



Article published on December 22nd 2011 | [Seo](#)

Anyone with a working knowledge of search engine optimisation (SEO) will already know that link building is an integral part of the process. Link building strategies vary greatly from one agency to the next: some are more effective than others, and perhaps more importantly, some are more ethical than others.

All but the most well funded link building initiatives must face the prospect of compromise. With limited resources, there is a choice to be made between ethical link building and unethical. On the one hand, unethical link building can produce fast results and requires little investment of time. On the other hand, ethical link building is sustainable in the long run and does not risk the reputation of either agency or client. Unfortunately for agencies and clients alike, there is no clear dichotomy between ethical "white hat" techniques and unethical "black hat" techniques - a "grey hat" area covers many widely used link building processes.

Perhaps the most unethical black hat tool in the link builder's arsenal is hacking. Some unscrupulous agencies and individuals use computer code to generate new web pages on existing, high-value domains such as .gov web sites. These pages can harbour backlinks to a web site that is being promoted and pass significant value to the link destination. This is unethical, illegal and potentially very dangerous.

Other black hat tools include spam-based link building techniques, such as sending meaningless, automated blog comments to thousands and thousands of different blogs. The vast majority of these links will never see the light of day as most blog owners quickly learn that automatic approval is a recipe for disaster. Those that do will pass little relevance and value to the link destination, although results can be impressive due to sheer weight of numbers.

Everything becomes less clear when you enter grey hat territory. While there are no strict and commonly agreed definitions in place, grey hat techniques often include the use of fake social media accounts for promotional purposes and affiliate cookie stuffing. Article spinning is also considered grey hat - this is the practice of turning a single article into several pieces of 'unique' content, often using a computer program. Buying blog posts and articles is another area that is widely regarded as grey hat. By definition, grey hat practices are perhaps morally questionable but never against the law.

True white hat techniques are steeped in the spirit of internet search. Rather than exploiting flaws in search engine algorithms, white hat techniques rely on playing by the rules. This type of link building takes a substantial investment of time and money due to fierce competition for good ranking positions - but the results are always worth it because they will be sustainable in the long run. White hat techniques include guest blogging, link baiting, on-page optimisation and the regular publication of unique, quality content.

Link building ranges from the extremely crude, fast and unethical to the painstakingly precise, slow and ethical. Ultimately, businesses that engage in black hat SEO techniques risk themselves and their clients for the sake of short-term gains. Those that employ white hat SEO techniques will expend more resources for the same gains, but their work will continue to benefit clients for years to come.

Article Source:

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[Robert Stevens](#) - About Author:

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Article Keywords:
backlink building,

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