How to Identify and Recover from a Negative SEO Attack

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01 Introduction to Negative SEO

SEO is powerful. Digital empires have been built by mastering the SEO arts of content strategy, web development, and high-performance marketing. But SEO is a double-edged sword, and can just as easily destroy websites as it can build them up.

In the early era of search optimization, a variety of black hat techniques once allowed SEOs to dominate the first page of search. These techniques included cloaking, keyword stuffing, spun/artificial content, backlink spam, and anchor text spam.

But as Google's computational infrastructure became more powerful, their algorithms evolved. The fields of natural language processing and machine learning have exploded with progress over the last decade, and the black-hat SEO methodologies that worked before 2010 have been fully stamped out. Not only do those black-hat strategies no longer work - they will destroy your site's rankings and can prevent a domain from ranking in perpetuity.

Although core algorithm updates or changes to your on-site content can impact your online visibility, a dramatic and unexpected change to your keyword rankings may be the result of what's happening off-site. It's possible that your backlink profile may be flooded with toxic backlinks that are intended to hurt your site's authority, reputation, and get your site off the SERPs. It happens to websites of all sizes, and it's called a negative SEO attack.

Negative SEO is the use of nefarious SEO tactics with the intention of harming another website's search engine rankings. At LinkGraph, we've seen webmasters fall victim to negative SEO attacks that drastically halted their momentum in organic traffic, conversions, and site visibility. Without quick identification of and response to negative SEO, a website's reputation with search engines can be permanently harmed.

At LinkGraph, we want webmasters to be able to recognize a negative SEO attack and take the necessary steps to minimize the impact. We know you've done the work to build a great site with high-quality content that's valuable to users and to search engines. You deserve to know how to protect it.

How Does a Negative SEO Attack Work?

Negative SEO is an off-site attack meant to damage a site's reputation or legitimacy in the eyes of search engines. Negative SEO can range from anchor text spam to fake reviews, but all of it is meant to turn the rules of Google's algorithm against you. Here are some common types of negative SEO tactics:

- **Link farms** building hundreds of spammy or toxic backlinks to a site
- **Fake reviews** on third-party platforms or social media sites
- **Copying content** from a site and posting it elsewhere (aka Scraping)
- **Fake Link Removal** requests sent to webmasters of quality sites
- **Hacking a site** to after on-page content

Negative SEO is dirty work, but unfortunately, it's fairly inexpensive and easy to perform. When it looks like a site is willingly engaging in black-hat strategies, Google will more quickly to penalize and reduce that site's visibility in search, which is why negative SEO is a technique some use to harm competitors. If negative SEO is not mitigated quickly, the consequences for your website can be long term.

Google once claimed that small sites don't need to be concerned about Negative SEO, but more negative seo services are appearing on freelance sites like Fiverr and Upwork offering to perform black-hat tactics for cheap. It's important to recognize that regardless of the size of your business, black-hat seo is a real threat to any website.

Why Someone Might Want to Attack your Site

To defeat your enemy, sometimes you have to think like them. Why would someone want to negatively harm your online presence? Most likely, they have a financial interest in doing so.

Many individuals now offer inexpensive negative seo services and make a living from tanking other sites. Securing quality backlinks takes a lot of time and work, so if you see link building services being advertised on the cheap, it's most likely that provider is engaging in questionable tactics. Here are some examples of black hat services offered for next to nothing on Fiverr.

If a competitor was looking for a way to negatively harm your site, it's fairly easy for them to find someone who will build those bad links on the cheap. Disclaimer: It's not possible to secure quality backlinks at this low of a price. If you are trying to build quality backlinks to your site, stay as far away as you can from services like the above.) Here are some reasons why someone might want to attack your site:

- **Competition**
  A competitor may hire someone to negatively harm your rankings
- **Spammers**
  Some individuals engage in negative SEO for income or just for fun
- **Blackmail**
  Someone may attempt to build bad links and then require you to pay money to get the links removed
- **Self-Promotion**
  People often do negative SEO as a way to build up their own site by linking to other sites in unusual ways

Even though Google has updated its algorithm to make sure negative SEO tactics don't get rewarded with improved rankings, there are still many people out there making a living by engaging in black-hat SEO. Being proactive and alert for these black hat tactics can help you identify a negative SEO attack early on and minimize any damage to your site.

What Makes a Site Vulnerable to Negative SEO

If you're a webmaster in business owner that offers a great service or product that could take business or traffic away from someone else, then your site's at risk. Although all websites are susceptible to negative SEO, local businesses and startups with less than 300 referring domains are the most vulnerable. The smaller your backlink profile, the more impactful any bad links or unnatural links will be.

In the early stages of optimization, new sites once used low-quality links to gain growth quickly. Search engine bots now crawl for this and penalize those sites that have too many toxic links. So if you're a local or small business owner and your link profile does not have thousands of referring domains yet, low-quality links could expose to Google as an effort to artificially manipulate your search rank and growth. Some spammy techniques we have observed can provide modest ranking improvements for a month or two, but Google's anti-spam algorithms are sophisticated enough to see straight through link spam.

Although large websites with thousands of quality links, good brand reputation, and a well-established link building strategy are less likely to feel the negative impacts of an seo attack, even relatively established sites without sufficient trust signals are still vulnerable.

> Ultimately, a site owner that fails to pay close attention to their backlink profile presents the biggest risk. Without regular monitoring, webmasters leave time for those unnatural links to accumulate and cause permanent damage.

02 Everything you Need to Know about Backlinks

Backlinks are hyperlinks to your website from other sites. They serve as "votes," or references to search engines about your site's value and authority. Backlinks are a Google ranking factor, and they are valuable to your site when they come from trustworthy sites with a high domain authority and contextual relevance to your site's content.
For example, if your site sells software, high-quality backlinks will come from sites that feature or publish content that has application to your software service. But not all backlinks are good. Toxic links can come from untrustworthy sites with low domain authority, from sites that are irrelevant to your content, or have a number of other characteristics that make them disadvantageous to your link profile.

What Makes a High-Quality Backlink?

Domain Authority is the most well-known SEO metric used to measure the reputation of a site. But domain authority alone does not make for a quality link. Google measures the value of a link in different ways, and links that meet more of these standards are better situated to appeal to search engine bots and to last for the long-term.
Some of the criteria Google uses to value links include:

- **Domain Authority** of the linking site
- **PageRank** of the linking page
- **Site traffic** of the linking site
- **Anchor text** relevance and diversity
- **User and social** engagement
- **Word count** of the linking content
- **Contextual links** with topical relevance
- **Links** that appear in content (ie. images, guest post attribution, etc.)

Meeting all of these quality standards takes work, and it's going to cost you a lot more than $5 on Fiver.

Securing backlinks that don't meet these standards takes work, and it's going to cost you a lot more than $5 on Fiver.

As you begin to utilize these tools to monitor your backlink profile, keep in mind that not all bad backlinks are nefarious. Occasionally, low-quality sites will link to yours with the intent of guiding their users to useful content. Also, the disavow feature is considered an advanced feature. If you disavow the wrong links, or too many links, you could end up negatively impacting your own SEO.

If you are not quite sure whether or not a site is risky, consult an SEO expert. They can help you identify which backlinks are low-quality or toxic enough that they warrant removal. Also, it is better to submit disavow files in batches rather than one-at-a-time. Google wants webmasters to use the disavow tool sparingly and will flag your site if you are disavowing links too often.

The Difference Between White-Hat and Black-Hat Link Building

Link building has a long, complicated history that involves webmasters outwitting algorithms and Google clapping back with more refined ranking factors and quality signals. In the early days of search engine optimization, it didn't matter what your anchor text was or who the link came from. As long as you had links from other sites, Google rewarded you with more keyword rankings and better search results.

Luckily, those days are long gone. As the shape of the internet has changed, Google has become far more sophisticated, and these older strategies are what end up harming sites, not benefiting them. Google only wants to show its users quality content from reputable web pages, and it will keep getting better at rewarding sites for quality signals on- and off-site.

But link building can be done effectively and in white-hat ways. At LinkGraph, we execute link building and digital PR campaigns for our clients, but they are quality-driven, and appear in original pieces of content with relevant anchor text on web sites with active user engagement and high domain authority. This type of link building is more expensive and requires more work and more time, but it is safe in the eyes of Google. The rewards for your site are improved keyword rankings, increased organic traffic, and tangible brand visibility and growth.

Nothing good in SEO is automated or cheap. A lot of people who still have these older sites, or who are still employing these cheaper link building options, end up harming their ability to ever rank in the future. Because it's often easier to take down another site than build up your own backlink profile with quality links, some choose the dark side.

Negative SEO will always be an option available to those webmasters who want the easy way out. Knowing the signs of the common Negative SEO strategies will help you prevent your site from ever becoming victim.

03 How to Identify A Negative SEO Attack

When your backlink profile begins to see irregularities, or the low-quality backlinks you do receive start to form patterns or similarities, these are tell-tale signs that a negative seo attack might be occurring. Some webmasters are so desperate to get backlinks, they don't analyze the quality of their linking sites closely enough, and they end up accumulating toxic backlinks faster than they can disavow them.

This is a nightmare scenario that we don't wish upon anyone, but that we've helped many webmasters recover from. Although Negative SEO tactics may occur more subtly, we've noticed that the majority of our clients who experience Negative SEO receive a large influx of low-quality, toxic links that all seemingly register at once.

Although there is no way to prevent a negative SEO attack, being on the lookout by monitoring your backlink profile is a preventative strategy that will equip you to take quick, decisive action before the negative implications take root.

STEP 1

Get to know your Backlink Profile

Do you currently know the sites that are providing you with the highest number of links? What is the most common anchor text other webmasters are using to link to your site? What exact match anchor text variations does your backlink profile currently have?

If you can't answer these questions, then you're not monitoring your backlink profile closely enough. The only way you can identify the patterns that signify negative SEO is by knowing what a natural, healthy backlink profile for your site looks like. We recommend a quarterly audit to make sure your site isn't keeping company with any questionable web properties.

STEP 2

Audit Entire Backlink Profile & Anchor Text Distribution

To perform a backlink profile audit, check each site on your list of backlinks in Google Search Console and "grade" them on a spectrum from "good" to "toxic." You should compare that data with the backlinks that LinkGraph's free Backlink Analyzer has marked as risky. Then, you can do the work of investigating those linking sites more closely.

Google Webmaster Guidelines offers useful insight into how Google views websites in their ranking process and what constitutes acceptable web practices vs. what will cause link penalties. Understanding this information allows you to make educated judgements about the quality of your backlinks, and will likely help you pinpoint the worst spam links.

Most Common Types of Negative SEO

Negative SEO can flood your backlink profile with toxic backlinks from a variety of sources, but here are some of the most common irregularities and patterns our clients have seen that have signified negative SEO efforts were actively occurring.

Comment Spam

Unmoderated sites that allow unregistered subscribers to post comments are places where negative SEOters regularly go to cause damage. This is known as "Comment spam," and can occur on popular domains like blogspot.com or wordpress.com. The comments usually have no relevance to the topic of the blog post and clearly only have the intention of inserting a link from your site.

There are software tools that scan the internet just for websites that allow commenting and have do-follow outlinks, and negative black-hat SEOs will utilize them to find stealth places to link to your site. Google will crawl these comment spam backlinks and see them as low quality, particularly when the blog or forum has no topical relevance to yours, includes irrelevant anchor text, or is an older blog post that has not been updated for a long time.

> "Although Captchas have been designed to tell humans and robots apart, they are insufficient for preventing bot generated comment spam because services such as 2Captcha, DeathByCaptcha, and even the most unsophisticated programmers can send audio captchas directly into Google's own speech-to-text APIs, transcribe the audio, and submit the results back into Google's captcha system."
>
> - MANICK BHAN, CTO OF LINKGRAPH

Unnatural Anchor Text

Irrelevant anchor text can sometimes occur if a linking site is less familiar or concerned about SEO, but unnatural, explicit anchor text is your sign that someone has bad intentions by linking to you. If you see a sudden influx of links from different referring domains that all happen to use the same anchor text, the chances of that occurring naturally is slim to none.

Too many exact-match anchor text is also problematic. Google bots also crawl the anchor text of your backlinks to determine your keyword rankings, and a bunch of links using anchor text with an exact match to the keyword you're trying to rank for will look like manipulation to search engines.

Multiple Links in Short Timeframes

Most often, a negative SEO attack will occur quickly, over the course of 1-2 days. One bad link won't harm your site too much, but a large influx of bad links that transform a healthy backlink profile into 25% spam can cause significant damage. If you do not have any sort of active link building campaign in place, any sudden accumulation of links should get your antennas up to start identifying any problematic patterns in those links.

Links Hidden in Images

Another age-old black-hat strategy is hiding backlinks in image files. These links are invisible on the front-end but are seen in the HTML source code. Although there are white-hat ways to do image link building, hiding links in images on irrelevant, low-quality sites is a classic black-hat technique. Google does crawl those images and will consider the hidden link when it evaluates your backlink profile.

Wordpress Plugins & Malware

Plugins on Wordpress and other website building platforms can contain code to insert links on certain pages of your website. For this reason, it's generally not a good idea to install and activate Wordpress plugins that aren't well known or haven't been thoroughly reviewed.

Free themes or site templates can often contain embedded malware, which when activated will inject spammy links into your site's pages or redirect certain users to explicit 3rd party sites. These are often ripped from popular paid themes, modified to include additional malware, and then made available for free download.

Other Common Types of Negative SEO not Visible in your Backlink Profile

Content Scraping

Although content scraping will not be visible in your backlink profile, it is a common negative SEO tactic used to harm sites. Content scraping is when someone steals content from your site and publishes it across the internet. Google does not like duplicate content, and will penalize sites who appear to be republishing content or using content that's not original.

Some sites scrape publications or ingest RSS feeds from other publications and syndicate them. Inadvertently, they can contribute to Negative SEO.

Negative Reviews

Similarly, negative reviews will not be visible in your backlink profile, but they should be regularly monitored. Reviews are a trust signal, so someone leaving a wave of negative reviews on platforms like Google My Business, TrustPilot, Yelp, and other platforms that Google ingests review data from can also negatively influence your rankings.

Someone on your team should be regularly monitoring your GMB listing and third party platforms to respond to negative reviews shortly after they are posted. If you believe the reviews are fake, reach out to the third-party platform to see if those fake reviews can be removed.

STEP 3

Identify who has access to your site

After you have audited your backlink profile and identified a pattern that resembles negative SEO, make sure you talk to your vendors, employees, freelancers or anyone who has access to your site.

Is someone at your company working with a vendor that you don't know about? Are you working with freelancers? If so, stop. Although you cannot prevent negative SEO from occurring, you want to do everything you can to make sure those links stop coming in.

04 Case Study: Appliance Repair Company Experiences Negative SEO attack

At LinkGraph, we have helped clients identify and mitigate negative SEO attacks quickly to avoid permanent damage to their online visibility and organic growth. To give you a more concrete idea of the investigative work that surrounds the process of mitigating negative SEO, take a look at some of the below data signals that helped us recognize a negative SEO attack and take subsequent action.

Identification: Keyword Rankings Drop

In the below chart you'll see that our client's keyword rankings experienced a sudden drop. Up until April 2020, our client had been experiencing steady growth. They had not made any changes to their on-page content, they had no active link building campaigns with other vendors, and there were no recent Google algorithm updates to account for the abrupt change.

Investigation: Multiple Links from blogspot sites

This sounded the alarms for us to take a closer look at the client's backlink profile. Over the course of a few days, they had added a sudden influx of links, the majority of which came from blogspot.com domains with low domain ratings and organic traffic.

Domain	DR	Ahrefs rank	Referring domains (dofollow)	Linked domains (dofollow)	Organic traffic	Links to target	Dofollow	First seen
supersbestcarcontest1.blogspot.com ↗	N/A	—	0	0	0.00	2 ↑ ▲	0	16 Jun '20
makersbox.blogspot.com ↗	1	37,174,590	25	390	20	1 ▲	0	18 Jun '20
saffronagent.blogspot.com ↗	0	28,201,317	58	59	5.73	4 ▲	0	18 Jun '20
data-processing1.blogspot.com ↗	0	192,129,021	123	1,449	0.00	1 ▲	0	18 Jun '20
richardhuculeanarchitecture.blogspot.com ↗	0	162,129,297	110	1,391	0.00	1 ▲	0	18 Jun '20
tinaparkerfilms.blogspot.com ↗	14	12,416,733	86	160	2.3	1 ▲	0	18 Jun '20
tyronehenrietcarson.blogspot.com ↗	0	71,015,866	1	0	29	5 ▲	0	18 Jun '20
refrigerators-repairs.blogspot.com ↗	1	143,019,000	1	16	0.00	1 ▲	0	18 Jun '20
soakingrockhotsuitecity.blogspot.com ↗	0	115,315,118	23	6,733	2.3	2 ▲	0	18 Jun '20
aimeejohanesquinterfrancisco.blogspot.com ↗	0	136,034,330	4	8	0.00	2 ▲	0	18 Jun '20
mgdbookcare ↗	0	45,005,390	45	0	0.00	2 ▲	0	18 Jun '20
tonymoreeedwards1.blogspot.com ↗	N/A	—	0	0	0.00	2 ▲	0	18 Jun '20
appliance-repair-or-appliance-replace.blogspot.com ↗	2	39,114,520	4	16	0.00	1 ▲	0	18 Jun '20
acsecrets.blogspot.com ↗	N/A	—	0	0	0.00	1 ▲	0	15 Jun '20
homeappliancerepair.blogspot.com ↗	0	125,120,664	22	7,774	0.03	2 ▲	0	15 Jun '20

A closer look at these backlinks showed that our client was being victimized with comment spam. The new backlinks were all appearing in the comment sections and appeared to be posted by different users. Although the blogspot url seemed to have some relevance to our client's appliance repair industry, the blog was clearly designed as a place to drop these links to make it appear as if our client was attempting to manipulate their own rankings.

Below is an example of what comment spam looks like in practice.

12 No Name | appliancerepairfairfax.blogspot.com/2012/05/pacific-heat-corporate.html
41 comments:
Unknown October 12, 2012 at 7:36 AM
Pull up a comfortable chair in Los Angeles call (855) 207-1785 | AmeriPro Appliance Repair offers fast, reliable, and services to Los Angeles county.
Reply
Unknown January 25, 2013 at 8:08 AM
Thank you so much for the information regarding the series problem to you. Thanks for this blog. I've recently been looking for a Washer in Dallas and this has helped me a lot a lot.
Pull up a comfortable chair in Dallas for a quote.
Reply
12 No Name | appliancerepairfairfax.blogspot.com/2012/05/pacific-heat-corporate.html
41 comments:
Appliance Repair Inc February 12, 2014 at 10:07 PM
Very bad
Pull up a comfortable chair in Los Angeles for 323 Appliance Repair
Reply
Unknown January 29, 2015 at 5:20 AM
Hi Sonya! you do by chance show / save washing parts for this sony dryer, I have lost my pick up, I really need the pulley and belt, I have looked everywhere, I live in Los Angeles, I can pick up anywhere in the Los Angeles area, I can be at your place in 30 minutes, I live in Sherman Oaks, I live in Van Nuys, I live in Encino, I live in Tarzana, I live in Reseda, I live in Northridge, I live in Woodland Hills, I live in Canoga Park, I live in Chatsworth, I live in Sylmar, I live in Pacoima, I live in Arleta, I live in Sun Valley, I live in Lake Balboa, I live in Granada Hills, I live in Porter Ranch, I live in Sunland, I live in Tujunga, I live in Shadow Hills