

Search Engine Optimization

How long does it take Google to remove bad backward links?



Jonathan Carter co-founded Glimworm IT BV in 2001 with partners Paul Manwaring, Marten Hoekstra and Colin Williams. At 15 his professional career began as a game programmer. After more than 10 years of innovative experience Jonathan was asked to join CMG's prestigious Advanced Technology Department consulting for blue chip companies. Eventually, he shifted his attention to new media and created Glimworm, bringing his talents to the world of web development. With nearly 30 years in the industry his list of accomplishments is huge including everything from project management to robot building and he continues to keep on top of new developments by constantly evaluating emerging technologies.

By Jonathan Carter co-founder and Chief Technical Officer of Glimworm IT BV in Amsterdam. In this white paper Jonathan explains how long it took to get the Glimworm website back up in the rankings, after being put in the sandbox by Google.

Glimworm IT BV has been providing web design and hosting services to customers in and around Amsterdam for 10 years. It is important for us to rank highly on the Google search term "Webdesign Amsterdam", for that reason we make sure we keep our own website content optimized with this in mind. We do a pretty good job of it and mostly we hover between position 9 and 12.



We also normally make a link from our customers' websites to our own, a bit like the "powered by" links which are quite common. In May 2011 we made a 'fatal' mistake by including this link in the footer of a client's webshop which in turn meant that it appeared on thousands of product pages. The knock on effect of this was that we dropped into the dark mysterious area reserved for people who use web farms. In this document I will describe how many links there were, how long it took to remove them and also how this affected our positioning.

My story starts on the 27th of July 2011. Our positioning had dropped "off a cliff" down to position 49, we had tried various methods of re-optimizing our site which did not work at all, we had turned our attention to the large amount of backward links which had accumulated from the recent webshop implementation, and we decided that this could be the only explanation.

Links to your site

Domains	Total links
topsites.nl	88,361
sitewells.nl	4,637
telusius.nl	2,169
www.stilwell.nl	1,726
www.vakhuizen.nl	1,159



As of the 27th of July 2011 we had a total of 160.000 backward links of which 80.000 came from the new webshop, which is referred to in my statistics as "book webshop". I have no idea how many links we had before this point, but by a process of elimination we must have had around 80.000 links. We had never kept track of the volume of backward links before so it was impossible to set a goal of how many backward links we had to shed to get back to our normal position. To me 80.000 links already seemed a lot, so together with my colleagues we decided to just reduce them and monitor our position using a tool that I made in 2005 which logs the top 100 URLs for a search term each day and keeps the results in a database for further.

Here is the starting point in figures

Total shown by Google web tools:	160.000
Our Google position:	49

Sites responsible for largest number of links

Book webshop:	88.000
Shoe webshop:	4,800
Baby webshop:	2,100
Speciality webshop:	1,700
Luxury gift shop:	1,550

How many backward links did the competition have?

I did a bit of investigation into the backward links pointing towards sites on the first Google search page using the links:(domain) search term. This threw up a bit of a strange anomaly; in the Webmaster Tools it cited that we had 160.000 backward links but Google reported many times less than this; therefore I used a multiplier of 10 as a rule of thumb to calculate the probable quantity reported in the Webmaster Tools for other sites.

To my surprise I found that the top sites had nearly no backward links, in fact less than 10 each; I also found that 5 of them were Flash sites which had no perceivable SEO that I could find based on the source code. Puzzled, I decided that the only course of action was to just start removing our backwards links as fast as possible until Google decided that we should rise.

Removing the links and playing the waiting game

Firstly I removed the links by changing the link to rel='nofollow' but this did little to help, therefore I removed the link all together from the 'books webshop' and also from the 4 other sites with the largest number of links. After making sure that the links did not show up any more I waited a few days.

In fact it was around 2 weeks before there was any real change in the number of links reported by Google Webmaster Tools. This first reduction was significant but triggered no real change in our position. The number of links reduced each 4-6 days and in return we floated upwards 1 or 2 spots. This was important because up until this point I did not even know if we were on the right track at all.

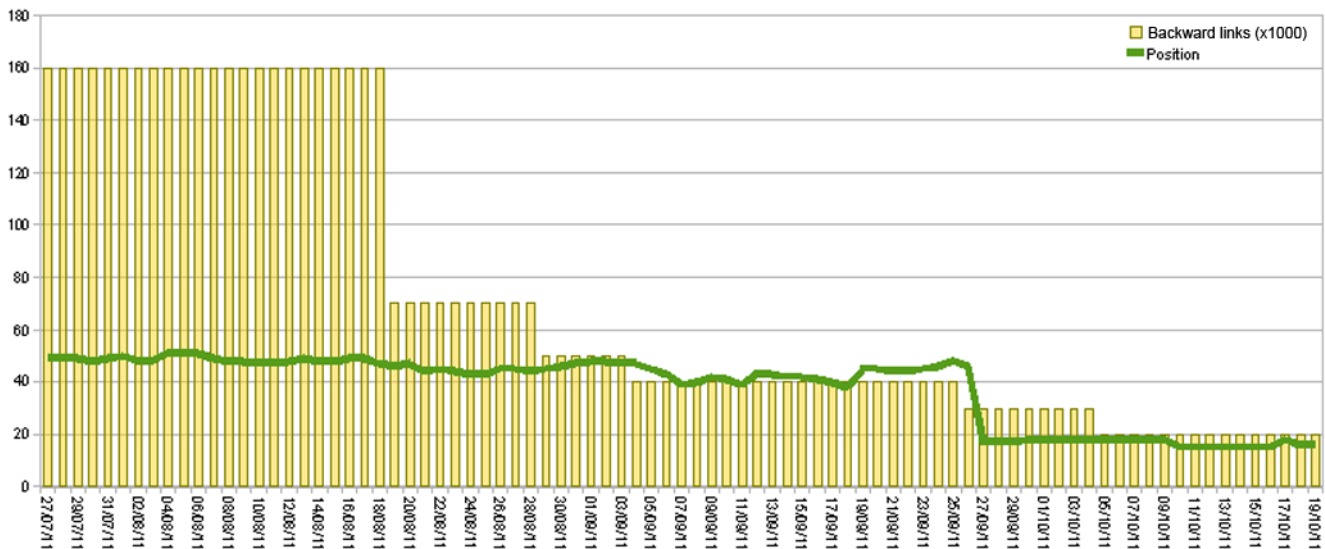
/// This is a dangerous area and it is slow to solve, compared with the speed at which Google indexes content. ///



The tipping point

The tipping point came on the 27th of September 2011 when our backward links dropped to the 30.000 mark and we shot up from 46 to 17 in one day. That is a single day gain of 29 positions, thereafter we have drifted up to 15 as our backward links dropped to 20.000. From a theoretical perspective I am happy now because I have seen the fruits of our labours realised. However it still completely sucks that it happened in the first place.

Below is a graphical representation of our Google position in relation to our number of backward links. I took the liberty of counting the number of backward links on 000s so that it could be represented on one graph.



And the answer is...

It took 2,5 months for our backward links to disappear from the GWT and for our position to recover. It is worth noting that we removed all the links on one day so this was all time spent by Google to re-index our site.

My personal view

In my opinion Google could have known that this was not a web farm and they could have been way quicker with the removal of the links. I did email them but got a sort of non response. Ultimateley this is a dangerous area and it is slow to resolve compared to the speed at which Google indexes regular content. I also wonder what would have happened if the backwards links were from a source that we had no control over. Actually, it is quite scary.

As a last point, when I had researched the subject I was not able to find this type of information so that is why I thought it was important to put it in a white paper.



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Schrijf je in voor de nieuwsbrief