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SEO: THE SECRETS OF YOUR COMPETITORS' BACKLINK SUCCESS



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INTRODUCTION

This eBook explains how you can use competitor analysis to inform your search marketing strategy.

Remember that your sector's search engine results pages (SERPs) are unique to your industry – so too should be your strategy for optimisation.

WHAT ARE GOOGLE'S RANKING FACTORS?

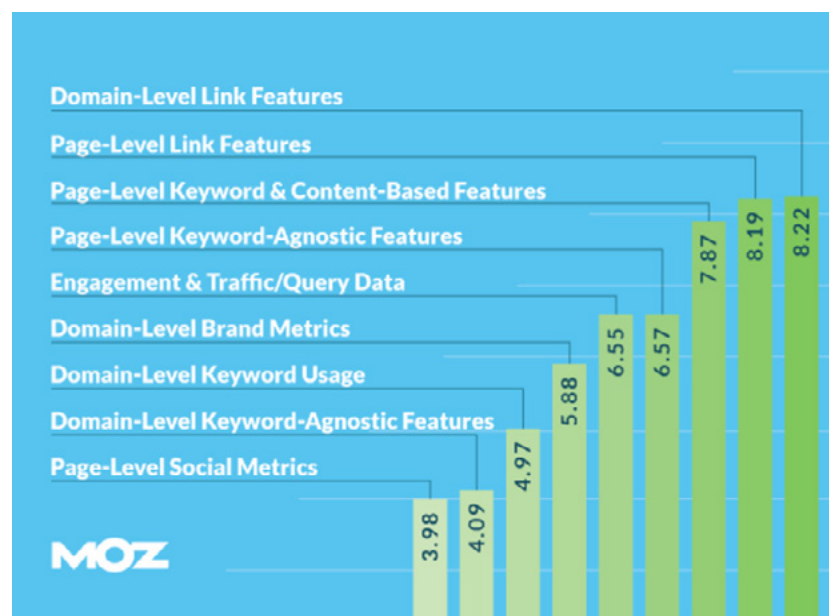
It is widely accepted that Google's algorithm is made up of over 200 ranking factors (too numerous to cover here); you can't analyse competitors for all these factors as you'd never have time to optimise your own strategy.

Studies have attempted to weight Google's ranking factors. Searchmetrics' last global study, covering all industries, was in 2016. The global leader in SEO marketing and analytics has since said this will be their last global study, as there's no single ranking that works for all industries – search is becoming bespoke and personalised:



Searchmetrics' ranking factors

Despite this, they saw a correlation between number of backlinks and ranking in top positions. A similar study by Moz back in 2015 not only included quantitative data correlation, but insights from industry experts. Its data also ranks backlinks as the top factor, so this is the main focus of this guide to competitor analysis.



Moz's ranking factors

We can take two main things from both of these studies:

1. There is no definitive order of global ranking factors.
2. Link features and backlinks continually have the biggest impact on rankings.

Google's John Mueller has discussed in the past how the search engine's ranking algorithms dynamically change based on query and context, with no one-size-fits-all approach to ranking signals. Different signals are weighted dynamically based on various factors, including industry.

If there is one area you should spend time on SEO competitor analysis - make it backlinks.

WHAT IS A BACKLINK?

The term 'backlinks' refers to links from another site to your own that can pass on authority, trust and relevancy from the search engine's point of view. The process can also be called earning links, link acquisition, or [outreach](#).



Link features

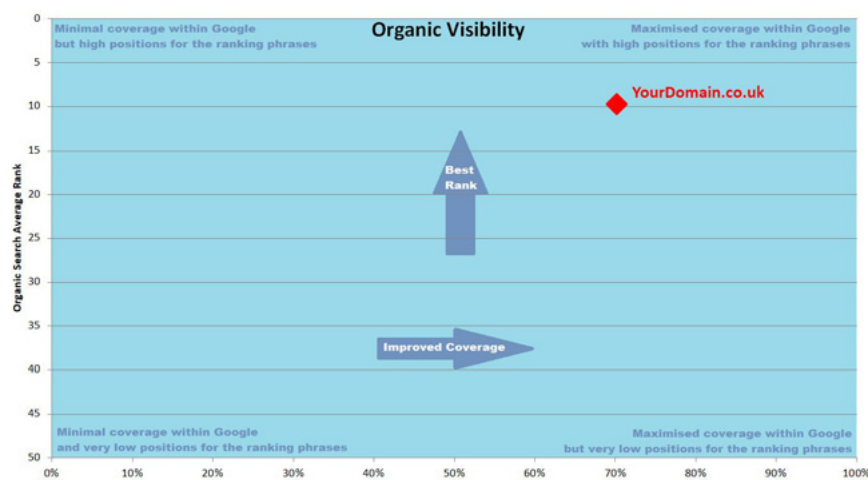
We'll go through the steps needed to carry out your own analysis of competitors' linking strategies, and the insights we pulled out through our own research on two industries: white goods and insurance.

IDENTIFY YOUR LEADING COMPETITORS

Firstly, you need to identify the market leaders in your industry, so that you can emulate their strategies and success.

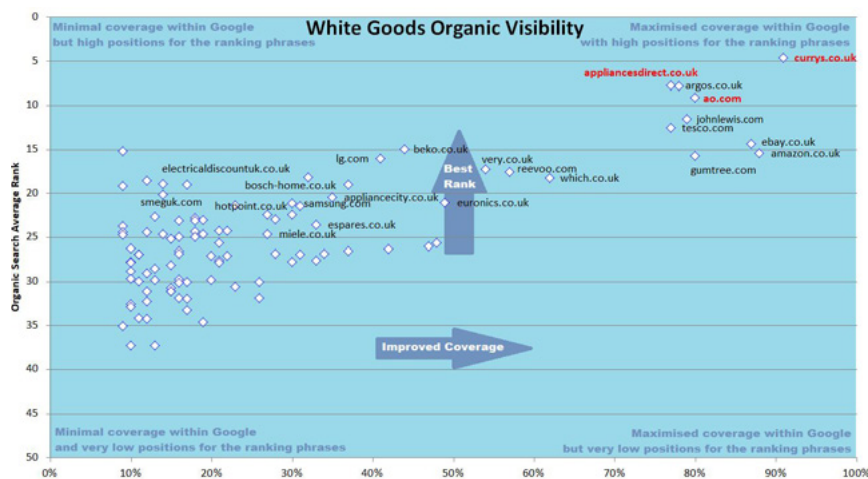
CARRY OUT THOROUGH KEYWORD RESEARCH

Find as many relevant keywords as possible – a minimum of 300 – using tools such as Google Keyword Planner, SEMrush or Moz. Once you have a list, find out who's ranking in the top 50 positions for each term. Then plot this on a graph – using a tool such as Tableau, as in this example:



X axis shows coverage, while the Y axis shows average rank. YourDomain.co.uk has an average rank of 10 and 70% coverage. As a simple example analysis of 100 keywords, this would mean they rank, on average, position 10 for 70/100 keywords.

We carried out this exercise with the white goods market, using a list of 2,300 keywords (such as washing machine, dryers, Smeg fridge, chest freezer, etc).



White goods industry's organic visibility

The market leaders appear in top right corner – these are the ones ranking for the majority of keywords and in the top positions. This is how they stack up:

- **Currys:** 91% coverage and average rank of 4.7
- **AO:** 80% coverage and average rank of 0.2
- **Appliances Direct:** 77% coverage and average rank of 7.8

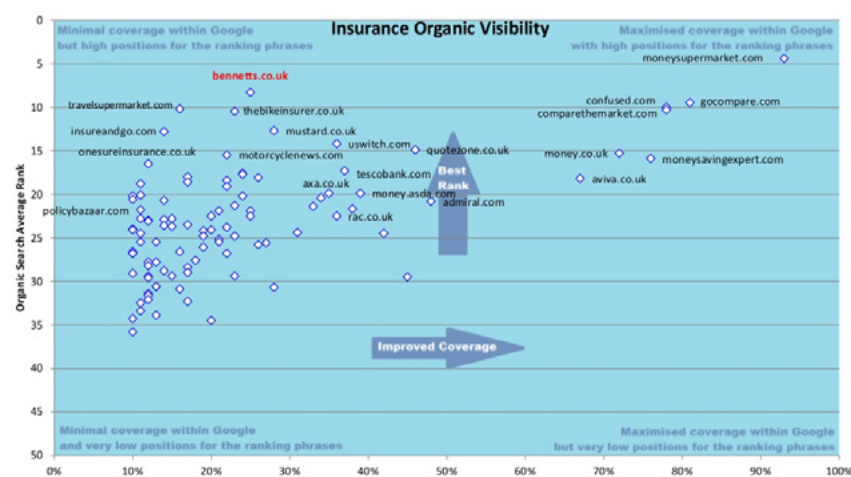
You should bear in mind that, as in this example, you will also be competing with other brands who may not immediately spring to mind when it comes to your product or service, but are still ranking for exactly the same keywords. In addition, Amazon and eBay always rank highly for eCommerce keywords in terms of coverage, but they don't always appear on P1.

In the second example, we looked at the insurance market covering car, home, travel, motorbike insurance etc, using over 2,000 keywords. As might be expected, the big four comparison sites appear in the top right quadrant.

- **MoneySuperMarket (by far the market leader):** 93% coverage and average rank of 4.4
- **Go Compare:** 81% coverage and average rank of 9.5
- **Confused.com** 78% coverage and average rank of 10.3
- **Compare the Market:** 78% coverage and average rank of 10

All of the market leaders above will have vast link profiles. For this eBook, we required smaller brands with smaller profiles to analyse.

The motorbike insurer **Bennetts** stood out:



Insurance industry organic visibility

We were intrigued that a couple of other motorbike insurance sites appeared in the chart. The graph wasn't a completely accurate representation of their marketplace because it contained keywords to do with travel and car insurance – which they don't cover. When we narrowed our research to just motorbike insurance keywords, **Bennetts** moved further to the far right, indicating them as market leaders, but still directly competing with the big four comparison sites.

The sites we decided to analyse were:

- **Bennetts**
- **The Bike Insurer**
- **Scooter Insurance chosen** (for comparison as it's not ranking as well as the others)
- **Carole Nash**

We used Searchmetrics to examine the visibility of keywords for which these sites were ranking, their position (and weighted by search volume), looking for major drops in visibility around Google updates – specifically [Penguin](#).

Here's an example of a site that was hit with a Penguin 2.0 penalty in May 2013:



Penguin drop graph from Searchmetrics

If this is the case, discount the competitor in your analysis as it shows they've probably been using unnatural, manipulative linking tactics (which you obviously don't want to emulate).

FOUR FACTORS TO FOCUS ON WHEN ANALYSING COMPETITOR LINK PROFILES

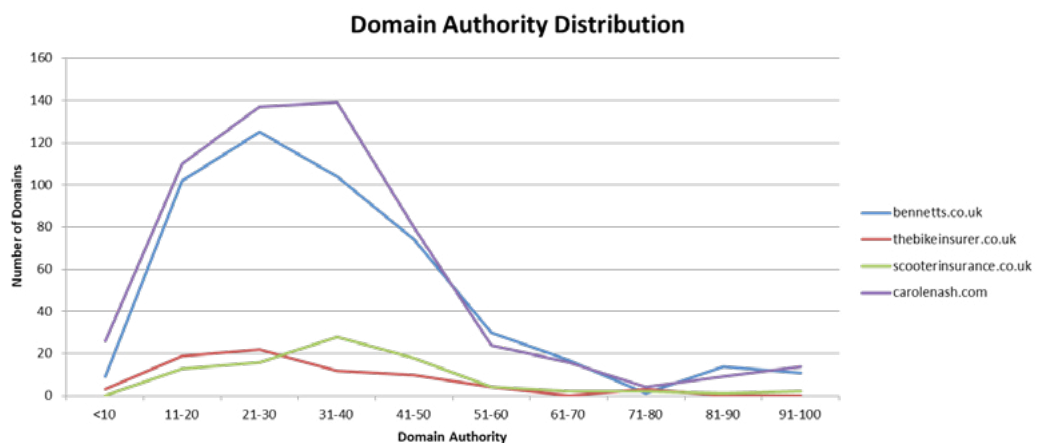
1. What quality of links is needed?
2. How quickly do they need to be earned?
3. What kind of anchor text should you use?
4. Where should they link to?



1. What quality of links is needed?

It's always better to focus on accruing links from unique, high quality referring domains rather than on the quantity of links alone. You can analyse your competitors' referring domains using tools such as Majestic, Open Site Explorer, Ahrefs and Google Search Console. (All of this information is publicly available and none of Click Consult's clients are used in this analysis).

1. Download all referring domains for each competitor
2. Categorise all domains into Domain Authority (DA) buckets (DA is a metric calculated by Moz and is their representation of Google PageRank so it's like an indication of authority of these sites)
3. Plot the results on a line graph



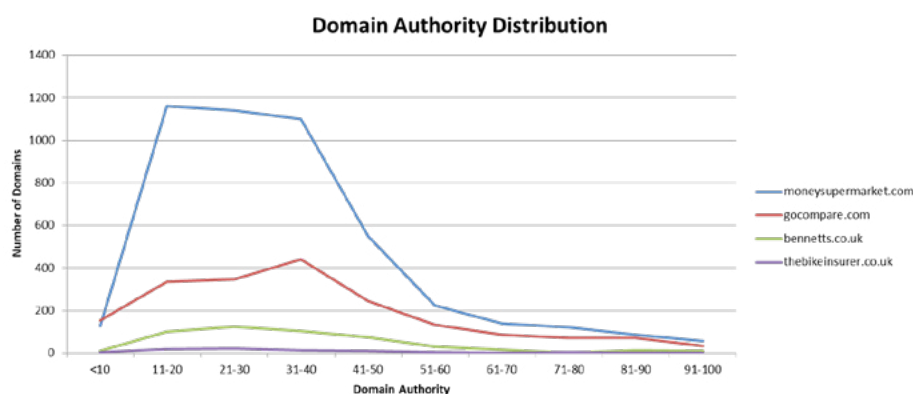
Domain Authority distribution - comparison sites

This tells us the **Bennetts** have authority from nine domains that have a DA between 0 and 10, and 100 domains that have DA between 11 and 20.

In most industries, you'll find that market leaders tend to peak at around the 20 to 40 DA area. This makes for a natural linking profile in this industry. When carried out for your own industry, this will give you a benchmark for the link profile you want to achieve.

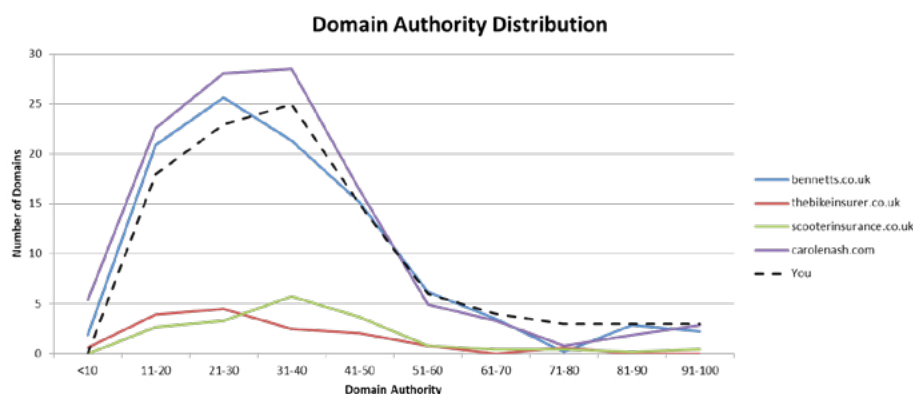
It also tells us that if you put all efforts into earning links on the higher end (or lower end); Google will see this as deviating from the norm and therefore judge the links to be manipulative and unnatural.

We carried out the same exercise, focusing on the comparison sites. The inclusion of **MoneySuperMarket** and **Go Compare** in the graph skews the scale as they have such a vast number of links, but we see the same shape in the graph:



Domain Authority distribution - comparison sites

The **Bike Insurer** was ranking really well in the XY graph, but only has a fraction of the links of other brands (more on this point later). All of this data allows you to plot a graph of what your backlink profile should look like.



Domain Authority distribution - what you should be aiming for

Go for quality rather than quantity of backlinks – but not to the point where it seems manipulative – keep the natural shape as shown in the graph.

This informs the type of content you need to create to achieve these links and will help you to plan the long term strategy for your outreach and content marketing campaigns, your budgets etc. Developing a content marketing strategy that earns links to develop a link profile that is both natural but has quality over quantity is how you can steal market share from your competition. Working smarter rather than harder, get this right and you're on the right track.

You'll need to refresh this graph at least every six months as it changes all the time.

2. How quickly do links need to be earned?

This can't be done overnight, not least because it will appear manipulative to search engines. The next step is to look at how quickly your competitors are earning links from each referring domain. Ahrefs is a good tool for doing this as it shows links, when they were discovered and when they were discovered for the first time.

As part of our research, we reviewed the previous three months for each of the insurance providers, looking at new referring domains acquired per month.

Competitor	Jun-17	Jul-17	Aug-17
bennetts.co.uk	100	87	112
thebikeinsurer.co.uk	13	12	12
carolenash.com	50	53	61
scooterinsurance.co.uk	12	11	16

Number of 'new' referring domains per month

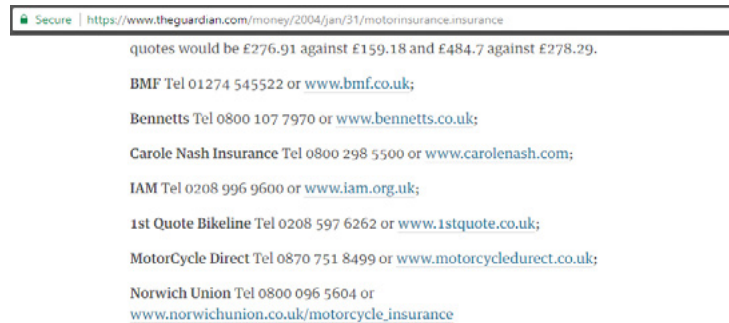
This shows you how many links you need to aim to earn in order to compete, eg, this table suggests a minimum of 12 per month is required to compete.

Keep in mind that your content marketing activity will need to supplement the backlinks your site is already earning from unique referring domains.

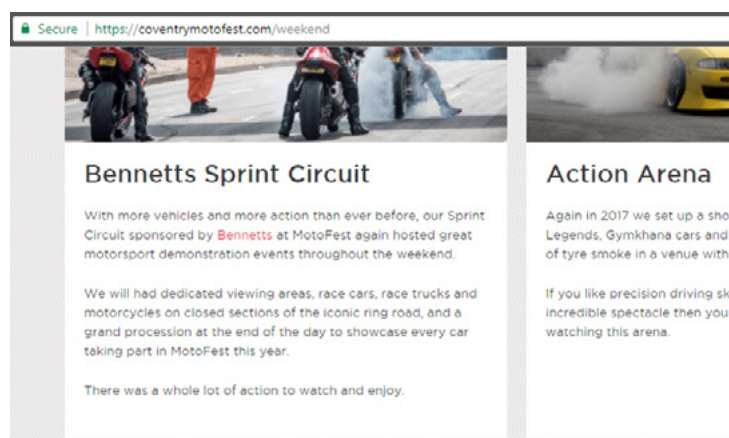
3. What kind of anchor text should you use?

We'll now look at all backlinks and the anchor text used for each one. Download lists of your competitors' backlinks, and categorise their anchor text into:

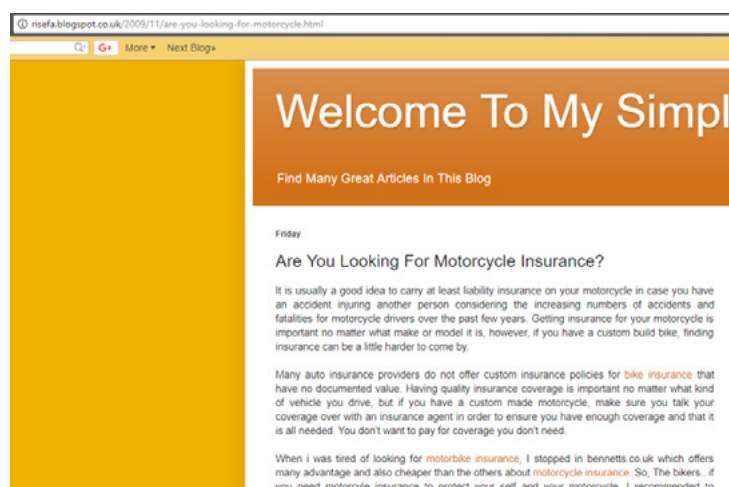
URL/naked links - Using the URL itself, eg:



Brand/domain name:




Generic/headline keywords - Or 'exact match' anchor text using the trophy keywords:



Long tail keywords:

www.friendlybikers.com/tag/motorcycle-insurance



for your pocket. However, there are some rather helpful hints and tips out there that can help ease the financial pressure that comes with making sure that you and your motorcycle are covered in the event of an accident, or even theft or damage for that matter.

Here, for your delectation, are a few of these insightful little hints which, assuming that they are right for you could help you to **save on your motorcycle insurance**.

Firstly, deciding which cover you actually need is very important. It might sound obvious, but many motorcycleists, particularly on their first attempt to provide themselves with the adequate level of cover will spend over the odds for an insurance scheme which is more than they need. By considering just how much cover you need, you

Hybrid/Brand + Keyword - Containing brand name and keyword:

roryskinner.com/2017-race-schedule/



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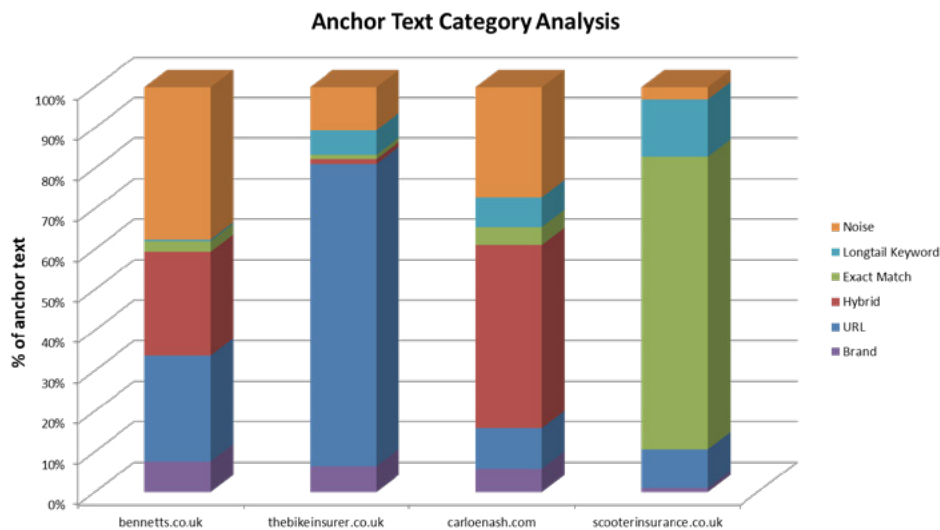
There's also a seventh category: spam. We suspect that **Carole Nash** had been hit by a spam attack, as each of these words appears as anchor text over 100 times:

sildenafil
viagra
medicines
apcalis
20mg
10mg
treatments
buy
toradol
online
100mg
suhagra

Carole Nash's spam anchor text

Most of the spam links pointed to pages that no longer exist on the site. Therefore backlinks categorised as spam in **Carole Nash**'s backlink profile was excluded so as not to skew the data.

The link profiles can be visualised like this:



Anchor text category analysis

This tells us that 80/20 rule (brand vs keyword) when earning links is no longer reliable because:

- The majority of **Bike Insurer**'s anchor text is the URL itself (as mentioned earlier, this is the site that doesn't have anywhere near as many links but are ranking really well).
- **Scooter Insurance** has got a lot of exact match links, such as 'scooter insurance', but it doesn't rank on P1 for this term as Google isn't easily fooled and recognises that this term is not the business' domain or brand name.

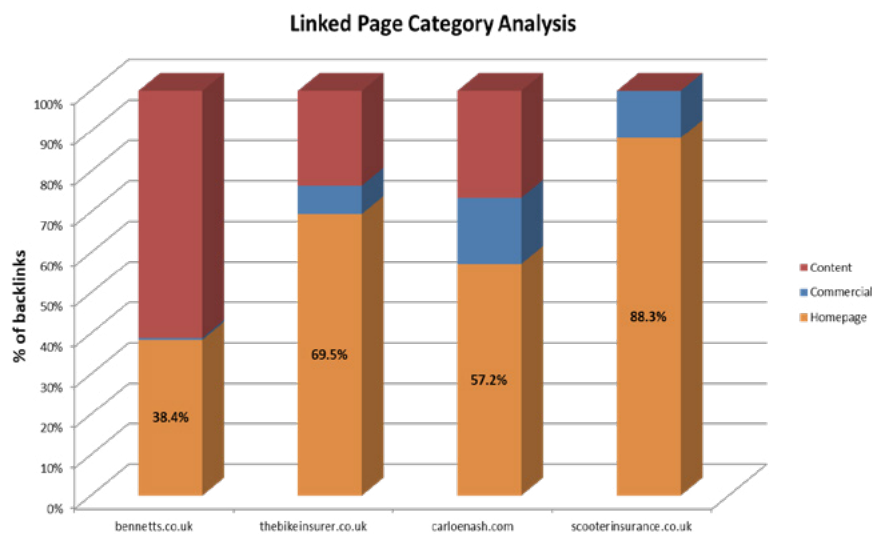
It also tells us that:

- In this industry - you should be looking for at least 40% of your anchor text to be your brand or your URL - ideally 80%. (Incidentally, we find that URL anchor text works better than brand for Click Consult's own clients.)
- Hybrid anchor text is the second choice to aim for as it includes brand or URL.
- You shouldn't be tempted to use your exact match or trophy keyword as an anchor: 4% should be the maximum in this industry, and long tail 7%.

4. Where should they link to?

Look at your competitors' backlinks and where they're linking to on their sites. First, download lists of your competitors' backlinks. Then categorise their linked pages into:

- Homepage
- Commercial Pages, eg, get a quote, product page
- Content Pages, eg, blog, FAQs



There are evidently two different types of tactic used by **The Bike Insurer** and **Bennetts**. **The Bike Insurer** has got a lot of URL anchor text which correlates with the fact that the majority of links go to its homepage.

Bennetts, on the other hand, takes a much more content-focused approach. The majority of its links go back to its resources section, Bike Social, and it's the great quality of this content that's earning the links.

Although it might sound counterintuitive, you should avoid 'forcing' links to commercial pages, as these are not necessarily the pages that you want to rank. Rather, link to these pages internally via pages that contain good content for a more natural linking pattern.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Link features are still commonly the most important ranking factors.
- Analyse market leaders to determine what makes the best link profile in your industry.
- Keyword lists should consist of a minimum of 300 keywords.
- Unless you are number one for all of your keywords (and even if you are), there are things to be learned from your competitors.
- Plot links by DA (Moz) to determine your industry's natural distribution curve.
- Focus content marketing efforts develop a natural but great quality link profile.
- Monitor link acquisition rates to determine how fast you need to accrue links, or what would be deemed as unnatural growth.
- Find out what distribution of brand/exact and long tail anchor text works best in your industry.
- Link juice flows, but where it starts is down to tactics – again, this will be unique to your industry.





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ABOUT US

Located in North West England, Click Consult is a multi award-winning search marketing agency with a focus on organic (SEO) and paid search (PPC), with over 70 professionals employed and with a portfolio of over 60 clients from across the UK, Europe, Americas and Australia.

Click was named Best Digital Agency and Best Large eCommerce Agency in 2017, adding to its long list of other awards and accolades, and also ranks within both RAR's and Econsultancy's 'Top 100 Digital Agencies', and Prolific North's 'Top 50 Digital Agencies'.

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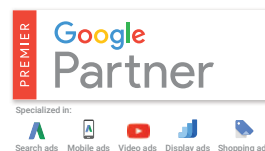
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