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LINK BUILDING THROUGH CONTENT MARKETING

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A LITTLE HISTORY

In a past life, the eBook upon which this has been based opened with a quote (quickly dismissed, but illustrative) that went as follows:

'Keep away from link building. Don't do it. It's rankings poison.'

While the source of the quote is lost in the mists of time, it does represent a good yard stick of how some people were feeling in April of 2012, when the Penguin algorithm update first waddled into view.

The update was designed to penalise (whether manually or algorithmically) unethical link building practices that had been a staple of black hat search marketing for a number of years – such as link farming.

Over time, however, Penguin matured until it became part of the core Google algorithm – capable of devaluing unnatural links as well as penalising pages and sites (for a run-down of Penguin's evolution, you can read all about the march of the penguin on the Click Consult site) and, it is reasonable to assume, Google has not stopped developing the way it evaluates links and link profiles.

What this improvement in algorithmic parsing of link quality means for brands is that, in order to succeed online, it is vital for brands not only to build links, but to build natural, relevant link profiles.

THE ALGORITHM EPOCH

The original version of this eBook referred to the 3.1% of searches that were impacted by the original release and the 'billions' of searches that were carried out per month. How times have changed.

With the latest figures suggesting around 5.6 Bn searches per day (Google has stated it now handles 'trillions' of searches per year) and subsequent iterations of Penguin impacting more and more searches (see below), the impact of Penguin, even at single digit percentages, was astonishing.

- **Penguin 1.0** – impacted up to 3.1% of queries as of April 24th 2012

- **Penguin 1.1** – impacted less than 0.1% of queries as of May 26th 2012

- **Penguin 1.2** – impacted less than 0.3% of queries as of October 5th 2012

- **Penguin 2.0** – impacted up to 2.3% of queries as of May 22nd 2013

- **Penguin 2.1**– impacted up to 1% of queries as of October 4th 2013

- **Penguin 3.0** – impacted up to 1% of queries as of October 17th 2014

- **Penguin 4.0** – impossible to calculate as real time nature will mean impact will change constantly.

While Penguin undoubtedly improved user experience (UX), it was often the case that when a brand was penalised, the wait for a data refresh could leave brands struggling for – in the final case – up to two years.

However, the inclusion of Penguin in the core algorithm, and its consequent real time updates, meant that brands unfortunate or careless enough to earn a penalty no longer had to wait so long to see recovery once necessary audits and link detoxes were carried out.

QUALITY OR QUANTITY?

Google's business relies on advertising revenue; and the amount of money it can make from advertising depends on how large the potential audience will be for those advertisements; and the size of the audience depends on how useful Google's service is. Therefore, though by a winding route, there is an absolute financial imperative for Google to ensure the best possible user experience (UX) of its search engine results pages (SERPs).

It is easy to see, therefore, why Google arrived at the decision to use links as an indication of quality and, therefore, as a significant ranking factor. However, this was quickly gamed by black-hat practitioners who manipulated rankings by building quantities of low-quality links – hosted on link farms, posted in comment sections etc.

Through various updates, what Google then sought to promote was a 'natural' link profile – as, with some marketer's seeking to gain unfair advantage by paying for links from high domain authority (DA) sites, an unbalanced link profile also became suspicious.

Penguin 4.0 simply reduced the weighting of low-quality or manipulative links rather than penalise entire sites, encouraging brands to allow a far more organic link building process and, while a regular link detox remains important, it is no longer so panic inducing for sites to receive spammy inbound links.

While the conclusion of the previous iteration was correct in asserting that quality was more important than quantity, it is safe to say that now – while quality is more so – both are relevant to the building and maintenance of a natural link profile.

Arguably, however, the most important (or at least of equivalent) concern should be the relevance of a link. With advancements in machine learning allowing Google to better judge the relevance of a link, it is more important to ensure you are focusing on the right IDSs (internet domain suffixes) for national campaigns (.co.uk for UK campaigns for example), the right verticals (fashion bloggers for fashion sites), natural anchor text, and focusing on the relevancy signals of your links.

THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF LINK BUILDING

As began the previous version of this chapter, so long as you've been adhering to best practice, you will have been building your links in the right way historically, presently and will continue to do so in the future.

It is always the case that you should look to offer the best possible UX whatever industry you're in and in terms of link building, that means you should be putting the effort in to earn the links that will lift you in the SERPs.

Sites with great content, which load fast, are easy to navigate and that deliver a fantastic UX will get links – so while it is no quick process, all areas of a brand's online presence should be consumer focused and link-building is no different.

One thing that must change, however, is the reliance on DA as an indicator of quality – while it is a useful data point, DA is not the be all and end all of quality for an inbound link and should certainly rate below relevance in the calculation of a link's usefulness to your site.

OFF PAGE PERFECTION

Along with around 200 other factors, link building is a vital part of the strategy required to improve your brand's online visibility. While your UX may be as close to perfect as you can reasonably get it and while we believe that the best sites will inevitably earn links, it can be a long process and not one that most brands can afford to endure with the financial incentive to raise a site's rankings.

Therefore, it is necessary – and grows ever more so – for brands to find a method which has the capability to earn links faster while allowing them to retain a natural link profile, send the right relevancy signals.

That method is 'content marketing', which can work safely for your overall brand, online reputation and site visibility.
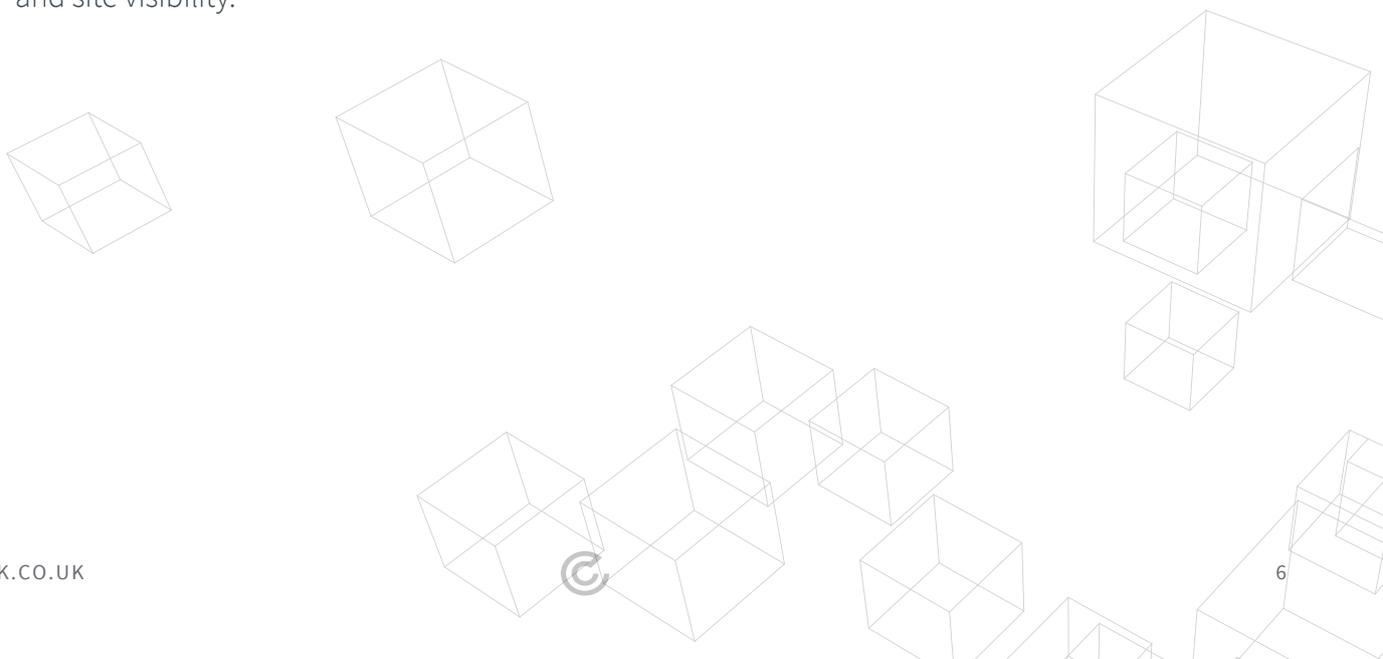
WHAT IS CONTENT MARKETING?

Content marketing is a process incorporating a number of different skill sets – design, copy, relationship building and more – but what will be the most commonly recognised description would be as: a process categorised by the dissemination of content through online influencers for the purpose of generating links.

A content marketing strategy seeks to extend the reach of content to a broader audience, drive traffic to your site and hopefully earn a broad range of safe links from a wide range of DAs but with a focus on relevancy. It does this by approaching online communities, social media networks, bloggers, the press and other industry relevant parties – or 'influencers'.
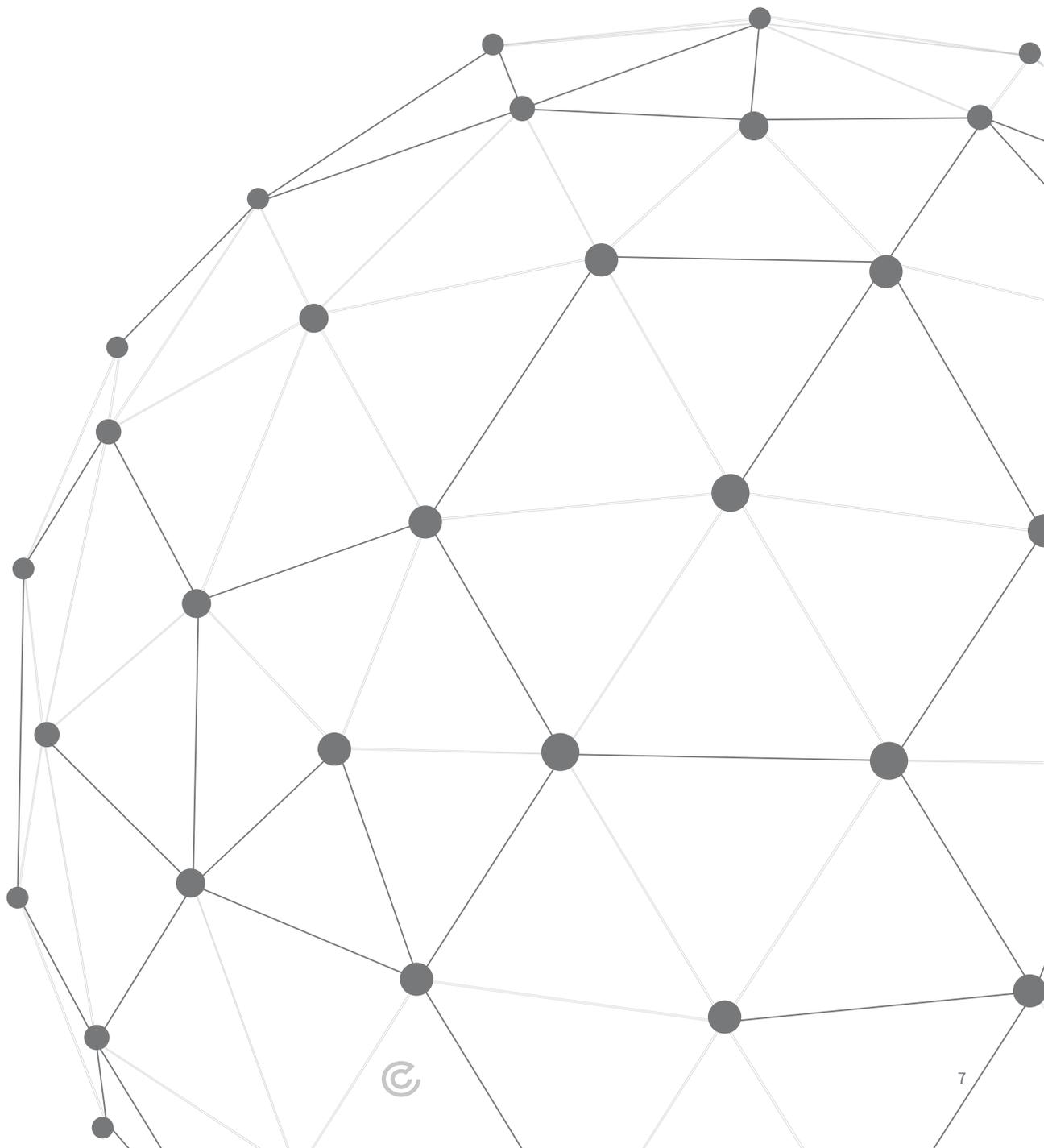
WHAT IS INFLUENCER TARGETING?

Influencer targeting shares a lot in common with keyword research, and should really stem directly from it. Across your site, you will be targeting specific industry keywords with product and service descriptions, blogs or other forms of content, headers, meta-descriptions and so on. If all is well, you should therefore have some kind of keyword strategy document – a list of what keywords you're targeting and for what part of the site, product or service for which they are being targeted.

This list – while unwieldy – with editing and prioritisation can serve as a fantastic resource for influencer targeting. The reason for this is that the appropriate influencer is likely to be targeting the same set of important keywords as your brand, and happily, there are plenty of tools that allow you to search specifically for those keywords prior to approaching your ideal candidates.

Though, obviously, as an expert in your industry, there may be key industry influencers that you would add to your dream team for brand promotion – and we would certainly encourage you to approach them. However, the better known the influencer, the more likely they will be to have been inundated with requests similar to your own.

The best way to approach this is to think of your list of industry superstars, the top of the pile desirable influencers as a kind of 'work-in-progress'. There will come a time when you will work with them, it may (in exceptional circumstances) come from the first contact, but in most cases they will remain an aspiration.

Instead target influencers with a similar status to that of your own brand. While agencies may have relationships with high-profile influencers that they can begin to employ immediately, if a brand is starting out in social outreach, it is best to start at an appropriate level.

FINDING YOUR LEVEL

For lack of a better known paradigm, I'm going to employ a football metaphor. Think of your industry as the English Premier League and industry influencers as transfer targets. In order to ensure the progress of your team, you need to ensure you're capturing the best talent you can.

However, it is never a level playing field – and unless your team is already at the top of the league, the chances are you will have to look for talent that isn't already on the radar of your competitors.

This means looking for up-and-coming talent and talent that currently plays at a similar level to you.
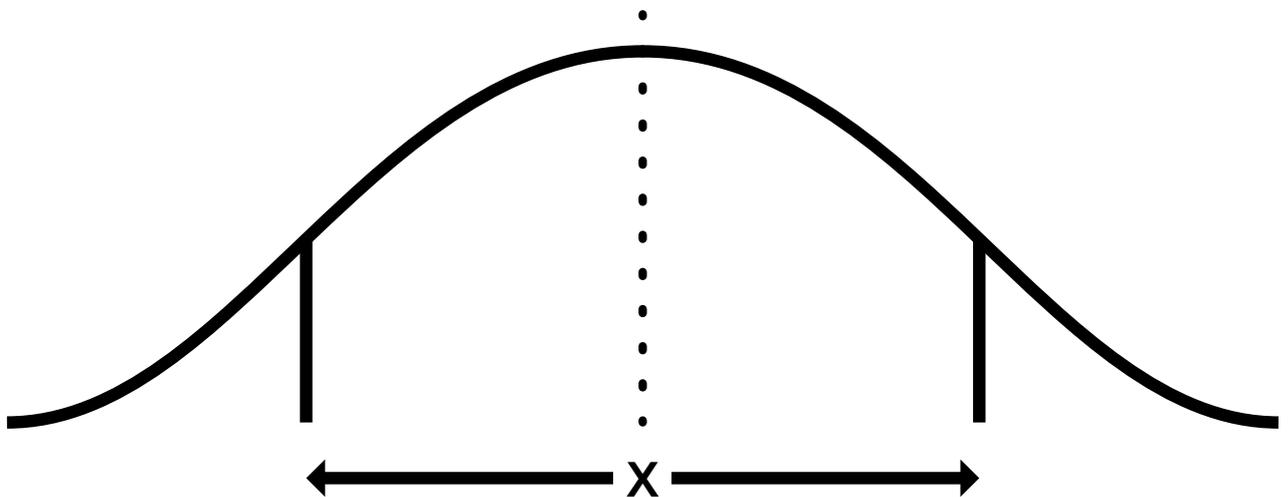
Think of your brand on a bell curve – while your position is X, the desirability of the influencer increases to the right, along with their esteem in the industry and vice versa, decreasing desirability and esteem to the left. Your curve represents your ability to harness their influence versus the desirability of that influence.

With content marketing, the best way of reaching a more desirable influencer is by shifting the position of X to the right and therefore the attractiveness of your brand to influencers (hence why Apple has no shortage of bloggers seeking to work with them at the launch of a new product). As this is tough to achieve in the short term, however, it is therefore best to target influencers around the top of the curve.
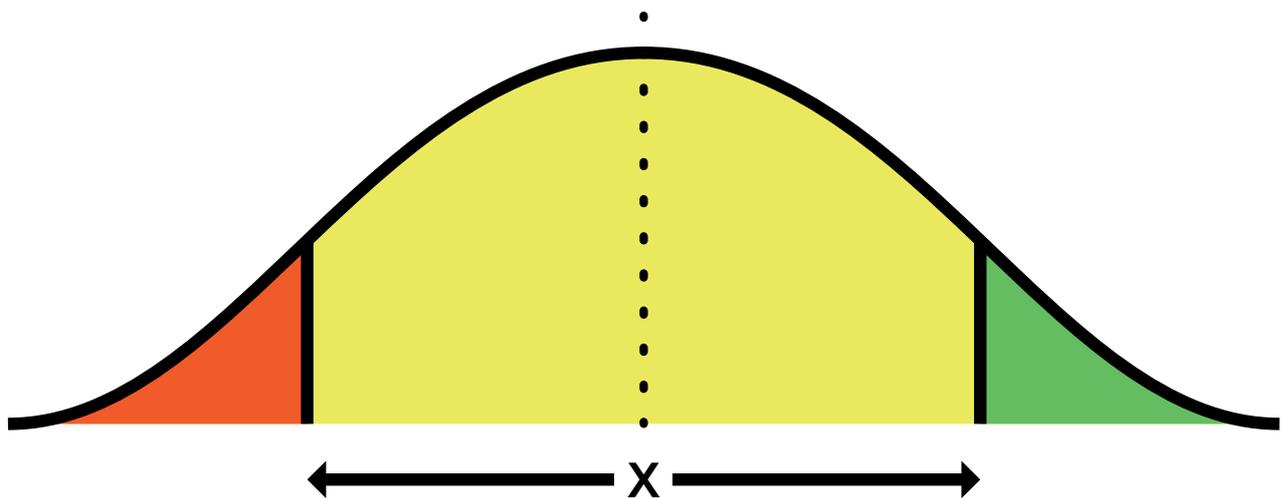
In this instance, that means looking to focus on influencers in this (albeit arbitrarily selected) pale green area.

Things to consider when deciding on your position along the access, and therefore your target range, will be your brand's audience on each platform and your average reach on each, your general rate of link accrual and your position in SERPs for key terms. By comparing this to the same factors of potential targets (you can implement basic 1-10 or 1-100 scoring systems for each data point for a total desirability score, and different attainability multipliers above and below your own position in the rankings to achieve an actual workable curve based on desirability vs attainability by plotting a total score), you will be able to increase your rate of success when approaching influencers.

While we wouldn't discourage brands from reaching out to influencers in the green area (low attainability vs high desirability) as the quality of the content will at least contribute to influencer decisions, equally don't dismiss approaches from the red area – as those who are there now may well be in the green next time around. Whatever is done with these two outlying areas, however, it is still better to focus the main bulk of your efforts on the pale green section.

REACHING OUT

Once you have decided on your list of primary targets for contact, the next stage is to actually approach them. This is probably the most difficult part of the process and comes with a variety of pitfalls. It is important to remember that you are aiming to build relationships with influencers, and that you will not be the only one seeking to do so.

With this in mind, it can be tempting to try to explain everything in the initial email – what you want, how you think it will benefit you and them, what the process will involve, how great your content is, and on and on. However, what people often forget is that time is at a premium – while you may have the best proposition, it may not even be read if the influencer sees a wall of text in an initial communication.

To that end, make your first email simple, to the point and interesting – think of it like a PPC add, with a restricted two or three lines, send a call to action that tempts the recipient into responding. Your first message should seek to intrigue, not seal the deal.

Therefore, if you've been impressed with the work of Joe Blogs, he occupies a good position in your curve and is relevant to your industry drop a simple message seeking only to initiate a dialogue.

Dear Mr. Blogs,

Having researched bloggers that write about [x], I've come across your work and been impressed (try to reference a specific piece of their work you have enjoyed and why you enjoyed it) – I have a project I'd be keen to work together on. Please respond if you'd like to have a chat to see if there's a way we can arrange this.

Yours,

Person A (Company Y)

Once you receive a reply, you can then look to begin making the case for collaboration, discuss content, compliment their past work – tell them what you've enjoyed and how you can add value to what they do. Remember that they have other options, and that it needs to be an exchange of value, if people see the benefits as too one-sided they are unlikely to participate.

Another problem with attempting to engage influencers is a lack of attention paid to the influencer's positioning. It's important that the content you're hoping they'll promote, must gel with their own branding – so ensure you read their blogs, mention their past work when discussing projects you can work on together (I think this would work a little like your blog on [x] from back in [y]).

Remember that, while they may not feel drawn to your first proposal, it is a relationship with the influencer that will benefit you the most in the long run. Share their content, keep in touch and pitch them your next piece of content too, show them that your request to work with them is based on respect for their output, not just on what they can do for you. Someone who feels valued will be far more receptive to working with you. However, even if they do agree to work with you first time, maintain contact – check in with them from time to time and listen to them if they have any of their own suggestions.

In this regard, being receptive is important, too – if there's a project you're working on, push a call-to-action across the social platforms you're focused on, with the right hashtags and wording you may be approached by bloggers you hadn't yet considered and to ensure best visibility and increase the chances of this happening, make the posts sticky for the duration of the targeting period.
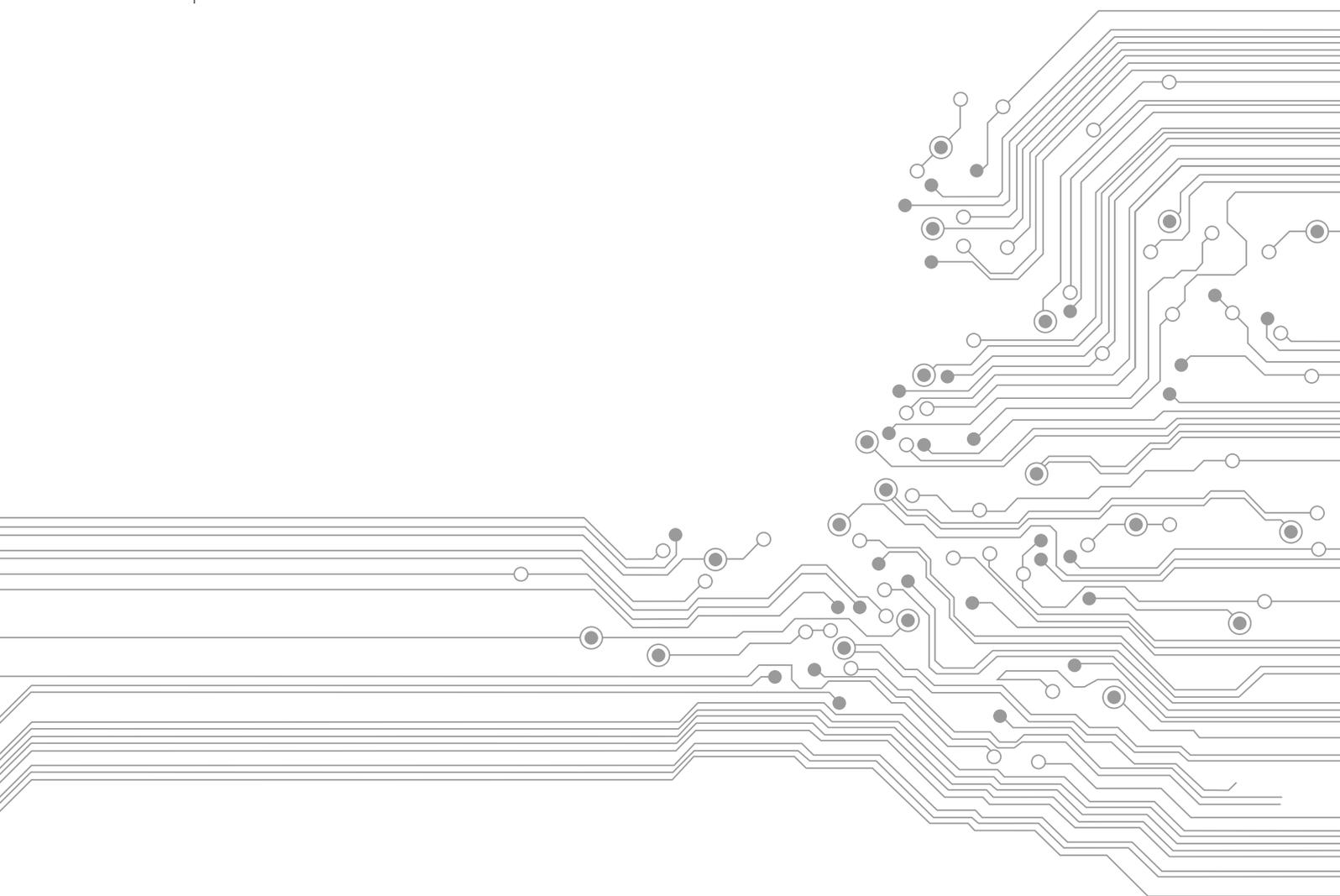
ACCESSIBLE, ADAPTABLE CONTENT

While in some cases it is best to have an influencer's input from the planning stage of the content you hope they'll help you promote, it is often beneficial to have something waiting – meaning that your design team can be working while you're engaging with the influencers.

This does mean, however, that the content should be easy to adapt to various audiences – if you're working on a project with ten bloggers, you don't want to have to create assets from the ground up for each of them, instead you need a more generic basic concept which can be personalised or segmented by the interests of your influencer's audience.

Again, by having a versatile and adaptable approach with your content, you open up a level of trust with your target influencers – allowing them to feel that you are both well prepared and open to their input and feedback while being able to harness their understanding of their audience to make the content more relevant to it and therefore more likely to achieve the targets you have set it.

Equally, don't over-brand your content – influencers work hard to build their audience and will fear losing it if they appear to be actively promoting specific brands and, therefore, to be losing their objectivity. So, while you don't want to make your brand invisible, it's worth not pushing it too hard either – the relationship should come first, the link second, brand promotion third.
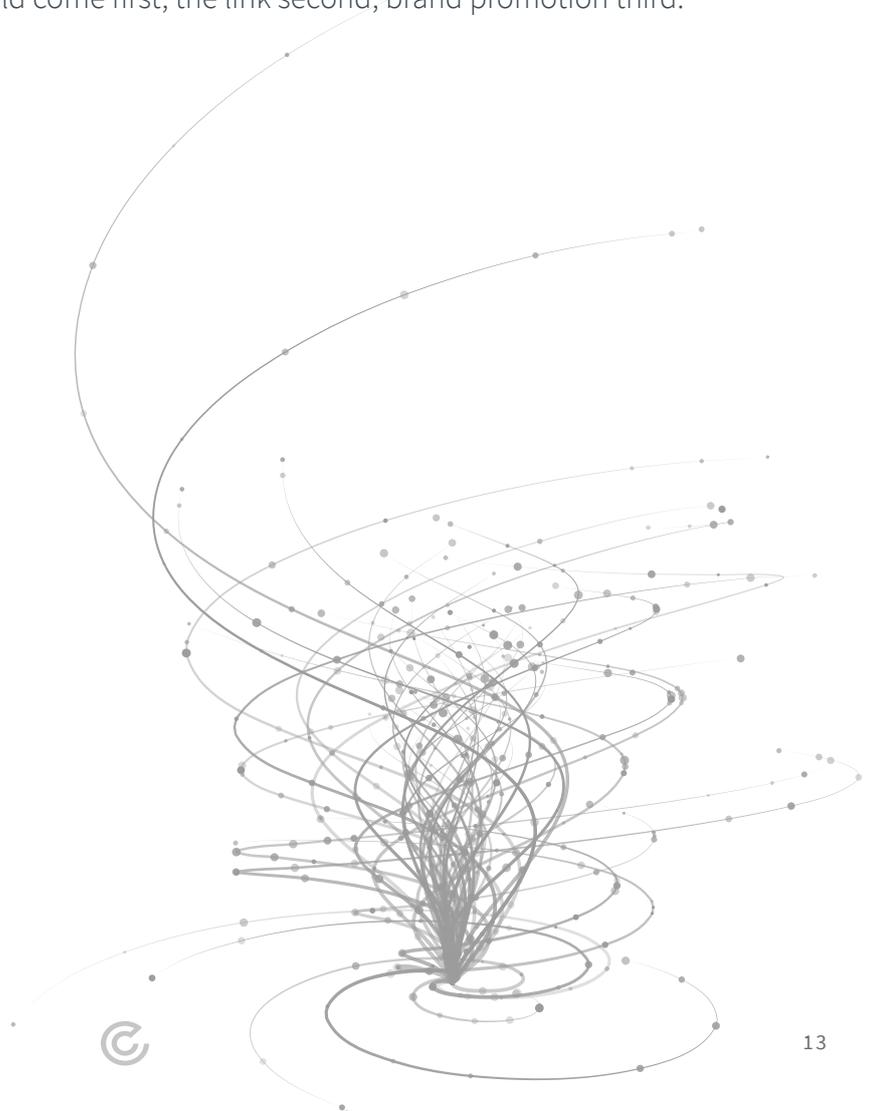
HOW TO BE A SOCIAL OUTREACH NINJA

TARGET THE RIGHT
INFLUENCERS

KEEP IT SHARP
KEEP CONTENT SHORT
AND TO THE POINT

BE FLEXIBLE
AIM TO ASSIST CONTACTS,
HELP THEM TO HELP YOU

TREAD SOFTLY
DONT MAKE DEMANDS, EARN
ENGAGEMENT

MAKE IT STICKY
KEEP CTA POSTS AT THE
TOP OF FEED

OUR FINAL THOUGHT

Link building is no easy task, and Google has been consistent in its campaign to remove any potential back-doors that could be used by the unscrupulous, yet that is how it should be. The world of search marketing needed to be encouraged to push towards a more creative, ethical model of marketing.

Outreach strategies, too, are part of this process – requiring exceptional content and the building of relationships in order to improve visibility. Digital marketing has, as such, become a creative force and a positive influence on the digital landscape.

In fact, the conclusion drawn last time around remains just as relevant today:

"Creativity has been at the forefront of marketing for decades, with the best campaigns catching the eye and really making people think.

By injecting some of that creativity into your content and outreach strategy you can potentially earn great links and help ensure your content gets seen by the right audience, attracting the right kind of traffic and engaging with online communities that are willing to share everything unique and interesting about your brand."

GET IN TOUCH WITH US TODAY

ABOUT US

Click Consult is a multi award-winning digital and search marketing agency with a focus on organic (SEO) and paid search (PPC). Part of global consumer brand business Ceuta Group, we have a team of 70-plus specialists and a portfolio of more than 60 clients worldwide.

Our complementary services include content marketing, outreach, social media, conversion rate optimisation (CRO) and international/multilingual search marketing. We can also offer training and consultation to support your teams or existing strategy.

Click was named SEO Agency of the Year 2019, adding to our long list of other awards and accolades, and also ranks within Econsultancy's 'Top 100 Digital Agencies', and Prolific North's 'Top 50 Digital Agencies'. We're also a Google Premier Partner, a Bing Select Partner and feature in The Drum Recommends.

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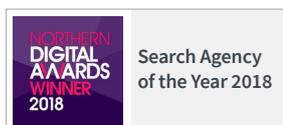
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