect Pagerank silo'ing techniques in 2017.

Sometimes I will ensure 10 pages link to 1 page in a theme, and not reciprocate this link. Other times, I will. It depends on the PR google juice I have to play with and again, if it feels right in the circumstance to do so, or the size of the site and how deep I am in the structure.

I like to build in-depth content pieces in 2017 that ranks for a lot of long-tail phrases. These days, I usually would not want those linked from every page on a site – because this practice negates the opportunities some internal link building provide.

There's no set method I find works for every site, other than to **link to related internal pages often** and where appropriate – it's where I find some creativity.

How Does Google Find My Internal Pages?

Traditionally – Google had to find a link to your home page on another web page – then it crawled all the pages it could find that was linked from your home page, and so on and so on – until it discovered all your pages on your site.

That was a long time ago. Now – opportunities are endless as to how Google will find your pages – although Googlebot still operates exactly as it always has done. If it finds a link it can crawl, it will crawl it – and index the page it crawls.

Just because Google can find your pages easier in 2017 doesn't mean you should neglect to build Googlebot a nice architecture with which it can crawl and find all the pages on your website.

Pinging Google blogsearch via RSS (still my favourite way of getting blog posts into Google results fast) and XML sitemaps may help Google **discover** your pages, find updated content and include them in search results, but they still aren't the best way at all of helping Google determine which of your pages to **KEEP INDEXED** or **EMPHASISE** or **RANK** or **HELP OTHER PAGES TO RANK** (e.g. it will not help Google work out the relative importance of a page compared to other pages on a site, or on the web).

While XML sitemaps go some way to address this, prioritisation in sitemaps does not affect how your pages are compared to pages on other sites – it only lets the search engines know which pages you deem most important on your own site. I certainly wouldn't ever just rely on xml sitemaps like that..... the old ways work just as they always have – and often the old advice is still the best especially in SEO.

XML sitemaps are **INCLUSIVE**, not **EXCLUSIVE** in that Google will spider ANY url it finds on your website – and your website structure can produce a **LOT** more URLs than you have actual products or pages in yur XML sitemap (**something else Google may PENALISE YOU FOR**).

Keeping your pages in Google and getting them to rank has long been assured by internal linking.

Traditionally, every page needed to be linked to other pages for Pagerank (and other ranking benefits) to flow to other pages – that is the traditional, and I think accepted theory, on the question of link equity.

I still think about link equity today – it is still important.

Some sites can still have short circuits – e.g. internal link equity is prevented from filtering to other pages because Google cannot ‘see’ or ‘crawl’ a fancy menu system you’re using – or Googlebot cannot get past some content it is blocked in robots.txt from rendering, crawling and rating.

I still rely on the ‘newer’ protocols like xml sitemaps for *discovery* purposes, and the old tried and trusted way of building a site with an intelligent navigation system to get it *ranking* properly over time.

Remember, Broken Links Are A Waste Of Link Power

... and a POOR USER EXPERIENCE.

The simplest piece of advice I ever read about creating a website / optimising a website was over a decade ago:

make sure all your pages link to at least one other in your site

This advice is still sound in 2017.

Check your pages for broken links.

Broken links are a waste of link power and could hurt your site, drastically in some cases, if a poor user experience is identified by Google. Google is a link based search engine – if your links are broken, you are missing out on the benefit you would get if they were not broken.

Saying that – fixing broken links is not a first-order rankings bonus.

The web changes, sometimes old links break. Googlebot isn't going to lose sleep over broken links. If you find things like this, I'd fix it primarily for your users, so that they're able to use your site completely. I wouldn't treat this as something that you'd need to do for SEO purposes on your site, it's really more like other regular maintenance that you might do for your users. **GOOGLE – 2014** (John Mueller)

Does Google Count Internal Keyword Rich Links To Your Home Page?

A long time ago I manipulated first link priority to the home page of a site for the site's main keyword – that is, instead of using 'home' to link to my home page, I linked to the home page with "insert keyword"). Soon afterwards the site *dropped in rankings* for it's main term from a pretty stable no6 to about page 3 and I couldn't really work out exactly any other issue.

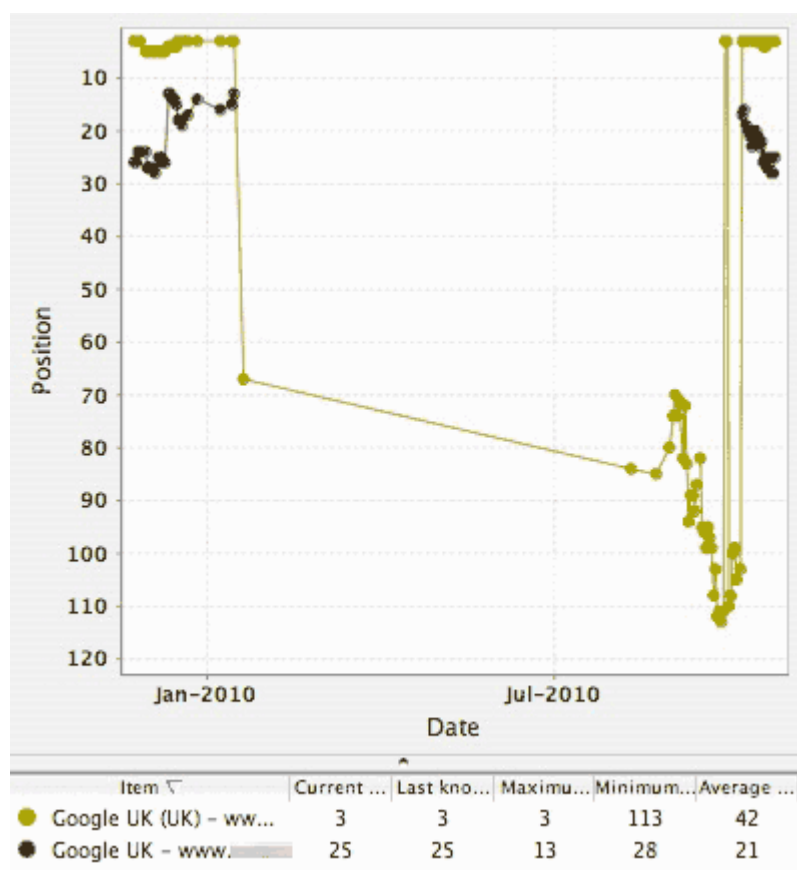
Of course, it's impossible to isolate if making this change was the reason for the drop, but lets just say after that I thought twice about doing this sort of SEO 'trick' in future on established sites (even though some of my other sites seemed to rank no problem with this technique).

So I formulated a little experiment to see if anchor text links had any impact on an established home page (in as much a controlled manner as possible).

*****Setup – I EDITED THIS A BIT: Basically the search term (anchor text) I was looking for was "keyword1 (not present on the target page) + 'keyword2 "' -(minus) 'keyword3 also not on target page but a common word that would accompany keyword1 "' – I did this to get rid of a lot of noise in the SERPs for more relevant pages to the original keyword phrase. Also this keyword (keyword1) appeared in anchor text on only ONE internal link on a static page which had no other links to the home page). *****

Result:

Well look at the graph below.



It did seem to have an impact.

However that massive drop for months is kind of worrying.

From Jan to July the site was nowhere for the phrase. Although it has just jumped 105 places back to no3 for the test term (which was a geographic location – not a made up word).

This change could be down to other reasons as I said – Google is always tweaking things. Perhaps this ranking drop would not have happened if the keyword was present on the target page.

It's very possible linking to your home page with keyword rich anchor text links (and that link being the ONLY link to the home page on that page) can have some positive impact in your rankings, but it's quite possible attempting this might damage your rankings too.

Trying to play with first link priority is for me, a bit too obvious and manipulative these days, so I don't really bother much, unless with a brand new site, or if it looks natural, and even then not often, but these kind of results make me think twice about everything I do in SEO.

I shy away from manipulative onsite SEO stuff in 2017 – and I suggest you do to.

How Many Links Is Too Many In A Website Dropdown Navigation System?

I answered in the Google Webmaster Forum a question about how many links in a dropdown are best:

The question was:

Building a new site with over 5000 product pages. Trying to get visitors to a product page directly from the homepage. Would prefer to use a two-level drop-down on homepage containing 10 brands and 5K products, but I'm worried a huge source code will kick me in the pants. Also, I have no idea how search engines treat javascript links that can be read in HTML. Nervous about looking like a link farm.

I answered:

Hobo – I'd invest time in a solid structure – don't go for a java script menu it's too cumbersome for users. Sometimes google can read these sometimes it can't – it depends on how the menu is constructed. You also have to remember if google can read it you are going to have a big template core code (boilerplate) on each and every page vying alongside flimsy product information – making it harder for google to instantly calculate what the individual products page is supposed to rank for.

I would go for a much reduced simple sitewide navigation in the menu array,

Home page links to **categories** > Categories link to **products** > Products link to **related products**

when you go to category links the links relevant in that category appear in the menu. Don't have all that pop down in a dropdown – not good for users at all. Keep code and page load time down to a minimum...



JohnMu (Google Employee) + 2 other people say this answers the question:

I thought seeing as somebody from Google agreed, it was worth posting on my own blog.

The **most important** thing for me when designing website navigation systems is:

1. Make it easy for the user to navigate
2. Make it easy for Google to get to your content and index your pages

In terms of navigation from a landing page (all your pages are potential landing pages) what do you think the benefits are of giving people 5000 navigation options.

Surely if the page meets their requirements, all you need is two buttons. Home, and buy now! OK – a few more – but you get what I mean, I hope.

Less is more.

In terms of site structure – to be honest – I do not think categories in a site structure (on anything but the largest site) helps your product pages OR BLOG PAGES rank BETTER (I mean, where is the evidence for that, really although every SEO in the land tells you that? I have TESTED THIS OVER AND OVER AGAIN – note I don't have categories on this blog but all my pages rank very well – it's far more important JUST TO GET AS MANY OF YOUR SITE PAGES INDEXED AS POSSIBLE and RANKING HIGH IN GOOGLE OVER AS MUCH TIME AS POSSIBLE – forget about making your 1,000 products rank better via an internal navigation system by making them more relevant by passing through category or tag pages, just get them to rank with the keyword phrase you want to rank for in your navigation system). And remember [first link priority](#).

Once you realise getting your product pages indexed is the key, don't go for a mega-menu just because you think this is a quick way to solve your indexing problem.

Again, if you look at the Hobo site, I go for a minimal sitewide navigation system and prefer to use contextual links (links within my content) and links to related pages as a way Google can find content.

The tree system I mentioned above is a good quick and easy system of getting a site like a e-commerce website indexed but never use a mega menu – you don't need to (why do you want to obscure your content either at any time with a drop down menu?). I've considered in the past too that obscured links in drop down tags (or) could well be devalued by Google (it's an easy way to hide unimportant links). I've not had time to test that thoroughly though.

With a site structure, it's all about getting your content indexed. That's it.

Depending on how much Pagerank you have, you might need to ensure you are linking to your product pages you NEED to rank in Google OFTEN FROM MANY PAGES WITH PR to ensure these pages have enough Pagerank to GET INTO GOOGLE'S MAIN INDEX. Think about that. If you can't be bothered tell Google what your most important pages are on your site via your own internal navigation structure, why should Google bother ranking it at all or assigning it [Pagerank](#)?

I test a lot with this site, **but that's not to say it's perfect**. I'm aware too, I have a decent amount of REAL PAGERANK to play with which many wont. I don't think there is a perfect system to follow, just a sensible one.

PS – A basic HTML site map is an old friend, and Google actually does say in its guidelines for Webmasters that you should include a sitemap on your site – for Googlebot and users.

Use CSS Drop-Down Navigation Arrays for SEO Friendly Menus

You can create a dynamic dropdown menus on your site that meet accessibility requirements and is SEO friendly and then link your pages together in a Google friendly way.

Just be sure to employ a system that uses CSS and Javascript (instead of pure javascript & HTML tables) and unordered lists as a means of generating the fancy drop down navigation on your website.

Then, if javascript is disabled, or the style sheet is removed, the lists that make up your navigation array collapses gracefully into a list of simple links.

Just be sure and include that 'skip links' link if your lists are long or repeated page-to-page and appear above the content.

Remember, with Drop down menus:

- Drop-down menus are generally fine but the JavaScript triggering them can cause some problems for users with screen readers and screen magnifiers.
- A `<noscript>` alternative is necessary.
- The options offered in a drop-down should be repeated as text links on the same page, so use unordered lists with CSS to develop your menu.

Use a “Skip Navigation” link on large mega menu systems

Add a skip navigation link that brings the reader straight down to the main content of the page if you have a large menu system on every page. This allows users to skip the navigation array and get immediately to the page content. You won't want this on your visually rich page, so some simple CSS will sort this out. You can hide it from the visual browsers, but it will display perfectly in text and some speech browsers.

I don't like mega menu systems for websites, at all. Too many options promotes indecision.

The 3 Click Rule of Website Design

Many have written about the **Three Click Rule**. For instance, Jeffrey Zeldman, the influential web designer, wrote about the three click Rule in his popular book, *Taking Your Talent to the Web*. He writes that the three click Rule is “based on the way people use the Web” and “the rule can help you create sites with intuitive, logical hierarchical structures”.

On the surface, the **Three Click Rule** makes sense. If users can't find what they're looking for within three clicks, they're likely to get frustrated and leave the site.

However, there have been studies into the actual usefulness of the *3 click rule* by usability experts, generating real data, that basically debunks the rule as a gospel truth. That is, if a task takes more than 3 clicks to complete, a visitor will not manage to complete the task successfully.

The 3 click rule is the oldest pillar of accessible, usable website design, right there beside KISS.

How To Optimise A Website Structure with Internal Links

The **3 click rule**, at the very least, ensures you are always thinking about the website navigation system, but apply it in the following way:

“Don’t put important information on your site that is more than 3 clicks away from an entrance page”

This way you’ll ensure visitors see the important content on your website before they leave.

The Benefits of A Consistent Website Navigation & Page Layout

A key element of [accessible website development](#) is a clean, consistent navigation system coupled with a recognised, usable layout.

Don’t try and re-invent the wheel here. A clean, consistent navigation system and page layout allows users to **instantly find important information** and allows them to quickly find comfort in their new surroundings especially if the visitor is completely new to your website.

Visitors don’t always land on your home page – every page on your website is a potential landing page. Ensure when a visitor lands on any page, they are presented with simple options to go to the pages you want them to go to. Simple, clear calls to action that encourage a user to visit specific pages. Remember too, that just because you have a lot of pages on your site, that does not mean you need a mega-menu. You do not need to give visitors the option to go to every page from their entry point. You do not need a massive drop down menu either. Spend the time and invest in a simple site navigation menu and a solid site structure.

A traditional layout (2 or 3 columns, with a header and a footer) is excellent for accessible website design, especially for information sites.